
The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet¹

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Abstract

This paper examines in detail the role of the Internet in individual radicalization processes of eight German former right-wing extremists. Applying Grounded Theory methodology the qualitative interviews were analyzed in several coding and re-coding phases. The findings are integrated into the existing literature afterwards. Besides well known factors, such as more effective communication, anonymity and better networking opportunities, this study found evidence that the Internet is a major driving factor to establish and foster the development of radical contrast societies (cf. Koehler, 2015) transmitting radical and violent ideologies and translating them into political activism.

As a venue for information exchange, ideological development and training, the individual radicalization process was characteristically shaped or even made possible through the Internet. This paper also shows the high value of qualitative research regarding the topic in contrast to usually employed quantitative analysis of webpage content.

I. Introduction

Internet as a facilitator of radicalization is nothing new to researchers and policy makers. With arriving at a new era of terrorist recruiting propaganda the terrorist group Daesh ('Islamic State') has nevertheless provided an astonishing account of highly effective online recruitment and radicalization mechanisms by proxy, convincing thousands of foreign fighters around the world of the group's cause and to join their fight. Although most theories of radicalization and 'homegrown' or 'lone wolf' terrorism rely on the Internet to explain why and how individuals moved from non-violent to violent political and religious activism, it is in most cases unclear how the mechanisms behind online based radicalization work. Even more unclear is the perspective of the consumer, as most studies rely on observatory or retro perspective analysis to recognize some role played by 'the Internet'. This present study aims to add the (former) radicals' perspective of how the Internet changed and shaped their individual radicalization processes and what they think are the important effects of online

¹ This article is an updated version of a study published as Working Paper 1/2012 by the Institute for the Study of Radical Movements (ISRM).

structures for radical milieus aiming to transport their radical and violent ideologies. Based on interviews with former German neo-Nazis this article provides an intimate and rare account of mechanisms behind Internet and radicalization. Although not treating jihadist online recruitment and radicalization this study gives an insight into how radical social movements and milieus use the Internet to foster individual radicalization processes and how they rely on specific practical opportunities provided by the Internet. This study also provides evidence that the Internet does not come as a risk free tool for radical social milieus but that it may become a double edged sword in certain circumstances. However, understanding these mechanisms through the eyes of former extremists is essential to formulate effective counter strategies. By providing a detailed insider perspective this study aims to help recognizing risks and building counter measures to violent radicalization.

II. Methodology

For this paper, eight problem centred interviews (Witzel, 2000) with former German right-wing extremists were conducted focussing on the role of the 'Internet' in their individual radicalization processes. The average age of the sample is 26.6 years, consisting six male and two female interviewees. Four of the interviewees entered the right wing movement before the Internet was available nationwide and commonly used. They reflected upon how the Internet changed their perception and radicalization within the movement. The other four entered at a time when the Internet was already very common in the movement and outside. Three interviewees were leading their own Internet projects or administrating larger online structures (web-radio, homepage, chat room). The selection bias stemming from the pool, only consisting of dropouts, i.e. individuals who left the movement, seemed acceptable when correlated with the biographical background of the interviewees. Using the former's perspectives the author could access the individual experiences from a cross-sectional pool regarding age (20-35), position within the movement (low level – high ranking), movement background (e.g. folkish-national, Autonomous Nationalists, Skinhead, militant Neo-Nazi), gender, education (e.g. student, worker, unemployed), family background (e.g. single, parent, broken or intact family).

All interviews were qualitatively analyzed (with MAXQDA) to find the basic common patterns and frames relevant for the research question: Which role did the Internet play for the individual radicalization process of right-wing extremists? After the main findings from the interviews are presented, these will be integrated into the existing literature.

In summary, this article aims to be a preliminary study to investigate the possible influence of Internet usage on radicalization processes and integrate the empirical findings into the previous scholarship.

III. Key Findings from the Interviews

1. The Internet provides a cheap and efficient way to communicate, network and organize meetings or make other arrangements, which in turn leads to a better integration of each member into the movement.

The first major effect of the Internet regarding individual radicalization mentioned by the interviewees was that the Internet provides a cheap and effective way to communicate, bond and network with like-minded movement members. The Internet was also particularly useful for social purposes, for example to get invited to events such as concerts or rallies:

“It was the easiest way to make contacts and to take over and coordinate responsibilities, to gain reputation and advance.”²

This quote directly establishes a link between the contacts made, the responsibilities taken over, the simplification of communication and the advancement within the hierarchy. In some cases, as stated in another interview, online status directly translates into offline status. Another interviewee who started to be active before the common use of the Internet explained:

“Years later, however, since 2005 until my exit, the most of my networking in the movement was almost exclusively done via the Internet.”³

A former administrator of a right-wing extremist online project among the interviewees estimates: “I think that 70% to 80% of the networking is done via the Internet.”⁴ The same person considers that the major shift of networking activities to the Internet within the (German) movement took place in 2003-2004.

2. The Internet provides a perceived constraint-free space and anonymity. This provokes or motivates individuals to speak or act out more radical online as they would normally do offline. Furthermore, through this more radical online behaviour, individuals may gain essential affirmation and confidence in their value for the movement.

² “Es war der leichteste Weg Kontakt zu knüpfen und es war der leichteste Weg Aufgaben zu übernehmen und zu koordinieren, um Ansehen zu gewinnen und aufzusteigen.”

³ “Jahre später jedoch, etwa ab 2005 bis zu meinem Ausstieg, lief ein Großteil meiner Vernetzung innerhalb der Szene fast nur noch über das Internet ab.”

⁴ “Ich denke, 70% bis 80% der Vernetzung läuft übers Internet.”

The second most common attribute of the Internet regarding the effect on radicalization amongst the interviewees, was the perception that communication had no constraints:

“If you sometimes have the feeling that some of them really run riot, placing swastikas wherever they can, this is because they think they are acting in a completely extrajudicial space.”⁵

Another interviewee stated:

“It is like that: some are very shy or introverted in real life but online they are pure agitators. This is connected to the privacy. They believe that they don't leave their living room and this motivates them to write more radical things, things they would never dare say outside.”⁶

This perception was common among the interviewees. The ones who were more active online, for instance administrating chat rooms, and knew more technical details, were very concerned with privacy, data security and encryption and in finding which servers were most secure from German state authorities. It is particularly worth noting in this last statement that the perceived privacy seems to motivate some individuals to use more radical language, be more ferocious, or call for direct action online. Similarly, many interviewees pointed out the fact that the Internet provides a core feeling of freedom - freedom to live out one's own ideology but also to engage in non-political activities without the danger of facing social resistance or exclusion.

Confidence-building and affirmation also stand out in some of these more radical statements as another opportunity provided by the Internet, which supported individuals through building a perception of anonymity: “The Internet provides an opportunity or fulfils an opportunity to present yourself, to be more that you actually are.”⁷

3. The Internet provides a space to share crucial information connected to the chosen lifestyle, such as banned literature, music, clothes and manuals.

⁵ “Wenn man manchmal also das Gefühl hat, dass andere wieder völlig ausschweiften, Hakenkreuze überall hinklatschen, wo sie noch können, denken sie, sie bewegen sich in einem völlig rechtsfreien Raum.”

⁶ “Also es ist so, einige sind im echten Leben völlig schüchtern und zurückgezogen, dann aber online sind sie die totalen Hetzer. Das hat mit der Privatsphäre zu tun. Die glauben, sie verlassen ihr Wohnzimmer einfach nicht und das regt sie an, radikalere Sachen zu schreiben, Sachen, die sie sich niemals Draußen trauen würden.”

⁷ “Das Internet bietet auch eine große Möglichkeit oder erfüllt eine Möglichkeit, sich darzustellen, vielleicht ein bisschen mehr zu machen als man ist.”

The interviewees who experienced the early stages of the Internet saw its main function in the distribution of illegal literature, music and manuals. Even for younger activists, for whom the Internet was a part of the movement since the beginning of their involvement, information distribution was crucial:

“The Internet was incredibly important for me! Only via the Internet could I access topics and opinions, which I would never have heard of otherwise.”⁸

Similarly: “I could get everything I wanted on the Internet. I read a lot and educated myself about the ideology.”⁹

That music, lifestyle, symbols and texts are not without effect on offline behaviour was illustrated by one interviewee:

“And I thought: just listening to music or writing texts is not enough! You get an urge, talking is not enough any more, now I really want to do something!”¹⁰

4. The Internet provides the major basis for ideological development and advancement through the potentially unlimited number of individuals participating, for instance, in theoretical discussions. In addition, it gives the movement the chance to become aware of ideologically incapable members quicker and more effectively.

One effect of the Internet on the movement and the individual process of radicalization was the ideological development. Through the Internet, the mass of participants voicing their opinions and taking part in the theoretical reflection and advancement of the ideology directly contributes to updating the ideology and making it more attractive:

“I mean everyone can participate! Everyone can voice an opinion. In theory the number is unlimited and they all take part in the discussion. They are essential to make everything look not so old fashioned and lame.”¹¹

⁸ “Das Internet war unglaublich wichtig für mich! Nur dort kam ich an ungefilterte Meinungen und Themen ran, die ich sonst nie erfahren hätte!”

⁹ “Ich konnte über das Internet alles bekommen, was ich wollte. Ich habe sehr viel gelesen und mich selbst in der Ideologie ausgebildet.”

¹⁰ “Und da dachte ich, nur Musik hören oder Zeug schreiben kann’s doch nicht sein! Man bekommt den Drang, nur reden reicht mir nicht mehr, ich will jetzt wirklich was machen!”

¹¹ “Ich meine, jeder kann doch mitmachen! Jeder kann seine Meinung sagen! Im Prinzip ist das doch unbegrenzt und die diskutieren doch alle mit. Sie sind unersetzlich, wenn es darum geht, das alles nicht total altbacken und von Gestern wirkt.”

The possibility to directly shape the ideology, to create own “schools” or interpretations, also gives even low-ranking members the feeling that they are actually able to influence their own movement. In other words:

“The plurality of thoughts and theories, all with the same goal and related to each other, invigorates the movement! And it invigorates you, because you can participate!”¹²

5. The Internet gives individuals the perception of a critical mass within the movement. This motivates individuals to get involved further or act more radically.

For the younger interviewees, the Internet provided the first steps into the movement before they actually had any offline contacts to movement members. Through chat rooms and homepages, they experienced a movement with a critical mass, that is to say, the Internet provided an image of a right-wing movement that might convincingly be able to take over power or reach its goals. This, in turn, encouraged some of the interviewees to get more involved and, consequently, seek offline contacts, take part in rallies or become active in any other way within the movement. They have been indoctrinated and socialized online before they were integrated into offline structures or activities:

“I felt, this is a big thing. I thought, if I make a name for myself in chat rooms, etc, I can make it outside as well, become part of the movement, and really change something.”¹³

6. The Internet offers the possibility to directly reflect on the effects of propaganda and adapt to the demand of the target group.

It was very important for the former activists interviewed to see the direct effect of the applied propaganda on their recruitment efforts. In the beginning of their own radicalization, most of them found it very helpful to engage the individuals behind the propaganda and to discuss certain issues or questions in chat rooms or via email. This gives the recruits the feeling that the movement is more “real” and even high-ranking activists are theoretically approachable. Furthermore, this helps to develop a sense of participation and

¹² “Die Vielfalt der Gedanken und Theorien, alle mit dem gleichen Ziel und alle verwandt miteinander, belebt die Szene. Und es belebt auch dich, du kannst ja mitmachen!”

¹³ “Ich hatte das Gefühl, das ist eine ganz große Sache. Ich dachte, wenn ich in Foren und so einen Namen habe, dann kann ich es auch Draußen schaffen und Teil der Bewegung werden. Wirklich was verändern.”

importance for every individual at a very early stage. For the committed activist, this possibility helps to customize the propaganda, try out different methods and improve them.

7. The Internet is the most important retailer space for right-wing merchandise, music and clothes, and gives individuals the opportunity to make a living out of the movement membership. In addition, it creates a competition for radicalism to ensure the loyalty of the customer.

Every interviewee was certainly well aware of the economical importance of the Internet for the movement as well as for individuals:

“Well I say in some areas it is definitely a huge industry. Music and clothes and so on. Some become filthy rich because they can sell their stuff all over the world from a little village in Brandenburg. And this money flows back into the movement, at least some of it. And many see the possibility to live from the movement. At least they hope to. It can push you into it, such a large market. You just have to be radical enough.”¹⁴

Although the motive might be economical in the first place, the effect seems to be a “race to the (radical) bottom”. Bands, merchandise and apparel producers have to be the “most radical” or outspoken brand. Their lyrics or slogans have to be the most daring and radical ones to prove their commitment to the movement and, subsequently, secure the loyalty of the customer. This, in turn, has an encouraging effect on other members.

8. Contradictory findings

Some interviewees were sceptical about the role of the Internet for individual radicalization processes:

“Sure, it is important, but I really only felt being part of a movement when I was at a rally. There I had this revolutionary feeling. The Internet was there to make

¹⁴ “Na ja ich sage mal, es ist schon in einigen Bereichen eine riesige Industrie. Musik oder Klamotten oder so. Die werden doch steinreich, weil sie ihr Zeug doch in der ganzen Welt verschauern können, und dass aus dem kleinen Kaff in Brandenburg raus. Und das Geld fließt doch auch teilweise zurück in die Szene. Aber viele sehen auch die Möglichkeit von der Szene zu leben. Wenigstens hoffen das viele. Das kann einen schon rein treiben, so ein großer Markt. Muss man halt nur radikal genug sein.”

communication effective. We did everything else directly. Besides, you can have as much digital stuff as you want, a bookshelf has status!”¹⁵

The more sceptical statements came solely from the individuals who entered the movement before the Internet was commonly used in the movement, so they in fact started their radicalization without it. Although they clearly saw some effect, for them it was more for organisational purposes. However, one interviewee from this group stated:

“It wasn’t so important for me but I think it is essential for the younger ones. There are many who would never get access to a certain group without the Internet. And many would have more difficulty to become someone.”¹⁶

Naturally there seems to be a difference in the importance of this medium to the individuals, according to their age and how they got in contact with the Internet and the group in the first place.

IV. Integration of the findings into previous scholarship and theories

General background on radicalization and Internet

After the September 11 attacks, the research and subsequent literature on “Homegrown Terrorism”, “Global Jihad” and radicalization processes of Jihadi terrorists expanded massively and led, among other elements, to the analysis of the role of the Internet in individual radicalization. For example, the well known radicalization study of the NYPD Intelligence Division (Silber & Bhatt, 2007) claimed to have identified the Internet as a “driver and enabler for the process of radicalization” (ibid, p. 83). Within the study, the authors point out the importance of the Internet at every stage of the radicalization process. In the “Self-Identification” phase, radical and “unfiltered” ideology is provided to the recruit via the Internet as well as the opportunity to meet and network with like-minded individuals. In the second “Indoctrination” phase, the person adapts the radical worldview, which is enforced through the “veil of objectivity” of the Internet. In the third

¹⁵ “Ja gut, es ist schon sehr wichtig, aber ich habe mich nur wirklich Teil einer Masse gefühlt, wenn ich auf einer Demo war. Da hatte ich diese revolutionäre Stimmung. Das Internet war eigentlich nur für die effektive Absprache da. Alles andere haben wir dann direkt gemacht. Außerdem, wenn man auch noch so viel digitales Zeug hat, ein Bücherregal hat einfach Status.”

¹⁶ “Für mich war es jetzt nicht so wichtig aber ich glaube für die jüngeren ist es das Entscheidende. Da gibt es einige, die niemals in eine Gruppe reinkommen würden, ohne das Internet. Und auch viele hätten es viel schwerer irgendetwas zu werden.”

“Jihadization” phase, the Internet serves as the “enabler”, mainly providing technical information about targets, methods. (ibid.) This last aspect has been pointed out by many authors, arguing that even without any formal contact to any terrorist organization, individuals, through training manuals, videos and other material available online could become “virtual partners” (Kohlmann, 2008) and commit terrorist acts by simply studying it. Although the major advantage of the literature on “Homegrown Terrorism” and Jihadi radicalization lies in the connection between the Internet and the *individual* level of radicalization, the factors found to be relevant seem to be roughly the same: more effective unhindered communication, networks, transmission of propaganda and knowledge, collective identity. These factors are supported by Maura Conway (2006), who classified terrorist use of the Internet into: information provision, financing, networking, recruitment and information gathering. Similar factors are also named by Awan (2007:76-77): News, Propaganda, Training, and Expression. Another very recent study by RAND corporation (Von Behr, Reding, Edwards, & Gribbon, 2013) also supports the accelerating effect of the Internet on individual radicalization processes by: creating more opportunities to become radicalised; providing an ‘echo chamber’ (a place where individuals find their ideas supported and echoed by other like-minded individuals); allowing radicalisation to occur without physical contact; and increasing opportunities for self-radicalisation (ibid.: executive summary page xi)

Looking at the literature on radicalization processes in general, one can roughly distinguish four major schools: the sociological, social movement, empirical (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010) and psychological theories. The “sociological” school (Kepel, 2004; Kepel & Milelli, 2008; Khosrokhavar, 2005, 2006; Roy, 2004) sees the main reason of radicalization as lying with the individual, who reclaims a lost identity in an environment perceived as hostile (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010). The “social movement” (and “framing”) theorists claim, however, that radicalization occurs due to networks, group dynamics, peer pressure and a constructed reality (Sageman, 2004, 2007; Wiktorowicz, 2004). The “empiricists”, in contrast, try to find individual-level motivations and socio-economic profiles and draw the theories inductively (Nesser, 2004; Slooman & Tillie, 2006). One outcome of this school is the classification of different types of members within extremist groups with different radicalization processes, motives and backgrounds, e.g. the “leader”, the “protégé”, the “misfit” and the “drifter” (Nesser, 2004). The fourth school can be called “psychological” with one main author being John Horgan (2005, 2008). Horgan points to the fact that no “terrorist” profile has been found and most studies do not look into the socio-psychological dynamics between push and pull factors. Horgan (2008, p.6-7) states that emotional vulnerability, dissatisfaction with current political activity, identification with victims, belief that the use of violence is not immoral, a sense of reward and social ties into the radical group, among others, are very important.

In general it should be noted that the concept of ‘radicalization’ is controversial and led to a broad debate about the role of violence and illegality to understand the process (for an overview see: Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Kundnani, 2012; Sedgwick, 2010). However failing to explain the specific mechanisms behind any form of radicalization the above mentioned theories are only partially useful to understand why and how individuals move from non-violent to violent forms of political activism. In need for a sharper concept of the process of radicalization another approach is presented here: *radicalization can be understood as a process of individual depluralization of political concepts and values (e.g. justice, freedom, honour, violence, democracy) according with those concepts employed by a specific ideology.* The more individuals have internalized the notion that no other alternative interpretations of their (prioritized) political concepts (e.g. ‘freedom’, ‘honour’, ‘justice’, ‘violence’) exist (or are relevant), the more we can speak (and show) a degree of radicalization. This may happen with varying degrees of *intellectual* reflection (e.g. quoting a fascist thinker to explain certain behaviour or merely stating to do something because it seemed right within the cognitive framework or collective identity). However, this means that a high level of radicalization does not necessarily equal a high level of violent behaviour or extraordinary brutality. Of course radicalization in this sense is a rather normal phenomenon in society e.g. in sports, animal rights movement or dietary preferences (veganism for example). The important link here is the fusion (and combination) with a certain type of ideology that *inherently denies individual freedom (or equal rights) to persons not part of the radical person’s in-group and thusly the degree of ideological incompatibility with a political culture based on human rights and pluralism.* Consequently it is possible to understand how individuals *need* to act and behave illegally according to the degree of internalized and monopolized political concepts of their ideology simply because at a certain point no other option is visible to them. This process in fact creates a kind of ticking time bomb: a rapidly *decreasing* amount of alternatives and options in combination with an *increasing* amount of ideological calls for action.

In addition most theories on radicalization focus on Islamic extremism or Jihadism. Research on right-wing *radicalization processes* has been erratic and mostly not been placed within a comprehensive theory or methodology, at least in the German context (Neidhardt, 2002). One major scholar on right-wing radicalization (and deradicalization), Tore Bjørgo (1997), identifies, for example, the following factors motivating adolescents to get involved in right-wing groups: sympathy for the underdog position of the extreme right in relation to radical and violent opponents; protection against enemies and perceived threats; curiosity; search for excitement; opposition to previous generation or to parents; search for alternative to family or parents; search for friends or a community; search for status or identity; tendency to be docile in friendships. Another exemplary study on radicalization processes of right-wing extremists by van der Valk and Wagenaar (2010) categorized the factors involved on

the 'micro-level' (looking for friends, certain identity lifestyle, rebel against society, frustrations, excitement, adventure), "macro-factors" (social circumstances, shocking events) and 'group-related factors' (attractive image, place of excitement, provocation, violence, ideological recognition). Van der Valk and Wagenaar discussed briefly the role of the Internet and came to the following conclusion: "Once again, friendships, relationships and ideology play a role. According to the authors, while the internet serves to strengthen and accelerate the process [of radicalization], it cannot be regarded as a causal factor." (ibid.: 12) This comes as a surprise since, in theory, the Internet could provide a platform for friendships, relationships and ideology and thereby act as a facilitator, making the radicalization process described by van der Valk and Wagenaar possible in the first place. It is clear that it is not the Internet itself that causes the process, yet it might be necessary to bring all the elements together. Van der Valk and Wagenaar do not explain how they came to this conclusion and utilize the usual content descriptions of right-wing sites. Later in the report, however, they claim that "the internet can serve many different functions: it is a source of information, a means of communication and a virtual social environment. (...) They [web sites and forums] supply all three of the aforementioned functions. Reports placed on these forums serve as a source of information for young people who want to learn about the ideas of right-wing extremist groups. The forums also serve as a means of communication, recruitment, mobilisation and propaganda. And lastly, these forums serve as virtual social environments or 'digital hangouts' for their participants" (ibid.: 24). With this statement the reason why the authors dismissed a possible stronger effect of the Internet on radicalization appears even less clear.

Another study by Köhler (2014) could establish an essential driving force resulting from the combination of tasks performed in the group and ideological occupation of political ideas and concepts. In this study however the role of the Internet was not treated explicitly.

Findings of this paper and existing literature

In general, it has been observed very early that racist and white supremacist groups are very technology-affine and tend to adapt to new media structures and avant-garde ways of communication fairly quickly. Consequently, these groups have been very active in using the Internet from its early stages (Burris, Smith, & Strahm, 2000; Perry, 2000). It has been argued that this affinity with the Internet especially is rooted in this medium's high level of anonymity (Dobratz, 2001), in the freedom from mainstream media constraints (Hier, 2000), in the low social costs of using and organizing communication through the Internet (Wellman, et al., 1996) and in its efficiency and inexpensiveness (Perry, 2000). Additionally many scholars have highlighted the strategic value of the Internet, for instance for recruitment, as a retailer space for cloths, music and propaganda (Adams & Roscigno,

2005), to foster a closer network internally and present oneself more effectively to the outsider (Pfeiffer, Greven, & Grumke, 2006), and to create more comprehensive images of adversaries and allies (Adams & Roscigno, 2005). These structural amenities have been pointed out very clearly by the interviewees, in connection to their own radicalization process or the perceived effect on the radicalization of others. These elements (effectiveness, cheap communication, anonymity, economical gains etc.) allow for a better integration of each member into the movement, arguably leading to the stabilization of the ideological commitment and the consolidation of the worldview (Becker, 2008). Becker also identifies a tension between 'intentional' and 'actual' mobility of the individual, which limits the natural integration into the movement. The Internet seems to have dissolved this tension almost completely, as the interviewees expressed how 'amazing' and 'impressive' it was to connect to other movement members around the world and really feel being part of an active social movement. Becker suspected that there is a relationship between right-wing radicalization and the extent (in quantity and quality) of the personal social network, which is directly by the interview material. The Internet seems to increase the 'actual' mobility, even if only virtually, but the interviewees rarely make this distinction. At least the Internet creates the perception of reaching out to the movement without any constraints.

The anonymity and consequent possibility to live out the extreme ideology provided by the Internet has been recognized by the German domestic intelligence service (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz - BfV) as a major risk factor regarding radicalization: "The elusive communication on the Internet is a risk that cannot be underestimated. In contrast to 'normal social life', the Internet allows for an anonymity which Internet can foster hidden extremist attitudes that can be acted out over a long time."¹⁷ (Verfassungsschutz, 2012: 36) This statement, while not underpinned by scientific research, shows the significance that the state authorities ascribe to the effect of anonymous Internet communication on radicalization processes.

On a more abstract level, scholarship about the value of media for social movements has led to the conclusion that these movements, heavily relying on media and mainstream culture attention (Morris, 2000), need to construct and maintain a collective identity, or more specifically, a "belief in their own political or social efficacy" (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). This collective identity, understood as a system to "voice grievances and pursue a collective goal" (Adams & Roscigno, 2005) while perceiving the group as a unified empirical actor (Melucci, 1995), is especially advanced through the effective application and distribution of 'symbolic' frames - constructs used to assign meaning to events, occurrences, social

¹⁷ "Die schwer nachvollziehbare Kommunikation im Internet ist als eine nicht zu unterschätzende Gefahr zu bewerten. Im Gegensatz zum ‚normalen Sozialleben‘ ist im Internet ein anonymes Auftreten möglich und damit können extremistische Einstellungen nicht nur im Verborgenen wachsen sondern über weite Strecken auch aktiv ausgelebt werden."

structures and cultural artefacts (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). The Internet is especially suitable for the quick creation, adaption and distribution of these frames and is thereby thought to play a central role in building and maintaining of the group's collective identity. The 'collective identity' consists of elements rooted in the relationship to and between groups and individuals. This element (collective identity) did not, however, appear directly in the interviews. In the contrary, some individuals pointed out the 'plurality' of thoughts and opinions, which would invigorate the movement. Another effect of the Internet seems to be the creation of a 'market of collective identities'. Individuals become able to 'shop' for ideological interpretations and styles most fitting for them and also change or evolve their own placement within the ideology. Although somehow the interviewees seem to have had the feeling of being part of one huge movement, clearly they felt that *within* it the Internet provided them with a complexity of different ways to be part of that movement. For subgroups, in contrast, the Internet seems to play a similar or slightly minor role to construct a collective identity compared to music and clothes. As a so-called "venue of information exchange" (Snow, Zurcher, & Ekland-Olson, 1980) the Internet has altered the traditional ways of communication for these groups and created the "digital hangout places" (van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010) which hold the group together, allow for bonding and engagement in social activities (e.g. meetings to play online games together). For group members the Internet might be a tool to accelerate the process of collective identity creation. This takes place at the risk of friction, as one effect of the low social costs of Internet communication is to make it easier to leave the group, join another or start their own. Theories arguing that the Internet promotes solidarity among members through the advancement of a collective identity (Adams & Roscigno, 2005), and thereby fostering radicalization, could therefore not be supported through the present interview sample. This is also the case for the stated obliteration of ideological differences between groups of the far right (Nickolay, 2000).

Of course the Internet is not a structure separated from the 'real world' but dynamically connected with it. It has therefore been argued that this relationship between offline and online networks gives activists and potential recruits the opportunity to assure themselves of the strength of the movement, commit to the cause and specialize in the ideology (Pfeiffer, et al., 2006). This is very much supported by the interview material. Although interviewees stated that there are some 'Computer Nazis' who are only active online, most members however take it to the 'next level', i.e. joining a rally or concert, meeting with groups, planning and executing 'actions', which was said to be inseparable from being a 'true' member of the movement. However, the Internet exactly helps to do this, giving multiple opportunities to find the right group to enter as well as start again if the person does not agree with the newfound comrades. Thus the Internet can be seen like a permanent gateway to offline political activism.

One major research gap of the previous scholarship is rooted in the applied methods of most studies: monitoring and analyzing content of right-wing extremist web pages. Although this is without a question an important and necessary tool to discover structures, ideological developments and networks of right-wing groups, there has been almost no major research about the use of the ‘non-political’, outer-movement Internet by right-wing extremists, as well as the general ‘non-political’ Internet usage by extremists (see Resnick, 1999, but focussing only on general political use of the Internet). Recruitment attempts on Facebook and Twitter need completely different strategies and tactics compared with clearly marked and recognizable ‘political’ online sites (Weimann, 2004). There are only few studies researching the success or impact of this recruitment efforts, but some claim that right-wing extremist propaganda can spread quite unhindered in “non-political”, i.e. non right-wing, social web structures (Hardinghaus, 2012). This would support the theory that propaganda efforts in external infrastructures by right-wing extremists are not pointless and lead to some form of ideological radicalization, in the sense that anti-Semitism or xenophobia become accepted norms among users and build the bridge to following recruiting and radicalization attempts.

It is also possible that the apolitical use of the Internet indirectly helps extremists to maintain their political life or endure stress and pressure associated with the group membership and to create ‘free spaces’ (Futrell & Simi, 2004) – political or non-political – through the Internet (the “politics within the net” by Resnick, 1999). In the interview material elements like recreation and relaxation are evident and popular. Opportunities to engage in non-political social activities, such as playing online games, seem to be very important to lose some of the strain associated with group membership. ‘Freedom’ to choose between political and non-political activities closes an important gap in offline recruiting attempts by right-wing extremist groups, as with this possibility individuals who are not yet fully ‘converted’ can engage ‘part-time’ in the movement and step up their involvement as they wish. In addition, this gives older members the chance to release social pressure, which could otherwise lead to a political burnout and maybe the exit from the movement. Even the members of the National Socialist Underground terror cell evidently sought recreation in sports and online gaming. They made friends via team speak during some gaming sessions and met regularly to discuss ordinary topics (Fuchs, 2012). A strong need for further research has become evident with regard to targeted recruitment in non-political online structures (e.g. Facebook, external chat rooms.). Many interviewees described in detail how ‘external’ recruitment works: monitoring chat room discussions and Facebook pages to step in at the right time, give small bits of information to specifically chosen individual in order to lure him/her into ‘harmless’ discussions adapted to the target individual’s preferences and argumentation skills found out through the previous monitoring and data mining. Furthermore one side effect of this ‘customized’ recruitment might be that it also changes the perception of movement members about the ‘outside’. As some are very engaged in

monitoring and finding the best ways to get into ‘the heads’ of possible recruits, they have to be permanently engaged with the life outside their movement. What the effects of this on the movement might be requires further and more extensive research.

Still the core aspect of the research question of this paper remains unexplained: how exactly does the Internet and elements connected to it influence individual radicalization processes. In relation to the above stated concept of radicalization processes as depluralization of political concepts according to a specific ideology one theory most relevant to understand the concrete effect of the Internet on this individual depluralization process is the ‘contrast society’ (Koehler, 2015). Defined as “the mechanisms involved within the social system of interaction between Radical Social Movements and their surrounding societies” (ibid.: 30-31) it is argued that “this mechanism starts with the Radical Social Movement’s goal to redirect the Target Society towards the (ideologically) desired direction and change it into the ideologically purified version of the Target Society. This includes the alternative societal environments created as well as the ideological niches within the positive Target Society already influenced. Thus, these Contrast Societies are the habitats of ideologies incompatible with their Target Societies’ dominant ideologies” (ibid.). Relying on a dynamic exchange between the radical social movement and its surrounding environment through ideology and infrastructure the main goal of these movements is to create an ideologically purified society. To achieve this goal it is in essence necessary to transport ideological core concepts into individual worldviews. As a main facilitator the Internet combines the ideological pillar with the infrastructure of the radical social movement. Those interviewees who grew up with the Internet and entered the movement through it clearly expressed how they ‘learned’ the ideology, the language, the topics and behavioural patterns online, *before* they engaged in offline activities. The other group was more sceptical but also pointed out two factors: first the rapid acceleration of movement integration and thereby expansion of activities; second the ideological professionalization, i.e. permanent sharpening of argumentation skills and the need to stay ‘on top’ of the ideological development.

Summing up this study found evidence that the Internet is a major driving factor to establish and foster the development of radical contrast societies (cf. Koehler, 2015) transmitting radical and violent ideologies and translating them into political activism.

V. Conclusion

In summary, the findings of the interview analysis provide support for many of the previous theories, mostly from the field of ‘Homegrown Terrorism’ and jihadist radicalization. Structural elements attributed to the Internet supporting right-wing groups (effective and inexpensive communication, anonymity) have also been mentioned and highlighted by the interviewees as fostering their own radicalization. In this sense, the Internet is the most

important sphere for individuals to ‘learn’ the skills necessary to access offline groups and advance within the hierarchy. In addition the Internet also seems to be the main space for groups, recruiters and strategists of the right-wing extremist movement to connect ideological patterns to behavioural patterns, effectively directly influencing individual radical behaviour and opinions through establishing and promoting the ‘radical contrast society’ (Koehler, 2015). Compared to other ‘socialization institutions’, such as offline group activities, music and concerts, rallies and political trainings, the Internet appears as the most important element driving individual radicalization processes, according to the used material. However, this study only used a small empirical basis to find indicators for the importance of further research about the relationship between the Internet and individual radicalization. Indeed, the material for this paper points to a far more substantial connection: “The Internet is now what the music used to be in the 80s.”¹⁸

¹⁸ “Was die Musik in den 80ern war, ist das Internet heute.”

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