EXTREMISM IN CYBERSPACE. HOW POLITICAL, IDEOLOGICAL, AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISTS AND INTENSE MINORITIES MAKE USE OF THE WORLD WIDE WEB

by

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LEFT- AND RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM ON THE INTERNET AND THE GERMAN SOCIETY [1]

The political discussion in Germany about extremists' use of the internet is focused on political extremism, especially right-wing extremists' propaganda on the World Wide Web (Bundesministerium des Innern 2006). Previous research provides evidence that political extremists from the left and from the right make use of the internet in mainly the same manner (Roessing 2005a). There are some differences between left-wing and right-wing extremists in the use of interactive technologies on web sites such as guest books and discussion forums (Roessing 2005b). Internet activists from the left tend to concentrate more on public and less manageable guest books whereas rightists resort to discussion forums that can be used both to hide objectionable content from public access and to manage user activities. It has been hypothesized that, at least in Germany, public opinion and authorities put more pressure on right-wing than on left-wing extremists, thus forcing right-wing activists to use the internet in a less public and more concealed manner (Roessing 2005b). Some empirical evidence substantiates this hypothesis, at least with regard to specific aspects of public opinion and certain sections of the German society. Since 1968 there is growing evidence that in Germany public opinion tends to assess right-wing positions as less acceptable than left-

wing positions (Noelle-Neumann 1996). The Allensbach Institute noticed a value change at least in Western Germany towards leftist values from the 1970s to the 1990s (Noelle-Neumann 1998).[1] This unequal evaluation of left- and right-wing extremism – at least in some sections of society, especially among the more educated ones – has not only consequences for survey researchers, who have to keep in mind spirals of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1984) against the political right, for example when striving to improve election forecasts. The phenomenon also constricts content analyses of extremists' propaganda: During a study on the use of the internet among extremist groups, coders complained for example that it was difficult to measure left and right content equally unbiased (Roessing 2005a). An experiment conducted at the University of Mainz in 2005 showed that the student participants tended to assess right-wing propaganda and activities as more threatening than left-wing propaganda or activities. This was especially true for extremist's use of internet discussion forums (Roessing/Siebert 2006).

A small survey (n=114), covering the same population, supported the findings of the experiments: In a split-ballot question, most respondents rejected the idea that right-wing extremists are not as bad as left-wing extremists, while a majority approved the contrary position.[2] While 54 percent rejected the notion that left-wing extremism is acceptable due to its compre-

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[1] No attempt shall be made here to discuss this phenomenon in greater detail since this would require large-scale historical analyses. Two possible reasons are regularly discussed in the literature: One possible reason for the unequal assessment of right- and left-wing positions might be the perception that the crimes and atrocities of the Nazis between 1933 and 1945 were the worst crimes in the history of mankind. Another reason might be the dominance of moderate leftist journalists in the German media in the 1970s and 1980s (Köcher 1985).There are some indicators that public opinion in formerly communist countries in eastern Europe tends to judge left-wing extremism as worse than right wing extremism (Szayna 1997).

[2] The questions read:

(Version A) "Neulich sagte uns jemand: 'Natürlich sind Links- und Rechtsextremisten gefährlich und müssen bekämpft werden. Meiner Meinung nach ist der Rechtsextremismus jedoch viel gefährlicher als der Linksextremismus, schließlich verfolgen die Linksextremisten letztlich nachvollziehbare Ziele' - Würden Sie dem zustimmen oder nicht zustimmen?" English: „Lately someone told us: 'Of course left- and right-wing extremists are dangerous. But in my opinion right-wing extremism is much more dangerous than left-wing extremism, because after all left-wing extremists pursue comprehensible goals.'"
(Version B) "Neulich sagte uns jemand: 'Natürlich sind Rechts- und Linksextremisten gefährlich und müssen bekämpft werden. Meiner Meinung nach ist der Linksextremismus jedoch viel gefährlicher als der Rechtsextremismus, schließlich verfolgen die Rechtsextremisten letztlich nachvollziehbare Ziele'" English: "Lately someone told us: 'Of course right- and left-wing extremists are dangerous. But in my opinion left-wing extremism is much more dangerous than right-wing extremism, because after allright-wing extremists pursue comprehensible goals.'"

hensible goals, 98 percent rejected the same idea for right-wing extremism.[3]

In the light of these results, it seems plausible that differences in the way extremists from the right and the left make use of the internet are induced in part by public opinion and public action. This may change in the future since recent evidence has shown that rightist values are gaining strength in the German society.[4] Therefore, and because of the transitory nature of the World Wide Web, longitudinal analyses of extremist web sites are an important research desideratum.

MANIFESTATIONS OF NON-POLITICAL EXTREME IDEOLOGIES AND INTENSE MINORITY OPINIONS ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB [2]

While preparing content-analyses on extreme online content, pretest coders became aware of striking similarities between political extremism and other forms of extreme ideology. In order to give a first definition of the research objects in this area, this paper refers again to the report of the office for the protection of the constitution. This report mentions three areas of extreme – i.e. antidemocratic and inhuman – activities in Germany that are not directly related to political extremism:

I. Extreme Islamism (Bundesministerium des Innern 2006: 192 ff).

II. Extreme actions of foreigners, sometimes motivated by ethnic, nationalist, or religious backgrounds (Bundesministerium des Innern 2006: 234 ff).

III. Activities of the Scientology-Organisation (Bundesministerium des Innern 2006: 291 ff).

Since the office for the protection of the (German) constitution limits its activities to substantial threats against democracy, this source will not suffice to determine 'extreme' activities on the internet. To analyse the online activities of religious, esoteric, and other ideological splinter groups, one has to go back to theories of the behaviour of minorities.

"Intense Minorities" (Gilljam/Granberg 1995: 199) usually employ certain styles of behaviour to influence public opinion (Moscovici 1979; Kepplinger 1980).

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[3] Phi = .488, p .000, n = 95, without „don't know" and „no answer" (n=19).

[4] The study is not yet available in a printed version, cf: http://www.tagesschau.de/ aktuell/meldungen/0,1185,OID6072192,00.html (German).

I. *Investment*. If the behaviour of a minority reflects notable investments and personal sacrifices for the goals of the group, the probability of social influence grows (Moscovici 1979: 135 f).

II. *Autonomy*. Autonomy consists of independence, dedication and objectivity. The appearance of autonomy strengthens the power of a minority faction (Moscovici 1979: 136 f).

III. *Consistency*. Consistent behaviour is a sign of self-confidence and firm dedication (Moscovici 1979: 146).*Rigidity*. Rigid behaviour can support but also weaken the success of minority group actions (Moscovici 1979: 153 ff). According to Noelle-Neumann (1985), intense, loud, and engaged (rigidly behaving) minorities can influence society best, when they address morally loaded, emotional issues.

IV. *Fairness* always gives a good impression and mitigates negative side-effects of rigidity (Moscovici 1979: 166 ff).

Using a research technique that includes an iterative procedure to identify camouflaged and hidden contents of the internet (Roessing 2005a; 2005b), the author identified four typical web sites of ideological minorities.[5] In the following sections of this chapter, the structure and content of these web sites will be analysed in the light of the styles of behaviour usually associated with intense minorities.

ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS [2.1]

Web publications of animal rights activists like http://www.directaction.info convey some typical attributes of intense minorities:

I. The minority is autonomous and rigid. Long lists of actions against their enemies are used to demonstrate presence and activity. Members of the movement are reinforced in their convictions, and accidental readers may be impressed by the pictured presence and strength of the activists.

II. Lists of arrested members of the activist movement document the amount of personal investment for the goals of the group.

ESOTERIC PSEUDO-SCIENCE [2.2]

Some people strongly believe in phenomena and theories that are either not accessible by commonly accepted scientific methods or have been proved to

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[5]   The research project took place in October and November 2006.

be nonsense by scientific research. Examples of those esoteric pseudo-scientific theories are Scalar-Waves (hypothetical longitudinal electromagnetic waves, c.f. e.g., http://jnaudin.free.fr/html/scalwidx.htm), Free Energy (a hypothetical inexhaustible source of energy, that violates the commonly accepted laws of thermodynamics, c.f. e.g., http://www.free-energy.ws). Esoteric web sites of this kind usually have little or no interactive devices such as discussion forums, but present detailed information on the underlying beliefs and incorporate in many cases accusations of conspiracy and maliciousness against opponents.[6] This is consistent with the assumptions of Moscovici's theory because the impression that a large amount of personal involvement is at stake and that a position is autonomously defended from attacks fosters the influence of a minority group (Moscovici 1979: 135 ff).

RELIGIOUS ACTIVISTS [2.3]
Besides the socially accepted or at least tolerated activities of the world religions and their official or semi-official institutions there are lots of religious (or alternative religious) minorities. And even some "secret" orders maintain web sites nowadays (c.f. e.g., http://www.oto.org or http://www.oto-uk.org, web sites of the Ordo Templi Orientis, a religious group often associated with occultism and magic, because one of its most famous members was the committed sexual-magician Aleister Crowley). Unfortunately, the area of religious or pseudo-religious splinter-groups is too extensive and too inhomogeneous even for a superficial analysis of only a few typical web sites. At least it is possible to propose a strategy for future analyses of the web activities of religious activists based on known online behaviour of other extremists and minorities. Categories for content analyses should include:
I. Relations between behaviour styles and web site features.
II. Intensity of opinion-expression, e.g. in terms of negative campaigning against other opinions or the proposal of violence against other beliefs.
III. User approach (interactivity, user contributions to the web sites)
IV. Multimedia (sound files, as previously found to be significant of a certain type of left- and right-wing web sites, cf. Roessing 2005a; video files or streams).

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[6] C.f. e.g., the discussion of alleged secret trials against a German promoter of Scalar Waves on http://www.etzs.de/go/index.php?dir=25_Strafverfahren&page=1&sublevel=0

EXTREMISTS' AND INTENSE MINORITIES' USE OF FREELY ACCESSIBLE WEB PROJECTS [3]

Ever since the online technology reached a greater public in the 1990s, extremists and exponents of minority opinions have made use of the internet. For example, some discussion groups of the Usenet (NNTP, cf. Roessing 2005c) are known for recurrent postings with anti-Semitic or nationalist content (e.g., de.sci.geschichte, which contains many denials of the Holocaust). With the introduction of Web 2.0 as an extension of past user possibilities to influence the content of a web site, and open projects like Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), the technological progress of the internet provides additional opportunities for extremists to seize cyberspace. Even a quite unsystematic look into the German Wikipedia (de.wikipedia.org) makes clear that the same extremists and exponents of intense minorities, whose general online activities have been discussed in the sections above, now try to exploit the online encyclopedia for their specific goals. In terms of the possible effects of these activities, Wikipedia is particularly interesting as it is used by a lot of people, in contrast to the Usenet, for example, which only a few individuals, most of them with higher education, use.

POLITICAL EXTREMISTS IN THE GERMAN WIKIPEDIA [3.1]

a) In November 2006 a user was locked out of Wikipedia because he tried to write a "Marxist point of view" into many articles, especially about economic subjects.[7]

b) Right-wing activists also try to place their point of view in Wikipedia's articles.[8] They usually get locked out very fast as 'vandals'.[9]

c) Regularly, some users try to import political conflicts from all over the world into wikipedia. In November 2006, for example, a user is facing an exclusion from Wikipedia as he aggressively wrote against the people of Macedonia.[10]

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[7] Cf. http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Benutzersperrung/Archiv/ HorstTitus&oldid=23989050

[8] Cf. http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia_Diskussion:Benutzersperrung/ Archiv/Cogito2&oldid=8229747

[9] http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Spezial:Log&type=block&user=&page=Benutzer: Cogito2

PSEUDO-SCIENTISTS AND RELIGIOUS ACTIVISTS [3.2]

Conflicts between followers of pseudo-scientific ideologies and users rely-ing on the commonly accepted theory of science often lead to so-called 'edit wars' in Wikipedia articles. These often result in partial or total locks of an article, which makes it impossible for unregistered or even all users to edit the content. Many of the hundreds of locked articles in the German Wikipe-dia deal with pseudo-scientific ideologies.[11] Due to the dangers of pseudo-scientific articles on health-issues, they sometimes get removed from Wiki-pedia;[12] exponents, fighting for their positive views of defused or deleted, articles are usually thrown out of the Wikipedia community.[13]

So far, there are no systematic analyses of Wikipedia that deal with the activities of intense minorities or extremists in the online encyclopedia. Es-pecially quantitative analyses of social structures and social processes in the online community of Wikipedia are missing.[14]

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[10] Cf. http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Benutzersperrung/Vergina&oldid=23988799

[11] Cf. e.g http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Diskussion:Freie_Energie_%28Pseudo wissenschaft%29&oldid=20869145;http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Skalarwelle&oldid=23979562 (the same subject is discussed in section 2.2 of the present paper).

[12] Cf. http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:L%C3%B6schkandidaten/10._Oktober_2006#Blutelektrifikation_.28zum_zweiten_Mal_nach_SLA_gel.C3.B6scht.29

[13] Cf. http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Edit-War&oldid=23818862.

[14] The author of the present paper is currently preparing a first content analysis approach to public opinion and Wikipedia, but there are no results yet.

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PRIMARY SOURCES (WEB SITES)

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