"THEY WILL DESTROY TELEGRAM" – NARRATIVES OF PLATFORM CENSORSHIP IN THE GERMAN-SPEAKING COVID-19 CONSPIRACY COMMUNITY ON TELEGRAM

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided fertile ground for the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories. In response, social media platforms have implemented stringent content moderation measures, including the deletion of problematic content and deplatforming of offending accounts, compelling conspiracy theorists to migrate towards the messaging app Telegram (Rogers 2020). Such actors face 'deplatforming', in which users are ejected "from a specific technology platform by closing their accounts, banning them, or blocking them from using the platform or its services" (Radsch, 2021, p.109). Short of being banned, users can also find themselves frustrated by a range of content moderation measures that prevent them from circulating content freely, including reducing the reach or visibility of content, adding fact checks or Wikipedia links to posts around disputed subjects or preventing creators from monetizing their content (Gillespie, 2022; Caplan and Gillespie, 2020; Cotter et al., 2022). Online conspiracy theory communities, which we address in our research, are particularly at odds with the governance of digital platforms (Papakyiakopoulos et al. 2020). The infrastructure for content moderation is crucial for content production and communication possibilities. While previous studies explore how non-conspiracy users perceive content moderation

(e.g., Myers West 2018), there is a lack of research on how conspiracy theorists interpret content moderation and how it fits into broader censorship narratives.

Our study addresses this gap by investigating how conspiracy communities – the "Querdenken" movement – on Telegram discuss and (mis-)conceptualize content moderation practices across platforms. Born in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the "Querdenken" movement gained prominence in the early 2020s for its criticism of what it believed to be restrictive government policies in Austria, as well as Germany. It rapidly expanded through digital communication and established itself as an important platform for coordinating protests and voicing dissent against political decisions and pandemic containment strategies (Holzer 2021). As the pandemic has abated, this community has pursued positions associated with right-wing populism, including on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, these communities have faced a tougher regulatory environment with new laws that directly impact content moderation in Germany (the Network Enforcement Act) and Austria (the Communications Platforms Act), as well as the European Digital Services Act and recently imposed sanctions against Russian state-affiliated media. We aim to uncover the prevalent beliefs of "Querdenken" community members about content moderation, proposed resistance strategies, and how these views intersect with overarching conspiratorial frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

While previous studies have explored the reactions of non-conspiracy theorist users to content moderation, this subject remains largely unexplored within conspiracist communities. In the context of non-conspiracist user populations, Myers West (2018) and Savolainen (2022) have looked at "folk theories" of content moderation and social media algorithms. This and similar literature argue that platforms' lack of transparency about content moderation contributes to the development of theories and speculation by users (e.g. Cotter, 2019). Further studies have revealed suspicions among users that they are being marginalised using content moderation for ideological reasons or because of platforms' discomfort with subjects such as sexuality (Riedl et al., 2024; Are, 2021). Although this might suggest that users are at the mercy of platforms, research has uncovered users' strategies for resisting content moderation, for example by changing the spellings of words that are likely to trigger content moderation processes (Gillett et al., 2023; Gerrard, 2018; Steen et al., 2023).

Methods

Our research methodology involves an in-depth examination and content analysis of Telegram messages utilizing a dataset comprising 87 channels in the German and Austrian corona skeptical "Querdenken" community. Messages were downloaded from the following time periods: (1) the time around the largest Covid-19 protest in Austria (9th to 23rd December 2021) (2) a selected time period following the Russian invasion of the Ukraine (3rd to 17th March 2022) and (3) a selected time period after most Covid-19-related restrictions were lifted in Austria (1st to 15th February 2023). These were chosen as time periods representing different phases for the COVID-19 protest movement in Austria. Using MAXQDA, this dataset was further filtered using a keyword search to only messages that mentioned at least one of a list of social media platforms,

messaging platforms and apps. In a second step, this was further refined using a list of German-language keywords relevant to content moderation and related controversies. For the qualitative content analysis, we analyzed references to content moderation to identify key themes and narratives. Using the three most mentioned platforms regarding content moderation – Telegram, Facebook and YouTube – we then developed comparative case studies on the discussion of these platforms. Overall, the case studies show how the content moderation measures identified by users are woven into conspiracy narratives and which actors are seen as central. At the same time, they reveal which platforms are seen as alternatives and free from censorship.

Findings

On each platform, there is a distinct discourse about how content moderation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is perceived. Conspiracy theorists portray Telegram as a refuge for unfiltered communication, citing its encrypted nature and limited content moderation. Nevertheless, they consider Telegram to be under existential threat from both government regulators and app store operators. In contrast, the central theme of the discussion around Facebook is its fact-checking program, which is responsible for removing and downranking COVID-19 vaccine-related content. Conspiracy theorists point to selective censorship practices and suggest that corporate influence, particularly from pharmaceutical companies, play a role in content moderation decisions. On YouTube, criticism of the removal of content and accounts is directed at various tech companies that are perceived as representing the so-called elites. The regulatory interventions that prevent people from learning the 'whole truth' are highlighted.

Discussion & Conclusion

Our findings provide valuable insights into the emergence and spread of conspiracy theories in digital ecosystems, shedding light on the development of censorship narratives and circumvention strategies. This helps to illuminate how conspiracy theorists make sense of disruption and unpredictability in their social media communications and bring the new order of platform power into their understanding of the old order of conspiracy. This is particularly timely considering the continuing growth of right-wing populism against the backdrop of a stricter regulatory environment against hate speech and disinformation in Europe.

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