Extended Abstract

Einreichung für die Jahrestagung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft

#Stolzmonat: How German right-wing actors hijacked the pride-movement to spread patriotic and anti-queer narratives on TikTok

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Extended Abstract

New avenues of participation have emerged in the digital era, providing marginalized groups with opportunities for engagement and articulation. With its rapidly growing user numbers (Silberling, 2021), TikTok's content-centric approach tailored to producing and consuming videos involving popcultural references introduces prospects for hashtag activism like #pridemonth but also provides a fertile ground for the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories (Basch et al., 2021; Shang et al., 2021).

Social media hypes are defined as media generated, wall-to-wall news wave, triggered by one specific event and enlarged by the self-reinforcing processes within the news production of the media (Vasterman, 2005) For instance, the hashtag #pridemonth has already developed momentum on (social) media platforms and also went viral on TikTok with more 18,2 billion views. Consequently, this kind of attention fostered backlash from emerging counter-movements: For example, right-wing actors in Germany have tried to piggyback on the pride-movement and spread patriotic and anti-queer narratives via the German translation #Stolzmonat on TikTok in June 2023. This practice of hijacking hashtags (Bradshaw, 2022; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015) is well-researched on Twitter with its core elements agenda surfing, reframing and derailment.

This study aims to investigate how the elements and dynamics of hijacking are employed on TikTok, using the example of the #Stolzmonat campaign. Accessibility to data and the searchability of the platform is challenging, so we use a mixed-methods design to identify relevant content and actors. As a first step a collection of 810 TikToks related to the #Stolzmonat search query was gathered, including account information, number of likes and comments, video descriptions, and timestamps. A combination of automated content analysis, network analysis and time-based analysis was conducted to identify related topics and communities and to trace the dynamics of the hashtag campaign. Additionally, qualitative content analysis was performed on the ten most active accounts and viral TikToks to get a deeper understanding of the used features and actors involved.

The automated content analysis revealed a strong association between the #Stolzmonat campaign and the German right-wing populist political party AfD and right-wing extremist accounts. The network analysis of co-occurring hashtags also showed a government-opposing network with spillover into other topics such as Covid, energy crisis, and climate change. The campaign peaked in the beginning of June but remained at a constant level over the course of the month. However, a significant queer countermovement within the countermovement was also observed, which could develop a far larger amplitude, but then immediately faded. The qualitative content analysis highlighted the role of initiators, queer accounts, and amplifier accounts among the ten most active users. While queer content garnered high engagement, TikToks promoting #Stolzmonat featured peculiar slideshows with patriotic motifs and queerphobic content, deviating from typical TikTok design elements and showing ties to Russian propaganda accounts and conspiracy communities.

The case study of #Stolzmonat exemplifies typical hijacking tactics in terms of agenda surfing (general media attention), reframing (exploiting the popularity of #pride and reconnecting it to own agenda) and derailment (distract from original movement, spread of hateful content). The current study can be seen as a first attempt to capture macrostructures with specific domain knowledge on TikTok. We propose further iteration of this mixed-methods design in the sense of a snowballing approach to

identify relevant networks of malicious communities and their involvement in social media hypes.

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