

# Social Media as a Tool against Populist Appropriation of FoRB and for Promoting FoRB?

## Challenges, Ideas and Strategies

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The words “Der ISLAM kann sich NICHT auf die Religionsfreiheit berufen!” (“ISLAM may NOT invoke freedom of religion!”) are emblazoned at the centre of a tweet by the Saxon parliamentary group of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD). The parliamentary group attributes this quote to the new-right professor emeritus Dr Karl Albrecht Schachtschneider, whom they had invited to a hearing in the Saxon parliament as an “expert.”<sup>1</sup> As of 4 May 2023, the tweet had collected a total of 191 likes. By comparison, the most popular post on the account of the Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief (@ReligionBund) counted just 68 likes at the same time.<sup>2</sup> A Facebook post by the Saxon AfD parliamentary group with the same content even collected over 1,800 likes.<sup>3</sup> The associated YouTube video – which contains a whole series of distortions and misinterpretations of religious freedom – made it among the top 20 most viewed German-language videos on the keyword “*Religionsfreiheit*” (“religious

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1 AfD-Fraktion Sachsen (@AFD\_SLT): Am 31. März 2023 sprach Prof. Dr. Karl Albrecht Schachtschneider als Experte im Sächsischen Landtag zum #AfD-Gesetzentwurf für ein Kopftuchverbot in Schulen und Kindergärten (3 Apr. 2023), [https://twitter.com/AfD\\_SLT/status/1642825189493727233](https://twitter.com/AfD_SLT/status/1642825189493727233), accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

2 Number calculated with the following tool: <https://www.vicinitas.io/free-tools/download-user-tweets?tracker=%40ReligionBund>, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.

3 AfD Fraktion Sachsen: Am 31. März 2023 sprach Prof. Dr. Karl Albrecht Schachtschneider als Experte im Sächsischen Landtag zum #AfD-Gesetzentwurf für ein Kopftuchverbot (3 Apr. 2023), <https://www.facebook.com/AfD.Fraktion.Sachsen/posts/pfbid0D0SrymexCo31wZr6YCeBczc33fytar36Rgbf1pAoTE37BgMaXWPEaSQZTeMKA7q1>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

freedom”) with over 19,400 views.<sup>4</sup> The above example already indicates that the attempts of the far-right to appropriate and reinterpret religious freedom are not limited to the analogue world. Social media platforms are gratefully used, and sometimes with considerable reach. This article not only discusses how to counter populist appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom in the digital space, but also looks at how engagement in social media can strengthen this right to freedom.

### **Attacks on religious freedom in social media: Narratives and strategies**

Taking a look at German-language tweets on the keyword of “religious freedom” in the spring of 2023, one can find a large number of contributions problematising religious freedom targeting religious (non-Christian) minorities.<sup>5</sup> Many users claim that it is being made use of to defend or even promote religious extremism; for example the notion that a foreign ideology is being imposed on the population under the guise of religious freedom. Users cite Islamism and alleged Islamisation in particular as threats made possible by religious freedom. Some Twitter users simply reject religious freedom based on an anti-liberal attitude.

Other Twitter users see the danger of having an ideology imposed on them in current social developments and political decisions and assess this as a threat to their own religious freedom. However, this is mostly not about legitimate criticism of a disproportionate encroachment on their freedom rights, but rather using religious freedom as a defensive argument against anything that contradicts their own views. For example, they present coronavirus protection measures, climate protection measures, divergent ideas regarding gender identity and/or sexual orientation, Islam, the societal “mainstream” and supposed political correctness as a threat to religious freedom.

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4 AfD-Fraktion im Sächsischen Landtag: Prof. Schachtschneider: Islam kann sich NICHT auf Religionsfreiheit berufen! (1 Apr. 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTsZl eRulYY>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

5 See the overview of a systematic content analysis of all tweets from the period 04/25/2023, 09:23 CEST to 05/05/2023, 09:23 CEST containing the term “*Religionsfreiheit*” (“religious freedom”) at the following online attachment: <https://link.transcript-open.de/9783839468272/download/001>.

Other users understand religious freedom selectively and discriminate against individual religious communities; for example by calling for unjustified restrictions on Islam in particular or even putting forward the thesis that it is not compatible with religious freedom. Frequently, users employ the form of “whataboutism” by referring to violations of religious freedom in countries where the respective religious community constitutes a majority of the population. The appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom often functions as a means of targeted disparagement of certain groups of people and particularly affects people of the Muslim faith.

These examples indicate that both instrumentalisation of religious freedom and ignorance about this human right are widespread. For example, religious freedom is reduced to a single aspect and other essential areas of application and aspects are implicitly or explicitly negated. For instance, the misconceptions that “freedom of religion” means “freedom from religion” or that religion must be apolitical and a purely private matter are frequently encountered. The concept of justified restrictions on religious freedom – which in turn are subject to strict criteria – is also often not properly understood.

In addition to the problematic narratives and misunderstandings listed above that (directly) refer to religious freedom, a large variety of other narratives that do not directly refer to religious freedom but are nevertheless harmful to it are also widespread. For example, hatred, misinformation and conspiracy theories are spread regarding individual religious communities, especially minorities.<sup>6</sup> In Western countries, we often have to deal with anti-Semitic and Islamophobic content.<sup>7</sup> Especially accounts that can be assigned to right-wing

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6 Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung/Auswärtiges Amt: 2. Bericht der Bundesregierung zur weltweiten Lage der Religionsfreiheit. Berichtszeitraum 2018 bis 2019. [Second Report of the German Government on the Global Situation of Religious Freedom. Reporting Period 2018 and 2019] (Oct. 2020), pp. 65–99, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2410402/9e394a9928461b6c4aco4368b7a26af/201028-zweiter-bericht-der-bundesregierung-zur-weltweiten-lage-de-r-religionsfreiheit-data.pdf>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

7 Especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Institute for Freedom of Faith & Security in Europe observed a new wave of anti-Semitic and Islamophobic content: Rose, Hannah: Pandemic Hate: COVID-related Antisemitism and Islamophobia, and the Role of Social Media, Munich: IFFSE 2021, [https://www.iffse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/IFFSE-report-Entwurf-Doppelseiten-12\\_13-10-21.pdf](https://www.iffse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/IFFSE-report-Entwurf-Doppelseiten-12_13-10-21.pdf), accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

milieus spread social media posts that harm religious freedom. However, misunderstandings about religious freedom are also widespread, for example the confusion of religious freedom with freedom from religion in some emphatically secular milieus.

Overall, the reinterpretation narratives and misunderstandings about religious freedom shared on social media correlate with those from the “offline world” already analysed in the previous chapters. Social media platforms offer particularly favourable conditions for the rapid spread of problematic narratives. The fact that every social media user can also publish and disseminate content themselves (“produsage”) makes it possible for right-wing milieus – for example – to achieve high coverage even bypassing the traditional media.

Through coordinated hate campaigns and supported by “influencers” from their own milieu as well as fake accounts, corresponding actors fuel the debates, introduce problematic narratives into the discourse in a targeted manner, remind the people of them<sup>8</sup> and deliberately disrupt constructive debates (for example with “derailing” tactics<sup>9</sup>).

## Promotion of religious freedom in social media

Even though far right-wing forces sometimes succeed in dominating discourses on social media and thereby harming religious freedom, social media platforms also offer strong potential for promoting religious freedom. Ideally, own positive narratives should strengthen religious freedom. Appropriate outreach and education work have a preventive effect against attempts at populist appropriation and reinterpretation. It can be important and effective to reactively use a prepared communicative counter-strategy.

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8 Kreißel, Philip/Ebner, Julia/Urban, Alexander/Guhl, Jakob: Hass auf Knopfdruck. Rechtsextreme Trollfabriken und das Ökosystem koordinierter Hasskampagnen im Netz, London/Washington D.C./Amman/Beirut/Toronto: ISD 2018, [https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ISD\\_Ich\\_Bin\\_Hier\\_2.pdf](https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ISD_Ich_Bin_Hier_2.pdf), accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

9 Weck, Andreas: “Derailing im Netz: Wie Diskussionen in eine völlig andere Richtung gelenkt werden” (3 Sep. 2015), <https://t3n.de/news/derailing-im-netz-636526/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

## Raising awareness and providing education via social media

Social media can and must be platforms for promoting religious freedom and clearing up misunderstandings. Video-based platforms in particular offer strong potential to address issues of religious freedom in depth. However, looking at videos with the keyword “religious freedom” on the highly frequented YouTube platform,<sup>10</sup> it is noticeable that among the videos with the highest reach, it is precisely those by (religiously) conservative or even right-wing actors that are strongly represented. In addition, some professionally produced explanatory videos – a few of them from large media companies – also feature among the top ranks. Moderate or progressive religious actors also publish videos, but they seem to have a hard time reaching more than a three-digit number of views. It is also noticeable that most of the high-reach videos focus in particular on controversial issues referring to domestic policy (such as debates on religious dress, circumcision or the question of whether services may be denied on account of religious beliefs, for example due to a negative attitude towards homosexuals). The wide-ranging references to religious freedom from the progressive side tend to focus on opposition to problematic conservative or right-wing positions and thus primarily have a reactive character. This one-sided focus reinforces the widespread misperception that religious freedom is a purely conservative issue. Polarising on the issue of religious freedom and naming only individual (domestic) irritants consequently means not working in a solution-oriented way and not paying attention to important issues such as violations of religious freedom by autocratic and totalitarian regimes worldwide.

The challenge for educational work is to break through this narrow focus and place religious freedom as a human right in the centre of society. Especially in secular societies, it must be communicated why religious freedom is not only relevant for those who see themselves as deeply religious or claim to be so. Persistence and thoroughness are as much in demand as creativity and a sense for the dynamics of discourse. The following aspects are likely to be decisive for the chance of success:

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10 See keyword searches in German and English for the term “*Religionsfreiheit*” or “freedom of religion”: [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=religionsfreiheit&sp=CAM%253D](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=religionsfreiheit&sp=CAM%253D) and [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=%22freedom+of+religion%22&sp=CAM%253D](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=%22freedom+of+religion%22&sp=CAM%253D), accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

**Human rights approach as a baseline:** In order to overcome misunderstandings and avoid even replicating such misunderstandings in the course of one's own work, awareness-raising and educational work must always be based on the human rights approach. In particular, the principle of the indivisibility of human rights must be kept in mind and – where it seems appropriate – the commitment to religious freedom must be integrated into human rights education in general.

**Establish partnerships:** It is important not only to produce content but also consider how such content can be disseminated. Without the skills and infrastructure necessary to build a community, as well as regular and well-placed posts, it is difficult to achieve broad impact beyond a limited circle of experts. Since media professionals are also not immune to the aforementioned misunderstandings on issues of religious freedom, cooperations are needed that bring together expertise and reach. The fact that it is possible to develop formats that are not only educational but also entertaining for a larger audience is shown by individual positive exceptions that reach tens of thousands of viewers with their content, such as the YouTube series *Abdelkratie* by the Federal Agency for Civic Education.<sup>11</sup> In addition, there are other successful formats that counter prejudices and populist agitation against religious minorities, such as the *Datteltäter* YouTube channel.<sup>12</sup> Despite lagging behind the previously mentioned coverage, the FoRB Learning Platform offers videos with five-digit viewing figures.<sup>13</sup>

**Adjustment to the target groups:** A successful education campaign must not only reach and convince those who are already educated and convinced. There is a danger here of “preaching to the choir,” that is communicating in one's own bubble. Trust and interest are essential prerequisites for a message to be heard. Accordingly, it is important on which channel, by whom and in which style communication takes place. For example, it is unlikely that an official government campaign will reach target groups that are particularly critical of government or disenchanted with politics.<sup>14</sup> It is also crucial that the habi-

11 Abdelkratie: RELIGIONSFREIHEIT – An was glaubst du? (20 Jun. 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8itQ38ZXlo&t=28s>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

12 <https://www.youtube.com/@datteltater>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

13 <https://www.youtube.com/@FreedomofReligionorBelief>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

14 Thus, the official advertising campaign launched by the German government for the Corona vaccination primarily appealed to people who were already convinced of the vaccination. Among sceptics, on the other hand, the campaign hardly met with any response. (Medianalyzer: Ärmel hoch oder runter: Was bei der Impfkommunikation bes-

tus and style of the message are well adapted to the target group. If this is not the case, the probability that the target group will be reached at all is low, including due to the algorithm. In the worst case, this can even lead to further alienation. For example, the message may be perceived as too “top-down,” artificially forced (“cringe”) or inauthentic, patronising or overly academic and abstract. It is also important that those sending the message are perceived as authentic and not as mere “service providers.”

**Awareness raising as a cross-generational task:** Young people are often portrayed as particularly vulnerable and impressionable in a negative sense. However, manipulation is not a problem exclusively for young people. On the contrary, some empirical research indicates that older people are on average even more susceptible to disinformation.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, there is a need for media and human rights education not only for the young but also for older generations. Mention should also be made of the large group of people who – regardless of their age – believe that they have already acquired the knowledge that they need to lead their lives and therefore hardly notice and accept learning opportunities.

## Counter-measures

With the help of populist strategies, attempts are made to devalue, disparage and marginalise other people/groups. People of the Muslim and Jewish faiths are disproportionately affected in the German-language network, whereby xenophobic motives are often involved as well. This kind of hate speech is problematic in the sense that online channels now partially have an even wider reach than traditional media, reaching an incalculable number of people in a very short time, and there is a danger that hate messages might turn into actual acts of violence. In order to limit and eliminate communication that is contemptuous of people (or groups of people), an effort by society as a whole

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ser sein könnte, <https://www.mediaanalyzer.com/studien/aermel-hoch-oder-runter-was-bei-der-impfkommunikation-besser-sein-koennte/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.).

- 15 Meßmer, Anna-Katharina/Sängerlaub, Alexander/Schulz, Leonie: “Quelle: Internet? Digitale Nachrichten- und Informationskompetenzen der deutschen Bevölkerung im Test” (22 Mar. 2021), <https://www.stiftung-nv.de/de/publikation/quelle-internet-digitale-nachrichten-und-informationskompetenzen-der-deutschen>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

is needed, in addition to the development and implementation of educational programmes.

Occasionally, it can be observed that social media users take action against the instrumentalisation, reinterpretation or devaluation of religious freedom with their comments and corrections. However, these reactions seem to be spontaneous and not organised. In addition, there are initiatives that generally and with different methodological approaches work against various forms of hatred, group-focused enmity and disinformation and accordingly also take organised action against anti-Semitic and Islamophobic postings. Examples of such initiatives in German-speaking countries include #ichbinhier<sup>16</sup>, the No-Hate-Speech campaign, hzsa.cyberwehr:neuland, correctiv.org, Counter Creators, Amadeu Antonio Foundation, Mimikama and HateAid.

Among other things, the initiatives mentioned use strategies of counter-speech. Counter-speech is a concept to secure freedom of expression in the long term and not primarily a measure to limit the effectiveness of individual, hateful postings. In the case of counter-speech, it is important to consider which social dynamics and psychological-cognitive effects are triggered on the users and how the input interacts with the algorithms of the social networks.

There is evidence that coordinated, well-planned counter-speech can quantitatively shift the overall discourse and that the proportion of problematic narratives becomes smaller compared to the proportion of counter-narratives after appropriate actions.<sup>17</sup> However, it should be kept in mind that counter-speech may increase the visibility of hate comments and communication containing contempt for people. Each additional comment contributes to the algorithm's assessment of a post as significant. In the worst case, it is possible that a problematic post only receives attention and is perceived by a larger public because someone reacts with counter-speech (keyword #dontfeedthetroll). On the other hand, if radical users post particularly often and the silent majority do not contradict these posts, there is the danger that the positions and the radical minority behind them appear more significant than is actually the case. Accordingly, the challenge is to find an effective balance

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16 *ichbinhier e.V.* is a civil society initiative which supports the facebook counter speech group #ichbinhier with over 40,000 volunteer members. The group is taking collective action to combat group-based enmity in the comments section.

17 Laufer, Daniel: "Neue Studie zeigt Wirksamkeit von Gegenrede im Netz" (8 Jun. 2020), <https://netzpolitik.org/2020/reconquista-internet-neue-studie-zeigt-wirksamkeit-von-gegenrede-im-netz/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

of which problematic posts are given attention, and care must be taken not to be pushed back into being purely reactive.<sup>18</sup> Counter-speech is well suited to counteract the danger of fundamental shifts in discourse. A counter-speech strategy that does not reproduce hate are solidarity postings on behalf of victims of hate speech, especially marginalised groups.

If counter-speech is resorted to, it should be ensured that it takes an appropriate form, because not all forms of counter-speech are equally successful.<sup>19</sup> As a general rule of thumb, aggressions should be named as such briefly and factually, and it should be made clear that misanthropic statements are not acceptable and that such views do not represent a majority in the population. However, which style is most successful in detail also depends on the specific context.<sup>20</sup>

Overall, the greatest potential of counter-speech seems to lie in activating a silent majority and thereby making problematic content of a radical minority less visible.<sup>21</sup> Finally, social media can also be used to mobilise for digital civic courage and raise awareness of the dangers of hate and misanthropy. The nature of the algorithms can be used in this sense to amplify positive, respectful and fact-based messages and increase their visibility compared to derogatory and hateful postings. The strategy should be adapted to the characteristics of the different algorithms of the various networks. For example, on Facebook, a well-structured use of supporting emojis is recommended.

However, it seems rather unlikely that counter-speech will also have an effect on particularly radicalised people and that they will be convinced by it. On

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18 Bromell, David: "Counter-Speech Is Everyone's Responsibility," in: David Bromell (ed.), *Regulating Free Speech in a Digital Age. Hate, Harm and the Limits of Censorship*, Cham: Springer 2022.

19 Benesch, Susan/Ruths, Derek/ Dillon, Kelly P./Haji, Mohammad Saleem/Wright, Lucas: "Considerations for successful counterspeech" (14 Oct. 2016), <https://dangerousspeech.org/considerations-for-successful-counterspeech/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023. However, the question of how success is defined and how it can best be measured remains crucial.

20 Binny, Mathew/Punyajoy, Saha/Hardik, Tharad/Subham, Rajgaria/Prajwal, Singhania/Suman, Kalyan Maity/Pawan, Goyal/Animesh, Mukherjee: "Thou Shalt Not Hate: Countering Online Hate Speech," in: *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 13 (1/2019), pp. 369–380.

21 Buerger, Catherine: "#iamhere: Collective Counterspeech and the Quest to Improve Online Discourse," in: *Social Media + Society* 7 (4/2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211063843>.

the one hand, it is conceivable that speaking out counteracts the disinhibiting effects of the anonymity of the internet (“toxic online disinhibition”).<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, it is also conceivable that radical users – out of defiance or because they perceive a threat to their identity – will stick to their problematic narratives or withdraw from the public space and resort to private groups and messenger services. The results of empirical studies tend to speak for the latter.<sup>23</sup>

In any case, good strategic planning (constant evaluation, accurate calibration of messages) is crucial in counter-measures.<sup>24</sup> What is also discussed is the importance of good coordination and networking for counter-measures to be successful.<sup>25</sup> On the whole, further research on the efficiency of counter-speech is necessary.<sup>26</sup>

## Responsibility and obligations of the key stakeholders

The promotion of religious freedom and successful awareness raising, human rights education and effectiveness in the fight against ideas showing contempt

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- 22 Wachs, Sebastian/Wright, Michelle F.: “Associations between Bystanders and Perpetrators of Online Hate: The Moderating Role of Toxic Online Disinhibition,” in: *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 15 (9/2018), p. 2030, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15092030>.
  - 23 Lopez-Sanchez, Maite/Müller, Arthur: “On Simulating the Propagation and Counter-measures of Hate Speech in Social Networks,” in: *Applied Sciences* 11 (24/2021), p. 12003, <https://doi.org/10.3390/app112412003>; Saltman, Erin/Kooti, Farshad/Vockery, Karly: “New Models for Deploying Counterspeech: Measuring Behavioral Change and Sentiment Analysis,” in: *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46 (9/2023), pp. 1547–1574.
  - 24 Winter, Charly/Fürst, Johanna: *Challenging Hate. Counter-speech Practices in Europe*, London: ICSR 2017, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ICSR-Report-Challenging-Hate-Counter-speech-Practices-in-Europe.pdf>, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.
  - 25 Laubenstein, Sina/Urban, Alexander: “Case studies: which types of campaign against hate and extremism on the internet work, which do not, and why?,” in: Johannes Baldauf/Julia Ebner/Jakob Guhl (eds.), *Hate Speech and Radicalisation Online. The OCCI Research Report*, London/Washington D.C./Beirut/Toronto: ISD 2019, pp. 50–57. The authors also list networking, exchange and training as helpful factors, but are not independent in the sense that they have both worked in leadership positions on the initiatives praised in the article.
  - 26 Blaya, Catherine: “Cyberhate: A review and content analysis of intervention strategies,” in: *Aggression and Violent Behaviour* 45 (2019), pp. 163–172.

for humanity requires that all relevant stakeholders take responsibility and fulfil their duties.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, showing solidarity with marginalised groups and protecting them should be one of their most important concerns.

### More digital civic courage

Every social media user can make a contribution in the form of digital civic courage. For example, individuals and communities can increase the visibility of positive posts by commenting, liking, saving, forwarding and reposting/sharing them abundantly in a positive and laudatory manner. In addition, users can report posts that violate the guidelines of the social media platforms and – in the case of criminal content – file charges. This requires civil society activism and empowerment of the actors to counteract a fight against wind-mills, isolation, coordinated attacks and a possible digital burn-out.

### Responsibility of (traditional and new) media

Media professionals and providers have a special responsibility, being challenged to take on a role as multipliers for awareness raising and human rights education. With their wide reach, they are also able to influence the generations that are no longer at school. Media creators and providers can also promote awareness raising, human rights education and the fight against inhuman ideas by giving a wide reach. For example, it would be conceivable for established influencers to draw attention to populist appropriations and reinterpretations of religious freedom and other human rights in “expose” and “reaction” formats. In order to avoid contributing to the spread of misunderstandings or producing (unintentionally) misleading presentations, a profound understanding of human rights is necessary for all media makers.<sup>28</sup>

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27 Regarding the responsibility of the churches and religious communities, see Blaya: *Cyberhate*, pp. 163–172.

28 In order to generate awareness and impart the necessary knowledge and skills, it might be helpful to organise workshops on human rights basics for multipliers such as journalists (e.g. the community toolkit by *ichbinhier e.V.* “Hass im Netz – Toolkit für Communities” can be used for both media makers from the traditional media sector and high-reach formats in social media like YouTubers). On the one hand, content basics could be conveyed precisely and comprehensively so that they are understood and internalised. On the other hand, they could be motivated to become creative, to

It is also important not to consider online and offline separately: misunderstandings take root across media boundaries and digital hatred may lead to physical violence and serious psychological consequences. Conversely, appearances in traditional media, in parliaments and at demonstrations also provide ammunition for the digital world. The traditional media are therefore also called upon to critically question their media logics and stop problematic patterns such as “false balance” and sensationalism. In addition, their own reporting should be critically evaluated with a view to balance; for example regarding the question of how often Islam is reported on and how many of the contributions are of a positive nature.<sup>29</sup> Stronger diversity in one’s own editorial team may also be helpful. In addition, it is important to establish human rights as a cross-cutting issue in journalism and use language that is sensitive to discrimination.

### Responsibility of platform operators and issues of legal regulation

In some cases, narratives of instrumentalisation, reinterpretation or devaluation of religious freedom are also formulated in connection with statements that hold criminal relevance (defamation, slander, insult or incitement to hatred). In such cases, it is to be expected of the operator platforms that they fulfil their legally prescribed obligations (obligations to delete, cooperation with law enforcement authorities) as long as the underlying laws are in conformity with human rights. The state in turn also has to ensure that these obligations are fulfilled.<sup>30</sup> Social media corporations should also ensure that their algorithms do not privilege problematic or even illegal content; for example by rewarding

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develop different formats and forms in order to pass on appropriate content to their own audience.

- 29 See also Media Tenor: Das Medienbild zum Islam treibt die Angst, <http://de.mediatenor.com/de/bibliothek/newsletter/1100/das-medienbild-zum-islam-treibt-die-angst-bedford-strohm-und-papst-franziskus-setzen-positive-akzente-fuer-ihre-kirchen>, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.
- 30 However, care must always be taken that the prevention of the dissemination of illegal content is not given greater importance than the protection of human rights such as freedom of expression, information or the press; see also the justified concerns of Reporters Without Borders Germany about the Network Enforcement Act: Reporter ohne Grenzen: NetzDG führt offenbar zu Overblocking (27 Jul. 2018), <https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/pressemitteilungen/meldung/netzdg-fuehrt-offenbar-zu-overblocking>, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.

polarisation with higher visibility. Moreover, it should be ensured that social media corporations do not stint on basic security and moderation tasks simply because they incur additional costs.<sup>31</sup>

## Protection of human rights defenders

It is also a cross-cutting task for all actors to ensure the protection of human rights defenders. People who stand up for human rights often become the target of attacks themselves. For example, human rights defenders are attacked (in a coordinated manner) in the form of “silencing” to keep them from talking and discourage further users from also campaigning for human rights issues.<sup>32</sup> Attackers often resort to diversionary tactics such as “gaslighting”<sup>33</sup> or “whataboutism.” Since attacks are to be expected, the accompaniment of human rights education and advocacy campaigns holds particular importance. Only close moderation over a longer period of time can ensure clear messages, otherwise further attacks and a “broken window effect” quickly occur: if there is no negative reaction to hate comments, the impression is created that such behaviour will go unpunished, which in turn can attract further authors of hate comments, while other people to whom the campaign is actually directed are deterred.

## Conclusion

In order to promote religious freedom and counteract communication that is contemptuous of human beings as well as populist attempts at appropriation and reinterpretation in the digital space, awareness-raising and educational work should receive comprehensive support. In doing so, existing approaches to human rights and media education should be taken up and

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31 Lauer, David: “Facebook’s ethical failures are not accidental; they are part of the business model,” in: *AI Ethics* 1 (4/2021), pp. 395–403.

32 Geschke, Daniel/Klaßen, Anja/Quent, Matthias/Richter, Christoph: #Hass im Netz: Der schleichende Angriff auf unsere Demokratie. Eine bundesweite repräsentative Untersuchung, ed. by Institut für Demokratie und Zivilgesellschaft (IDZ), Juni 2019, [https://blog.campact.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Hass\\_im\\_Netz-Der-schleichen-Angriff.pdf](https://blog.campact.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Hass_im_Netz-Der-schleichen-Angriff.pdf), accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

33 “Gaslighting” means systematic questioning/doubting/small-talking about the experiences/facts/truths of a person or a group of people.

modern (counter-)strategies developed that also focus on solidarity with those affected. Both should definitely be done thoroughly and not simply symbolically. In this sense, long-term, sustainable funding must be provided for corresponding initiatives instead of promoting many short-term projects that do not have an impact beyond the symbolic. It is also crucial that the online and offline worlds are always thought of together. There remains a strong need for research on the dynamics of digital populism and corresponding counter-measures, and especially research on the question of the effectiveness of counter-strategies is still in its infancy.