GET THE TROLLS OUT!

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"Get the Trolls Out!" – Program to Encourage Young People to Combat Discrimination and Religious Intolerance in Europe

"Religion is easy to portray in the wrong light. Reprinting a politician's hate speech risks causing offence; reporting on acts of religious intolerance carries a danger of contributing to the stigmatization of a religious group. These are the two most common manifestations of religious intolerance in the media, the *Get the Trolls Out (GTTO)* media monitoring has been documenting since the project's inception in 2015.

This report presents the results of our examination of media performance from January 2019 to January 2020. It first offers a short overview of the objectives and the analytical tools used in media monitoring, followed by an analysis of the media texts within which discrimination and religious intolerance occur. The significance of the findings is then discussed in relation to the key moments in media's decision making, and the ethical paths journalists take at different points of news production.

18th of May 2020

Why media monitoring?

Citizens' understanding of public issues largely depends on the media and their ability to provide accurate, fair and balanced information on matters of public concern. However, the 24 hours news cycle created an environment where there is an overwhelming amount of information with never ending flow.

Understanding what is true and what is false, what is real and what is not becomes hard if the media do not make an effort to increase news literacy. Sharpening audience's critical thinking skills might be the goals of any media organisations but, as our previous reports show, negative sentiments and intolerance are still part of the media discourse.

The objective of this project is to identify discriminatory media texts through media monitoring and use the data to empower civil society organizations in Europe to counter intolerance and xenophobia targeting minority communities including Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities. To draw attention to the patterns of media coverage we document incidents of intolerance and xenophobia that have emerged both on new and traditional media platforms.

Although the media landscapes in all six European countries involved in this project - Belgium, France, Germany, the UK, Hungary and Greece – significantly differ, it has been possible to set up a common framework for the analysis of antireligious speech.

The monitoring is based on the premises that mainstream media reach the largest audience, have influence on decision makers and play a vital role in shaping public opinion. It believes that journalism is a vehicle for public conversation and civic action and online hate speech linked to mainstream media is more powerful than individual social media accounts.

The main criterion for selection of media to be monitored, as in all previous years, was the audience reach (circulation, number of viewers, listeners and number of views). Using key words that refer to religion and religious affiliation when selecting the sample, monitors collected data and analysed media content published on the main platforms (online pages of newspapers, radio, television, and online only news outlets), as well as the Facebook and Twitter accounts of these organizations.

Posts on the social media pages of mainstream organizations were used to identify individual posts that carried anti-religious messages.

Documented incidents were used to inform other project activities: production of a range of online creatives aiming to challenge stereotypes, debunking discriminatory rhetoric, showing its harmful impact to at-risk communities and encouraging dynamic social media engagement.

The media monitoring process generated data about the following aspects of reporting: date of publication, country, type of hatred speech, hate speech originator, type of content, description and context of the incident, details about the outlet, engagement level on Facebook and Twitter and YouTube, if the incident was reported, could it be considered a criminal offence, and would a monitor report the hateful comment (on main platform or social media).

Data was collected and analyzed in terms of the content and context of religious intolerance, as well as the production and reproduction of hate speech. Attention was paid specifically to the use of sources, dominant frames, newsgathering techniques, genre of the text, and language used. When it comes to the social media content, monitors examined comments and replies to the main text, number of likes, shares, replies, and background of the author. The objective was to provide information for creating counter narrative social media content.
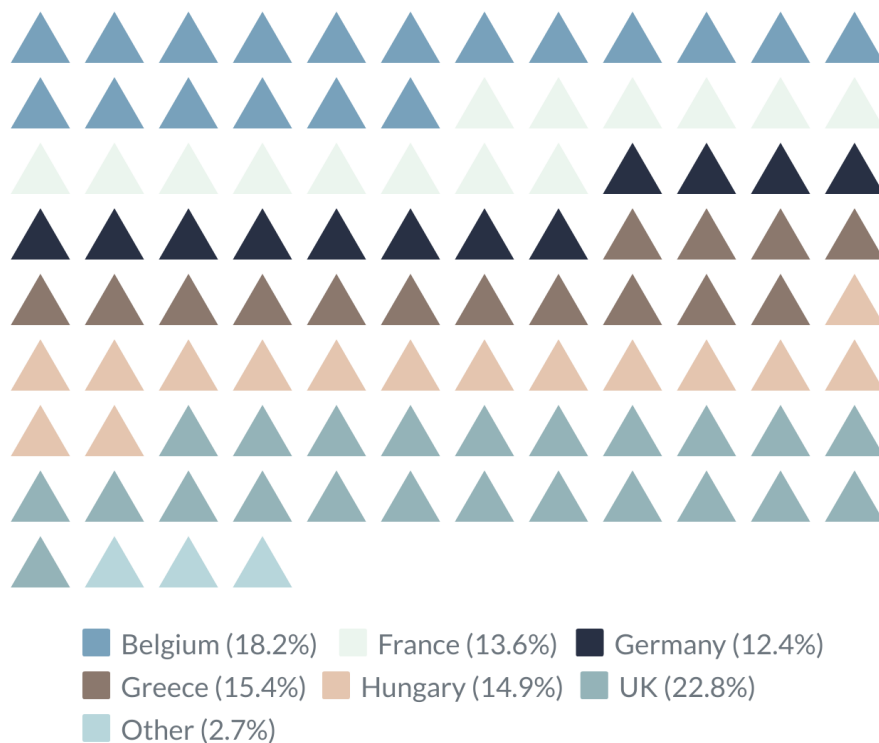
FINDINGS:

There were 604 registered incidents over the monitoring period. In the previous monitoring period we registered 310 incidents. The double number of incidents was not the only significant change – in 2018 they were equally spread across all six countries, in 2019 the number of incidents in the UK and Belgium were higher than in other countries.

Chart 1:

In which country did the incident take place?

■ Belgium (18.2%) ■ France (13.6%) ■ Germany (12.4%)
■ Greece (15.4%) ■ Hungary (14.9%) ■ UK (22.8%)
■ Other (2.7%)

There are a number of possible reasons for this increase, but a quick look at the political landscape in 2019 suggests what might have triggered this change. 2019 was the Brexit year, when both Brussels and London politicians, (primarily far-right populists) used language that spread fear and mistrust among religious minorities. In the UK, rhetorical strategies often included references to EU immigration policies and "violent religious communities the nation has to be protected from.
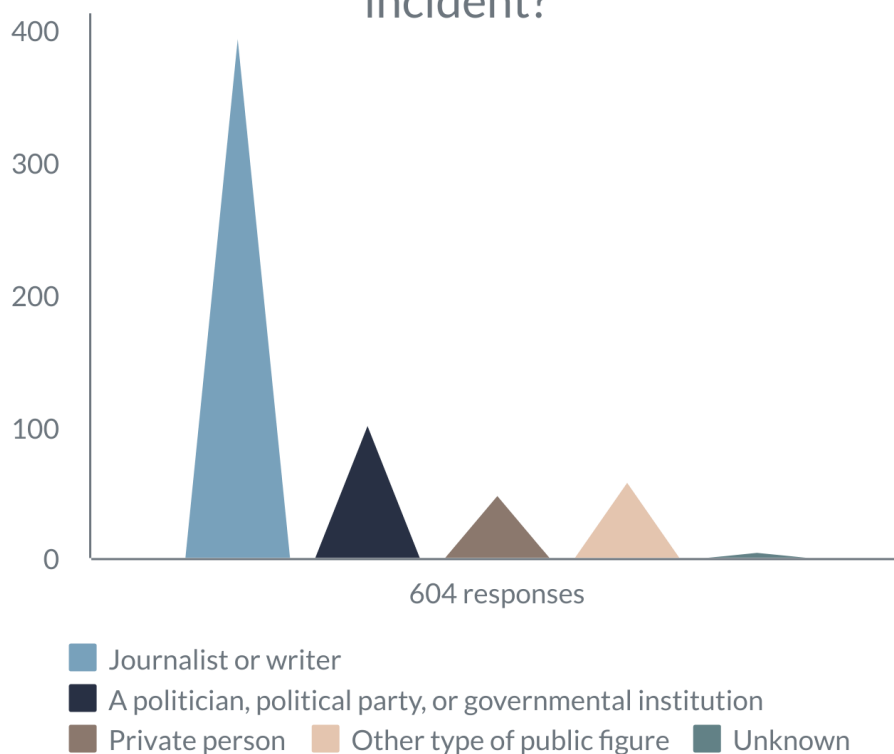
What type of content are you reporting?
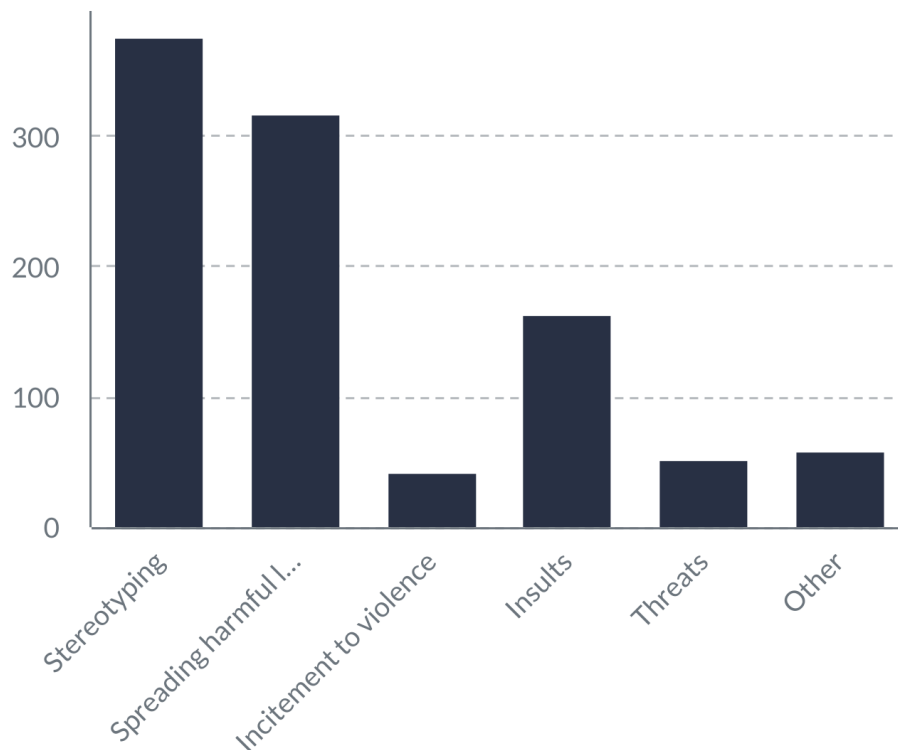
'Take back control', the most often used slogan of Brexiters, referred both to the perception that decisions were not carried out by British politicians themselves but influenced by EU officials, as well as the ethnic and religious sovereignty of the country. While the division between Anglicans and Catholics has been reinforced through the many texts blaming Ireland for the UK situation, Islamophobia remained the dominant type of religious hatred in the media content sample, followed by implied references to religion in anti-migrant and anti-refugee messages, antisemitic messages and racism (Chart 2).

The disgraceful examples of reporting on refugees and asylum seekers in Europe, confirmed that the majority of discriminatory speech in the media continues to target Muslims (Chart 2).

Monitors registered a small increase in Islamophobia (from 66.6 percent in 2018 to 67.7 percent last year) and a decrease in anti-migrant and anti-refuge hate speech (from 41.9 percent to 33.9). International Organisation for Migration reports that in 2019, the number of migrant workers declined slightly in high-income countries while increasing elsewhere (IOM 2020), and how it might have impacted the shift in the media's attention from immigration to other issues.

What type of figure committed the incident?

604 responses

- ■ Journalist or writer
- ■ A politician, political party, or governmental institution
- ■ Private person ■ Other type of public figure ■ Unknown

Last year we noted that the answers to the question 'who committed the discriminatory incident', has to be taken with caution because it only gives a snapshot from the communication process that incudes politician, academic, CSO representative or citizen as a source of information, journalists and editors as co-creators and disseminators and audience members as active participants in the process.. Monitors discovered that journalists and writers of the text were the most dominant generator of offensive language (Chart 3).

This, however, has to be understood in the context of the digital communication space that allows an ongoing dialogue between both traditional and new media, and between the media and citizens. When Anne Marie Waters, founder and leader of the far-right party "For Britain", posts a commentary claiming that Islam is inherently violent because that is what the Quran prescribes (*Politicalite*, 7 January 2019), her role as an author is turned into the role of a mastermind of offensive speech, someone who opens a chain of communicative acts in all arenas of public life including the media, both mainstream and social. In this case, she is both an author of the text and a political leader, two most prominent categories of figures who committed the incident (Chart 3).

What kind of hatred are you reporting on?
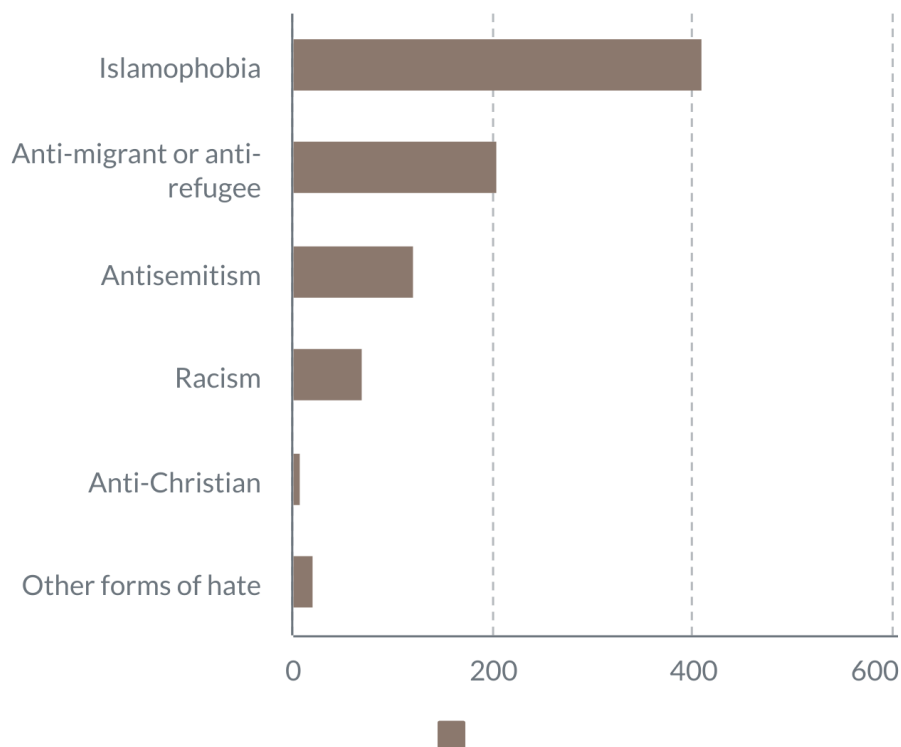
Our monitors looked at the nature of offensive statements. Stereotyping and spreading misinformation remained at the top of the list (Chart 4), highlighting and documenting the media's role in influencing prejudice within an increasingly diverse Europe. Earlier studies have shown that the majority of journalists do not hesitate in declaring their dedication to the values of objectivity, unbiased reporting, promotion of plurality, democracy, and civic society, while at the same time admitting that the media create negative stereotypes about minority groups.

This ethical discrepancy where journalists declare their dedication to objectivity but acknowledge that the media are not objective, is identified in the MDI study *Getting the facts right: reporting ethnicity and religion in Europe* eight years ago, which shows the scope of this current problem of religious intolerance in the media.

When it comes to social media, the majority of hate speech still occurs on personal pages (63.5 percent). Far behind them are campaign pages such as "Leave UK" and various private groups (both on 9.5 percent). A small increase has been registered on media organisations' social media accounts – from 6.7 percent to 8.1 percent (Chart 5).

Chart 5: Social media - the page or the profile the incident took place on belongs to

- An individual (63.5%)
- A public group (9.5%)
- Other (9.4%)
- A private group (9.5%)
- A media organisation (8.1%)
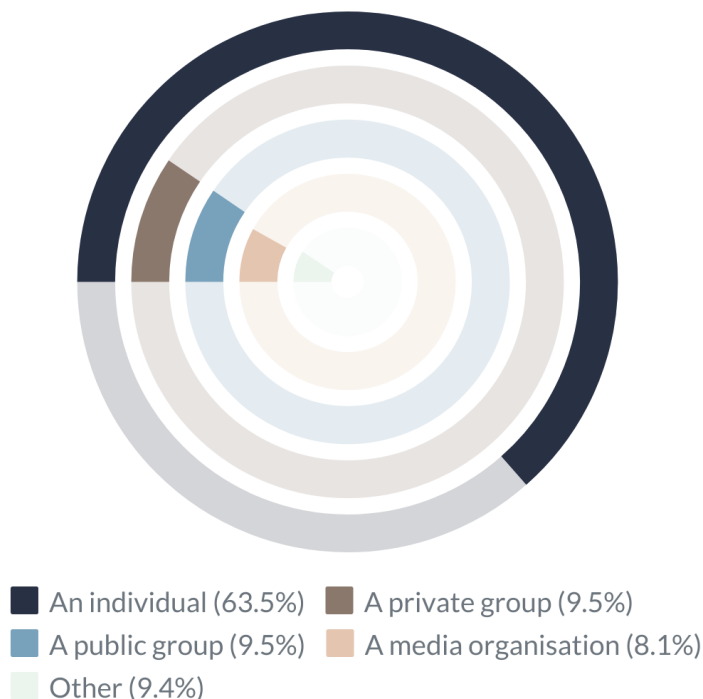
The purpose of the GTTO project was to generate material that would put anti-religious media language into the context of the dominant social issues at the time. A number of open-ended questions were listed in the incident form to provide further information on the relationship between media text and a wider social, political and cultural context.

Findings

The following examples illustrate the ways that the media practice of labelling, generalisations, and negative stereotyping stand in sharp contrast with reporting based on universal human values and on moral reasoning that supports common good. They also show how the digital age turns the acts of producing and publishing discriminatory texts into the weaponizing and dispersing of hate.
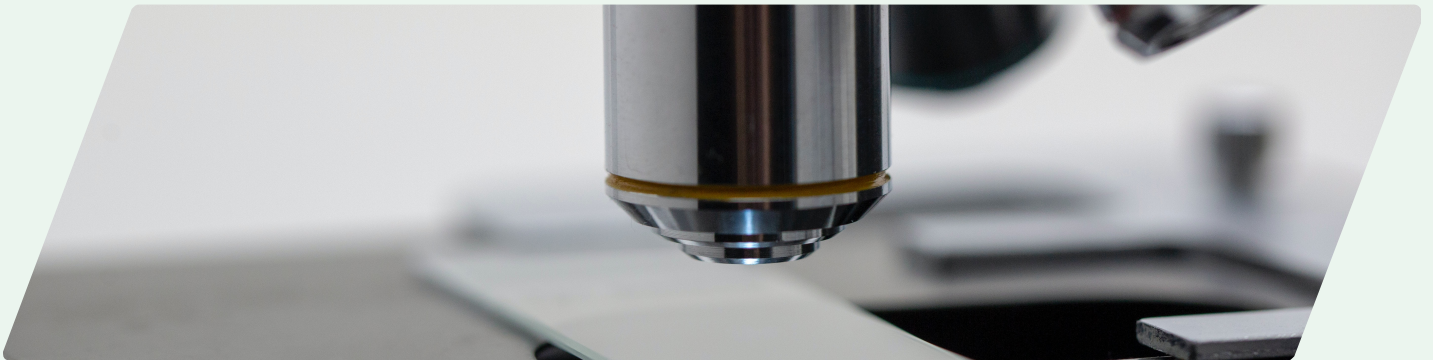
Fast spreading of hate:

The first trend that clearly emerged during the last monitoring period is the speed at which hate spreads. German tabloid newspaper Bild reported that in the city of Gelsenkirchen, north of Essen, the police shot dead a man who tried to attack officers with a knife.

Below the headline "Police prevent terrorist attack in Gelsenkirchen" it said: "The police are certain, this cowardly attack was an attempted terrorist attack on police officers in the middle of Germany!" The man shouted 'Allahu Akbar' when approaching the police officers. For Bild, the Arabic phrase "God is great" was enough to declare a terrorist attack. A search of the man's flat later did not suggest a terrorist motive, the 37-year-old Turkish citizen turned out to be mentally ill.

What did the tabloid do? The *Bild* editors changed the headline to "Police Officers Attacked in Gelsenkirchen" and the opening sentence to: "The police are certain: this cowardly attack was an attempted assault on police officers in the middle of Germany!"

The consequences of *Bild's* rush to declare terrorism are indicative of the media's contribution to religious intolerance and how online media has made things worse. In the hours following the publishing of the original piece, far right and anti-Islamic groups reposted the story as did the German right-wing AfD party, who shared the *Bild* article along with statements such as: "Islamic motivated attack could be thwarted!". The initial post generated more than 34,000 digital interactions – clicking, sharing, liking, commenting – contributing to the identifying of Muslims with terrorism.

Religion as a part of immigration story:

The European media frequently reports on religion when it is covering highly contested political issues such as immigration. One of the incidents from Hungary detailed a television anchor who called migrant teenagers 'black animals', asking for their 'immediate cleansing'. The story started with the use of a video that the anchor Zsolt Bayer described as showing "a white Swedish boy" being robbed and humiliated by "two migrants".

Using derogatory language, he linked immigration and crime reinforcing the massage of risks it carries. The monitors tracked down the video that was used as 'evidence' for Bayer's claims. It was broadcast by HirTV, following its publication by the Swedish anti-migrant news outlet Samhällsnytt and originally taken from the internet. citizen turned out to be mentally ill.

Calling people "animals" is not new, historically it has been directed towards black people as an instrument of discrimination. When the word animal is used to refer to a person of colour, as well as a migrant, it constitutes a racist dehumanisation. Our monitors stressed that Zsolt Bayer's words "black animals" are unequivocally racist, and his calls to cleanse society of migrants directly reproduces the discourse of far-right authoritarian regimes, including Nazi Germany. The use of a video from Sweden is significant. In the Hungarian propaganda media, Sweden (as well as Germany and France) has become the poster child of the dangers of migration. Scaremongering stories from these countries are used daily to show why migration should be heavily restricted.

The absence of context

Although journalistic codes of conduct implore journalists to be aware of the danger of discrimination based on, among other things, ethnicity, religion, and national or social origin, covering stories involving religion remains a complex task. It requires knowledge, understanding, and a full awareness of social responsibility to avoid stirring up tensions, or stimulating confrontation and intolerance. The most common mistake made in the sample of stories GTTO monitors highlighted as problematic, was reflected by a text published on Doorbraak.be, Belgian opinion website "Flanders Flemish, Europe European" (25th August 2019). The article was about the 18th annual IJzerwake event organised to commemorate the victims of the two World Wars, but is also largely a place for political figures to share their views on Flemish independence and other current topics.

Many of the IJzerwake members are from far-right political party Vlaams Belang. The chairman of IJzewake, Wim de Wit, made some hateful comments during his speech that included statements such as "in principle, freedom of expression still applies, except when it comes to Muslims, Negroes, holibi's [homosexual, lesbian and bisexual individuals], transgender people, transvestites, Gypsies, feminists and certain politicians." He was quoted without any critique, in a manner which suggests that the author and publication agree with this view. No other source of information was used or any context and background information provided.

Conspiracy theories

Morally questionable journalism practices contribute to raising tensions and allocating blame. One of the most common practices has been the use of conspiracy theories. The article published in the popular lifestyle publication *Athens Magazine* in Greece is illustrative of this. Below the headline "This is how Greece's debt was created! A look back." (30th September 2019), the magazine explores how Greek debt has accumulated from 1974 until today. The author takes the reader through a supposed timeline of events which led to the debt levels which Greece faces today. Throughout the article the author refers to the involved banks as 'Jewish banks.' Furthermore, the article builds on a well-established conspiracy theory claiming that former Prime Minister Kostantinos Simitisis is of Jewish origin and promotes Jewish interests.

The author says that Simitis' original name is Aaron Avouri (Ααρόν Αβουρί). Similar allegations are made about former Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou and his son George, who also served as Prime Minister. Simitis and Andreas Papandreou appear in the article's accompanying photo. The article displayed blatant antisemitism, by referring to the banks involved as 'Jewish banks' and are to be blamed for Greece's debt. Furthermore, conspiring to say that former PMs who played a role in the accumulation of Greece's debt are in fact 'secretly Jewish', and implying they only have the interests of Jewish people in mind, is extremely hateful misinformation.

Internationalisation of far right

Messages of hate travel fast, crossing national borders, bringing together and sharing ideologies of far-right groups. In Germany, a far-right website PI-News ("Politically Incorrect") published a story about the German birth rate figures. Our monitors noted that the article uses official numbers to push the conspiracy narrative of "Umvolkung" (i.e. ethnic replacement) which is often also called "the Great Replacement." Specifically, the article states that "the number of foreign-born babies increased from the already high 97,702 children in 2017 to a frightening 105,901 last year" and further points out that "German" birth rates, on the other hand, decreased for the second year in a row. Furthermore, the article stresses that the actual numbers of what it deems "true" Germans is bound to be much lower than these figures. It brings up the racist argument of the so-called "mass immigration" which it considers to be relentless and which consists of immigrants who "mainly live off social welfare provided by the state and who receive the usual full amount – every month!"

The ethnic replacement theory is often used by far-right groups and individuals. The right-wing terrorist who attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, titled his manifesto "The Great Replacement", and although violent outcomes might not have been intended by the people who wrote the narrative of "Umvolkung", the Christchurch shooter makes a strong case for the argument that facilitating this narrative is at the very least negligent behaviour because it works to strengthen a perceived pressure to act for potential far-right terrorists.

Conclusions

The media monitoring part of the project Get the Trolls Out has informed several activities in the project. It provided a database of anti-religious speech and discourse in the media, that were exposed and acted upon by making formal complaints and countering them by publishing analysis and commentaries, producing videos, blog posts, letters to and meetings with editors and heads of policy, as well as reporting hate speech to social media platforms.

This significant data base for the production of counter-narratives and dynamic social media engagement has been used by all partners and their partners in numerous other projects run by these civil society organisations.
Documenting incidents generates knowledge about the ways traditional and social media are implicated in antireligious discourse. This knowledge provides an excellent ground for developing future projects in the area of intermedia agenda setting as a mechanism that underpins media hate speech.

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