

Abstract

For obvious reasons, radical right mobilisation in Germany faces formidable institutional, political, and cultural obstacles. Previous outfits such as the 'Republicans' (REP), the 'National Democrats' (NPD), or the 'German People's Union' (DVU) were occasionally successful at the local, regional, or EU level but were quickly stigmatised as neo-Nazi's by mainstream political actors and the media and taken over by backward-looking political extremists who could not hope to attract a broader constituency.

The new 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD), however, was created by a group of disaffected right-wingers from Germany's centre right parties and has so far avoided any involvement with the past. While the party stops short of embracing outright right-wing populism and hard-core euroscepticism, its somewhat ambivalent stance at the very margin of Germany's party system has attracted a large number of activists from various right-wing backgrounds within a very short span of time, and has mobilised a substantial number of right-wing voters in seven subsequent national and state-level elections.

Social media play a crucial role for the party's mobilisation strategy, with a reach that goes far beyond the party faithful: The AfD's Facebook wall has become one of the largest right-wing forums on the German-speaking internet. While a ban on overt extremism is enforced by the party, the wall a platform for homophobes, immigration sceptics, Christian fundamentalists, Prussian nostalgics, anti-feminists, Islam critics, and just about everyone who opposes diversity and the policies that support it. While the wall directs activists, attention and resources towards the party, it also provides an echo-chamber for those who disagree with the relatively moderate policy proposals and general appearance of the current leadership. This exploratory paper looks at the role this page is playing not just for the AfD but more generally for the dynamics of the wider, highly diverse right-wing subculture in Germany.

The AfD's Facebook wall: A new Hub for Far-Right Mobilisation in Germany?

Kai Arzheimer*

1 Introduction

The Alternative für Deutschland party (AfD) is one of the most successful new parties in German post-war history. Founded only seven months before the September 2013 General election by a motley band of “Euro-Rebels” comprising renegade Christian Democrats and Liberals, but also hard-line conservatives and Christian fundamentalists, it came tantalisingly close (4.7 %) to the electoral threshold, scoring the best result for a new party since 1953. In May 2014, it polled 7.1 % in the EP election, equaling the 1989 record of the “Republican” party, then went on to win double-digit representation in a series of three East German state elections in the summer of 2014. In 2015, they were somewhat less successful in the Western city states of Hamburg and Bremen, but still managed to win representation in both parliaments, bringing the total number of AfD MPs to 55.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the AfD's success is the rapid growth of its membership in 2013. The AfD was founded in February. Spurred on by the legal requirements for taking part in the election, the party managed to set up party organisations in all 16 states within a couple of months. These state parties quickly attracted thousands of members, held hustings, and submitted lists of candidates by the deadline in July. This rapid growth as well as the subsequent mobilisation of voters was greatly facilitated by the internet in general and Facebook in particular. The rise of the AfD coincided with the mainstreaming of Facebook in Germany. In 2014, the party already had more than 100 000 “fans” on Facebook, nearly twice

*Department of Political Science, University of Mainz, Germany, <http://www.kai-arzheimer.com/>

as many as either of the two mainstream parties (CDU and SPD), which only began to catch up in 2015.

The AfD also allows non-fans to post on the page, but seems to delete openly racist or otherwise illegal posts. This way, the AfD's fan page has become one of the most lively online fora for far-right discourses in Germany within a very short time, taking the notion of user-generated content to the realm of politics. This huge and active online community has been an asset for the party, because it serves at least four purposes:

1. It helps them to get their messages to members, voters, and potential supporters via viral sharing. This is particularly relevant for a party that is watched with distrust by some of the mainstream media.
2. It gives the party an opportunity to select content from mainstream and other sources and present it to its members within a specific frame.
3. It ties various and heterogeneous groups and organisations within the larger far-right spectrum to the party.
4. It facilitates public communication between party chapters while giving the leadership (which controls the central account) the opportunity to moderate and dominate. At the same time, there is a clear danger that the AfD's inner conflicts are laid out in the open when warring factions pick the social media environment as their battleground, and that the leadership could be seen as censoring when it intervenes too much.

On the other hand, right-wing actors outside the party proper will benefit from interaction via the AfD's social media presence, because the AfD's "reputational shield" (Ivarsflaten, 2006) will increase their reach.

This exploratory paper tries to answer the question of how the AfD's activities fit into the wider right-wing online network in Germany. It first looks at the links between the AfD's various websites and social media profiles are linked into the wider far-right online environment. It then turns to a quantitative content analysis of the AfD's national Facebook page, focusing on topics, actors, and links to content by outsiders.

2 The Far Right in Germany and the rise (and fall?) of the AfD

The Far Right in Germany has long struggled to get rid of Neo-Nazi connotations. Since the mid-1960s, a whole host of parties including the National Democrats (NPD), the Republicans (REP), and the German People's Union (DVU) enjoyed sporadic electoral success but failed to become permanent parliamentary fixtures because of their fixation with Germany's past (Kitschelt, 1995), and because they attracted the wrong kind of activists (Art, 2011). The NPD (which recently merged with the DVU) in particular has come full circle since the 1990s and is embracing the right-wing extremist ideology of the inter-war years. Attempts to form a more modern radical-right party have been few and far between: The STATT ("instead") party of the 1990s and the "Law and Order" party of the early 2000s remained both confined to the local/regional level, whereas the "Pro-Deutschmark" party never won any seats.

Against this backdrop, the AfD was a promising start. It possessed what Ivarsflaten has called a "reputational shield" that 'protects them against "accusations of racism and fascism" (Ivarsflaten, 2006, p. 2). At least some of the founders had previous political experience as long-term members of the CDU or FDP, and the share of university professors (mostly academic economists or jurists) was remarkably high. Early on, the party was accused of being right-wing populist by the established parties and much of the mainstream media, but initially, there was relatively little substance to back-up this claim. Although party leaders including Bernd Lucke, a professor of Economics and long-term member of the centre-right Christian Democrats who quickly became the party's most prominent face, occasionally toyed with anti-gay and anti-immigrant sentiment, they rarely embraced populist rhetoric and ideas.

Their 2014 EP manifesto – the party's first national platform – is focused on "soft" euroscepticism and liberal economic policy and has very little to say on gender roles, immigration, or religion. A quantitative scaling of nine German 2014 EP manifestos including that of the right-wing extremist NPD assigned it a left-right score on par with that of the Bavarian Christian Democrats (CSU), i.e. at the right margin of what is considered centre-right in Germany (Arzheimer, 2015). The party quickly adopted a policy that banned former members of right-wing extremist parties and organisations from joining the AfD, and did – some high profile cases notwithstanding – by and large a reasonable job enforcing this rule.

The resounding success in the 2014 EP election was, however, also a turning point for the AfD. It marks the beginning of an open struggle between warring factions in the party that ostensibly focused on the

AfD's position within the party system and global image, but also involved personal ambitions and conflicts about the leadership structure of the party. During their respective campaigns, the leaders of the Eastern state parties shifted the focus of their attention from soft euroscepticism that was grounded in economic theory towards immigration and Islamophobia, a strategy that was electorally successful. Later that year, Frauke Petry, the leader of the AfD in Saxony, engaged in a high-profile dialogue with the organiser of the anti-Muslim "Pegida" marches, while Björn Höcke, party leader in the Eastern state of Thuringia, tried to build bridges to more traditional ultra-nationalist groups and organisations, and Marcus Pretzell, leader in the populous Western state of North Rhine-Westphalia and one of the AfD's seven MEPs, continued his campaign for a more hardline eurosceptic position.

Lucke and his supporters still dominated the AfD delegation in the EP as well as the national executive committee, but during the first half of 2015, the situation deteriorated to the point where formally organised factions within the party were formed, and party leaders unsuccessfully tried to expel each other and wrestled for control of the party machinery. Following a tumultuous party conference in July, Lucke and his allies were finally ejected from the national executive committee and subsequently left the AfD to form a new party called ALFA on July 19.

Undoubtedly, this split has deprived the AfD of some of their most visible and respectable representatives (recruited from the market-liberal German elites), as well as of some of their most potent donors. However, the mainstream media's portray of the split as the outcome of an epic struggle between Lucke's "Liberals" and Petry's "National Conservatives" is misleading. In fact, many members of the tiny "Liberal-Conservative" platform had already left the party in 2014 (when Lucke publicly rejected the "liberal" mantle), and both Lucke and Petry have repeatedly claimed to represent broadly similar positions. The delegation in the Bremen state parliament may have all but collapsed, and, more importantly, of the party's seven MEPs, five have left the AfD. But so far, only ten per cent of the rank-and-file members have followed suit. Lucke's public voicing of concerns about Islamophobia and xenophobia within the party during the dying days of his leadership were reminiscent of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, as the rapid growth of the AfD's membership was only possible because the party started out as a very broad church open to anyone on the right of the centre who was not openly right-wing extremist. During the two years of his dominance, Lucke managed to craft and project a fairly moderate image for the party at the national and at the European level, but he

must have been aware that he presided over a fairly heterogeneous bunch, and that his focus on intellectual euroscepticism was neither electorally sustainable nor enough to pacify the party base in the medium term.

Lucke was, however, very well aware of the relevance the social media had for the AfD and their image. An initial analysis for the AfD's Facebook page for the period from early 2013 to mid-2014 shows that the party's official posts broadly reflected Lucke's relatively moderate line (Arzheimer, 2015), while a well-documented incident regarding access to the party's email database from May 2015 shows that Lucke still exercised control over the AfD's central infrastructure including their digital assets only a few weeks before he left the party.

3 Findings

3.1 The AfD's place in the larger German far-right online network

3.1.1 Data and methods

Data on the German far-right network were collected over two weeks in late June/early July 2015, i.e. just before the AfD split using HYPHE, a program developed by Sciences Po that allows one to build a corpus of "web entities". A web entity could simply be a single site, but also a sub-domain of a large site (example.wordpress.com), or a page within a site (twitter.com/example), making it easy to deal with the structure of the Web 2.0. HYPHE is also pre-configured to treat http-/https-sites and sites with or without sub-domains (http://www.example.com vs. https://example.com) as equivalent.

A snowball sampling scheme was used: The software was seeded with 19 URLs: The main websites of six parties (AfD, NPD, REP, Die Freiheit, Die Rechte, PRO NRW), the site of a prominent right-wing faction within the AfD ("Der Flügel"), three far-right magazines (Compact, Junge Freiheit, Sezession), one newspaper for expellees (Preußische Allgemeine), two islamophobic sites (German Defence League and Political Incorrect (PI) News), one Christian-Conservative blogger (99 Thesen), four well-known far-right bloggers (Guido Grandt, Jürgen Elsaesser, Honigmann, and Staseve), and the blog of one AfD politician who lost his office over racist comments. For each address, HYPHE downloaded the start page as well as all internal pages that could be reached from the start page by a single click. These pages and all links they contained were stored in a data base. This first run resulted in thousands of new URLs. In a bid to find

Party	Count
FREIHEIT	6
PRO	58
RECHTE	72
REP	198
NPD	371
AfD	831
not affiliated	1013

Table 1: Affiliation of 2549 right-wing web entities

more far-right web entities, the data base was then searched for the names of the six parties, their official abbreviations, prominent far-right politicians, and a number of far-right keywords. The hits were then crawled, too.

This procedure was repeated several times over to uncover as many web entities as possible as well as the connections between them. Additional serendipitous hits arose from reading some of the crawled pages and looking at the blog rolls. The search was confined to political content that was (mostly) written in German by Germans (but not necessarily hosted in Germany). Politically far-right entities related to foreigners were recorded, but not systematically crawled and not included in the final network. In some cases, the web entity had moved to a new address. Where possible, this new address was recorded and crawled, and the entities were consolidated under a new label. In a few other instances, web entities had been deleted. When their name related them in an obvious way to the far-right network, they were still included but obviously not crawled. Moreover, some manual intervention was required to consolidate entities across mobile, desktop, and international sites (e. g. m. facebook.com, www.facebook.com and de-de.facebook.com). In the end, 2249 entities connected by 16 493 hyperlinks were identified.

It should be noted that the search was restricted to what a (diligent) human would see of these entities, i.e. all the pages that could be reached by a single click from the start page. Even so, more than 15 GB were downloaded and indexed. A deeper crawl and a more extensive list of keywords would without doubt have uncovered an even larger and somewhat denser network.

3.1.2 Results

Of the 2549 web entities, 1536 or just over 60 % are affiliated with a political party in an obvious way and amongst those, the AfD is clearly the most important organisation in terms of numbers (Table 1). The NPD comes second, though the figure in Table 1 probably underestimates the actual number, as the NPD is behind some ostensibly non-partisan groups and organisations. The REP, who lost their last parliamentary representation on the state level in 2001, also still have a relatively large number of chapters that retain their own sites and social media profiles, whereas the three other parties maintain much smaller presences online.

What are the patterns of interaction between these entities? The six parties are obviously contenders in a zero-sum game. Apart from negative campaigning, they have little incentive to link to each other. Parties and non-partisan actors, on the other hand, may find cross-linking mutually beneficial: Parties link to non-partisan actors like bloggers and magazines because they provide fresh and ideologically compatible content that reinforces their own political message, while non-partisan actors will often treat parties as their champions in the electoral arena. Formal analysis shows that these conjectures are borne out in practice. Restricting the analysis to the 1536 partisan entities yields a subnetwork of 8437 edges. Of these, only 40 (less than 0.5 per cent) connect entities that are affiliated with different parties, resulting in a high degree of modularity (0.571).¹ In the full network, on the other hand, nearly 18 % (2473) of the links connect partisan and unaffiliated entities bringing down modularity to 0.540. Further analysis reveals that partisan and non-partisan actors behave asymmetrically: Partisan entities make up 60 % of all nodes but initiate 72 % of all links connecting partisan and non-partisan entities.

Which are the most important entities in the German far-right network? Different measures highlight different aspects of what it means to be “central” in a given network, but they all agree that the AfD is a highly relevant actor (Table 2).

Indegree is a straightforward measure of local centrality that simply counts the number of incoming links. Here, the AfD federal website and their central Facebook page come top, followed by the NPD’s Facebook page. At least in part, this positioning as well as the high ranks for the NPD’s federal website

¹Modularity compares the fraction of edges within a given set of groups to the fraction that would be observed if connections were random. Its range is $[-\frac{1}{2}; 1]$.

	Indegree	Betweenness	Closeness	Pagerank
1	Alternativfuer	Alternativfuer	Facebook/Zukunftskinder-20	Facebook/alternativfuer.de
2	Facebook/alternativfuer.de	Pi-News	Facebook/deutschesprachwelt	Facebook/UlrikeTrebesiusMdEP
3	Facebook/NPD-Die-soziale-Heimatpartei	derhonnigmannsagt.Wordpress	Facebook/blauenarzisde	Facebook/Dr.Frauke.Petry
4	Jungfreiheit	Afd-opr	Facebook/einlicht.de	Facebook/NPD-Die-soziale-Heimatpartei
5	Kopp-verlag	Npd	Facebook/Pegada	Rep
6	Rep	Rep	Facebook/germaniaversand.de	Alternativfuer
7	Facebook/Dr.Frauke.Petry	Twitter/republikaner	Facebook/AfD-Forum-Spessart	Facebook/Pegida
8	Facebook/Pegida	Deutschelobby.Wordpress	Facebook/in.bewegung2014	Facebook/jungfreiheit
9	Facebook/BerndLuckeMdEP	Facebook/npdhw	Facebook/Ja-zur-Alternative-201314-MitteBasis-Afd	Facebook/BerndLuckeMdEP
10	Shop-rep	Facebook/npd.kn.rv.bodensee	Facebook/Ich-bin-stolz-Deutscher-zu-sein	Facebook/pesn.meiningen.schmalkalden
11	Facebook/jungfreiheit	Facebook/rickiriefli999	Facebook/ReconquistaGermania	Facebook/Compact.Magazin
12	Npd	Twitter/DeisterEdith	Facebook/Alternative-für-Deutschland-Saarland	Facebook/Anonymous.Kollektiv
13	De-de.Facebook/jafuer.de	Blu-news	Facebook/Starbatty	Facebook/BeatrixVonStorch
14	Pi-News	Jungfreiheit	Facebook/JA-zu-Björn-Höcke	De-de.Facebook/jafuer.de
15	derhonnigmannsagt.Wordpress	Facebook/Pegida	Facebook/alternativfuer.de	Shop-rep

Table 2: Centrality of right-wing web entities

(12) and for the REP's federal website and online shop (6, 10) are driven by the large number of regional and local party chapters which maintain web entities that link to websites and social media profiles run by the party headquarters. Therefore, the other highly ranked entities are perhaps more interesting: "Junge Freiheit" (4, 11) is a weekly newspaper at the heart of the self-styled intellectual "New Right" that aims at building bridges between traditional conservative and more radical or even extremist right-wing groups. "Kopp Verlag" (5) is a right-wing publishing house that chiefly trades in conspiracy theories, right-wing esotericism, and islamophobia. Also remarkable is the rank of "Pegida's" national Facebook page.

While indegree is akin to popularity, betweenness is an alternative measure of centrality that takes both incoming and outgoing links into consideration and is proportional to the number of shortest paths that pass through a node. Betweenness can help to identify nodes that act as brokers between groups. Once more, the AfD's federal website appears at the very top of the list, followed by the "PI News" site and the right-wing extremist "Honigmannsagt" ("The bee-keeper says...") blog. One new and interesting entry is "Blu News", a right-wing media site run by former authors for "PI News". Other entities include the central NPD and REP websites as well as social media profiles that are associated with local/regional party chapters or individual party members. The high rank of the central party websites is partly due to the star-like topologies of the partisan subnetworks: Nearly all chapter websites link to the main site of the respective organisation, which in turn may link to content outside the bubble. Both the AfD's and the NPD's Facebook pages are missing from the list. While their betweenness is still high in absolute terms², neither is amongst the most important brokers in the network, presumably because both are embedded in dense neighbourhoods that provide redundant connections.

Closeness is another measure of centrality that picks up the average distance between a node and all other (reachable) nodes. In directed networks, it is best calculated in terms of paths leading *from* other nodes *to* the node in question. Remarkably, due to the high levels of connectivity across Facebook, all top 15 entities in this list are Facebook pages.³ Most of these correspond to relatively small far-right blogs, organisations, and groups, but once more, the AfD's central Facebook page as well as pages of various initiatives within the party and the Facebook profile of one of the MEPs (Starbatty) are amongst the top 15.

One final measure of centrality is pagerank, which was proposed by the founders of Google as a measure

²The betweenness rank of the NPD's Facebook page is 17, the AfD's Facebook page comes 23rd.

³In fact, the first 51 entities are Facebook pages, and the website in position 52 is followed by another 547 Facebook pages.

for web page authority. Pagerank takes into account not only the number of incoming links but also the authority of the sites providing those links, leading to a recursive definition of authority. It is proportional to the amount of time a person randomly following the links between a set of web pages would spend on each page. According to this criterion, the AfD's website has the highest authority, followed by the Facebook profiles of two AfD politicians: Ulrike Trebesius, one of the MEPs who was head of the pro-Lucke association within the AfD and later on played an instrumental role in the creation of his new party, and Frauke Petry, who replaced Lucke as leader of the AfD. Other highly ranked entities include the NPD's Facebook page, the REP and AfD website, the Facebook pages of Bernd Lucke, "Pegida", "Junge Freiheit", "Compact Magazine" (a far-right journal), and "PESN" (a smallish anti-refugee movement organisation).

From these analyses, a clear picture of the German far-right network and the AfD's position within it emerges. First, almost one third of the web entities surveyed is affiliated with the AfD, with the NPD coming a distant second. While there is certainly no directly proportional relationship between the number of entities and the parties relevance, authority, or membership base, it is clear that the AfD has become a dominant player in terms of sheer numbers. Second, and very much like the other clusters of partisan web sites and social media profiles, the entities affiliated with the AfD form a mostly closed community that centers around their federal website, their central Facebook page, and the social profiles of a few prominent politicians. Third, while most entities are affiliated with one of the six far-right parties, there is still a large interstitial space occupied by more than a thousand entities.

This particular structure becomes clearly visible once the full network is visualised (Section 3.1.2). Here, nodes are coloured according to their affiliation (the AfD is purple, the NPD green, and the REP red) and sized according to their pagerank. For their placement in the graph, the Force-Atlas-2 Algorithm was applied. Force-Atlas-2 belongs to the family of "force-directed" algorithms: While nodes generally repulse each other, an connecting edge will pull two nodes towards each other. Force-directed layouts in general and Force-Atlas-2 in particular are useful because they reduce visual clutter and help to separate densely connected communities.

In Section 3.1.2, this has worked well. Although the algorithm did not take the information on party affiliation into consideration, the partisan nodes are clearly separated from each other, and from the

interstitial group of unaffiliated nodes (light blue) that form the centre of the network.⁴ For the parties, these nodes are potential allies, recruiters, or sounding boards. Within this group, a few nodes that were already identified in Table 2 stand out: The central “Pegida” Facebook page, the Facebook page of “Compact Magazine”, and the Facebook page of “Junge Freiheit” magazine. The latter occupies a particularly interesting position: It is closely linked to a large number of AfD sites and profiles on the one hand, and to a number of authoritative entities within the unaffiliated cluster including “Pegida” and “Compact Magazine” on the other. This chimes with “Junge Freiheit’s” self-proclaimed mission statement to act as a “bridge” between diverse right-wing actors, and with the widespread perception in the German research community that both organisations are unusually close because the AfD mostly fulfils “Junge Freiheit’s” old dream of an overtly respectable far-right catch-all party.

3.2 The AfD’s Facebook fan page

The analysis in the previous section has shown that the AfD has become one of the biggest players in Germany’s far-right web. Their Facebook page in particular is placed very close to that of the “Junge Freiheit” magazine, an important bridge-builder for the far-right. From the very start, the party has made extensive use of the internet. While their central website is professionally run and regularly updated, it presents static content such as manifestos, contact details, and press releases. Crucially, it has no comment, guest book, or other “Web 2.0” features. For social communication, the party has always relied almost exclusively on their main Facebook profile.

A previous analysis of the party’s first year of social media activities showed that the AfD’s own posts mostly reflected the soft eurosceptic, non-populist line of the EP 2014 manifesto (Arzheimer, 2015). Comments and posts by others were monitored for racist or otherwise extremist statements and at least occasionally deleted. Data collection for that analysis stopped, however, in June/July 2014. Since then, Lucke and some of his core supporters moved to Brussels, “Pegida” emerged as a new player and potential ally, and the power struggle within the leadership over the future course and public image of the party intensified so much that the split became all but inevitable. This section aims at extending and complementing the initial analysis in Arzheimer (2015): First, it tracks the use of keywords *by the AfD* over time, gauging the

⁴One partisan group was almost embedded in the large cluster of unaffiliated entities: PRO. This makes some substantive sense, because PRO bills itself as a movement and has close ties to local anti-foreigner/anti-refugee initiatives.

amount of control Lucke and his supporters had over the party's public profile. Second, it maps the topics others are discussing on the page, again tracking developments over time. Third, it looks into networks of people posting on the page, and at patterns of linking content, thereby returning to the AfD's role within the wider far-right network.

3.2.1 Data and methods

In the previous section, patterns of interlinking within the far-right sector were studied using a snapshot of a wide array of websites and social media profiles. This snapshot was confined to what a (diligent) human would see: the most recent content that could be accessed by clicking the links on an entities start page. In the case of an active Facebook fan page, this is just the tip of the iceberg: Over the course of a day, people will post hundreds of comments and links, which will be hidden from view by default. To analyse the full content of a page, it is necessary to access Facebook via its API. To bypass the (unknown) limits Facebook places on the API, posts on the AfD's page (both by the party and by others) were downloaded in 24-hour chunks for every day from between March 11, 2013 and June 11, 2015. Only posts that attracted at least five comments were considered. Then, the comments associated with each post were downloaded too, and everything was aggregated into a single structure consisting of 2188 original posts and 1493 comments by the AfD plus 57 034 posts and 372 178 comments by other users.

3.2.2 Findings

In a bid to break the mould of German party politics, the AfD had given itself a rather unusual leadership structure. The national executive was headed by three "speakers": Lucke, Petry, and Konrad Adam. Each of the three had exactly equal rights and competences and could claim to speak for the party. Early in 2014, Lucke began a long campaign for amending the party constitution in a way that would replace the "speakers" with a more traditional unified leadership structure, assuming that this position would fall to him. This plan met with fierce resistance from other members of the executive, and from at least some of the rank-and-file. The eventual outcome was a compromise: In January 2015, a party conference finally decided that the AfD should switch to a "first speaker/second speaker" model in mid-2015, following the end of the term of the current executive. The "first speaker" would then become sole party leader in

December 2015. The implicit agreement was that Adam, who had the lowest profile of the three, should resign his speakership first. Petry would become second speaker, effectively Lucke's deputy. Only when the conflict over the party's future course escalated during the second quarter of 2015 as Lucke founded a formal association of his supporters within the party, members of the executive began to publicly discuss the virtues of a challenge. Petry declared that she would stand against Lucke less than three weeks before the July conference.

While the struggle over the leadership structure lasted for much of 2014, became enmeshed with a (public) struggle over the course of the party in the winter 2014/15 and finally turned into a struggle over the person of the leader in 2015, Lucke remained very much the public face of the party. Journalists habitually refer to Lucke as "founder", although Adam, Petry, Gauland, von Storch, and many others were founders as well. This perception was reflected in and projected by the postings of the AfD's central Facebook account.

Figure 2 shows for each month between March 2013 and June 2016 what percentage of the AfD's posts contain the names of eleven prominent AfD politicians. For the whole period, right up to his last month in office, Lucke outstrips everyone else by a considerable margin. Moreover, there are some interesting patterns: Lucke's mentions declined sharply when he moved to Brussels after the EP election (the vertical dotted line) whereas Petry and the other Eastern leaders came to the fore during the summer of 2014, when they fought their state-level campaigns. Lucke reasserted his position towards the end of the year and retained a high level of mentions throughout 2015, although Petry was also frequently mentioned in most months. In June, finally, one in three posts mentioned Lucke, whereas Petry was relegated to a minor role once more. This suggests that Lucke successfully tried to shape the party's appearance on Facebook right until the end of his leadership.

Is this reflected in the substance of what is posted, too? To address this question, a simple coding based on keywords/regular expressions was employed to identify major topics for right-wingers: (1) Europe and the Eurocrisis, (2) Greece, (3) Muslims and Islam, (4) migration, (5) crime, (6) Turkey and the Turks, (7) poor CEE EU member states and their citizens, (8) welfare, (9) gender mainstreaming and same-sex marriages, and (10) the Pegida movement.

As can be seen in Table 3, Europe/the Euro is by far the most important issue for the official party

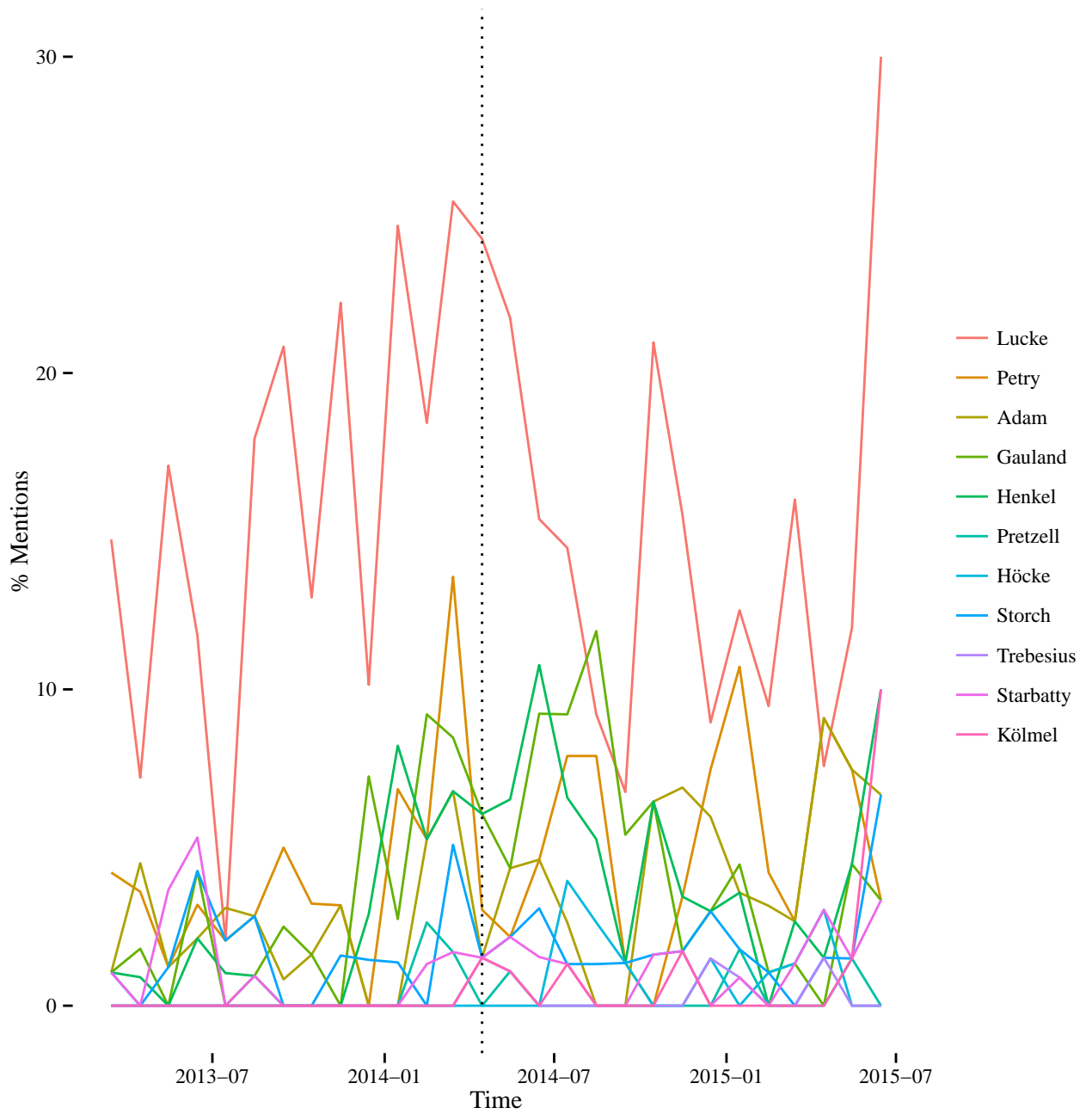


Figure 2: Prominence of AfD leaders in the AfD's Facebook posts over time

	AfD Posts	AfD Comments	Other Posts	Other Comments
Euro	28.92	7.64	15.36	8.42
GR	6.44	0.60	1.69	1.76
Islam	0.97	0.33	2.93	1.36
Migration	5.05	1.81	5.07	3.11
Crime	2.18	0.54	2.28	1.57
RussiaUkraine	1.90	0.60	4.42	1.59
TurkeyTurks	0.93	0.60	1.23	0.79
BulgariaRomania	0.46	0.00	0.46	0.27
Welfare	0.65	0.07	0.32	0.14
Gender	2.27	0.54	1.69	0.80
Pegida	0.42	0.07	0.78	0.38
N	2158	1493	8231	372 178

Table 3: Issues on the AfD's Facebook page by poster and type (percentages)

account: It appears in more of a quarter of all posts, followed by Greece. For other accounts posting on the page (see column three), the Euro issue is still the prominent issue but appears far less frequently, and Greece is less important than Islam, migration, crime, or Russia and Ukraine. Keywords related to migration appear in five per cent of the AfD's own posts, at about the same rate as in the posts of other people and organisations, but in line with Lucke's strategy for the party, Muslims and Islam are hardly ever mentioned by the AfD. Similarly, Russia and Ukraine are mentioned less frequently by the AfD than by other posters.

Focusing on those issues where the AfD and the other posters and commenters differ most, the longitudinal perspective is once more revealing. From Figure 3 it can be seen that the party (or rather its Facebook account) began pushing the European issue from late 2013 (right after the Bundestag election and all through the EP campaign and well into the Land election campaigns of 2014), and then again from February 2015, when Europe and Greece returned to the political agenda. Fans and other users of the page, however, hardly responded. A very similar pattern holds for Greece.

Conversely, the party barely reacted when people began to post about Muslims and Islam in late 2013 (Figure 4). The party became significantly more active on this front in late 2014 when the "Pegida" marches were a new phenomenon that drew large crowds in Saxony, and Lucke voiced some tentative support. From February/March, however, when Lucke tried to distance the party from Islamophobia, the activities on that front flatlined, whereas posts by others reached a new peak. Similarly, during spring and autumn

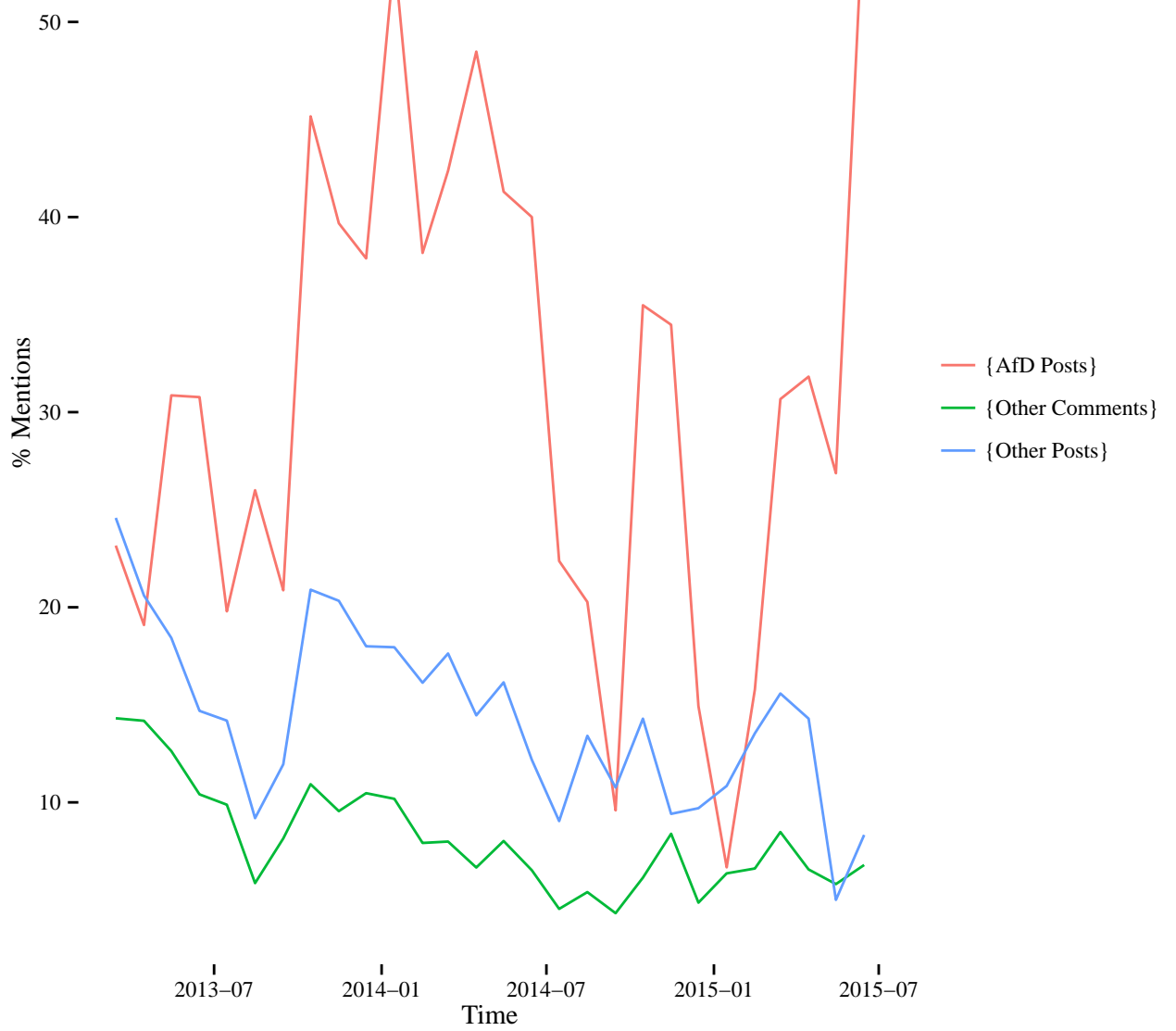


Figure 3: Issues over time: Euro(pe)

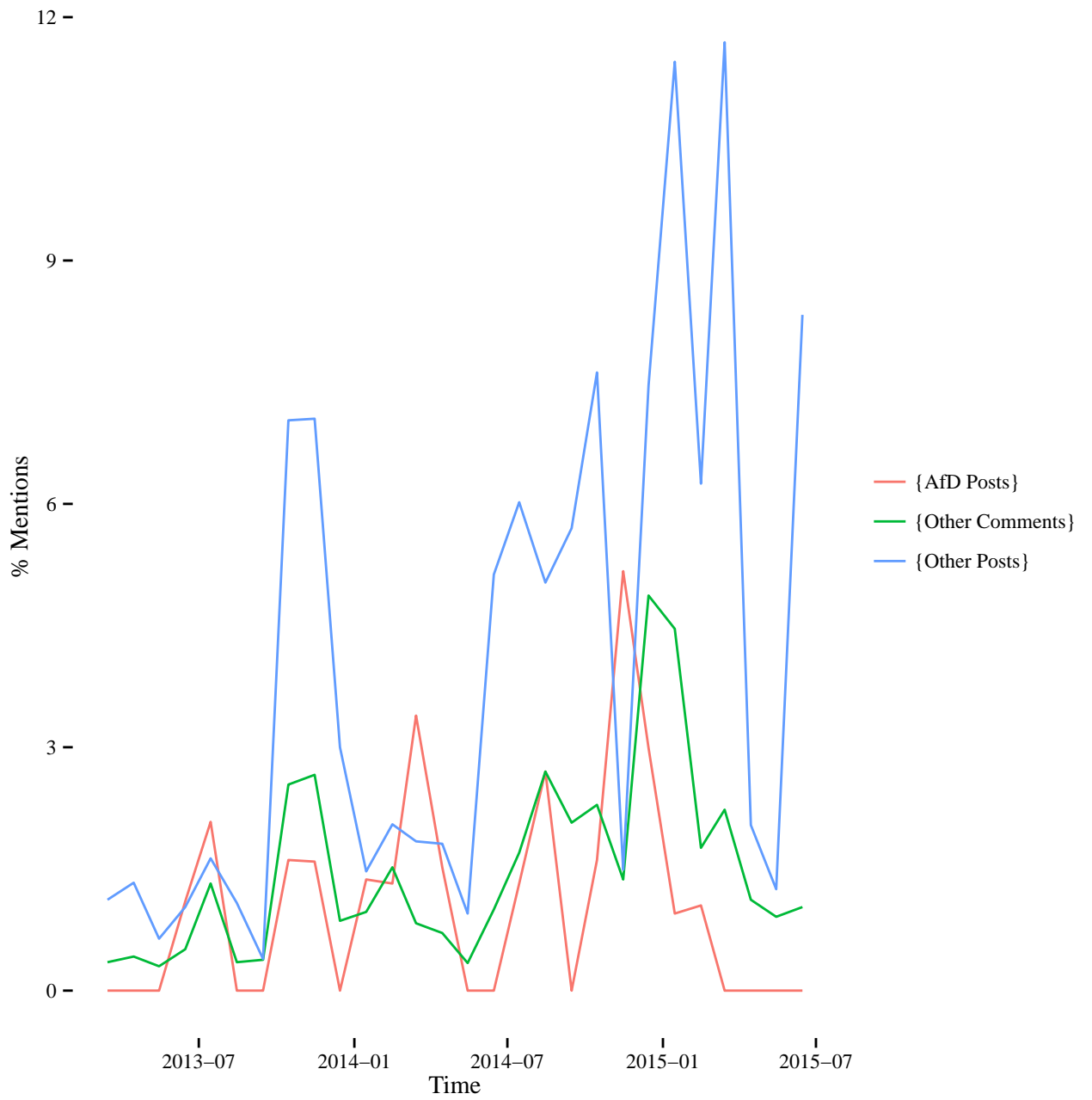


Figure 4: Issues over time: Islam

of 2014 posts on Russia or Ukraine made up up to 20 % of the activities by others on the page, whereas the fraction devoted to that topic by the AfD remained below 5 %. The activities of the AfD and other users were more attuned when it comes to immigration, but even here, the amount of posts devoted to this topic by the AfD, other posters, and commenters are often out of step.

That does not mean that the AfD's posts do not resonate with their audience: The median number of "Likes" per post is 1055. But posts mentioning Europe (1087) or Greece (1077) hardly exceed this number. Posts that do mention those issues that Lucke wanted to de-emphasise, however, are significantly more popular, averaging a median number of 1146 (Islam), 1608 (Bulgaria(ns)/Romania(ns)), or 1611 (Migration). In sum, this means that the AfD's social media strategy was successful in creating an active forum, but much less successful in setting the agenda.

The identification of relevant issues via keywords/regular expressions is obviously rather crude, yet it is able to classify a surprisingly large share of the AfD's own posts. It is less clear, however, what the other posters and commenters are talking about, as the chosen keywords appear relatively infrequently in their posts. This could be either because they are talking about different *topics*, or because they are using a different *vocabulary*. One possible approach to address this issue is topic modelling.

Preliminary findings from a STM look interesting but are very preliminary

Finally, as regards the position of the AfD within the wider far-right wing network, the party links almost exclusively to mainstream news sites and to their own federal website. The one prominent exception is "Junge Freiheit" but even here, only nine articles were linked in more than two years. Most links posted by the AfD are, however, not internal but point to Facebook profiles closely associated with the party: Lucke and Petry (63 each) and the state party chapters in Saxony (71), Hamburg (60), Thuringia (19), and Berlin (9).

Posts by other users show no such restraint. While social media (Facebook and Youtube) and mainstream news sites dominate, links to blogs and other sites identified as part of the far-right network in the previous section also make up a sizable chunk of all links posted.

A little more on the network of posters

4 Conclusion and outlook

The AfD is an unusually successful new party. The quick rise of the party is intertwined with its deft adoption of the internet and Facebook in particular. Other German parties only began to catch up with the newcomer. In a very short time, the party has created an impressive array of websites and social media profiles. Their central Facebook page in particular has attracted a huge and active user base. Because the party is not (yet) stigmatised in the same way the NPD is, their Facebook page has become a prime location for far-right online discourses.

The AfD's online activities reflect the dominant position that Bernd Lucke held within the party right up to his downfall in July 2015: Even a relatively crude, keyword-based method shows that the postings closely reflect Lucke's agenda for the party. However, the account was not able to dominate and shape the issue agenda: euroscepticism simply did not resonate in the same way that Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment do. In a sense, this proves Lucke's critics right.

When Lucke and his supporters left the party, the AfD has lost at least a part of their "reputational shield" (as well as about 20 000 of their Facebook fans). On the other hand, the party is now free to pursue a broader range of policies, both online and offline. It will be interesting to see how the change in the leadership affects the discourses on the party's Facebook page.

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