
How to use campaigns for exit work?

An overview of Exit Germany's target group approach

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Summary

How do you reach a target group that is relatively insular and communicate with a message that is meant to challenge their worldview? What role can campaigns play in this context and, how has the target group reacted to corresponding actions? Can campaigns reach into groups like neo-Nazi groupuscules and trigger a de-radicalisation or disengagement effect in the recipient? And if this is the case, how can these processes be made visible?

In its 20 years of existence, Exit Germany has developed and implemented a variety of target group approaches, like online and offline campaigns, flyers, co-operations with influencers, former who are visible in the media, to name just a few of them. The article presents a review of Exit Germany's target group approach, their public relations strategy related to this, and a case study of three strategic communications campaigns of Exit Germany and their objectives.

Uniquely, this article is also about how the topic of exiting is discussed in the right-wing extremist scene. Song texts and social media reactions by right-wing extremists to Exit Germany campaigns are provide insight on responses. In addition to qualitative and quantitative insights into the implementation of the campaigns and experiences, the paper quotes people who have left the right-wing extremist scene and experienced Exit Germany strategic communcations campaigns during their active time. The article concludes with lessons learned.

Exit Germany

Exit Germany is an initiative assisting individuals who want to leave the violent right-wing extremist movement and start a new life. It was founded by criminologist and former police detective Bernd Wagner and former neo-Nazi leader Ingo Hasselbach. Exit Germany has been working since 2000 to assist disengagement and ultimately de-radicalization from far, extreme, and right-wing environments. Being the first to start such an endeavour in Germany, Exit Germany constitutes a very experienced and successful program in de-radicalisation and exit-assistance, looking back to the first de-radicalization experiences by its founder Bernd Wagner starting in 1989. Exit Germany since then has been continuously working to help individuals from all backgrounds, but mainly from highly radicalized milieus (group leaders, terrorists, party leaders) to leave the movement and to develop methods and programs in the field to make such interventions more effective. Exit aims to counter right-wing extremism and hate crime by assisting in breaking with this scene. The freedom and dignity of every human being, and the establishment of the principles of equality and mutual respect, are the cornerstones of the work. Thus, Exit challenges and counters every extremist ideology that rejects these values and in the meantime/ and simultaneously actively engages the individual human being. Moreover, the goal is therefore to also provide the public with information about right-wing extremism; either through workshops at schools or other institutions, presenting the work at conferences. The Exit Germany team is staffed by a variety of professionals, including criminologists, educationalists and cultural scientists. In addition, former neo-Nazis are involved in the work in various forms.

Exit Germany's exit assistance is based on the principle of voluntarism. People who need help have to get in contact with Exit. This is also the first check of their motivation to leave extremist milieus. In doing so, however, they must be aware of the possibility that there is a chance to leave and that there is someone who might be there to help them build a psycho-social 'bridge' out of the movement.

Exit Germany works politically and professionally in a non-party way and independently of state agencies such as the police, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution or the judiciary. Information is not passed on to any authority without explicit authorisation. The handling of information is absolutely discreet. As a CSO, exit can creatively try out new forms of addressing, designing and implementing campaigns for our target groups, and can also choose unusual forms for addressing them.

To reflect on the narrative "exit" in the target group, and society, various forms of addressing the target group and counter-narratives¹ were developed and implemented in the past. Together with former extremists (hereafter described as 'formers'), Exit Germany is working on specific strategies for interested stakeholders in politics, administration, education, business, and civil society to deradicalize and prevent extremist activity. Among these are situation analyses and the conception of traditionally conceived Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) projects, their accompaniment and advice, but also creative art projects such as plays and exhibitions that aim to educate people about the politics of hate. In addition, Exit has supported and accompanied various cinema and film productions on the subject of right-wing extremism as well as documentaries with expertise and consultancy advice in order to give an authentic portrayal of life within extremist milieus.

¹ For the Institute for Strategic Dialogue is a Counter-narrative „a message that offers a positive alternative to extremist propaganda, or alternatively aims to deconstruct or delegitimise extremist narratives.“ In: The Impact of Counter Narratives Insights from a year-long cross-platform pilot study of counter-narrative curation, targeting, evaluation and impact. Tanya Silverman, Christopher J. Stewart, Jonathan Birdwell, Zahed Amanullah (2016). https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Impact-of-Counter-Narratives_ONLINE_1.pdf

Exit Germany in a nutshell

Case numbers: 884 cases since founding in 2000

Cases per year: 30 +/- 10 cases per year

Age of the clients: 18 - 35 (average)

Gender: M (86%) & W (13%) and families with children

Time of activity: between 5 - 10 years and up to 20 years

Target group: Federally relevant groups / persons, Highly radicalised profiles

Exit time: 2-4 years on average

Recidivism rate: 16 conversions or formers - with reference to state protection (Islamism, right-wing extremism and left-wing extremism)

Involvement of former extremists

People who are in the process of exiting deal intensively with their past, explore the motives for their entry and exit in conversations with exit facilitators and reflect on questions of guilt and address ideological narratives. Some formers want to share their story known to give insight and warn others not to make the same mistakes. For some, it is also a form of 'making amends' for past wrongs and aid their recovery and reintegration into society. Exit Germany supports them in developing skills to express themselves in writing or in public in front of an audience. It helps open up possibilities, accompanies first steps, and makes its media platforms available. The top priority at Exit is always the safety of the formers. Because of this, some choose to speak anonymously in interviews, texts, and podcasts. In accordance with our standards², Preventing Violent Extremism (or PVE) measures are implemented in schools or with other partners together with suitable former right-wing extremists who are didactically and methodologically qualified for this purpose.

Involvement of former extremists!? What does "exit" mean?

Exit is the process of finalizing the decision to no longer belong to the previous radical/extremist group/movement and to reject radicalism as a guiding principle of personality, thought, and action, and to shape a perceptible and sustainable new life in accordance with democratic values.

An exit requires critical reflection, reappraisal, and the successful questioning of the previous ideology. Exit is, therefore, more than leaving a party or group, more than a change of aesthetic expression or renouncing the use of violence. An exit has occurred when the ideology underlying and guiding the previous actions has been overcome – in other words 'wholesale' de-radicalization and disengagement.

² Ulrike Krause, Bernd Wagner, Fabian Wichmann (2021): Standards EXIT-Deutschland. Ausgestiegene in der politischen Aufklärungsarbeit. Schriftenreihe Zentrum Demokratische Kultur, Berlin.

Together with a so-called "Working Group of Former Extremists", Exit Germany constantly designing flyers and postcards specifically to reach our target group³. We also use other communication platforms to address the target group directly. Our formats also include videos and articles in collaboration with formers. Also, exhibitions, like „Under the skin – Former neo-Nazis and their symbols“⁴ used a combination of photographs and interviews designed to make the process of profound change visible. We photographed and documented the visible 'exit' process, conducted interviews with formers, documented tattoo removals or disguising mechanisms to denote formal disengagement. The exhibition tells stories of successes and the everyday challenges in the 'exit' process. Due to a large number of images, interviews and various approaches, perspectives, and juxtapositions, the project creates a unique insight and access to the topic of right-wing extremism and exit processes. The exhibition Skin, Stone is available as an indoor and outdoor version. Since 2019, it has been presented nationally and internationally in 10 locations, including: Berlin, Cottbus, Weimar, Zielona Gora. The exhibition podcast, published in 2021, reached more than 60,000 listeners in three quarters of a year.⁵ In another example, Exit collaborated with a beverage manufacturer. In 2018, for example, we implemented a campaign⁶ with our partner "Fritz-Kola" and the club FC. St. Pauli, a football club that plays in the Bundesliga. The slogan "Exit means to rise up" was printed on the banners in the stadium. In addition to this slogan, the address of the Exit homepage was displayed on the banners, and information was distributed outside the stadium. This action was intended to make Exit better known to the general public and reached 29,546 people in the crowded stadium.

In addition to these actions, to reach our target group and to implement their perspective, we involve formers as editors in our journal, Journal EXIT-Deutschland⁷, and have set up a news blog⁸. Through this, stories of formers can be conveyed as authentic countermodels to the right-wing extremist scene. At the same time, former extremists critically deal with their past, inform about the dangers of right-wing extremism and thus contribute to prevention.

Media use and target group

Exit's public relations work extends across different media and forms, covering different activities, target groups and environments. For project communication, the opportunities of media and social media are used, as well as partners and authorities or the direct social environment of our target group, people who are active in the right-wing extremist scene. The environment can be in the digital space or non-digital space of the persons. The target group to be reached can be roughly divided into two areas, but is further operationalised and concretised depending on the implementation and goal of the campaigns. The core target groups are as follows:

- People who are active in the (violent) right-wing extremist scene + people from the surrounding area and
- the general public.

³ The primary target group of Exit Germany are persons in the organised right-wing extremist scene. In other words, the part of the scene that aggressively and militantly strives to eliminate the 'Free Democratic Basic Order' in its entirety and in its essential parts for the purpose of its elimination and to establish a non-democratic basic order that is contrary to human rights. Because of this they are subject to special state observation by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution on a legal basis and whose political/ideologically intended criminal acts are separately prosecuted as state protection offences by the Criminal Police State Protection and other organs of the state protection complex. Depending on the need articulated through requests to Exit, the assistance is directed at the defined target group as well as at anti-Islam activists and other facets of right-wing extremism as a form of movement.

⁴ Under the skin – Former neo-Nazis and their symbols <https://www.exit-deutschland.de/ausstellungen/?c=under-the-skin>

⁵ Report on the podcast from 2021. https://prezi.com/i/rhm2foxu30y_/exit-bericht-audio-podcast-2021/

⁶ In this context, a campaign is an intervention or form of communication, usually limited in time, which communicates a specific offer or narrative aimed at a target group in order to achieve perception and generate interest among the target group.

⁷ Journal EXIT-Deutschland www.journal-exit.de

⁸ www.ak-exit.de

The aim of the approach is to make the project known and thus to reach the target group of people from the right-wing extremist scene. Furthermore, the general public should be informed and possibilities for the reintegration of those who have left the scene should be facilitated. To reach the target groups, Exit has been able to build a network of sites, media outlets and social media channels that can reach more than 134,000⁹ users on social media alone.

For example, Exit Germany publishes video and audio podcasts that deal professionally with the topic of deradicalisation and radicalisation, as well as experiences of people we have assisted in exiting, as part of our biographical work.

The first to go - exit from the neo-Nazi perspective

Through our practice, we were able to find out that the topic of leaving is being discussed intensely in Violent Right-Wing Extremism (VRWE). In general, this refers to the topic and specifically to Exit Germany. We can illustrate this with the example of many right-wing extremist songs that deal with the theme of leaving and feelings of disillusionment and betrayal. In a preliminary review, more than 39 songs on this subject were identified. Among them are titles like: *EXIT Superstar, Former, Traitor, Enemies Among Us, Fuck Off, Death for Traitors, Traitor Pig, Where Have You Been, Walk in Shame and Dead Man Walking*. In concrete terms, there is a song by the German neo-Nazi band *Mahnwache* called *EXIT* and that song deals with the narrative of exiting the right-wing extremist milieu but also very concretely references Exit Germany. The text of the song describes the exit process as almost tragically; a process that in the song suggests a lack of understanding on behalf of the disengaged individual and personal disappointment. It clearly illustrates the relevance that the topic exit has for the right-wing extremist scene.

*The BRD society has come up with
something great*

and comrades are falling into it.

Should it happen

that we lose each other.

Then I can only think of these words.

You were always there from the beginning,

*What do you want now in the exit
programme?*

You've always been great at phrases.

And now all of a sudden your resolution is:

EXIT - you want to leave,

you are no longer ready for the loyal deed.

EXIT - goodbye!

Then you're no longer my comrade either!

We shared a dream and now

you've hurt my feelings.

You change your mind overnight

I never thought I'd see the day from you.

Refrain

*What happened to you? What has
happened?*

*Why do you want to leave after all these
years?*

How do you fall for these hypocrites?

I wonder how stupid you have to be.

Refrain

Lyrics: Mahnwache

⁹ Exit Germany: Social Media Report 2021: <https://prezi.com/i/7ibn3mo61vy/exit-bericht-social-media-2021/>

Other bands like „Gigi und die brauen Stadtmusikanten“ had printed a flyer and the logo of Exit Germany in a booklet for their album. Below is a song lyric that deals with the topic of exit.

We still have to be grateful to the exit programmes. They get the the very worst of the dirt from our ranks. But still a word to every word to every traitor pig: Before you get out, you have to get in.

Then they sit in talk shows, these poor liars. Presenting their films and fictional books. They talk about persecution and threats because still nobody cares about them, interested in them.

Lyrics: Gigi und die brauen Stadtmusikanten

Exiting is not only interpreted as a personal decision in the sense of an individual change, but as a betrayal of the common cause, right-wing extremists deal intensively with the topic and try to scare their members off leaving. The band *Agitator*, on the other hand, is more explicit in their song „Aussteiger,, (Former) and threatens without hesitation: "Yes, we can still be good friends, he said to me, unfortunately I didn't have the gun ready at that moment". The band „Triebtäter“ sings about exiting in their song "God forgives ... we never! You should be clear about one thing, you lousy traitor pig, you should be clear about one thing God forgives - we never! Judas!" In our work at EXIT Germany, we try to take advantage of this fact. In fact, these findings have reinforced our decision to take the exit narratives contained in these songs to the community of disengaged right-wing extremists we support, creating or reinforcing doubt. Moreover, counter-narratives we develop aim to reach the target group and to be discussed within the target group. The overarching question for all these activities: How could we fight right-wing extremism without resorting to aggression?

Operation Trojan T-Shirt



Year: 2011

Preparation: 1 year

Partner: Grabarz & Partner

Involvement of formers: in communication design, graphic implementation, wording and monitoring

But even with all this money raised from prank charity marches and social media trolling, how does one change the hearts and minds of those invested in right-wing extremist causes in the long term?

‘Operation Trojan T-Shirt’ evolved in cooperation with our partner, the ad agency Grabarz & Partner, who sought to target the neo-Nazi scene directly. On 6 August 2011, we distributed T-shirts for free, showing a skull with the text ‘Hardcore Rebels’ at a right-wing rock festival (‘Rock for Germany’) in the city of Gera, organized by the nationalist party, National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD).

The surprise effect became visible after the T-shirt was washed once. The message appeared: 'What your T-shirt can do, you also can do – We help you free yourself from right-wing extremism. Exit Germany'. The goal was to increase the awareness and popularity of Exit Germany in the scene and mainly to target youth that have not yet firmly settled in the right-wing extremist scene.



The Trojan T-shirt before washing (top) and after washing (bottom).

Implementation

It took us about one year to implement the project. During this year, we worked on the method, the wording, the layout, the text, the message and the mechanics. Furthermore, we discussed different locations where the campaign should be implemented. In the end, the German neo-Nazi festival „Rock for Germany“ offered the greatest planning security, control and fitted best into the developed security concept. Since it was not clear how we could document the action and the reactions before implementation, we prepared one of our old fake profiles in a neo-Nazi forum for use. The reactions in such for a were native and very prompt and acted as a useful, qualitative barometer of whether the counteraction was successful or not.

1. Before we started the production of the T-shirts and after a long testing and planning process, we contacted the organizer of the festival. Via email, we described an invented biography and right-wing extremist references. We explained that we wanted to support the cause but did not want to go public.
2. After a first positive feedback from the recipient, we started with the production of the T-shirts. Beforehand, various tests were carried out for printing to evaluate the functionality of the T-shirt.
3. In the follow-up communication, the organizer suggested meetings, which we declined due to overlapping schedules.

4. Shortly before the implementation, the communication with the organizer broke off. We contacted his supervisor. He then gave us the address of a local right-wing extremist shop where we should send the T-shirts.
5. Due to this delay, we sent the T-shirts a few days before the event. The two boxes of shirts were sent from another federal state. The top layer of the T-shirts were not manipulated as Trojans, so that they could withstand an initial check.
6. On the day of the event (on August 6th 2011), we placed a project worker on the outskirts of the festival. He monitored the situation and was able to take the first pictures of the T-shirts at the festival.
7. When we were sure that the T-shirts had successfully reached the target group, we monitored neo-Nazi forums and social media to document the reactions. The research continued through Sunday.
8. On August 8th 2011 morning, the first press enquiries reached the project, as neo-Nazis publicized the action on social media and forums.
9. On August 8th 2011, we also published our press release.
10. Even weeks after the action, the NPD, which belonged to the network of the organizers of the festival, explained itself and tried to limit the damage of the infiltration.

The article that the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote about was recommended almost 100,000 times on Facebook, Twitter and Google+ - a massive number that, according to the 2011 ZDF Hyperland Charts, no other journalistic contribution came close. But not only the recommendations in social networks were gigantic. More than a hundred international media outlets reported on "Operation Trojan T-shirt", including the Times, Guardian, BBC, Le Monde, the Rachel Maddow Show, The Local, Toronto Sun, Herald Sun or China Daily. There were also reports in the Australian, New Zealand, Japanese, Polish, Russian, South African and Arabic press. In Germany, more than 300 newspapers, blogs and forums reported on the action, including the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Stern, Spiegel, and many other daily newspapers. Academic researcher, Dr Andreas Dafnos highlighted the exceptional value of the campaign, concluding that the „The campaign combined deeds and words and instigated fierce discussions in Germany making the headlines in the global news media landscape as well as catching the attention (either positively or negatively) of radical right supporters in social media and online forums.“ and „the Trojan t-shirt campaign could guide future operations, since it has shown that slick products accompanied by concise messages could make a difference“ (Dafnos, 2014)¹⁰.

We are very aware that this project did not have an immediate effect within the immediate arena of distribution (i.e. the concert itself), however after the operation the number of persons contacting Exit and asking for help to leave the movement tripled. In addition, when thinking about leaving the scene, a right-wing extremist might remember us later on. In the Reactions section, two former neo-Nazis are quoted who experienced either or both campaigns during their active time. Furthermore, we hear again and again from former members of the neo-Nazi movement how Exit is discussed within the scene and how it is sometimes warned against. This negative attention benefits our perception.

The following year we posted a big poster next to the festival area with the slogan: "Sorry guys, this year we have no t-shirts, but always an alternative. Exit Germany." The idea was to generate renewed attention among the participants by referring to the action.

¹⁰ Narratives as a Means of Countering the Radical Right; Looking into the Trojan T-shirt Project by *Andreas Dafnos*. In: <https://journal-exit.de/narratives-as-a-means-of-countering-the-radical-right/>



The Trojan T-shirt as handed out by the organiser at entrance of the festival.

Outcomes: Operation Trojan T-Shirt

- The article written by the Süddeutsche Zeitung about the action was recommended almost 100,000 times on Facebook, Twitter and Google+. No other journalistic contribution came close to in 2011, according to the ZDF Hyperland Charts. Der Spiegel and Süddeutsche Zeitung reported on the project gathered 1.2 million views
- More than a hundred international media outlets reported on "Operation Trojan T-shirt", including the Times, Guardian, BBC, Le Monde, the Rachel Maddow Show, The Local, Toronto Sun, Herald Sun or Chinadaily. There were also reports in the Australian, New Zealand, Japanese, Polish, Russian and South African and Arabic press
- In Germany, more than 300 newspapers, blogs and forums reported on the action, including the Süddeutsche Zeitung, Stern, Spiegel and many other daily newspapers
- Thus, 250 T-shirts reached a media value of more than half a million euros
- In total, Germany was reached by more than 30 million users via Facebook
- The exit requests at Exit Germany tripled
- Social and advertising awards (Politikaward 2012 & Social Economy Award | Best Social Campaign 2012/2013)

Nazis against Nazis – Germany's most involuntary charity walk



Year: 2014

Preparation: 3 years

Partner: Grabarz & Partner / GGH MullenLowe

Involvement of formers: in communication design, graphic implementation, wording and monitoring, implementation on the ground

Back to the streets

In many places, neo-Nazis hold regular marches through towns and municipalities: one example is an annual march held in the small city of Wunsiedel in Upper Franconia, Germany. Despite the numerous protests by citizens and complaints in front of the German Federal Constitutional Court, neo-Nazis use the town repeatedly as “a place of pilgrimage”. Until 2011, the grave of Adolf Hitler’s deputy, Rudolf Hess, was located there. These commemorative marches became a firm fixture of the right-wing scene. The reaction of local people to these demonstrations are well known and expected by those organizing marches. In particular, the idea of a violent escalation is part of the strategy, of like Ponsaers called it “organized chaos” of the neo-Nazi demonstrations. Faced with this situation, it was a matter of considering how we could mobilize a counter-protest that is not aggressive but active, provocative, and makes a clear statement. It was essential to develop an approach that targeted the demonstration’s idea but also that created a new and bigger alternative narrative. In this context, irony, absurdity, and humor are the resources that have allowed us to portray serious circumstances in a different way and build a bridge to activate creative counter-protest through adopting the ‘charity walk’ model of fundraising for our organisation.

Nazis against Nazis – Germany's most involuntary charity walk

We named this ‘Nazis against Nazis’, Germany’s most involuntary charity walk, and it was a form of counter-protest against neo-Nazi demonstrations that harnessed the negativity of the protest for social good. The idea is simple: with every step of their march, the demonstrators unlock funds raised against their ideals – funds we previously had to raise. The idea behind this is based on a subversion of the demonstration’s real purpose: if one cannot legally prevent them from demonstrating, one should let them go but repurpose their mission, for example, to raise funds against one’s cause. The idea throws the demonstrators into a dilemma: either abandon the demonstration or know that participation means being a part of raising money for an organization that is working against right-wing extremism. The demonstrators thus become opponents of their demonstration. For an added twist, the donations accrued due to their marching activities actually contributes to our work to help those extremists typically targeted by those extremist groups via the donations raised. In the end, the narrative of the demonstrators is satirically and peacefully counteracted and contributes to our disengagement and de-radicalization work in the long-term.



Start of the campaign.

The reinterpretation, the so-called reframing of the actual intention of the demonstrators, can be described as a 'paradox intervention'¹¹. The term paradoxical intervention comes from psychotherapy and is usually understood to mean various psychotherapeutic methods that seem to contradict therapeutic goals but are actually designed to achieve those goals. In this sense, paradox intervention is intended to disrupt entrenched views and enable the solutions of problems. In psychology, these approaches were used to counteract systems experiencing resistance to change. These systems are usually held together by dysfunctional patterns, and changes are perceived as a threat to the established intrinsic rules of stabilization. In our case, we added another level – reinforcing the intended paradox intervention communicative elements such as banners, road signs, in double-bind style. The double-bind style was also implemented in the graphic and visual execution of the campaign. The dominant theme were bright tones, confetti and the typeface was broken up by fractured fonts. For the colour code of the entire graphic creation process, colours were chosen that aped Nazi insignia and counteracted the demonstrators' cause and appearance. The unified appearance of the demonstrators in black and muted colours was intentionally contrasted with vibrant colours such as pink, purple and blue.

Relevant keywords for the target group were written in fractured fonts to expose them to further irony. The slogans used on the banners refer to phrases or narratives that were well-known by the target group. For example, we used the slogan: If only the Führer knew. a slogan that is generally considered ironic. Or a modified quote from Adolf Hitler, which he told the Hitler Youth on 14 September 1935 in front of 50,000 boys from the Hitler-Youth. The new ideal of youth propagated in the speech was: "nimble as greyhounds, tough as leather and hard as Krupp steel". We have turned it into: "nimble as greyhounds, tough as leather and generous as never!". In a modified and re-contextualised form, they were ironised in the framework of the campaign and counteracted by the writing. In summary, the double bind message works for the graphic elements over 4 levels: 1. colour code and graphical elements, 2. font, 3. text & message and 4. the situation in which the banners and posters are placed.

The implementation of the campaign and the communicative elements create a communication situation in which two contradictory messages are transmitted, thus creating a dilemma. In

¹¹ Wolf, F. (2000). Paradoxe Intervention. In: Stumm, G., Pritz, A. (eds) Wörterbuch der Psychotherapie. Springer, Vienna. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-211-99131-2_1319

relation to the audience, the cause, the statements, and the goal are in contradiction and create a dissonance, which exposes irony to the audience and undermines the right-wing extremists' true purpose. This activity was implemented for the first time on 15 November 2014 in Wunsiedel. For every meter the demonstrators walked, they involuntarily released €10 for Exit Germany. The demonstration route was decorated with posters and banners that ironically referred to the activity to motivate the demonstrators. For example: "If only the Führer knew." On the road, we clearly marked the amounts that were raised at each respective stage in order to add further humour and provocation.



A neo-Nazi march passing in front of a banner of EXIT-Germany. On the Banner: If only the Führer knows.

Implementation

The implementation of this action had a planning lead time of several years. It was a matter of finding the right place and occasion for the implementation, ensuring the technical prerequisites were there, that possible partners were secured, and a secure project communication was implemented, in which no information about the action would become public in advance. Because the action was planned as a live event, it was of particular importance to control variables and prevent a possible failure, as this could lead to a loss of the event. The variables included knowing the space, the route, the group of demonstrators, the process of the march and possible reactions and behaviours of the demonstrators.



Illustration of the route and banners that were displayed.

The location

The chosen location had the advantage that we could talk confidently with our local partners in advance. The local networking of our partners facilitated access to volunteers. With regard to the demonstration, it was also an advantage that the route was known in advance.

The event

For the implementation of Nazis against Nazis, we deliberately chose a funeral march. The background is that this kind of march is predictable and disruptive factors very controllable. In addition to the strong police presence in this federal state, the organisers, i.e. the neo-Nazis, have very clear rules of conduct. These include the consumption of alcohol, which is forbidden, and the reaction to provocations from outside, i.e. counter-protests. The demonstrators are instructed not to react to the counter-protest. We were able to use all this to our advantage.

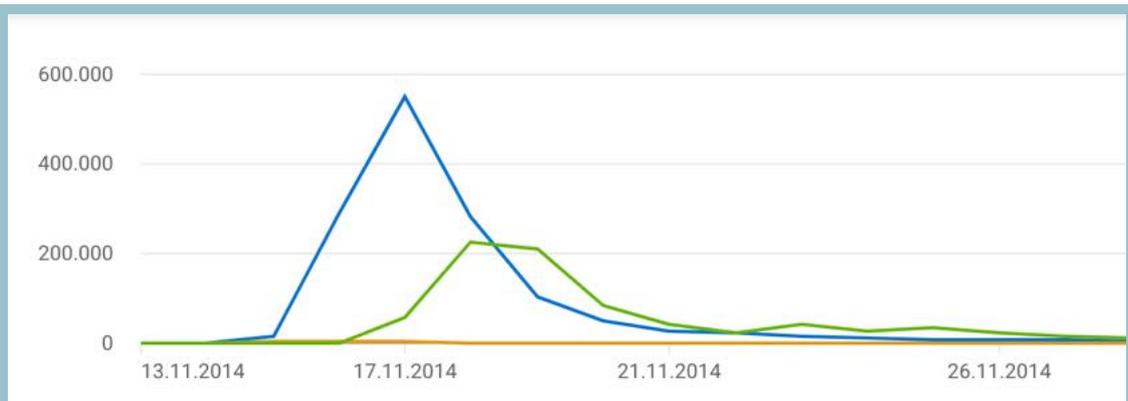
Technical requirements

The biggest challenge was the technical requirements. We had to have a fast internet connection to upload the video material as quickly as possible and edit the material for our video. With a partner, we set up a centre where all this was possible. The live coverage, which ran via our homepage and social media, was also implemented from this centre. In addition to this base, we had mobile film crews and photographers on the sidelines of the demo, and volunteers to ensure the implementation.

Secure communication

To ensure that no information about the action would become public in advance and avoid possible political damage to responsible persons, only very few people were informed in advance. The knowledge was limited to a core of 10 people in preparation and a circle of about 30 people on that day too. The police, the mayor of the city and the media were not informed in advance. They were only informed when the action started. Initially, this caused irritation, but the local partners were able to resolve this situation quickly.

As described, the campaign was designed for communication. Communication with the target group but also with society in general. The most crucial communicative element in the implementation was the 2 minutes video of the campaign. Under the title "Nazis Against Nazis - Germany's most involuntary charity walk"¹², the video was uploaded on the evening of the demonstration and produced during the entire day in addition to the implementation. Almost video production steps, such as shooting, editing, dubbing and the script, were realised on site. Thus, the video could be played on YouTube in the early evening. The awareness generated by the video far exceeded that of the immediate arena of execution (i.e. the protest event). The video increased the news impact as well as the general dissemination. On the campaign day, the two-minute video had more than 13,000 views within 4 hours. By November 16 2014, it had 291,281 views and on Monday, November 17, it peaked with 551,567 views in one day. These numbers illustrate the prolonging effect the video has had on the campaign. The English and German videos together have reached 4 million views and a total playtime of more than 110,000 hours until 2021.



Access figures for the video on the action. Legend: Blue: German version; Green: English version; Yellow: Pre-release campaign making of. Source: YouTube Analytics

¹² The video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvjIYl_Nlao and more information https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-practices/exit-germany-nazis-against-nazis_el

Part of the concept – and reason for its success - was the controlled involvement of media and influencers in the process of dissemination. In terms of media, there were two groups: a) media that we had exclusively informed in advance and b) media that were informed about the upcoming action and were informed at the start of the action. Furthermore, we had influencers who reported about the campaign on social media. Overall, however, only a few people were involved in the field of media and influencers to prevent information about the campaign from becoming public in advance.

The target group for this implementation was civil society. We wanted to develop a form of protest that would reach and be attractive to other actors, in addition to the familiar forms of protest. In second instance, however, and inline with our main mission, the neo-Nazis were also addressed, as the topic of exit was a fixed content and logical component of the mechanism and core idea of the project alongside the broader public communication and fund-raising element. In the run-up and not yet knowing what the implementation will cause, we have set ourselves three core criteria as a goal:

1. Activate the local democratic civil society through active participation;
2. Create frustration among the neo-Nazis, who will ideally refrain from future demonstrations;
3. Get attention and spread the narrative of exit to a wider audience.

Various media outlets reported about the protest as well. An article about the campaign was ranked number two on the New York Times website (in the category "Most Read in the World"). The campaign reached more than 279 million impressions worldwide in 64 countries. Alone in Germany, the campaign achieved a media value of €1.3 million. The originally-provided donation sum of €10,000 was almost doubled during the march. After Wunsiedel, other cities in Germany, Sweden, Norway and the US followed the same principle. Inspired by Nazis against Nazis, US organisations attempt to trick white supremacists into 'funding their own demise'. In 2017 the Jewish Bar Association of San Francisco (JBASF) launched a campaign in San Francisco, which was called: "Adopt-a-Nazi (Not Really)"¹³. More than 2,100 people have "adopted a Nazi" in the US, raising more than \$157,000. Donations were directed to the Southern Poverty Law Center. Only a few days before the rally, they cancelled Saturday's "Freedom Rally".¹⁴ In 2021, this form of counter-protest will continue to be used in Germany and internationally, which the Dutch historian Rutger Bregman describes in his book: 'Humankind: A Hopeful History' as a „central example of active charity and constructive non-violence“. Now, more than €47,000 has been donated on projects for refugees and right-wing extremism prevention in Germany. Through the actions known to us that referred to Nazis against Nazis or copied the activity alone, more than €240,000 in donations were generated internationally. In the context of protests against the Covid-19 restrictions, the mechanism was used by counter-demonstration and protest, for example, to raise funds that have supported the World Vaccination Programme¹⁵. This example illustrates the spread of the idea and the adaptability of the campaign.

¹³ Campaign Adopt-a-Nazi (Not Really) <https://www.gofundme.com/f/adopt-a-nazi-not-really> and <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/adopt-a-nazi-fundraiser-passes-150k-goal-1.5446157>

¹⁴ Laurin-Whitney Gottbrath (2017) 'Adopt a Nazi': How groups are countering neo-Nazis.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/8/26/adopt-a-nazi-how-groups-are-countering-neo-nazis>

¹⁵ Vaccination sponsorship page, who use the mechanics from Nazis against Nazis. <https://www.impfpatenschaft-qd.de/>

Outcomes: Nazis against Nazis – Germany's most involuntary charity walk

- 20,000 Euro donations on the day of implementation
- More than 279 million campaign impressions worldwide in 64 countries
- In Germany alone, the campaign achieved a media value of 1.3 million euros
- 155,000 users visited the Exit Germany homepage within one week
- 21,000 people followed the action live on the homepage
- The video of the action reached more than 3 million users on YouTube
- The action has been implemented several times in different cities with and without the participation of Exit
- Through implementations in which Exit was involved, more than 47,000 Euros were donated for projects in the field of P/CVE
- In Germany and internationally, more than 240,000 euros in donations were generated
- Social, advertising and fundraising awards¹⁶

Donate the hate – let them donate for their hate



Year: 2015

Preparation: 6 months

Partner: Grabarz & Partner

Involvement of formers: in communication design, graphic implementation, wording and monitoring, support as part of the team in the implementation

In today's digital and social media age, confronting extremists (such as neo-Nazis and white supremacists) requires more than just the offline world as a space for engagement. In fact, some would argue that the majority of these groups coordinate their efforts online. With the conflict in Syria in 2015 and the people fleeing as a consequence, the issue of hate speech became more and more an issue – especially in European but also German society. However, the discussions were limited to a smaller group of... At the same time, the climate on social media became harsher. For example, in addition to targeted trolling and so-called sock puppets, there were countless users who posted xenophobic or racist comments, inciting others and posing criminal comments on social media. At this point, we started our new campaign and the question: So, how

¹⁶ Selection of awards for the campaign „Nazis against Nazis“: Central German Fundraising Award of the Fundraising Forum, Special Award from the German Fundraising Association, Nominated for the IndexAward 2015 (ZDK / EXIT-Germany), Nominated for the CIVIS Media Award, IFC Global Award, Lead Award, Politikaward 2015 <https://zentrum-demokratische-kultur.de/geschichte/?c=auszeichnungen>

does one combat right-wing extremism in the digital space? Our latest idea is the digital continuation of the “Nazis against Nazis” initiative. Linguistically, colour-wise and in terms of the overall style, we created clear links to Nazis against Nazis to create a clear reference through the implementation and at the same time to transfer effective forms of communication into a new, exclusively online campaign.

Implementation

This idea was launched in 2015 under the ironic motto ‘Hass Hilft’¹⁷, which translates to ‘Donate the Hate’. Because in this case, hate actually does help! Various partners and countless users made it possible for us to transform hate speech on Facebook into involuntary donations against Nazi causes. One euro from the money provided from our supporters is donated to every successfully discovered hateful post. Designated for an organization that helps refugees (Aktion Deutschland Hilft) and Exit Germany, the model of funding was simple: the more hatred, the more donations.

The overarching goals of the “Donate the Hate” online campaign were to:

- draw attention to the issue of hate-speech;
- confront the authors of hate-speech with direct criticism;
- contact the hateful content through irony and sarcasm;
- give EXIT Germany and the topic "exit" a social resonance and to bring it to the target group and;
- to create a situation that confronts the authors with the effect of their postings and presents them with a dilemma – using the same ‘paradox intervention’ approach as before.

Again, there is a dilemma: stop making xenophobic comments or with every single post, collect money against xenophobic interests. With a unique tool, we convert these hateful posts into donations. On our homepage, it is possible to see the latest hateful comments and the actual donations. We were supported in the development by Grabarz & Partner, and through our volunteers in the practical implementation of the mechanism.

On our Facebook page, users can get in touch with us and support this action with donations or by submitting examples of the hateful comments they come across online. Our tool, which we had first and primarily designed as a toolkit for the editorial offices of newspapers or other media and their social media departments, developed more and more into an independent brand. The core of the campaign was an API (Application Programming Interface) linking the homepage with the Facebook account of #HassHilft. Hate comments sent and evaluated by us could be answered through this API with prepared and standardized comments, together with a meme associated with #HassHilft slogan. However, due to technical constraints, this also meant that the implementation of the action was limited to Facebook.

In addition to turning hate into help, we published articles that were a mixture of entertainment and education. The idea was to provide ‘edutainment’. In other words, to convey serious content through an entertaining medium. This kind of entertainment reached several hundreds of thousands of users month after month. From a purely quantitative point of view, the campaign reached several million users over a period of 6 years. The implementation also showed a psychological dimension of relief for many users. Users who were confronted with forms of hate speech and did not know how to help themselves were informed about which content is criminal,

¹⁷ Homepage of „Donate the Hate“ https://www.hasshilft.de/index_en.html and https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-practices/exit-germany-donate-hate_en

how to deal with illegal content and how to report it. Moreover, it was a relief for many users to know that hate can contribute to something positive; in this case, donations to humanitarian aid and EXIT organisations. Thus, for these users, it was not just a prank to which they contributed, but instead, there was a satisfying, long-lasting solution for them. After one and a half years, we received several awards for our activities¹⁸, and by June 2021, more than €100,000 in donations had been collected.

Objectives: Donate the hate

- More than 40 million users were reached via Facebook in the first month
- By 2021, more than 100,000 euros in donations had been generated. Consequently, more than 50,000 euros for EXIT Germany and more than 50,000 euros for Aktion Deutschland Hilft
- More than 80.000 users follow on social media
- Social and advertising awards

Reactions from the Right-Wing Extremist Scene

Among the target group, these interventions created irritation because they do not serve the expected forms of control exerted by right-wing extremist organisations on the day-to-day interactions and communications of their extremist milieus. In addition to direct confrontation, these interventions help 'sow seeds of doubt' among right-wing followers by questioning the dominance and authority of their leaders and by inserting an 'exit' narrative of the idea of leaving an extremist environment.

A former neo-Nazi who actively participated in the Wunsiedel march answered the question after his exit if it had achieved anything or had an effect: *"Yes, well, it definitely [had] an effect. And that also went straight to the target audience."*¹⁹ Furthermore, he describes the feeling of confusion in the situation, because from the perspective of the participants, it was not clear how they could react to it: *"Yes, as a participant I didn't really register it at first. It was only when people kept pointing at it that I became aware of it. Of course, that penetrated us hard. But what are you supposed to do at that moment, right? You can't just grab your things and go."*²⁰ Moreover, this statement is interesting because in the planning, we very deliberately decided to choose a funeral march for implementation. This is because funeral marches have a special significance for the movement and are subject to special rules of conduct. As a result, the campaign became more predictable and controllable, as therefore, the reaction could be expected, and a risk assessment could be calculated with fewer unknown variables (knowing the space, the environment, the route, the group of demonstrators, the process of the march and possible reactions and behaviours of the demonstrators) complicating the execution of the counteraction campaign. Later on, he describes his ambivalence in evaluating the action, though he also expresses a certain recognition of its impact and effectiveness – even grudgingly and despite a very confrontational implementation: *"But even then I found it funny to creative"*²¹. He gives a similar assessment of Operation Trojan T-shirt, which he also witnessed during his active

¹⁸ Selection of awards for the campaign „#HassHilft“: The Bobs Awards - Best of Online Activism in der Kategorie "Social Change", One Show NY, The RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices, Politikaward 2016, New Media Award, 2. Preis Smart Hero Award. <https://zentrum-demokratische-kultur.de/geschichte/?c=auszeichnungen>

¹⁹ Former 1, personal correspondence, Berlin, 17.11.2019.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

time: "[Referring to right-wing against right-wing] Not quite as sensational as the one with the T-shirts in Gera back then, but you have to think of it first."²² And adds that "[the actions] have not failed to have an effect"²³.

The implementation of the campaign succeeded in creating doubts among the participants, as illustrated by another participant: "I asked myself: for whom am I actually doing this? For the perpetuation of a national socialist cult or for the financing of exit? Exit was more of a topic in this situation than we would have liked."²⁴ Furthermore, frustration was described as the purpose of the march was turned into the opposite: "Nazis against Nazis: When I realised that I was actually raising money for Exit Germany with every meter I marched, it frustrated me greatly and eroded my ideological motivation that drove me to march there."²⁵ At another point, he emphasised that the unexpected form of communication. Irony as a stylistic tool of communication makes it particularly difficult for the recipients of the message to react to it. The inherent ambiguity of irony and the description of the opposite of what is said, make it impossible to react seriously. A first reaction of the target group to the campaign would have the effect of upgrading the campaign and secondly of giving the impression of not having understood the irony. On the other hand, irony can be hard to countered with irony. Known communication and reaction patterns were therefore broken through this technique. This is also emphasised by one interviewee. As he very clearly describes, known and expected forms of communication and interaction were and are used: "to strengthen the image of the enemy and to promote fun and action towards my followers."²⁶

This use of irony and sarcasm also had an especially profound impact on the considerations of recruiting young people. "In contrast to blockades of demonstrations or the aggressive confrontations with the so-called Antifa, the actions of "Nazis against Nazis" or "Donate he Hate" put us under constant pressure to be careful not to lose our young people to the exit. The sustainability of such actions was simply too extreme in the internal discussion."²⁷

Of the 250 participants in Wunsiedel, a total of 4 people contacted Exit afterwards and withdrew. That shows once again that the implementation:

- attracted the attention of the target group,
- was able to channel the target group to the project,
- although the approach was critical and confrontational, it was not deterring or over aggressive such that exiting right-wing extremists wouldn't engage and
- the target group was confronted with the narrative of exiting the scene.

Also a text message that circulated in the right-wing extremist scene 24 hours after the concert shows this: "Attention fake! Yesterday, T-shirts were given away at the RfD that have a message from Exit, the state drop-out program, under the Hardcore Rebels imprint. This message only becomes visible after washing. Exit has wasted several thousand euros of taxpayers' money here". The message was also shared and discussed in far-right forums, and on the event's Facebook page. The reactions of the target group were quite mixed. Some praised the action, others condemned it or suggested burning the T-shirts like the Nazis did to books in Berlin's Opera Square in 1933.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Former 2, personal correspondence, Berlin, 25.10.2019.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

In addition to the case studies presented, various other actions were also implemented on the sidelines of demonstrations or online. A discursive public for the topic of exit was created and the biographical experiences of formers were communicated. For example, banners and posters were displayed on demonstrations to confront the demonstrators with the exit narrative. Flyers or homepages were designed that targeted well-known narratives in the target group in order to raise awareness. In right-wing extremist forums or comment columns of right-wing extremist media, the topic was made visible on various occasions and discussions were generated. One reaction to this was the song "Exit" by the band "Mahnwache", quoted above. The song reacted directly to the exit of a client supported by Exit Germany. Another band reacted by printing the flyer and the logo of Exit Germany in a booklet for their CD. Although it was a negative mention, Exit became visible in the target group. Furthermore, articles appeared in right-wing extremist media that dealt with the project and thus the exit narrative. Just as bad news increases the attention of media recipients. Negative mentions of Exit also create attention in the target group. In this sense, organic audience outreach via negative mentions, works naturally and develops reach in the target audience.

The aim of all public relations work and campaigns is to make the project known and to establish it as a deonym - a word derived from a proper name - for the exit as a process. So that people in the right-wing extremist movement, with doubts or in general discussions, use Exit Germany to describe the exit process and thus establish a permanent visibility.

Summary: (Re)-Write the rules instead of playing along

To conclude, the described actions above have one thing in common: they convey the offer of Exit, to leave the far-right scene in a light and witty manner. By using a humorous approach directly to the targeted audience, they raise awareness about these problems and show that those topics should still be debated by public opinion. Through this form of satirical communication, the known communication and behavioural forms from the target group were broken and the presentation of hate, violence and perceived power was cancelled out. For example, the solemn, funeral narrative of the demonstrators in Wunsiedel was disrupted by our activity and reconstructed into a new narrative: our narrative of involuntary donation through a paradox intervention.

Rewrite the rules instead of playing along is to be taken literally in this sense to generate intrigue in the target audience and put them into a situation of confusion and uncertainty. Instead, tackle the issue on a personal level: use this as a moment to show them that while you may not respect their organization's values, you recognize them as an individual with their own set of struggles and that you're not trying to dismiss them entirely as a result. In many cases, the first course of action many take is to try and legally shut down white supremacist groups and take away their permits to organize. However, this can prove difficult under the laws of free speech. So, when one cannot legally prevent right-wing extremists from organizing, let them demonstrate, but channel their efforts to benefit your own P/CVE interventions instead. Use a form of counterprotest, that satirically and peacefully counteracts their narratives and goals whilst furthering the work of P/CVE in your context.

Our experience has shown that campaigns can be used effectively for the exit-oriented targeting of right-wing extremists if the following points are taken into account in their implementation.

As a general rule, campaign design should be guided by the GAMMMA+ model to avoid potential mistakes in conception and implementation. The GAMMMA+ model addresses all the key

elements to consider when building an effective communication campaign. It includes the following key elements: Goal, Audience, Message, Messenger, Media, Action, Monitoring and Evaluation.²⁸ You must really know these elements before embarking on a communication campaign in order to make it effective and avoid unintended backfire effects.

Lessons learned:

- **Wrong expectations create bad outcomes:** When designing a campaign, you must be clear about precisely what you wish to achieve on the one hand and have a idea of your Theorie of Change, a essentially a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context, to avoid bad outcomes and failure or harm someone.
- **Generate doubt, strengthen doubt:** Address existing doubts about the ideology / belief systems, the narratives and the utopian ideals.
- **Create perception:** Create awareness and thus bring the topic, e.g. exit, to the target group's attention as a possibility for their exit.
- **Long term and constant attention:** When implementing exit-related campaigns, the focus must be on sustainability. Different forms of small and large activities must be included. The target group approach must be conceived and taken in mind holistically when thinking about the offer, the project and its execution.
- **Combine criticism with an offer:** Linking criticism to an offer of support for change or discussion. Your offer must be relevant for your target group because of the offer or because of the topic in general.
- **Controversial and unexpected:** The form should be controversial, unexpected but clear in communication and expression. Do not simply impose your own values to address the target group if they really do not share them.
- **Eye level and target group orientation:** The implementation should occur at eye level and be based on the communication of the target group in a language and narrative directly attuned to them. Having a clear understanding of your target audience will be the key to a successful implementation of a campaign.
- **Analyze the wording and the environment:** Addressing a campaign effectively requires a comprehensive understanding of the target group. Being clear about the target group and the context in which the communication takes place, e.g. ideas, current events, views, wording and narratives, opinion leaders, symbolism or coded messages, information and feelings that are important to the target group. The described examples feed off internal communication and interaction, and this must be the start of any project.

²⁸ The GAMMMA+ model addresses all key elements that need to be taken into account when setting up an effective communication campaign. It comprises the following key elements: Goal, Audience, Message, Messenger, Media, Action plus Monitoring and Evaluation. It combines key elements and lessons learned from RAN C&N meetings with an overview of relevant research. The model does not only aims at helping practitioners to increase the impact of the campaign, be it online and offline; GAMMMA+ also addresses the risks of well-intended campaigns doing harm by entering a field of political or social polarisation or conflict without being aware of the potential unintended negative consequences this may have. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2019-12/ran_cn_academy_creating_implementing_effective_campaigns_brussels_14-15112019_en.pdf

- **Consider communication platforms for the campaign:** Depending on the capacity in terms of the budget of the sender and the target audience, the platforms through which the campaign will be implemented must be defined.
- **Call to action:** The campaign should offer concrete calls to action to channel emotions and ideas. This can range from appeals to contact to donations.
- **Collaboration:** People are more likely to listen to someone with whom they can identify. Many potential messengers who are seen as credible by the target group: 'victims', family members or especially 'formers'. Even to boost the reach of your campaign also, celebrities/influencers, peers or local community and community leaders could be important partners. Professional partners, such as advertising agencies, can also be helpful in the implementation, strategy and the generation of creative content.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Including monitoring and evaluation of the campaign project from the very beginning. Based on the feedback and data, it will allow you to adjust and improve your campaign and advertise your efforts to external stakeholders and funders.
- **Do no harm:** Highlighting the danger of specific extremist or terrorist groups can prove counterproductive. Campaigns in particular, should only target a well-defined and understood audience that is curious about extremist content or sympathizes with it already.

And in general, the most important points are empathy and attitude. How do we make these displays of compassion more tangible? To ensure our little efforts hold weight, those leaving extremist groups need to be aware that they have a place in society if they choose to take it, that there's a chance to change if they want to, and that there are organizations out there willing to help them. Even if we are showing empathy on a personal level, organizational alienation can still push right-wing extremists back into the comfort of their extremist groups. This is why non-governmental and civil society activities have such an important role in de-radicalization and disengagement away from the state itself.

While outing these people may give us satisfaction in the short term — and even lead to arrests of those spouting hatred — from the extremist's perspective, it also solidifies for many of them the thought that they are increasingly isolated from a mainstream, diversity-embracing society. Providing spaces for right-wing extremists to feel they can leave and reintegrate into society without judgment is incredibly important for those who are motivated. Together, these resistance efforts of using communication campaigns convey a message that works because they challenge right-wing extremists by shocking them at their core. The offer of help from the outside in a witty and kind way goes a long way simply because members of extremist groups are often unused to it, don't expect it and feel like they would benefit from it.

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