How the German federal election has fueled COVID-19 misinformation online

A Report for Governments and the WHO

Oct. 7, 2021
This report features Facebook pages and groups that have been spreading misinformation about the German election AND health topics - including COVID-19, vaccines, and COVID-related governmental regulations - to large audiences.

As became apparent in the wake of the U.S. presidential elections in November 2020, German elections proved once again that national elections are a fertile growing ground for misinformation of all kinds, including health misinformation.
a) The German federal election spurred new COVID-related myths online.
False claim: During the Bundestag-election campaign, the federal government deliberately hid from the public the side effects of COVID-19 vaccines as well as their lack of efficacy, while dissenting opinions were silenced.
False claim: Starting this fall, the German federal government is planning to make shopping in supermarkets only possible for people with proof of vaccination.

Facebook account with 627,861 Followers

Post: 1,590 comments 3,358 likes 305 shares
This claim was also shared by the Facebook Group “Ich misstraue der Regierung!” (“I don’t trust the government”), with an article from another well-known misinformation website, rated Red (generally unreliable) by NewsGuard: JournalistenWatch.com

Facebook group with 15,048 members
b) The election also helped perpetuate long-lasting myths about the pandemic, with a new twist.
In April 2021, one of the most widely shared conspiracy theories about the pandemic, **the Great Reset theory**, took a different spin in Germany - and gained new traction - ahead of the federal elections of September 2021.

**False claim:** "Global financial elites" and world leaders planned the COVID-19 pandemic to take global political and economic control in a New World Order, or take control over the Bundestagswahl 2021 elections, with a new chancellor that will come from the Green party.
In April 2021, this false claim started being shared by several large Facebook groups.

“Ob du dumm bist hab ich dich gefragt”
(I asked you, if you are stupid?)
19,519 Followers

“Boarisch Bluad”
(Bavarian Blood)
41,577 Followers
And in August 2021, a month before the election, the claim was still being shared on large Facebook groups.

“Glaub nicht alles!”
(Don't believe everything!)
62,515 members
c) As election misinformation spurs new narratives or gives them a second life, COVID-19 misinformation continues to thrive on German-language groups and pages on Facebook.
False claim: A phenomenon called “antibody dependent enhancement” causes an infection with the COVID-19 virus to be worse in previously vaccinated persons than in unvaccinated persons.
This false claim was shared by the Facebook Group “Glaub nicht alles” (“Don't believe everything”).

Facebook group with 62,515 members
It was also shared by the Facebook Group “Völker dieser Welt erheben sich!!” (“Nations of this world rise up”).

Facebook group with 17,532 members
False claim: The COVID-19 Pfizer vaccines kills twice as many people as it actually saves.
This false claim was shared by the Facebook Group "Völker dieser Welt erheben sich" ("Nations of this world rise up").

Facebook group with 17,532 members
It was also shared by the Facebook Group "Neuwahlen für Österreich. Demokratie jetzt" (New elections for Austria. Democracy now).

Facebook group with 15,319 members
This report was produced using two proprietary datasets from NewsGuard.

- The Misinformation Fingerprints dataset, a catalogue of data about top misinformation narratives, contains related keywords and search terms for all of the top misinformation and disinformation narratives spreading online—produced using human intelligence but designed for use with AI/ML/NLP tools to identify content matching specific false claims. NewsGuard analysts used the Misinformation Fingerprints dataset to identify relevant searches related to misinformation narratives about COVID-19 and other topics.

- The second dataset used was the News Website Reliability Ratings, which consists of credibility ratings for over 6,000 news and information website that account for 95% of online engagement with news in the U.S., U.K., France, Germany and Italy. Each site's rating is based on nine basic, apolitical journalistic criteria. Based on the criteria, each site receives an overall designation of green (generally trustworthy) or red (generally not trustworthy) and a trust score of 0-100. NewsGuard's analyst used the News Website Reliability Ratings dataset to identify misinformation sources that appeared in the results for searches conducted as part of the analysis.

- Examples selected for the report represent an illustrative, but by no means exhaustive, list of search results that contain misinformation sources. Both the Misinformation Fingerprints and the News Website Reliability Index are available to be licensed for research and other purposes.