

# #BTW21 YouTube Regrets

## 2021 German Federal Elections

*An analysis by Mozilla Foundation and Democracy Reporting International*

*Have you ever watched an automatically recommended video on YouTube you wish you would have never clicked? You're not alone. For this investigation, Mozilla Foundation and Democracy Reporting International teamed up to analyse user-reported YouTube Regrets during the German election campaign period. Our main takeaway: YouTube failed to apply its Covid-19 medical misinformation policy to German-language videos.*



### Introduction

Germans took to the polls this past September to vote for their new federal government. After 16 years of Angela Merkel as chancellor, voters decided on the shape of Germany for the post-Merkel era. Meanwhile, the campaign period was overshadowed by the Covid-19 pandemic, and conspiracy movements such as Querdenker and QAnon took hold online. Amidst an online-focused campaign

period, social media played a critical role as information gatekeepers.

YouTube is the second most popular social media platform in Germany following WhatsApp, which made it a player to watch in this year's election. Being talked about on YouTube matters, as videos may be shared across other social media platforms too. Germany's far-right party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), as well as conspiracy communities, parties, and movements

like Pegida, Identitarian Movement, Querdenker, die Basis, and QAnon, have been known to [use the platform](#) to spread their ideology in addition to [false information](#).

Mozilla Foundation and Democracy Reporting International teamed up to investigate user-reported YouTube Regrets during the campaign period. “YouTube Regrets” refers to videos that people on YouTube regret watching. Because of YouTube’s automated recommendation system, sometimes these videos send people down rabbit holes that are harmful and unwanted. Mozilla’s [RegretsReporter](#) browser extension allows people to send these videos to Mozilla to power their research into people’s experiences on the platform.

#### Our analysis found:

1. YouTube failed to apply their [Covid-19 medical misinformation policy](#) to German-language videos and did not provide informational banners directing users to the World Health Organization’s website as they’ve promised.
2. Videos created by pro-AfD, anti-Vax, and nationalist groups on Facebook were viewed by hundreds of thousands on YouTube before the election. This community of right-wing German influencers often cross-reference each other and use similar examples and patterns of argument, particularly the right-wing network called Reitschuster.de.

The examples analysed include various unsubstantiated claims presented as facts, where the line between opinion and false information is thin. If consumed without alternative sources, these videos have the

potential to mislead viewers to arrive at factually incorrect conclusions and generate distrust in politics, media, and government.

Furthermore, these videos were recommended to RegretsReporter users by YouTube’s recommendation algorithm. Even if not all of the videos reported do violate YouTube’s [misinformation policies](#), people submitted these videos to Mozilla because the information contained in them was false, misleading, or harmful to them. These findings chart with what Mozilla found in its [global RegretsReporter investigation](#) and their analysis of other [social media platforms negligence](#) with regard to the German election.

## Case Studies

### Chebli-Prozess-BONBON – Im Gespräch mit Qualitätsmedien!

Tim Kellner

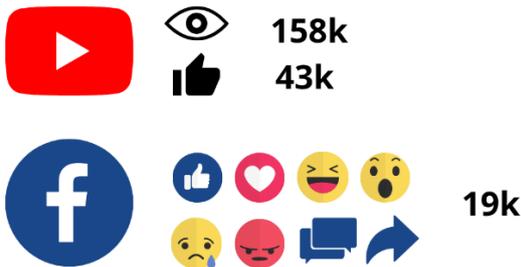
Mar 4, 2020



This video displays an interview conducted with Tim Kellner before and after court proceedings in which he stood accused of insulting the politician Sawsan Chebli. Kellner, a YouTube personality popular with right-wing circles, was reported to the police by Chebli, a female Muslim SPD politician, who was degraded online as an “Islamic talking doll” by Kellner. Kellner’s bottom line in this

interview: Chebli is a “quota migrant” and he, as “a German”, does not want to be told what to say and what not to say. The second part shows his acquittal, with loud cheers by some of his followers. According to the court decision, his statement is covered by freedom of expression.

In the video, Kellner falsely claims that Chebli “owes her position to the migrant quota only”, despite the [SPD's internal quota](#) applying only to federal leadership ranks. This incorrect claim undermines Chebli’s competence based on her religious and ethnic background. Such false narratives may feed into biases that women, particularly from minority groups, cannot be trusted to lead effectively, which is detrimental to [empowering diverse female leadership](#) and ultimately society as a whole. See DRI’s research brief to read more about what we found regarding [\(gendered\) toxicity in YouTube comments](#) during #BTW21.



This video was watched 518k times and received over 43k likes on YouTube. On Facebook, it received 19k interactions and our investigation found that pro-AfD accounts were amongst the top sharers.

<sup>1</sup> YouTube claims that it will remove content that includes: “Claims that the symptoms, death rates, or contagiousness of COVID-19 are less severe or

## Merkel DREHT VÖLLIG DURCH!

Neverforgetniki

Oct 3, 2020



In essence, this video promotes the conspiracy theory that the protection recommendations and measures implemented by the German authorities (in this case: Angela Merkel as Chancellor) against Covid-19 are fearmongering and that the Covid crisis is media-induced. Niklas Lotz, the channel owner, supports his claims with questionable statements made by critics of the German government’s crisis management. Interestingly, this video was published in October 2020, so the state measures talked about were no longer fully in place during the election campaign.

Niki’s video falls under the category of freedom of expression in opinion, but the claims he makes refrain from clearly differentiating opinion from facts. He makes the false claim that the media only cites one person (Dr. Christian Drosten), which is false. He also compares the virus to the flu because “several doctors said so”, which may violate YouTube’s own [COVID-19 medical misinformation policy](#).<sup>1</sup> He also uses isolated cases and selective citing of sources as evidence to

equally as severe as the common cold or seasonal flu”.

corroborate his assertions. This misleading strategy suggests that his opinion is shared by the better part of society – or at least those who can see behind the veil – and is solely undermined by the government. Claiming that the pandemic is “mainly conjured up by the media” is a false statement that fosters media scepticism. As a key tactic to fuel confirmation bias, he makes generalising claims with no evidence, which ignore most medical assessments. For example, he states that “politicians spread panic while doctors calm down”, based on one isolated case. He uses a quote by Merkel saying the pandemic reminds her of her childhood in the GDR as substantiation for why protective measures give politicians more power. This can be labelled as a clear *red herring* that serves as fertile soil for conspiracy theorists.



185k  
26k



19k

This video was viewed 185k times, receiving 26k likes on YouTube. It received over 19k interactions on Facebook and was disseminated by various pro-AfD, nationalist, anti-covid measures, anti-Vax, and extreme-right accounts.

## Vlog #790 - Neue Quote in Berlin!// Die nächste Verlängerung! ...wieder ohne Kritiker... 😞

Carolin Matthie

Jan 18, 2021



Carolin Matthie is an AfD member who criticises the protection recommendations and measures taken by the German government against Covid-19 and their renewal in January. It's a daily vlog, where she comments on current political discussions. Another topic on the agenda of this issue: The “migrant quota”.

Matthie disagrees with the protection measures. She calls the pandemic a “zombie plague”, suggesting that only incapable citizens believe in the pandemic. She also compares the government to an “ivory tower” wherein everyone is toeing the party line. The line between opinion and unsubstantiated false claims is once again very thin here, but her video clearly aims at addressing government sceptics who are not in favour of the government’s crisis management. Matthie makes the false claim that countries with the toughest measures have had [the highest Covid-19 incidence rate](#) since the beginning. She also argues that there is a possibility of causation between vaccination and death, which is ignored in Germany due to fear,

profit, and lobbying. These claims do not necessarily violate YouTube's misinformation policies, but can be regarded as problematic, as it plays with stereotypes and conspiracy ideas that fertilise polarisation.



This video was viewed 44k times and received 3.5k likes on YouTube. It was shared on Facebook by private accounts, but no public data is available to analyse.

## About this investigation

The case studies presented here were self-reported to Mozilla Foundation's [RegretsReporter](#) during the #BTW21 campaign period. Facebook sharing activity was investigated further using the [CrowdTangle API](#) and [CrowdTangle Chrome Extension tool](#). Additionally, the videos were shared on Twitter, but we were not able to report concrete numbers due to API limitations. The videos were not shared on Instagram or Reddit. Note that YouTube views/likes and Facebook sharing data was captured as of November 1st, 2021. One of these videos may violate YouTube's own [Covid-19 medical misinformation policy](#), but it has been kept online for over one year.

## About Mozilla Foundation

Mozilla Foundation is a global non-profit dedicated to keeping the Internet a global public resource that is open and accessible to all. To achieve its goals, Mozilla rallies citizens, connects leaders, and shapes the agenda.

More from Mozilla on #BTW21 can be found [here](#), including:

- [Dialogues and Debates](#) – Big Tech and Germany's Election
- [Broken Promises](#): TikTok and the German Election
- [Platform policy tracker](#) analysing each company's approach to BTW21
- [Opaque and Overstretched](#): How platforms failed to curb disinformation during the German 2021 election

## About Democracy Reporting International

Democracy Reporting International (DRI) strengthens democracy by shaping the institutions that make it sustainable. We support local ways of promoting democracy with impartial analysis and good practices, bringing international standards to life.

More from DRI on #BTW21:

- [#BTW21 dashboard](#) in collaboration with Der Tagesspiegel newspaper
- Assessing [online risks](#) to Germany's election
- The [final report](#) about the German election discourse on social media