Broken Promises: TikTok and the German Election

TikTok struggles to curb disinformation ahead of the German Federal Election 2021

Mozilla Foundation

Authors: Marcus Bösch and Becca Ricks

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Executive Summary

TikTok is one of the fastest growing social media platforms in the world, with a reported 11 million German users, according to TikTok's count. As the September 2021 German federal election approaches, political parties and politicians in Germany are joining the platform and TikTok has laid out a number of actions it will undertake to safeguard the election. Building on Mozilla's past research into political advertising on TikTok, during the period July-August 2021, we investigated the platform in order to better understand how TikTok has been delivering on its promises. Our research shows that these efforts have so far been largely unsuccessful, and in some cases, have yet to be implemented.

In our investigation, we found that:

1. TikTok’s automated approach to labeling content about the German election with informational banners is not working effectively, with videos being improperly labeled.
2. TikTok implemented its fact-checking partnership with Germany’s largest press agency, dpa, only weeks before the election.
3. We uncovered several TikTok accounts with significant followings that are impersonating prominent German political institutions and figures. These fake accounts suggest the platform is failing to enforce its community guidelines in the critical countdown to the German election.

In light of these findings, we recommend that TikTok:
1. **Labeling:** Invest more resources to ensure that the labeling of election-related videos is working effectively;

2. **Fact-checking:** Start working early in the election season with external fact checking teams;

3. **Enforcement:** Enforce the Community Guidelines more effectively by proactively monitoring and checking popular political accounts; and

4. **Transparency:** Release more information about the removal of content and accounts during the election season. Invest in better data access tools for researchers, such as a public API or database, to enable community oversight by external researchers and institutions.
Introduction

TikTok is one of the fastest growing social media platforms in the world. In Germany alone, TikTok is reported to have approximately 11 million users, which equates to roughly 13% of the German population. The most downloaded non-gaming app globally in 2020, TikTok has become a key part of the media diet of its mostly younger users aged under 24. Despite its reputation for viral songs and silly dances, various studies have shown that politics and political groups have a strong presence on TikTok. This is certainly true for TikTok in Germany, where in recent months parties and politicians have flocked to the platform. Mozilla’s past research into political advertising on TikTok has shown how political influencers in the US may be flying under the radar on the platform, in spite of a ban on political ads.

With Western democracies facing declining interest in politics and decreasing party memberships especially among young people, parties have turned to the potential of new media platforms to revitalize their relationship with the electorate. Of the seven parties (counting the two Union parties CDU and CSU individually) represented in the German parliament, five of the parliamentary groups have an active TikTok account in August 2021. By German policy adviser Martin Fuchs’ count, more than 120 individual TikTok accounts of German politicians now exist on the platform.

Responding to this surge of political interest in the platform, TikTok has committed to safeguard elections globally. In Germany, these commitments have included labeling political videos, fact-checking, and enforcing its rules on misinformation. Such actions suggest that TikTok recognizes its role and influence in global politics, and it is taking steps to develop responsible policies.

However, so far TikTok’s actions have fallen short of its stated commitments. TikTok has repeatedly promised to enforce its own community guidelines to ban hateful behavior, ideology, and misleading and infringing content. But recent research by journalists and think tanks like the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has shown how not-marked election ads, negative campaigning, and hate speech and extremism are being spread on the platform.

In our own investigation of the platform ahead of the German election, we looked into whether TikTok has been enforcing its policies and delivering on its promises.
Our research demonstrates that so far these efforts have been neither very successful, nor especially extensive.

TikTok's Commitments and Policies

“It is very important to us that we provide our users with credible information about elections.” (Source: Gunnar Bender, TikTok’s Director of Public Policy Germany)

On July 20, 2021, TikTok officially launched an in-app information page about the election that describes its efforts “to protect the integrity of our platform and the federal elections.” In recent blog posts and communications, TikTok highlighted three major steps it would be taking in connection with the German election: (1) Labeling election-related videos; (2) Fact-checking with external partners; and (3) Enforcing its Community Guidelines.

Our Research

To conduct this research, we first analyzed all of TikTok’s policies, public statements, and communications around the German election. After reviewing different hashtags related to the German election, we then identified a set of individual accounts and posts to investigate further. Desktop research and interviews informed our analysis.
of these posts. We used qualitative methods like the walkthrough method to study how a user of the platform might engage with hashtags, labels, and accounts. Finally, we teamed up with the data team of Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Germany’s Bavarian public broadcaster and researchers at the Algorithmic Transparency Institute to develop a research framework for future quantitative investigations into the platform.

Our research shows that TikTok’s election efforts in Germany so far have had mixed results:

1. TikTok’s automated approach to labeling content about the German election with informational banners is not working effectively, with videos being improperly labeled.
2. TikTok implemented its fact-checking partnership with Germany’s largest press agency, dpa, only weeks before the election.
3. We uncovered several TikTok accounts with significant followings that are impersonating prominent German political institutions and figures. These fake accounts suggest the platform is failing to enforce its community guidelines in the critical countdown to the German election.

1. TikTok’s automated election banners are not working effectively.

“If our users are looking for election related content on TikTok, we refer them to the information page in the form of a banner. In addition, we link them under videos with reference to elections and under videos of political accounts.” (Source: TikTok)

On July 20, TikTok users in Germany discovered something new on the platform. Various videos had a banner at the bottom including an exclamation mark and the sentence “Erhalte Infos über die Bundestagswahl in Deutschland” (“Get info on the German federal election”), with a link to an information page about the German election. It was set up in cooperation with Germany’s public broadcaster ARD and includes links to 28 TikTok videos (e.g. How to spot fake news) and short answers to questions like “Am I allowed to take a selfie in the voting booth?” (The answer, by the way, is “No”). A similar in-app page has been used throughout the Covid-19 pandemic to direct users to “verifiable, trusted sources of information.”
While the labeling of political content seems like a good idea, especially during the election season, so far the results have not been particularly effective. For instance, when we searched for the hashtag #SPD, which stands for the Social Democratic Party of Germany (on a mobile phone with a German SIM card used in Germany), none of the first nine videos visible on a mobile screen were related to the Social Democrats or politics at all. In fact, only four out of the first 50 videos shown contained any political content. This, of course, is due to the fact that the term SPD stands not just for Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), but also Sensory Processing Disorder, Schizoid Personality Disorder, Schizotypal Personality or Sexual Pleasure Device. Nevertheless, TikTok adds a statement at the top of the #SPD page that says: “a few reminders while creating, viewing, or interacting with election-related content.”
The results were similar when we searched for #FDP, Freie Demokratische Partei, the Free Democratic Party. Despite the fact that FDP has varied usages across different languages and geographies, including a common profanity in Portuguese, TikTok applies German election labels to the entire hashtag.

It could be argued that this indiscriminate approach to labeling is not so bad, as long as political content is labeled. On the other hand, a fully automated approach that relies solely on single keywords weakens the intended goal of the labels, and may even damage efforts to sensitize users and/or redirect them to verifiable, trusted sources of information.

Furthermore, relying on single keywords does not ensure that all political content is labeled. For instance, posts from both the official Die Linke account (@linksfraktion) and the official AfD TikTok account (@afd.offiziell), are labeled inconsistently by TikTok. Despite the fact that most posts by the accounts are related to the election, some go unlabeled because they do not include TikTok’s pre-defined hashtags. This demonstrates the limits of the platform’s automated banner approach.

Our research suggests that TikTok’s automated approach to labeling posts about the German election is not working effectively. This leads to further questions about
how TikTok is implementing such labels, and whether the platform has taken any steps to check labels or identify bugs. For instance, the search results could be optimized easily by filtering out videos, including the hashtags mentioned above (e.g. Sensory Processing Disorder) or by applying labels to posts in a more targeted way.

We recommend TikTok invest more resources to ensure that its labeling of election-related videos is working effectively.

2. TikTok has only just begun external fact-checking, weeks before the election.

“Another building block is our global partnerships with fact-checking organizations. In Germany, for example, we have entered into a cooperation with "dpa" to check facts in order to work together to limit the potential dissemination of incorrect information on the platform and to ensure that incorrect information in connection with elections is checked.” (Source: TikTok)

Ahead of the German election, TikTok has been quite vocal about its fact-checking partnership with Deutsche Presse-Agentur GmbH (dpa), the largest press agency in Germany. On the TikTok website, the dpa is listed as a “safety partner” in Germany, together with Agence France-Presse (AFP) and others covering different regions. TikTok states that its “fact-checking partners help review and assess the accuracy of content across 55 markets.”

When TikTok launched its in-app information page on July 20, the platform again highlighted these fact-checking partnerships as a “building block” of its misinformation approach, stating: “In Germany, for example, we have entered into a cooperation with "dpa" to check facts in order to work together to limit the potential dissemination of incorrect information on the platform and to ensure that incorrect information in connection with elections is checked.”

This statement suggests that the dpa had already begun fact-checking long ahead of the German election on TikTok. However, our investigation discovered that this was not the case. When we asked dpa about the partnership, Jens Petersen, dpa’s
Head of Communication, told us that as of August 13, the dpa “was not yet officially commissioned by TikTok” to do any kind of fact-checking. On September 7, Petersen confirmed that a contract had finally been signed at the end of August, and that the fact checking agreement applied retroactively and included a test phase.

Fact-checking can be an effective first step at curbing misinformation on platforms. However, TikTok only recently commissioned its fact-checking partnership with an established safety partner in Germany. This is concerning, as misinformation campaigns centered around, for instance, the 2020 US elections, began months ahead of election day. Given that German voters began mail-in voting as early as September 5, that does not leave much time for efficient fact checking ahead of the election. In 2017, nearly 30% of German voters used mail-in voting to cast their votes, and it’s likely that those numbers will be higher in 2021 due to Covid.

We recommend that TikTok take misinformation campaigns seriously, and start external fact-checking early in the election cycle.

3. TikTok is failing when it comes to enforcing its community guidelines.

“We do not allow activities that may undermine the integrity of our platform or the authenticity of our users. We remove content or accounts that involve spam or fake engagement, impersonation, misleading information that causes harm.” (Source: TikTok)

TikTok’s Community Guidelines are meant to serve as a code of conduct for the app. TikTok says that accounts that consistently violate community guidelines are banned from the platform. However, our research paints a very different picture of how such rules are enforced.

Fake accounts

Seated in the famous Reichstag Building, the German Bundestag, Germany’s federal parliament, has its own internet presence and social media accounts. There is an official YouTube channel with 71.3K subscribers. There is an official Twitter account with 12.4K followers. And then there appears to be a TikTok account (@derbundestag) with 14.1K followers and 130.8K likes. The only problem here is
that the Bundestag does not have a TikTok account. When we called the Bundestag's official press office on August 18 to ask whether it has a TikTok account, we got a very clear answer: “No. We only have YouTube and Twitter.”

TikTok’s Community Guidelines explicitly prohibit harassment, bullying, and hate speech. They also prohibit posing as another person or entity in a deceptive manner. TikTok is very clear on these rules: “Do not pose as another person or entity by using someone else's name, biographical details, or profile picture in a misleading manner.” There are exceptions for fan, commentary or parody accounts “as long as the user indicates in the bio and username that it is fan, commentary, or parody.”

However, this is not the case here. The account in question, @derbundestag, is not a fan, commentary or parody account. In fact, our analysis of the account suggests
that it may be being used to spread political propaganda, while appearing to be an official account of a central institution of German democracy.

In our analysis of the account, we found several details that reinforced the illusion that this was an official, authentic account of the German parliament. First, the description of the account says: “Deutscher Bundestag...Parlamentarische Sommerpause bis zum 07.09.” (The German Bundestag / Parliamentary summer break until September 7), with a link to the official website. Second, the account has a large following and reach: 14.1K followers and 130.8K likes. For context, that’s roughly 0.13% of all German TikTok users, or more than 1 in 1000 German TikTok users. It’s also more followers than the official Bundestag Twitter account.

The posts by the account are mostly video clips of parliamentary speeches, featuring well-known German political faces, including German chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel and Claudia Roth, Vice President of the German Bundestag. These video clips seem to have been taken from the Parlamentsfernsehen (parliamentary television), a public service run by the Bundestag that offers livestreams and on-demand coverage of parliamentary debates. The parliamentary television makes all its image material available free of charge and free of third-party rights, as long as the content is used strictly for educational purposes.

In our analysis of the account, we observed that AfD politicians and messaging are featured prominently in video clips. The AfD, or the Alternative for Germany, is a German nationalist and right-wing populist political party that currently holds 86 of 709 seats in the German parliament, having entered the Bundestag for the first time in 2017. Of the 77 videos total the account posted between April 7 and August 10, 42 of them (55%) include an AfD politician as the main speaker, 18% include a CDU speaker, 10% include a Die Linke speaker, 9% SPD, 5% FDP, and 5% Greens. Some videos feature more than one politician, and several videos featuring non-AfD speakers show them responding to or addressing themes raised by the AfD. Only 12 videos in total have no clear connection to the AfD. For context, the AfD holds only 12.6% of the parliament’s seats. If this were an official parliamentary account, you might expect the coverage to be more balanced.

We are not calling attention to this account to agree or disagree with a particular political perspective, and we do not know who is responsible for the account.
Rather, the account illustrates that TikTok is not enforcing its rules prohibiting accounts that pose “as another person or entity,” regardless of political leaning.

In addition to the @derbundestag account, we found several other fake accounts that have since been deleted by TikTok. One such account (@frank.walter.steinmeier), which we identified on July 26, impersonates Bundespräsident Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the president of Germany. With 3K+ followers and 72.3K likes, this account has a much broader reach than other easy-to-spot fake accounts (@frankwaltersteinmaier, @federalgermanpresident, @frankwaltersteinmeier88) with very few followers. This particular account frequently posted videos promoting the German military, sourced from the company BTB concept that specializes in filming military events. While TikTok has since deleted the account, it is unclear how long the account was up, who ran it, and what kind of impact it may have had on German users.

Regardless of who is behind these accounts and what their motivations might be, these accounts appear to be in clear violation of TikTok’s community guidelines,
which prohibit the creation of accounts that impersonate someone else or mislead users about the account’s identity or purpose. The fact that inauthentic, politically-oriented accounts have not only continued to exist on the platform, but have attracted thousands of followers and likes on the eve of the German election, suggests that TikTok has not taken basic steps to enforce its community guidelines. A simple search for the names of prominent German politicians and political institutions would have alerted the platform to some of these issues.

In the short term, we recommend that TikTok immediately take steps to ensure that its community guidelines are being enforced ahead of the German election in September, including a thorough and ongoing review of German political parties, officials, and institutional accounts to ensure their validity.
Conclusion and Recommendations

In our research, we determined that TikTok’s efforts to provide users with credible information about the federal election and protect the integrity of the platform have thus far fallen short. We observed a clear enforcement gap. TikTok’s automated banner approach is not really working. The proclaimed partnership with external fact-checkers in Germany has officially started just days before mail-in voting. And there are obvious, inauthentic accounts on the platform spreading political messages under the guise of an official German institution.

A statement made by Gunnar Bender, TikTok’s Director of Public Policy Germany, hints at where the problem may lie: “TikTok is not the go-to place for political debate and breaking news.” But their rhetoric doesn’t match reality. Our research suggests that TikTok is shaping political discourse and influence, especially as political groups increasingly join the platform. In light of these findings, we recommend TikTok take the following actions:

1. **Labeling:** Invest more resources to ensure that the labeling of election-related videos is working effectively;
2. **Fact-checking:** Start working early in the election season with external fact checking teams;
3. **Enforcement:** Enforce the Community Guidelines more effectively by proactively monitoring and checking popular political accounts; and
4. **Transparency:** Release more information about the removal of content and accounts during the election season. Invest in better data access tools for researchers, such as a public API or database, to enable community oversight by external researchers and institutions.

As signatories of the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, TikTok has already publicly committed to taking concrete action against disinformation (disclaimer: Mozilla is also a signatory of the Code). As the Code will be updated this fall, we ask that TikTok, related signatories, and policymakers incorporate this research. We urge TikTok to consider our recommendations in order to safeguard against harm and abuse on the platform, most critically during election seasons globally. With major elections coming up in Kenya and Brazil in 2022, and with so much at stake, TikTok must invest in enhanced strategies, tools, and processes.
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References


