Tracking down Extremist Narratives in German Telegram Channels

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Extremist narratives can take various forms, but they often involve a distortion or manipulation of facts to support an extremist agenda. Our overarching research goal is the detection of conspiracy-related content in texts. The standard computational linguistic approach for classification of texts or text spans is to collect and manually label large amounts of data and train (or fine-tune) automatic classifiers (ML/DL/LLM).

This “supervised” approach is known to work well if lots of training data are available and the categories to be identified are well-defined. However, in a discursive landscape where narratives are evolving quickly, training data are hard to come by. In our current study, we explore a Telegram corpus containing approximately 400 million tokens from 300+ selected channels collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our categorisation scheme covers COVID-19-specific narratives and previously existing conspiratorial narratives.

We take a corpus-linguistic stance and characterise narratives by means of manually selected groups of linguistic patterns, based on collocation and keyword analyses and close inspection of concordance lines (cf. corpus-based discourse analysis). Since manual annotation is labour-intensive and supervised ML approaches struggle when there are only a handful of examples for each category, we report on experiments with zero-shot classification.