

8 Satire and Affect

The Case of Stefanie Sargnagel in Austria

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Abstract

This chapter analyzes the case of the Austrian writer Stefanie Sargnagel focusing on the hateful reactions to a 2017 fictional travelogue published in the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard*. Her case is exceptional because she did not only live through, but also publicly commented on the outburst of hate she faced. Moreover, Sargnagel – as an astute observer of the mechanisms of social media – exposes the logics of hate speech in social media and shows how they work in triggering the reactions she wants to turn the readers' attention to. Sargnagel's reactions and reflections, the chapter argues, shed light on the phenomenon of hate as an affective network that runs through the online and the offline world.

Keywords: affect and media, social media, online literature, Internet culture

‘She needs the same treatment as what the Americans did to those bitches in Vietnam.’ These words, written as a reaction to a provocative newspaper article written by the Austrian writer Stefanie Sargnagel seem completely out of proportion, but are quite familiar to us as users and observers of social media. Thousands of similar threats and insults are likely to appear whenever a woman, and sometimes a man, posts politically or sexually

1 ‘die braucht gleiche Behandlung wie Amis haben gemacht in Vietman krieg mit solchen Nuten.’ Wegrzyn, Ryszard, Facebook Post, Posted as a screenshot in Stefanie Sargnagel's Facebook Album: ‘Richard Schmitt wishes you a Happy Women's Day’, 9 March 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154578674413037.1073741857.711248036&type=3>.

Misspellings in the original German quotations from Twitter and Facebook are not rectified here. Translations of all posts by Ann-Marie Riesner.

provocative or ambiguous content in any other way on the Internet. Jarett Kobek, for instance, has dedicated his novel *I Hate the Internet* to the problem of online vitriol in the USA. One of the narrative threads of the book is the history of Adeline, a graphic novel artist from San Francisco who has lived through the worst series of harassment and death-threats after carelessly making statements in public and, without knowing it, online: 'Being a kind of famous woman who expressed unpopular opinions in a culture that hated women was in itself a serious mistake, but neither it nor its constituent parts were the big one.'² As the reader learns several pages later: 'She neglected to notice that someone was recording every word that she said.'³

If the main pillar of the Internet project back in the days of its inception was to create a space of free speech, it is worth noting that hate speech or revenge projects are also among the oldest practices of online communities.⁴ The relative anonymity and the lack of technical barriers in social media leads to an ever increasing amount of online vitriol, as the case of Stefanie Sargnagel demonstrates. Her case is noteworthy for at least two reasons which are deeply linked. The first is that Stefanie Sargnagel is one of the most astute observers of the mechanisms of social media in the German speaking world. I would argue that a significant part of her posts is actually about the relentless logic of social media which makes the unrestricted expression of spontaneous euphoria and hate possible. To analyze her case seems promising because she not only underwent but also consciously lived through and commented on the outburst of hate – what one might call a shitstorm – that occurred to her. Generally, Sargnagel not only comments on but exposes the logic of hate in social media, plays with connotations and shows how they work in triggering the reactions she wants to turn the readers' attention to. She employs a couple of very particular strategies, sometimes through bold provocation, sometimes by playing with identities, with fact and fiction and with changing frames. The way she 'manipulates' the readers and triggers hate comments allows many insights into the phenomenon of hate as an *affective network* that runs through the online and the offline world.

This chapter analyzes one of her newspaper articles which elicited a furious shitstorm, titled 'Three Authors in Morocco: Now We Have a Horse

2 Kobek, *I Hate the Internet*, p. 3.

3 Ibid., p. 34.

4 The News Group *Alt.Revenge* e.g. was founded in 1983 already, when the world wide web was not even launched.

and Hashish'.⁵ In what follows, I will first introduce Stefanie Sargnagel as an author and focus on her particular interest in the mechanisms of affect in social media. I will then present the case of the harassment she experienced after the publication of her newspaper article in *Der Standard*. The analysis is grounded in theories of media and theories of affect, and employs analytical methods originating from literary studies. Through the analysis, this chapter aims to untangle the inner dynamics of online vitriol and elucidate on the functioning mechanisms of online hate speech.

The author: Stefanie Sargnagel

Stefanie Sargnagel (1986) is an emerging Austrian author writing almost exclusively on social media like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and regularly publishing selections of her best posts in print anthologies.⁶ Sargnagel started posting on Facebook in 2007 and initially did not have many followers. In 2013, the newspaper *Wiener Zeitung* stated that she had only 1300 followers.⁷ By contrast, in 2016, the newspaper *TAZ* counted already 20,000 followers.⁸ The publication of her forth book *Statusmeldungen* ('Status Updates') in 2017 by the renowned publishing house Rowohlt in Germany brought her vast attention and more than 50.000 followers⁹ – a considerable number in the German speaking context. Her posts embrace a broad range of topics from very harmless observations on the everyday life in Vienna, in the tram line 6, or at the supermarket, to sensitive political issues like Austrian (cultural) politics, being a feminist, a 'bohemian' and a female author and on the mechanisms of social media, be they good or bad.

On 7 October 2017, Sargnagel writes on Facebook: 'Everything written here is fictional, in reality my name is Lara and I work at the graphics department of an NGO.'¹⁰ Whereas integrity and authenticity are usually among the most defended issues on social media, Stefanie Sargnagel plays with identities and with the boundaries between fact and fiction. That does not only account

5 Haider et al., 'Drei Autorinnen'.

6 These publications are: Sargnagel, *Binge Living*; Sargnagel, *In der Zukunft sind wir alle tot*; Sargnagel, *Fitness*; Sargnagel, *Statusmeldungen*.

7 'Die Wohlstands-Verwahrloste'.

8 'Urarg', p. 13.

9 *dieschreibmaschine.net*.

10 'Alles was ich hier schreibe ist fiktiv in wirklichkeit heiß ich lara und arbeite in der grafikabteilung einer ngo.' Sargnagel, Stefanie, Facebook-Post 10 July 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/stefanie.sargnagel/posts/10153055927808037>.

for scenes from her daily life that she sometimes turns into fiction, even fantasy, but also for highly explosive political topics. On the one hand, it is obvious that she stands for left-wing politics, for feminism, the freedom of art and speech. On the other hand, she also ironically comments on the positions she herself supports. One of the topics she ironically reflected on was the movement for help for the refugees in Vienna in the fall of 2015. As we can read from her posts, she was involved in smuggling refugees from Hungary to Austria and worked devotedly at the refugee camp Traiskirchen near Vienna. During that time, she clearly pushed forward the debate around responsibilities for refugees in Austria by critically commenting on Austrian politicians being passive and leaving the actual work to volunteers.¹¹ Simultaneously, she ironically reflected on the pride and self-righteousness that often underlies the altruism of the volunteers: 'is there a Traiskirchen sticker album out there where you can glue in the refugees you snapped while bringing them charitable donations?'¹² This critique goes naturally also against herself, and precisely that is the intention. Sargnagel's aim is to constantly provide the readers with new lines of interpretation and to show the complexity, sometimes inconsistency, of the issues she addresses. She explicitly claims to not be afraid to provoke harsh reactions, as stated in September 2015 'I don't know what everybody has against shitstorms. I love shitstorms'¹³, and a month later: 'I am my own shitstorm.'¹⁴

I argue that her pronounced interest in 'shitstorms' comes from her deep understanding of the nature of *affect* in political and social relations that becomes most visible in discussions and comments on social media. As she correctly assumes, the topic of the refugee crisis in Austria cannot be grasped, nor pushed forward, without taking note of the *affects* that the experience triggers in Austrians of all political beliefs and in the refugees. Instead of being concerned to create a neutral, unemotional setting of

11 On 18 August 2015 for instance, Sargnagel writes: 'It is nice to see how many people just naturally provide Traiskirchen with groceries and sanitary products, but it is also totally absurd how politics simply rely on that.' ('Schön zu sehen wieviele leute selbstverständlich traiskirchen mit lebensmitteln und hygieneartikeln versorgen, aber auch vollkommen absurd, wie sich die politik darauf verlässt.'). <https://www.facebook.com/stefanie.sargnagel/posts/10153141457198037>.

12 '20.8.2015: Gibt es eigentlich schon ein Traiskirchen-Stickeralbum, in das man seine Flüchtlinge einkleben kann, die man beim Spendenbringen knipst?', Sargnagel, *Statusmeldungen*, p. 30. (This post is not available on Facebook any longer).

13 'Ich weiß nicht was alle gegen shitstorms haben ich liebe shitstorms', Sargnagel, Stefanie, Facebook-Post 23 September 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/stefanie.sargnagel/posts/10153217794643037>.

14 'Ich bin mein eigener shitstorm' Sargnagel, Stefanie, Facebook-Post 22 October 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/stefanie.sargnagel/posts/10153263895963037>.

discussion, she intentionally, through provocation and contradiction, creates a space that sets free not only opinions but also affects and emotions. This strategy has led to several escalations, sometimes to her temporary exclusion from Facebook,¹⁵ and in the case to be examined here to a name and shame on different media that affected Sargnagel seriously.

The case Sargnagel

Stefanie Sargnagel and five other emerging authors, among them Lydia Haider and Maria Hofer, travelled to Morocco in January 2017. The purpose of the trip was to finish their current book projects. Two of them, Sargnagel and Haider, received partial funding from the Austrian Ministry of Culture (*Bundesministerium für Bildung, Kunst und Kultur*). Several weeks later, on 25 February 2017, the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard* published the article 'Three Authors in Morocco: Now We Have a Horse and Hashish',¹⁶ a travelogue that the three authors had written collectively. The travelogue, a harmless 'byproduct' of the trip, as Lydia Haider describes it,¹⁷ is split into short fictional diary entries that each of the women wrote every day during the stay. Not surprisingly, the text as a whole is marked by satire, exaggeration and provocations, as well as by a mixture of facts and fiction. Again, Sargnagel and her co-authors address highly explosive topics in a provocative manner, and the three most provocative ones, that triggered the biggest part of comments, were the following:

- 1 Violence against animals, especially cats: most unbearable for self-proclaimed cat-lovers were the fictional accounts about Lydia Haider hating and assaulting animals. On 5 January, Sargnagel writes in the travelogue: 'Lydia is the only vegetarian in the group, but in contrast to other vegetarians I know she is a vegetarian not because she loves animals but because she deeply hates them. Today she kicked a baby kitten aside, claiming it had rabies, after which she complacently took a bite from her vegetarian crêpe.'¹⁸ Lydia Haider confirms a few days

15 In April 2016, her fictional account about Alina Wychera, a politician focusing on identity politics, triggered so many hate comments that the author's account was blocked during a couple of days, cf. *Der Standard*, 2016.

16 Haider et al., 'Drei Autorinnen'.

17 'Wirbel um Marokko-Reisebericht'.

18 'Lydia ist die einzige Vegetarierin der Gruppe, aber im Unterschied zu den anderen VegetarierInnen, die ich kenne, ist sie es nicht, weil sie Tiere liebt, sondern weil sie Tiere zutiefst

later: 'I do hate all animals, profoundly, but doves are really nature's worst creation.'¹⁹

- 2 Sexual provocation and challenging 'the Austrian Angst' of North Africans: Already in the fall 2015, Sargnagel had posted very provocative content on tensions that came up when suddenly many refugees came to Austria. On the one hand, many left-wing and liberal Austrians welcomed the refugees with enthusiasm; on the other, the concerns of more conservative voices, namely that many refugees were young single men and would try to get in touch with, sometimes to harass, Austrian women, were not completely groundless. Multiple debates about the role allocation of perpetrators and victims flared up, and Sargnagel's contribution was pinpointing the blind spots:

'so difficult to distinguish on Facebook those guys who send you 'you are beautiful' messages from those who are the refugees you actually met...'²⁰

For the trip to Morocco, Sargnagel addressed the same topic, this time again blurring the roles of perpetrator and victim:

The trip is great. However, as women in our prime, we are slightly disappointed about how people react on us. Miniskirt, going out with no bra and red lipstick forces Essaouira's inhabitants to do nothing more than to say an indifferent 'bon jour' from time to time. And whenever we, willingly, sit down with them at the beach late at night, they want to get stoned and play Uno. Cologne Central Station has promised too much.²¹

- 3 Arts, idleness and tax money: The use and abuse of tax money for the life of emerging artists is one of the most controversial and explosive

hasst. Heute hat sie eine Babykatze zur Seite getreten mit der Behauptung, sie habe Tollwut, danach biss sie selbstzufrieden in eine vegetarische Crêpe', Haider et al., 'Drei Autorinnen'.

19 'Ich hasse ja Tiere, von Grund auf, aber Möwen sind wirklich das Letzte vom Allerletzten in dieser unserer Schöpfung', *ibid*.

20 'urschwer zu sagen welche auf facebook jetzt diese typen von denen man 'you are beautiful' messages im 'others' ordner hat sind und welche die flüchtlinge, die man kennengelernt hat....' Sargnagel, Stefanie, Facebook-post 13 September 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/stefanie.sargnagel/posts/10153198958428037>.

21 'Dieser Urlaub ist toll. Als Frauen in den besten Jahren sind wir aber etwas enttäuscht über den Umgang mit uns. Minirock, Rausgehen ohne BH, roter Lippenstift ringen den Bewohnern Essaouiras nur hin und wieder ein desinteressiertes 'Bon jour' ab, und wenn wir uns spätnachts willig zu ihnen an den Strand setzen, wollen sie eingeraucht Uno spielen. Der Kölner Hauptbahnhof hat echt zu viel versprochen', Haider et al., 'Drei Autorinnen'.

topics Sargnagel often reflects on. On purpose, she often enacts her life as an artist as pure leisure paid by the state, as exemplified by the Morocco trip: 'From time to time we hire poncey quads and, stoned, altogether speed around the idyllic beach with loud engine noises. That is what they call freedom. The BMUKK has given me a travel grant for that. (For the literature). If the FPÖ only knew.'²²

These examples, again, shed a light on Sargnagel's humour that works essentially through the spontaneous transgressions of the boundaries between fact and fiction and through sudden turns to irony. The fact that the reader must be alert at all time as Sargnagel's text can turn into fiction or irony any moment, makes for an enjoyable yet demanding read that forces readers to leave their comfort zone. Moreover, the texts require a lot of knowledge on the part of the reader and they even work through the pleasurable exclusion of those who do not understand the transgressions and the insider jokes. Just take the comment on 'Cologne Central Station' that actually refers to a series of assaults made by young, mainly north African men on a considerable number of women during the night of New Year's Eve in 2015 in front of Cologne central station. The events lead to a heated debate about migration, sexism and Western liberal values in which the conflicting roles of Muslims as victims of war and expulsion, but also as sexual perpetrators were widely discussed. Sargnagel not only nonchalantly refers to 'Cologne Central Station' without explaining the reference but also introduces the provocative point of view of Muslims as the target of harassment through sexually frustrated Austrian women.

To be at eye level with the text, Sargnagel's texts require readers to never easily settle in a comfortable line of thought, but to always consider the complexity and the unpleasant aspects of the topic in question. Far more than to elaborate on her own thoughts about specific topics at length, Sargnagel's activism consists in destabilizing deep-rooted patterns of thought and comfortable explanation patterns. The success of her texts results from the reader's satisfaction of being able to understand the references, the irony and the provocations and to stay cool vis-à-vis the affective reactions that Sargnagel's provocations might cause in people without the required flexibility of mind.

This is also how the article about the Morocco-journey works. Instead of conveying any reliable information on the trip, her travelogue is a Molotov

22 'Immer wieder mieten wir uns prollige Quads und zischen eingraucht mit lauten Motorengeräuschen zu sechst über den idyllischen Strand. Das ist Freiheit. Das Bmukk hat mir dafür einen Reisekostenzuschuss gewährt. (Für die Literatur.) Wenn das die FPÖ wüsste', *ibid.*

cocktail of explosive topics that are piled up onto each other. It could not be more obvious that combining cats, sex, Muslims and the waste of tax money in one article has only one aim: to trigger reactions; the article is a trap. Its mechanism is very simple: a person who affectively reacts to the content of the article has automatically disqualified him- or herself as a critical reader who understands satire. On the contrary, he or she belongs to those who are excluded by Sargnagel's sense of irony, to those who are led through the Internet by affect instead of reflection. Imagining those who seethe with anger at Sargnagel's provocations then becomes part of the pleasure for those readers who consider themselves on equal terms with the texts' requirements. The trap did catch its 'victims'. Although the satirical format was more than obvious and despite the fact that *Der Standard* had published the article in the section Culture/Literature, thereby hinting to the possibility of fiction or irony. Nevertheless, many Austrian media took everything to be real, fell into the trap, and started one of the biggest shitstorms that the Austrian cultural scene had ever seen.

The reactions came in two steps, the first being the article 'Literary Journey – Drinking and Smoking Weed on the Taxpayers' Expenses', published by *Die Krone* on 8 March 2017. *Die Krone* is Austria's most popular newspaper, a tabloid newspaper that usually supports the course of FPÖ, Austria's right-wing party. The article cites original passages from the *Standard* article, although ripped out of context, and mentions the fact that the women in question are authors. However, the responsible journalist Richard Schmitt does not account for the context of fiction or satire and takes the content of the travelogue for real, at least he pretends to do so. Vis-à-vis the very obvious markers of satire in the text and the paratext of the *Standard* article, and considering Schmitt's experience as a journalist and as the *Krone's* chief editor, it is not probable that Schmitt missed the satirical and fictional character of the text. It is rather likely that the article was already a kind of 'revenge' for a coverage on Sargnagel and her so-called 'fraternity hysteria' that the TV channel ORF had aired the day before.²³

The article by *Die Krone* can be read as a first step of the shitstorm because it was actually the newspaper which made the topic of Sargnagel's travelogue available to an audience and to social networks that would not read the article in *Der Standard*. In that function, the *Krone* can be seen as an intermediary between the Austrian intellectual, left-wing class that

23 In the coverage, broadcasted within the news format 'Kulturmontag', ORF reports how the group Hysteria had disturbed the 'Akademikerball', a ball traditionally attended by ultra conservatives, FPÖ members and by (former) fraternity members, cf. Wienerin.at, 2017.

reads *Der Standard* and the right-wing, FPÖ-oriented, conservative, often misogynistic and islamophobic readership of *Die Krone*. As the newspaper *Der Kurier* wrote on 10 March 2017, the effect of that contact is 'as if two worlds collide that should not have touched each other.'²⁴ From there, in a second step, the content spread within minutes to readers who would not even read *Die Krone*, but far more conspiracist newspapers or not even newspapers but only comments by (online) hate commentators.

Within the next hours and days, a couple of articles in clearly populist media went an important step further than the *Krone* article. Not only did these all pretend the details from the travelogue were real, calling the trip a 'drug-journey' and Sargnagel's writings 'the confessions of an animal abuser',²⁵ they also 'enriched' the story with details that make the perfect enemy and target for hate out of Stefanie Sargnagel. The article 'Hofer-Hater Does Drug-Journey on the Taxpayer's Expenses',²⁶ published on the 9 March 2017 by the online platform *wochenblick.at*, does this already in the title, which characterizes Sargnagel mainly through her activism against Norbert Hofer, the president of FPÖ. A second but even more important strategy of the same article is the creation of the cover image: it is a montage of the prototypical picture of a joint, a photograph of Stefanie Sargnagel wearing her 'against nazis' pullover and a screenshot from a post by Sargnagel that she made as a cynical reaction to the beginning of the shitstorm: 'If the Krone knew that we did not only kick kittens' asses but that we also fucked puppies to death...'

The online platform *unzensuriert.at*, again an FPÖ-friendly conspiracist organ, published a similar article on 11 March 2017: 'Kicking baby kittens, smoking weed and drinking: 'Literary journey' on the tax payer's expenses'.²⁷ The article not only presumes the 'Literary journey' to be only a pretext for a scandalous trip, but also characterizes Sargnagel as 'a left-wing extremist' and as 'essentially an FPÖ-hater'. From Sargnagel and the €1.500 that were taken from the taxpayers, the article moreover quickly moves on to the Austrian Ministry of Culture's 'abominable and corrupt' principles of attributing stipends to artists. It thus ties a network of emotive terms and 'hot topics' that it knows will make the readers' blood boil. In the context of that hate campaign, it is not only interesting to observe the increasing distance of this article from the original text, but also the development of

²⁴ 'Heldenplatz, reloaded'.

²⁵ 'Hofer-Hasserin'.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sargnagel, 'Babykatze'.

the comments in newspaper forums and social media that accompanied the articles.

If we consult the comment forum of *Der Standard* in the days after the publication of the travelogue, we find a rather high amount of comments, almost 230 comments in the days before *Die Krone* publishes its article. It is astonishing that almost all comments in the *Standard* forum are adequate reactions to Sargnagels text. Criticism comes only from those who do not appreciate that the journey has been funded by a stipend from tax money. But no matter if people find the text 'boring, immature, pointless'²⁸ or if they appreciate the 'mix of literary journal and Dschungelcamp-Satire' as 'really funny',²⁹ no commentator actually doubts the satirical and fictional character of the travelogue. Some even reflect on the mechanisms the text wants to trigger and make valid points in their analysis:

I think that's what they wanted. Just shit-talk as much as possible and wait for the reactions. The product is not the text but the discussion after. I mean, they didn't leave out anything: infantile behaviour, sex tourism, bohemian life style, tax misspending, drugs, André Heller... they did not even stop at kicking kittens. That is what makes me smile about the forum discussion.³⁰

Several vitriolic comments like: 'You find kicking kitten is funny????? Are you crazy????'³¹ that found their way into the *Standard* forum all came in after the publication of the *Krone* article, supposedly by *Krone* readers, and are rare exceptions.

In comparison to that very homogeneous discussion on the *Standard* forum, things got far more heated on the Twitter profiles of Stefanie

28 'unglaublich unnötig von denen niemand was zu sagen [...] gar nix langweilig, unreif, sinnarm_diese worte kommen mir beim Lesen dieses TB in den Sinn.' Comment at the *Standard* Forum by 'smily record', 25 February 2017, 15:26:19, Haider et al., 'Drei Autorinnen'.

29 'Ich fand das wirklich lustig. Offenbar als Einzige hier. Eine Mischung aus literarischem Tagebuch und Dschungelcamp-Satire.' Comment at the *Standard* Forum by 'lizboa, don', 26 February 2017, 08:06:09, *ibid*.

30 'Ich denke das ist so gewollt. Fleißig shit talking betreiben und schauen was zurück kommt. Das Produkt ist nicht der Text sondern die Diskussion danach. Sie haben ja wirklich nix ausgelassen: infantil, Sextourismus, Bobotum, Steuerverschwendung, Drogen, Andre Heller [...] Ja, sogar vor dem Katzentreten haben sie nicht zurückgeschreckt. Deshalb schmunzle ich gerade besonders über das Forum. :)' Comment at the *Standard* Forum by 'Ich mag Züge', 26 February 2017, 12:31:13, *ibid*.

31 'Also Babykatze treten witzig finden????? Geht's noch????' Comment at the *Standard* Forum by 'de-fake-news-gitti', 9 March 2017, 09:49:46, *ibid*.

Sargnagel and Richard Schmitt, the author of the *Krone* article, after the publication of his article. However, although the debates here are much more controversial than on the *Standard* forum, they are still rather equilibrated in the sense that both Sargnagel and Schmitt receive support and critique and in the sense that actual arguments are exchanged. Schmitt shared his article eleven times with different headers, on 8 March at 07:48am with the words 'Drinking, smoking weed, kicking kitten – that deserves a travel grant. From our tax money.'³² This post on Twitter and the attached article led to different reactions, some of them being defamatory and irrespective towards Sargnagel, for example: 'Sargnagel is the dumbest creature under the African sun. The living proof that the left is stupid.'³³ But Schmitt received also a lot of critique for the post and the article, pointing to his own use of tax money ('how much tax money does the *Krone* actually get as press subsidy?')³⁴ or to his incapacity to detect satire: 'being a 'journalist' you, theoretically, earn your money through writing but you don't recognize satire?'³⁵ The same applies for Stefanie Sargnagel's Twitter profile, where she also gains lots of support on the one hand, as well as defamatory comments on the other. These 'virtual' debates have 'real' consequences: in another article by *Die Kärntner Krone*, a local newspaper owned by *Die Krone*, the journalist Fritz Kimeswenger published Sargnagel's current address in Klagenfurt, mentioning in the same sentence that Sargnagel was 'willing' and thus brought her in actual danger.³⁶ As a countermovement, the Austrian press council initiated legal proceedings for issues of media ethics against *Die Krone*.³⁷ In addition, an online petition called for Fritz Kimeswenger's dismissal, and different celebrities from Austria's media industry spoke up for Sargnagel.³⁸

32 'Saufen, kiffen, Babykatzen treten – dafür gibt's ein Reisestipendium. Mit unserem Steuergeld.' Twitter-post by @richardschmitt2, 8 March 2017, 07:48, <https://twitter.com/RichardSchmitt2/status/839551599785582592>.

33 '@RichardSchmitt2 Die Sargnagl, das dünnste Geschöpf unter der Sonne Afrikas. Der lebende Beweis, das Links dumm ist.' Twitter-post by @Maxx_Heidegger, 8 March 2017, https://twitter.com/Maxx_Heidegger/status/839514949596692480.

34 '@RichardSchmitt2 wieviel steuergeld kriegt die krone eigentlich als presseförderung? @stefansargnagel @CLangOnline'. Twitter-post by @ChristianMock, 8 March 2017, <https://twitter.com/ChristianMock/status/839595136732524550>.

35 '@RichardSchmitt2 als 'journalist' zumindest theoretisch schreibend sein geld verdienen u dann keine satire erkennen.' Twitter-post by @nopulse, 11 March 2017, <https://twitter.com/nopulse/status/840650400768356352>.

36 For a screenshot of the article 'Ex-LH Dörfler tritt zurück', cf. Wienerin.at, 2017.

37 Österreichischer Presserat, OTS.at, 'Presserat'

38 'Fall Sargnagel'.

Still, although these articles and comments entail important consequences, one has to consider that the Twitter and Facebook profiles of Sargnagel and Schmitt were not the actual setting of the 'core' hate campaign. Although Richard Schmitt with his *Krone* article clearly *initiated* the hate campaign, and Stefanie Sargnagel even denounces him ('Just read the comments you trigger with such a misogynist article. Happy women's Day.³⁹'), the pure hate comments are spread on other walls, i.e. in reaction to other individuals sharing the articles published at *Die Krone*, *wochenblick.at* and *unzensuriert.at*. Mediated and torn through multiple biased intermediaries, the content that reaches these Internet communities and their readership has nothing to do with the original text anymore. The whole campaign is now oriented around Sargnagel as the target of an irrational hate, the details of the initial story are not only forgotten but do not matter at all.

As it is pointless to present a plethora of totally disconnected death and rape threats here, I will give only some examples, all of which can be found as a collection of screenshots that Stefanie Sargnagel compiled into the Facebook album 'Richard Schmitt Wishes you a Happy Women's Day' on Facebook.⁴⁰ Whereas some hate comments were 'at least' related to facts from the Sargnagel case, mainly on the animal abuse topic,⁴¹ on the waste of taxpayers' money⁴² and on Muslim men,⁴³ many others simply insulted her as a 'dirty cunt' or 'genetic waste' and wished her 'generally speaking' death and rape: 'she needs the same treatment as what the Americans did to those bitches in Vietnam' or 'frustrated old women's libber. They should be pushed in a hole with rapists in it.'⁴⁴ What we can see from these extremely hateful and disrespectful comments is that vitriolic comments on the Internet are only rarely the result of the study of arguments. Instead of engaging with the actual content a person provides, vitriolic comments react

39 'lesen sie mal die kommentare die sie mit so einem frauenhasser-artikel produzieren. fröhlichen frauentag.' Twitter-post by @stefansargnagel, 8 March 2017. <https://twitter.com/stefansargnagel/status/839570421762637826>.

40 A compilation of 32 comments has been collected as screenshots by Stefanie Sargnagel and can be found in the Facebook-album 'Richard Schmitt wishes you a Happy Women's Day', 9 March 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154578674413037.1073741857.711248036&type=3>.

41 'that monstrosity is a shame for every animal lover, vegetarian, vegan...', 'that animal torturer should be in a psychiatric institution', *ibid*.

42 'put her into a labour camp', 'why would these betrayers of the nation not be put up against a wall? I could make a good job as an executioner', *ibid*.

43 'I hope one of her beloved nafs (my apologies if that term is forbidden by now) does her really hard against her will in the staircase', *ibid*.

44 All comments: *ibid*.

in a generally refusing manner in order to unload frustration, strengthen their own position, or the one of their group, and humiliate the victim.⁴⁵ The level of debate and argument then gets completely out of sight.

As I have explained before, Stefanie Sargnagel is not afraid of 'shitstorms' and even harsh reactions for they illustrate the affects that she wants to show. The first reaction of *Die Krone* was thus more or less what she intended. In order to stoke the flames, immediately after the publication of the *Krone* article, she writes on Facebook: 'If *Die Krone* knew that we did not only kick kittens' asses but that we also fucked puppies to death...'⁴⁶ That comment was again included in the *wochenblick.at* article as 'the confessions of an animal abuser',⁴⁷ which pushed Sargnagel to write the following post:

Now that another right-wing medium has picked up on the point that we fucked puppies to death, I surrender and tell you the whole truth: [...] we also whipped baby camels, while we, laughing, ate little patés from baby dolphins.⁴⁸

For many readers of the debate, that comment was the drop that caused the barrel to overflow. After people complained about the author, her Facebook account was closed for a month. The events finally led to a point where Sargnagel herself changed the tone back to argument. For instance, she had a very serious discussion with Richard Schmitt on Twitter.⁴⁹ On 12 March 2017, she even wrote a two-page statement where she mentions

45 In her analysis of online hate speech from a psychological perspective, Josephine B. Schmitt names four motives pertaining to hate comments: exclusion of the other in order to reach a positive understanding of the self; intimidation of those who threaten the self; demonstration of dominance and power; fun and thrill, Schmitt, 'Online Hate Speech'.

46 'wenn die krone wüsste, dass wir nicht nur babykatzen getreten, sondern, dass wir auch welpen zerfickt haben...' Sargnagel, Stefanie, Facebook-post 8 March 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/stefanie.sargnagel/posts/10154574558763037>.

47 'Hofer-Hasserin'.

48 'nachdem ein weiteres rechtes medium nun auch aufgegriffen hat, dass wir welpen zerfickt haben, gebe ich mich geschlagen und rücke mit der ganzen wahrheit raus: wir haben in marokko nicht nur babykatzen getreten und welpen zerfickt. wir haben auch kleine babykamele ausgepeitscht, während wir lachend faschierte laberl aus babydelfinen gegessen haben. dabei saßen wir auf baby schildkröten und dekoriert war das ganze szenario mit baby hamstern die wir auf palmen aufgehängt haben, nachdem wir sie mit unseren haschsspritzen betäubt haben. beim rückflug haben wir menschenbabys aus dem fenster geworfen auf eine babyinsel auf der nur babys leben, die von den andern babys erschlagen wurden.' Sargnagel, Stefanie, Facebook-post 9 March 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/stefanie.sargnagel/posts/10154577761988037>.

49 Cf. the discussion under a twitter post by Richard Schmitt on the 8 March 2017, <https://twitter.com/RichardSchmitt2/status/839551599785582592>.

that she was usually not easily intimidated but that, after the publication of her address, she felt uneasy at Klagenfurt.⁵⁰

To sum up, it can be said that the hate campaign Sargnagel experienced consists of two phases: the first is the act of translation of provocative content from Sargnagel's text into realms of a right-wing readership through *Die Krone*. As I have argued, it is very unlikely that journalists like Richard Schmitt do not understand the satirical frame of Sargnagel's text. But he knew what some of her quotations would trigger in the *Krone's* readership: affects like hate and anger, which means attention, clicks and money. In the second step, the content starts to circulate in total disconnection from its source and becomes the plaything of very aggressive online networks centred around the collective celebration of hate. Although these sorts of reaction were initially intended by Sargnagel, Hofer and Haider, the reach and the intensity of the hate comments and threats transgressed by far their expectations – while also affecting their personal resilience.

Affect and hate online

As I have said in the beginning of this case study, I argue that hate on the Internet is not a phenomenon of single actors sitting frustrated in front of their screens. Instead, it is a powerful dynamics of affect of a whole network of people. Affects like hate (be it against strangers, Muslims, women, etc.) is a constant affection that accompanies and pushes people through the online *and* the offline world, while they are at work, at home, in their couple or family, in private gatherings or on social media.⁵¹ Hate is constantly there, as a 'movement of emotions and feelings in and out of the cyberspace, through bodies, psyches, texts and machines',⁵² but cannot always be expressed as it is not tolerated in all contexts. The affect outbursts in protected realms and in exchange with like-minded people. That is why the network of hate and the network of the Internet largely overlap, as people find their platform of exchange and agency online, act out their hate, affect and offend each other, and also find new targets for their hatred, as the case Sargnagel shows: delivered in an already biased way by *Die Krone*, the Molotov cocktail that Stefanie Sargnagel, Lydia Haider and Maria Hofer prepared with their

50 Twitter-post by @stefansargnagel, 12 March 2017, <https://twitter.com/stefansargnagel/status/840884161518960640>.

51 See, for example, Bargetz and Sauer, 'Der Affective Turn'.

52 Karatzogianni and Kuntsman, *Digital Cultures*, p. 2.

travelogue is only one of many contents that make their way into a network of hate consisting of right-wing Austrians who strongly react to anything loosely connected to Islam, women, feminism, left-wing ideology, intellectualism, certain elements of social injustice and other adjacent topics. Through intermediaries like Richard Schmitt, Fritz Kimeswenger and *Die Krone*, and even more through conspiracist organs like *wochenblick.at* and *unzensuriert.at*, the content is filtered and arranged in the most effective way to appeal to people's hate. These articles are orchestrated in a way that aims not at intellectual persuasion through argument but at the provocation of affects,⁵³ that is 'potential bodily responses, often autonomic responses, in excess of consciousness'.⁵⁴ The software that is needed for these techniques to function is so easily accessible that even absolute beginners can create web content which at first glance (and often that is quite enough) looks confidential. Often, the exponential logic of algorithms is on the side of those who express hate because the posts with the highest number of clicks are the most visible ones.

Thus the Internet and social media can be seen as an important playground for people whose life is entangled with networks of hate. Hate posts and conspiracist articles play an important role because 'the movement of violent words in online domains can intensify hatred and hostility'.⁵⁵ For those who are members of online communities centred around hate, media technologies allow them 'both to 'see' affect', through the behaviour of other users, 'and to produce affective bodily capacities beyond the body's organic and physiological constraints'⁵⁶, that is to extend the (felt) realm of agency. As the Internet and social media thus become a space for self-empowerment, they 'insert the technical into the felt vitality, the felt aliveness given in the pre-individual bodily capacities to act, engage, and connect – to affect and be affected'.⁵⁷

Still, the case of Sargnagel shows exactly that the Internet and social media alone cannot be blamed for the mechanisms of hate. Instead, the case shows that different communities create their own networks within the same medium and within the same social media platforms. Furthermore,

53 By reframing content and taking it out of its context, by using collage techniques as we have seen it on *wochenblick.at*, content is moulded into the shape that affects the most. Claire Wardle explains these techniques in a very insightful article on the construction of Fake News: Wardle, 'Fake News'.

54 Clough, 'Introduction', p. 2.

55 Karatzogianni and Kuntsman, *Digital Cultures*, p. 2.

56 Clough, 'Introduction', p. 2.

57 Karatzogianni and Kuntsman, *Digital Cultures*, p. 2.

the clash of these networks as demonstrated in this case, the integration of information from the intellectual, left-wing network around *Der Standard* into the right-wing network of hate, leads to escalation. Hence, filter bubbles and echo chambers create the effect that different networks, almost different 'Internets', coexist, making the Internet for some users a space of hate, for others a space of tolerant exchange (and even support against such attacks).

Conclusion

The merit of Sargnagel's text is to show what happens when the border between mutually exclusive networks and virtually closed communities is crossed. Her text is thus transgressive for several reasons. First, it is a transgression of the limits of 'good taste' but also a transgression of the discourse limits of the realms of different networks that rarely touch each other. Second, the text functions as a boycott in the sense that it wants to go beyond the borders of closed communities and reach out to a broader readership in order to affect people and push the debates further. Although it entailed a disaster for Sargnagel including death and rape threats, she did not change her provocative writing style – perhaps the best proof of her persistency is that a year after the whole scandal, she went to Morocco again and published another travelogue 'Morocco Travel Journal II: 'Steffi Got Married to Hassan' again in *Der Standard*.⁵⁸ The article already counts more than 1,000 comments in the *Standard* forum.

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⁵⁸ Haider et al., 'Marokko-Reisetagebuch'.

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