

**Book Review: Monika Hübscher and Sabine von Mering, Eds., *Antisemitism on Social Media*. Routledge, 2022. ISBN-13: 978-1032059693 (paperback). 270 pages. \$35.96.**

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The world of Antisemitism Studies is a shifting terrain derivative of the political and social context that each individual journal, institute, or editorial board comes from. The Indiana University's Institute for the Study Contemporary Antisemitism Studies and the The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism at Hebrew University lean to the political right, often focusing on what they see as the outsized threat of Muslim and left-wing antisemitism. The studies those institutes subsequently produce, while often including good scholarship as well, often include unchecked assumptions that guide both their statistical research and their discourse: anti-Zionism is antisemitism, Israel is central to Jewish identity, and that antisemitism is a foundational piece of the left's critique of capitalism.

The same problems exist in the complex web of both Countering Violent Extremism organizations and Jewish civic organizations, both of which often quantify data on antisemitism in ways lacking transparency and guided by disputed definitions of what qualifies. If we were to look at the data itself, if we were to construct the studies and research from a different political vantage point, how would the information they present parse out? The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) is the largest organization tracking antisemitism in the U.S. and whose data is typically used throughout the media. The ADL is currently undergoing a reckoning as left-wing groups, particularly leftist Jewish groups, cut off relationships with it based on its conservative policies around Israel and its willingness to call criticism of Israel antisemitic.<sup>2</sup> Left-wing Jewish publications like

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<sup>2</sup> David Ian Klein, "Left-wing activists call for boycott of Anti-Defamation League," *Forward*, August 13th, 2020 [forward.com/fast-forward/452610/left-wing-activists-call-for-boycott-of-anti-defamation-league/](https://www.forward.com/fast-forward/452610/left-wing-activists-call-for-boycott-of-anti-defamation-league/).

*Jewish Currents* have talked about why the data offered by studies at places like the ADL can be questionable, often roping together vastly different types of incidents into an artificially homogeneous picture that supposedly shows an uncontested and clear picture of escalating antisemitism.<sup>3</sup> The research that we do have, no matter how it is understood, clearly shows an uptick in antisemitism and the growing threat of anti-Jewish bias and violence, but how does it work? How should we approach these studies, and how can we produce the most reliable data possible on the subject to better inform the work of civic and antiracist organizations?

A slew of academic anthologies have been published recently pulling together the latest scholarship on the subject on antisemitism, but Routledge's new volume *Antisemitism on Social Media* cuts with most of the pleasantries and gets down to brass tax: it lays out as clear of a picture as possible of how antisemitism is growing online and how it appears to work. It does this by essentially collecting various studies rather than papers or essays with a great deal of expository prose passages, instead trusting that the reader is there for hard data and clear predictions. By taking this approach, *Antisemitism on Social Media* has the ability to slice through much of the political fog around the subject of antisemitism, letting the data reach a wider audience of scholars and policy makers, and takes an approach that let's neither right-wing or left-wing orthodoxies dictate exclusively how the data will be interpreted.

This anthology was pulled together by German scholars Monika Hübscher and Sabine von Mering to compile research on the way that antisemitism functions in social media spaces, a subject that stands out from past research because it requires cutting edge methodologies applied to emerging technologies and a sense of how this relates to real-world violence. Most scholarship that exists often disconnects the social sciences from technology, rarely displaying a native understanding of these information systems and producing results that can feel a bit dated. Hübscher and von Mering's approach breaks from this trend by producing a volume who's style is both more technical and more centered in research on technology and Internet information systems, something which also lends to the more neutral tone of its chapters.

The editors start the book with their own "snapshot" chapter, which is helpful in setting the framework for the rest of the book since we return to some of their key statistics and observations throughout the book. Instead

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<sup>3</sup> Mari Cohen, "A Closer Look at the 'Uptick' in Antisemitism," *Jewish Currents*, May 27th, 2021, [jewishcurrents.org/a-closer-look-at-the-uptick-in-antisemitism](http://jewishcurrents.org/a-closer-look-at-the-uptick-in-antisemitism).

of making the volume repetitive, this actually creates a helpful marker for getting through the rest of the material, which creates a clear picture by the time you reach the closing entries. “[Antisemitic] content, when it is liked and shared and commented on, constitutes social validation and reward for the user who posted it, and, thus, social media encourages the creation and dissemination of hateful content, such as antisemitism,” writes Hübscher and von Mering (7). The book hovers on a number of key claims both discovered in these studies and from those they cite: antisemitism is posted every 83 seconds online, Twitter is the worst offender but places like Tik Tok are quickly radicalizing, and those numbers are all on the rise. Michael Bossetta’s closing chapter unpacks why antisemitism is both particularly severe online and so threatening: the complex mix of distance, sharability, and “meme” virality allows antisemitic commentary to be more easily produced and to spread more quickly.

Given the editors’ German background, it’s no surprise that there is a sizable focus on Germany, particularly the far-right Alternative for Deutschland party. What is interesting about this, and the entire book, is that they hone in on far-right politics at the cost of discussing the left. This feels like an intentional, and welcome, distinction that helps this volume to stand out when compared to others in the field where alleged left-wing antisemitism is the disproportionate focus. This could be the effect of the left-wing “anti-Deutsch” movement on this book, a German socialist movement that sees fighting antisemitism as an essential piece of radical politics.<sup>4</sup> This is especially visible in Sophie Schmalenberger and Monika Hübscher’s chapter on the AfD, that focuses on the way that AfD leaders employ antisemitism in their social media posts. This “tertiary antisemitism,” as they identify it, emerges from what was labeled as “secondary antisemitism” by Peter Schönbach: it is reacting to the disproportionate attention, and perhaps sympathy, that Jews receive as victims of the German genocide. These antisemites focus on statements that undermine the central importance of the Holocaust, such as comparing German civilian casualties during World War II, and lamenting the inability of the German people to have access to an uncomplicated patriotism. This acts as a kind of Holocaust trivialization, something that Schmalenberger and Hübscher point out runs through German culture as the majority of Germans believe they were either victims of the Nazis or aided the Jews, something that is statistically untrue.

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<sup>4</sup> Raphael Schlembach, “Towards a critique of anti-German ‘communism!’” *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 2 (2010), 199-219.

What may be most remarkable about this book is how recent the scholarship is, and how pressing the specifics are. The study on Tik Tok shows that while antisemitic posts on Tik Tok rose by 41% in 2021 when compared to 2020, antisemitic comments were up by 1,375% and antisemitic usernames (such as @jewdestroyer88) saw a 912% increase. Navras J. Aafreedi's study looks at antisemitic social media activity in the Urdu language, often associated with South Asian Muslim communities, and provides a comprehensive look at a sub-topic that is underexamined. Aafreedi shows how websites like YouTube and Twitter do not extend comprehensive language services to Urdu, which means that they both don't monitor Urdu language content as closely and does not make the Terms of Service easily available in Urdu, which ends up creating a vacuum of accountability around antisemitic content. This is the only chapter that focuses primarily on Muslim antisemitism, and it does so with an incredible amount of nuance and care, avoiding some of the problematic assumptions and statements that have tarred the Antisemitism Studies field in recent years. Instead, it shows the ways that the lack of accessibility for Urdu harms both Urdu speaking Muslims and others by allowing antisemitic content to proliferate without challenge. Hendrik Gunz and Isa Schaller's chapter on COVID-19 conspiracy theories hones in specifically on a German far-right context, showing with incredible precision how conspiracy theories, particularly in Germany, can edge into Holocaust Denial specifically. This was a standout chapter that will be relevant for years to come, but it also highlighted that this book would have benefitted from an additional study around COVID-19 conspiracy theories that took a broader approach as well.

Only one chapter prioritizes alleged left-wing antisemitism, "'Everyone I know Isn't Antisemitic': Antisemitism in Facebook Pages Supportive of the UK Labour Party" by Jakob Guhl. Unlike much of the recent scholarship on Labour antisemitism, Guhl takes an incredibly measured approach, presenting data that shows that 59% of Labour Facebook Groups have clearly documentable antisemitism in them. He also takes great care to show where that antisemitism does not exist, and that open antisemitism is challenged more often than it isn't, giving us a more complicated understanding of where the antisemitism is coming from and how it is experienced in the Labour Party. The majority of antisemitic content emerges from conspiracy theories, according to Guhl, with Israel-

related discourse coming second, something that is confirmed by comprehensive books on the subject by people like David Renton.<sup>5</sup>

A great deal of expertise runs underneath the statistical information, which owes to the data's reliability and the context provided has unmatched clarity. Cassie Miller's chapter on "accelerationist" terror networks tracks well with the developments we have witnessed in the U.S. neo-Nazi scene, where "groupuscular" formations have started to outpace formal organizations, many of which tied to underground classics like James Mason's *Seige*. Miller tracks how accelerationist ideas have become almost a meme online, such as the phrase "read Siegfried," which has been posted 5,500 times on the alt-right favorite website 4Chan since 2017. As all the chapters show, there is a direct correlation between the use of antisemitic discourse, often phrased as a joke or "just asking questions," and the resulting increase in actual antisemitic threats.

Perhaps the most important chapter is Michael Bossetta's contribution, which refuses to take the bait on many of the more alarmist studies that populate the media landscape. Instead of simply accepting the alleged ubiquity of rising antisemitism, he looks at the hard data and concludes that, while antisemitism is growing and a serious threat, it is still incredibly marginal. The perception of antisemitism, Bossetta argues, outpaces what the data actually tells us. He gives three options for why this is:

1. Jews are few in number, so the posts, while not making up a high percentage of traffic, are felt as more significant in relationship to the small Jewish population.
2. "Third person effect" finds that while Jewish individuals may not themselves feel threatened, they could overestimate the effect perceived threats will have on other Jews besides themselves.
3. Non-public spaces are not factored in, so theoretically Jews could be receiving excessive antisemitic private messages that are untracked.

This is a discussion that happens regularly on the Jewish left, in both useful and harmful ways, where a more realistic picture of antisemitism is necessary. Some have argued that the discrepancy between Jewish reports of antisemitism and objective data on antisemitism could be the way that

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<sup>5</sup> David Renton, *Labour's Antisemitism Crisis: What the Left Got Wrong and How to Learn From It* (London: Routledge, 2021).

difficult discourse, such as that on Israel-Palestine, is presented. If criticism, particularly criticism that uses harsh language or is loose with the facts, of Israel is labeled as antisemitism, does this then increase the perceived frequency of antisemitism? If those cases are presented as a part of the same constellation as what we all know is antisemitism, does it mean that concerns over antisemitism may escalate past the point where the data is telling us? Could being loose with how we talk about antisemitism lead people to believe it is more frequent than it is, and that they are at a greater threat than they are?

At no point and time does Bossetta do what has become so common in left-wing journals in denying the present threat of antisemitism, but instead strives after a clearer picture of how great the danger is. Instead of undermining our efforts to fight antisemitism this measured approach should actually give us a leg up: the growing threat of antisemitism is not hopeless, we can fight back and make gains against it. Bossetta also points out that antisemitism rarely goes unchallenged online, which is itself a much more hopeful picture of the situation since it reminds us that there is more consciousness, allyship, and action on antisemitism than there is antisemitism itself. Bossetta, along with other contributors, highlight some of the factors that allow us to push back more effectively, such as effective moderation and education, empowering counter-speech, and addressing the spaces that percolate the most antisemitism. While these studies do rely on dispassionate writing styles in an effort to let the research speak for itself, we understand that this information is being presented not just for disinterested reasons. The research is meant to give us the tools needed to neutralize antisemitism before it becomes lethal.

One element of *Antisemitism on Social Media* that could be a problem is the extensive embrace of the International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) "Working Definition" of antisemitism. The IHRA definition has been widely adopted by academic, NGO, and governmental bodies as the definitive measuring tool for identifying antisemitism, but it has also gained an incredible amount of criticism by those who say it unfairly ropes in criticism of Israel.<sup>6</sup> The definition's examples, which are the meat of the tool itself, include criticisms of Israel and Zionism that should not be universally understood as constituting antisemitism, and this definition has been used against Palestinian activists working in

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<sup>6</sup> "Palestinian rights and the IHRA definition of antisemitism," *The Guardian*, November 29th, 2020, [theguardian.com/news/2020/nov/29/palestinian-rights-and-the-ihra-definition-of-antisemitism](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/nov/29/palestinian-rights-and-the-ihra-definition-of-antisemitism); Brian Klug, "Is Europe a lost cause? The European debate on antisemitism and the Middle East conflict". *Patterns of Prejudice*. 39 (March 2005) (1), 46–59.

movements like the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) project.<sup>7</sup> When the IHRA definition is used as part of a statistical analysis or study, it can skew the data, finding more antisemitism and showing that antisemitism primarily emerging from criticisms of Israel. This is a concern for a book like this that focuses so heavily on producing numerical data on frequency, type, and spatiality of antisemitic incidents. But what stands out most about *Antisemitism on Social Media* is that the scholars who employ the IHRA definition do not let the definition simply define their work without examining the results. Instead, while they may use the definition to locate antisemitism, special care was taken to parse through the examples and remove those that are not dependably defined as antisemitic. The care taken in managing the data makes the reader much more trusting in the numbers produced, even though the IHRA definition may be considered questionable. The authors in the book do more than simply fixing some of the problems in the IHRA definition, they instead re-analyze the data closely enough to ensure that the antisemitic incidents included in these reports are, in fact, always appropriate to that label. This is a standard that all studies should have on the subject, not just ones correcting for a faulty definition. Still, it would have been good to see the problems with the IHRA definition acknowledged and the inclusion of counter-definitions like the Jerusalem Declaration (JDA) used more frequently. It was nice to see Sophie Schmalenberger and Monika Hübscher using the JDA in their chapter, which is uncommon in most Antisemitism Studies institutes, so hopefully this book can chart a course that includes more robust definitions of antisemitism rather than simply reproducing the most common one.

Antisemitism on Social Media is just one of several recent anthologies trying to quantify and qualify the recent antisemitic insurgency. Anthologies like Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, and Kalman Weiser's book *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism* lay out a useful series of frameworks for how to approach antisemitism from different disciplines or specific sub-topics. Other books like Ari Kohen and Gerald J. Steinacher's *Antisemitism on the Rise: The 1930s and Today* try to compare historical antisemitism in today by looking for unexamined correlations, producing a volume that is readable beyond its core audience. At the same time, books like Alvin Rosenfeld's *Contending With Antisemitism in a Rapidly Changing Political Climate*, released last year, will likely get the most attention, which is unfortunate given its turn towards sensationalism,

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<sup>7</sup> "US to label Israel boycott movement as 'anti-Semitic': Pompeo," *Al Jazeera*, November 19th, 2020, [aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/19/pompeo-says-will-visit-israeli-occupied-golan-heights](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/19/pompeo-says-will-visit-israeli-occupied-golan-heights).

right-wing agitprop, and a lack of dependable research. Among this crowd, *Antisemitism on Social Media* is both the most technical and perhaps the most useful: for researchers, civic organizations, organizers, and other people working in the field, this is going to give you the most dependable and accessible data to govern your work. Unlike the other books, it also may have less crossover to people outside of the field because of its reliance on statistical methodologies and lack of prose passages, but this hardly seemed to be its goal. Instead, it is an intervention into a field that desperately needs dependable numbers, and rarely do we see a volume that tries to bring together as many relevant studies with such up-to-date research in a singular work. In that way, Monika Hübscher and Sabine von Mering have produced something incredibly special and is guaranteed to be on every researcher's Works Cited for years to come.