

Letter to the Editor

Thank you that we have had the opportunity to comment and answer your questions before the article "The Global Machine Behind the Rise of Far-Right Nationalism" by Jo Becker has been published.

The New York Times reported on August 10, 2019 in detail about a network of right-wing extremist sites, which in Europe and especially in Sweden have created a mood against immigration and an open, tolerant policy through one-sided and partly incorrect reporting. The article associates these portals with Russia's possible geostrategic interests. In addition, the author Jo Becker also associates the AUTODOC Group with these websites.

AUTODOC is deeply concerned about these assertions. AUTODOC is committed to democratic principles, human rights, equality and respect for all humans. AUTODOC expressly distances itself from any kind of racism, far-right radical ideas and any efforts to hinder or influence democratic processes from the outside. The employees of AUTODOC speak over 30 languages and come from all over the world. The majority have a migration background themselves.

Jo Becker's article mentions AUTODOC banner advertisements on far-right websites. What it does not mention is that this unfortunate event took place in 2017 and has long since been stopped completely. In 2017, AUTODOC advertising was found on over 400 Swedish websites. These included a total of six Swedish portals, whose far-right radical contents or views were not known to AUTODOC at the time. AUTODOC uses external service providers to efficiently and quickly generate links and traffic on the AUTODOC websites by placing advertisement banners on third party websites. Which pages are used exactly remains the trade secret of the service providers. This is common practice in advertising as you reported yourself in December of 2016¹. According to that article you experienced the pitfalls of such ad placements yourself. Such external service providers have placed banner advertisements on the six Swedish portals mentioned above and on a small number of other such sites in other countries. This happened without any knowledge of AUTODOC.

AUTODOC only became aware of the unwanted banner placements later via the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter. The AUTODOC management stopped the advertising on these web

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/02/business/media/breitbart-vanguard-ads-follow-users-target-marketing.html>

pages immediately and excluded the corresponding pages permanently. In addition, AUTODOC established additional controls, quality standards and clear internal rules to prevent such cases in the future.

It is therefore not true that AUTODOC provided "financial backing" to these websites. The advertisements placed on alt-right websites represented a minuscule part of a large online marketing operation. This shows that these marketing measures were driven purely by business considerations on our part and not motivated by the context of the ad placements in any way. It is also heavily biased to say that "six of Sweden's alt-right sites have drawn advertising revenue from a network of online auto-parts stores based in Germany and owned by four businessmen from Russia and Ukraine, three of whom have adopted German-sounding surnames." AUTODOC does not support these websites or their ideology. AUTODOC is a 100 percent German company. Its three founders are German citizens. They are descended from Volga Germans, an ethnic German minority in Russia that was deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan during World War II. All of them immigrated to Germany roundabout 20 years ago, following the fall of the iron curtain. One of the three already had a German family name, which of course he retained after arriving in Germany. Two of the founders adopted their wives' surnames. There is no fourth owner, and no connection to the Ukraine in this context. It is wrong and unfair to misrepresent AUTODOC as a tool of Russian influence, based solely on its founders' ancestry.

The article also addresses content on the web pages of AUTODOC which is not visible for normal web users. AUTODOC uses such content which is not listed for public purposes only for search engine optimization. This is customary in the industry as well, including among American companies. This content has been automatically transferred from other sites. The sources were primarily publicly accessible scientific reports and news. AUTODOC only learned from the article by Jo Becker that this apparently included some content, which was clearly dubious in nature. As a result, AUTODOC immediately deleted all these articles. They contradict the principles and culture of AUTODOC.

Jo Becker raises the following question: "Was the auto-parts dealer simply trying to drum up business, or was it also trying to support the far-right cause?" The article implies the latter. The truth is that AUTODOC has nothing to do with alt-right ideology and is opposed to any form of racism. Therefore we would like to know, how you arrived at such a conclusion?

We are looking forward to hearing from you concerning this.

AUTODOC GmbH, Berlin, Germany, 14th of August 2019