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Artificial Amplification and Intermedia Dynamics in the Hybrid Media System: The Case of #LaschetLacht

Florian Muhle and Indra Bock

Department of Cultural Studies and Communication Studies, Zeppelin University, Germany

Correspondence: Florian Muhle (florian.muhle@zu.de)

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Abstract

The article demonstrates intermedia dynamics in the hybrid media system and reveals the susceptibility of traditional media to attempts to influence their agenda and public opinion formation. Specifically, it deals with the thematization of a faux pas by the conservative chancellor candidate Armin Laschet during the German federal election campaign in 2021. To analyze the intermedia dynamics in this case, the first step is a content analysis of journalistic reporting of the faux pas, which illustrates the responsiveness of traditional media to social media trends and activities. The research shows that journalistic media addressed the faux pas only after it was problematized on social media and became visible through the trending hashtag #LaschetLacht on Twitter. Building on this, the next step involves network and content analyses of Twitter users and their posts about the faux pas, which shed light on how the hashtag trend emerged and gained momentum. Key actors who were particularly relevant to the emergence and dissemination of the hashtag are identified, as well as their strategies to reinforce the trend and draw the attention of journalistic media to it. As the analysis reveals, highly active accounts played a significant role by attempting to artificially amplify the emerging Twitter trend, aiming to exploit the attention logics in the hybrid media system.

Keywords

artificial amplification; attention logics; hybrid media system; legacy media; political communication; social media

1. Introduction

The establishment of major social media platforms as part of the current transformation of the public sphere has not led to the displacement of traditional media or a complete fragmentation between different media spaces. Instead, new and old media form a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017) in which continuous

interrelationships between social media and legacy media exist. As research on intermedia agenda setting has shown, topics that first appear in one media space are often addressed shortly thereafter in another (Conway et al., 2023; Su & Borah, 2019; Weimann & Brosius, 2017). This means that, on the one hand, people in the dispersed personal publics on social media often discuss topics that originate from traditional mass media. On the other hand, journalists observe the activities of social media users and increasingly cover issues that receive broad attention online (Fürst & Oehmer, 2021). In this way, they ensure that topics emerging in the fragmented sub-publics of social media can gain general visibility, provided they are deemed attractive and relevant according to journalistic selection criteria.

The latter plays a significant role in the field of politics, especially during election campaigns. In this context, social media have the potential to "drive traditional media coverage" (Chadwick, 2017, p. 255), which is also strategically utilized by political actors, whose online activities often aim to "set the agendas and shape the frames of journalists and influence campaign coverage in legacy media" (Kreiss et al., 2018, pp. 16–17). On the one hand, there are powerful and professional actors who aim, as "primary definers" (Anstead & Chadwick, 2018), to exercise their influence on journalists' coverage. On the other hand, activists and other actors, including bots (Howard et al., 2018; Muhle, 2022) and "disinformation workers" (Ayeb & Bonini, 2024), need to be considered. These actors engage in online activities, among other reasons, to amplify trending hashtags and draw public attention to certain topics and opinions, thereby influencing the formation of public opinion.

This is where the present article positions itself. Building on existing research on intermedia agenda setting and artificial amplification on social media, it presents a case study addressing the public thematization of a faux pas by the conservative chancellor candidate Armin Laschet during the 2021 German federal election campaign (Section 3). This faux pas was initially problematized on social media, brought to public attention under the trending hashtag #LaschetLacht (#LaschetLaughs), and subsequently picked up as a topic by the journalistic media. As a result, the candidate's public image suffered noticeably, and he and his party, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU), actually lost the election two months later, which hardly seemed conceivable before the faux pas.

To analyze the intermedia dynamics, after presenting the case (Section 3) and methods of analysis (Section 4), a content analysis of journalistic reporting on the faux pas is used to illustrate the responsiveness of traditional media to social media trends (Section 5.1). The analysis shows that the journalistic media initially did not address the faux pas. Only after it was problematized on social media and became visible through the hashtag and social media comments from political elite actors did the media change their coverage. Building on this, in the next step, content and network analyses of Twitter (now X) users and their posts about the faux pas shed light on how the Twitter trend emerged and gained momentum (Section 5.2). Key actors who were particularly relevant for its emergence and dissemination are identified, as well as their strategies to reinforce the trend and draw the attention of journalistic media to it. As the analysis reveals, highly active accounts played a significant role by attempting to artificially amplify the emerging Twitter trend.

Based on the empirical findings, the article closes with critical remarks on public opinion formation, attention dynamics, and the changing journalistic role in the hybrid media system (Section 6). The article begins with a literature-based examination of artificial amplification in the context of a hybrid media system (Section 2). This outlines the theoretical background for the subsequent case analysis.

2. Artificial Amplification in the Hybrid Media System

In democratic societies, the political public sphere mediates between politics on the one hand and civil society on the other. Its function is to ensure that the interests of the general public are perceived by politics and that political decisions are linked to the citizens' opinions and (majority) will (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1991; Habermas, 2021). This essentially happens through the identification and articulation of socially relevant issues and the enabling of democratic will formation, which becomes visible as public opinion. Traditionally, it is journalism that is responsible for the representation of public opinion (Habermas, 2022; Hardy, 2019). For this, journalists select relevant topics and include "opinions and perspectives of a broad range of social actors and groups" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 51) in their reporting, which is realized in accordance with professional norms in a manner committed to neutrality and balance. In this sense, journalism is responsible for the "throughput" of the public sphere and thus for filtering out from the multitude of existing topics and opinions those that can be considered generally relevant (Habermas, 2022, p. 157) and representative (McGregor, 2019, p. 1072).

With the establishment of social media, the conditions for public opinion formation have changed drastically. Now, political actors can directly address their constituents online, attract attention, and bypass the filters of mass media (Enli, 2017; Nuernbergk & Conrad, 2016; Stier et al., 2018). In line with the selection logic of social media (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), this potentially contributes to the fragmentation and polarization of the political public sphere (Fischer & Jarren, 2024; Van Aelst et al., 2017). At the same time, however, due to the extensive datafication of online communication (Mejias & Couldry, 2019; van Dijck & Poell, 2013), topics and opinions that are circulating in the scattered personal online publics have the chance to become accessible to broader audiences. This is possible because algorithms "aggregate, categorize, and combine their observations of our communication" (Brosius, 2022, p. 56). In doing so, they make the results of these processes observable, e.g., in the form of trending topics (Duguay, 2018).

This algorithmic aggregation of online activities, therefore, transforms the scattered private online activities into public communication. This allows social media users to gain insights into currently discussed topics and opinions, and in this way contributes to the emergence of larger online publics. In addition, it makes online activities visible to interested third parties, such as journalism or politics, which observe the social media discourse to get a glimpse of what people are concerned about (Beckers & Harder, 2016; Wehner, 2020). As Fürst and Oehmer (2021) point out, a news factor called "public response" has even developed. This means that journalists increasingly attribute news value to topics that generate particularly high resonance among online publics, which is reflected, for example, in the fact that news reports include references to trending hashtags on social media, thereby informing the general public about what is happening online (McGregor, 2019, p. 1073). As research on intermedia agenda setting shows, sometimes, social media discourses even manage to set entirely new topics that are then picked up by legacy media (Abdi-Herrle, 2018; Chadwick, 2017; Conway et al., 2023). This is especially the case when topics are presented pointedly and picked up by popular accounts (Abdi-Herrle, 2018) as well as "right after the occurrence of breaking news" (Su & Borah, 2019, p. 10).

In this sense, social media serve as an important resource for journalists in the hybrid media system to quickly, easily, and cost-effectively generate information about "hot" and controversial topics and opinions in the (online) public sphere that have news value and can be further communicated almost in real-time to

the general public (Dubois et al., 2020). This is regularly used, especially during election campaigns, which, in view of the increasing relevance of social media and the cost and time pressure on legacy media associated with the digital transformation, is not surprising: "By the nature of their quantification, social media data also give journalists a near-instantaneous metric by which to measure political winners and losers, meeting news values like timeliness and conflict, while working in favor of horserace-style coverage" (McGregor, 2019, p. 1074).

At the same time, however, the inclusion of easily obtained online data in journalistic reporting also comes with some problems. Fundamentally, under the conditions of an accelerated hybrid media system, there is often a lack of time for careful research and verification of news that attracts attention on social media. In addition, journalists often do not have the ability to analyze and evaluate aggregated online data (Toff, 2019). Consequently, for example, undifferentiated generalizations are often found in reporting. This is the case, when certain trends are associated with statements about the "internet users" or the "Twitter community" as such (Beckers & Harder, 2016), or metaphors like "wave of outrage" or "Twitter storm" are used, which create the impression of a uniform public opinion in social media and tend to dramatize and amplify the perceived intensity of the observable trend. In connection with this, there is usually a lack of contextualization of the online trends reported on, for example, regarding the size and composition of those trends (Fürst, 2023).

This goes hand in hand with the risk that journalistic reporting on online trends will give a voice to "loud minorities" and hence fail to fulfil journalism's own claim of a balanced and neutral representation of public opinion. Online trends often do not come about "naturally" but through the strategic activities of professional or hyperactive political actors (Martini et al., 2021; Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). It is not only established political players who try to influence political communication on social media platforms. Activists across the political spectrum also rely on strategic and coordinated action to make their concerns publicly visible and heard. For example, hashtag activism involves the strategic development and distribution of hashtags (Meraz, 2024; Yang, 2016), whereby activities such as "clicktivism" and "metavoicing," i.e., sharing and commenting on messages, are used for amplification (George & Leidner, 2019).

While it is an expression of active citizenship—and thus the legitimate right of citizens—to draw attention to their issues and opinions, it becomes problematic when such activities are deliberately employed not merely to influence the formation of public opinion, but to manipulate it. This particularly takes place when civic engagement is simply simulated, as is the case with: (a) astroturfing (Keller et al., 2020; Kovic et al., 2018); (b) individual users who are disproportionately active (Matuszewski & Szabó, 2024; Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020); (c) bots that are deployed to mimic human activities (Chadwick, 2017, pp. 275–279; Gehl & Bakardjieva, 2017; Hagen et al., 2022; Keller & Klinger, 2019); or (d) paid disinformation workers on troll farms who create and operate fake profiles (Ayeb & Bonini, 2024; McCombie et al., 2020).

Such activities can be commissioned or carried out by individual actors operating independently or within the context of orchestrated campaigns. In addition, such manipulative attempts can be carried out manually, automatically, or in a hybrid manner. But what all of these activities have in common is that they show "inauthentic behavior" (de-Lima-Santos & Ceron, 2023) and, in this sense, aim at amplifying certain topics and opinions artificially. Strategies of artificial amplification that have been identified in the literature include the dissemination of particular content, e.g., via (co-)retweet (Keller et al., 2020; Muhle, 2020), targeting

popular users through mentions and replies (Shao et al., 2018), or misdirecting users to unrelated content (Khaund et al., 2022).

Such activities can be characterized as *artificial amplification* (Colombo & De Gaetano, 2020; Lin et al., 2025) because they aim at exerting influence on online trends whose visibility is artificially increased (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020)—not least to address the journalistic news factor "public response" in this way (Fürst, 2021; Fürst & Oehmer, 2018; Muhle, 2022). The battle for attention and opinion formation is therefore taking on new forms in the hybrid media system, which is also changing the role of journalism. Not only are public activities and opinions on social media becoming visible in unprecedented ways, making them attractive to journalists, but their visibility has also become a contested commodity in struggles over attention and opinion leadership. In this context, political actors utilize the attention and selection logic of journalism to draw attention to certain topics and opinions even beyond platform publics in the hope that the legacy media will respond to this and make artificially amplified social media trends visible across the general public.

The work of Fürst and Oehmer (2018) and Fürst (2021) shows that corresponding strategies can be successful. Using the 2016 US presidential election campaign as an example, the authors show that hashtags promoted by automated accounts on Twitter actually made it into news media coverage and thus contributed to the creation of a distorted image of public opinion, at least temporarily. As the following case study on the 2021 German parliamentary election campaign shows, this is not an isolated case. Highly active and (partially) automated accounts also play a significant role in the German-speaking Twittersphere and can contribute to the emergence and spread of trends and thus draw the attention of journalists to corresponding trends.

3. #LaschetLacht: A Case Study on Artificial Amplification

The case study revolves around a faux pas of the conservative candidate for chancellor, Armin Laschet, during the German federal election campaign in 2021. The incident, which later became the "defining moment" of the election campaign, happened in July 2021, while regions of Germany were hit by severe flooding that claimed many lives and caused extensive damage. On July 17, Armin Laschet, who was not only a candidate for chancellor but also Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia, a federal state that was particularly affected by the floods, together with Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the Federal President of Germany, visited an area that had been hit particularly hard by the flooding. The two politicians—Laschet officially in his capacity as Minister President—wanted to get a sense of the situation on the ground and express their solidarity for those affected. This included pre-announced public statements from the two politicians. After talking to residents and aid workers, they appeared one after the other in front of the press to make their statements. In this situation, Laschet could be seen joking and laughing in the background with other people standing next to him, while Federal President Steinmeier expressed his empathy and condolences to those affected by the flood in front of the media microphones and cameras.

The Federal President's statement with Laschet's laughter in the background (and later Laschet's own statement) was broadcast live on social media channels of different legacy media. Later, the news media additionally reported on the politicians' visit to the flood area and their press statements in their programs and news portals. Initially, in the coverage, the laughter went unnoticed or at least it remained insignificant

(see Section 5.1). However, social media users, who watched livestreams of the statements, recognized Laschet's laughter, and some of them started commenting on it online. Thus, Laschet and his companions unintentionally became part of the situation in which the Federal President was speaking. The laughter then became the subject of public outrage because it created the impression of disrespectful behavior—unbecoming of a representative aspiring to a position as chancellor.

Over the course of the afternoon, an increasing number of posts—particularly on Twitter—began to criticize Laschet's behavior, with the hashtag #LaschetLacht gaining significant traction. By the evening, the hashtag had reached the top position among trending topics in Germany (see Section 5.2). As a result, the outrage was picked up by political rivals, and the legacy media began reporting on the laughter and outrage on social media that same evening. Laschet apologized later that day but could not prevent the faux pas from damaging his public image. From that point on, he and his party's poll ratings dropped significantly, while the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which had been lagging until then, caught up and ultimately won the most votes in the election (Klein et al., 2022, p. 29; Oppelland, 2023, p .117).

The case exemplifies how attention dynamics between social media and legacy media develop and how topics that initially emerge in scattered online publics can reach the general public. At the same time, it shows how the attention logics in the hybrid system are exploited by strategic actors to artificially fuel topics and increase their visibility. To demonstrate this, the following section will first explain the methodical approach of the case study (Section 4). Building on this, Section 5.1 shows how the legacy media reported on the politician's visit to the flood area and how they later changed their coverage. After this, the analysis focuses on how the trending hashtag emerged and which strategies and actors were important in this context (Section 5.2).

4. Methods

The case study is based on two different data sets: news articles, on the other hand, and Twitter messages using the hashtag #LaschetLacht, on the other. How these data sets were collected and analyzed will be explained in more detail in this section.

4.1. Analysis of News Coverage

The analysis of the news coverage aims at investigating the responsiveness of traditional media to the hashtag trend. It is based on a quantitative content analysis of German-speaking news articles that were published in online news portals and dealt with the politicians' visit to the flood area on July 17th. The articles were collected using the Media Cloud database. The query referred to all German media available on Media Cloud (Germany state and local) and to the period from July 17th (visit to the flood area) to September 26th (federal election). This period was chosen to examine the duration and manner in which the media referred to the laughter incident or the related Twitter phenomena. To narrow down the results to relevant articles, keywords were developed through an iterative process of searching and reading articles (see the Supplementary File). In total, a list of 2,136 URLs of news reports was gathered. After processing the data (e.g., deleting duplicates and articles that were no longer available), 865 articles of 137 news outlets were examined. Most of the articles are news, but they also include a few opinion pieces, reports, and (very few) interviews. The news outlets under study are online portals of major national newspapers (e.g., *Zeit*, *FAZ*, *Bild*, *Sueddeutsche*, *taz*), national news magazines (e.g., *Spiegel*, *Focus*, *Stern*, *Cicero*), regional newspapers (e.g., *Rheinische Post*, *Ruhrnachrichten*,

Hamburger Abendblatt), national and regional radio and television media (e.g., ARD, ZDF, rbb, WDR), as well as digital-only sources (e.g., t-online, Yahoo, inFranken.de).

In a first step, all 865 articles were coded using the ATLAS.ti program. In addition to formal coding such as date, time, medium, and text type, the articles were coded according to whether or not they addressed the event of the politicians' visit to the flood area and whether or not they referred to the laughter of the chancellor candidate Laschet. In this way, it was possible, on the one hand, to ensure that the articles with the corresponding keywords were indeed thematically relevant. On the other hand, it allowed for the identification of when articles began to address the laughter and to what extent the faux pas started to dominate the reporting.

To analyze how the coverage of the faux pax related to public responses, in the next step, a subsample of the articles mentioning the laughter incident was coded as to whether and how the articles referred to public reactions, especially on social media. The subsample consists of all relevant articles that were published by the 15 major news outlets that achieved the greatest reach online in Germany in September 2021 and/or recorded the most visits (see list in the Supplementary File). The decision not to examine the entire sample in the second step was made for pragmatic research reasons. While the first step aimed to identify when news outlets began reporting on the incident, the second step focused on analyzing references to public resonance in general. For this purpose, a smaller sample is sufficient, which also reduces the coding effort. In sum, 154 articles were coded in the second step.

During the initial reading of the articles, codes were created for various references to public response, which were further developed inductively during the coding process. On the one hand, the codes distinguish between unspecific, general references to public reactions on Laschet's laughter (e.g., "outraged reactions"), references to reactions on social media (e.g., tweets, shares, or likes), and references to specific public reactions offline (e.g., polls, interview statements). On the other hand, the codes reflect references to individual expressions of opinion by specific persons and organizations (e.g., political parties) and those to aggregated reactions (e.g., use of a hashtag). The coding scheme can be found in the Supplementary File.

4.2. Analysis of the Twitter Trend

The analysis of the Twitter trend is based on all tweets that used the hashtag #Laschetlacht on 17 July and thus contributed to the hashtag trend. In sum, the trend involved 34,300 tweets sent by 16,027 different accounts. The tweets were collected using the Twitter API v2. Only a small proportion of the collected tweets are original tweets (a total of 4,848 tweets from around 3,500 different accounts). Retweets make up the largest share (22,268 retweets), accounting for around 65% of the total volume. In addition, 7,200 tweets (or 21%) are quotes, mentions, or replies.

Methodologically, the analysis of the tweets applies a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), which combines quantitative and qualitative analyses to gain the most comprehensive insights possible into the dynamics and composition of the Twitter trend. Quantitative analyses were carried out to determine how the hashtag #LaschetLacht developed over time on 17 July and to identify central actors. For this purpose, networks were created from the collected Twitter data, and different centrality measures were applied for analysis. In particular, the indegree, the outdegree, and the diffusion degree were calculated. While indegree

basically is the number of incoming ties of a node, outdegree is the number of outgoing ties (Brass & Borgatti, 2020). In the case of the constructed Twitter networks, this means that the outdegree equals the number of activities (different types of tweets) of a single account and thus allows for the identification of highly active accounts. The indegree equals the sum of mentions, replies, or retweets an account received and normally is interpreted as an indicator for the prestige or popularity of a node (Brass & Borgatti, 2020). In the present case, the analysis of the indegree provides insights into which accounts stimulated other accounts to become active and, in this way, specifically influenced the dissemination of the hashtag. Indegree and outdegree were calculated using the *R* package igraph.

Diffusion degree is a more complicated measure. It measures the cumulative contribution score of a node and its neighbors. That is, the diffusion degree of a node is high when, in a diffusion process, all of its neighbors are activated after an activity of the node (Pal et al., 2014). Diffusion degree, therefore, aims to identify nodes that are central to the diffusion of an object in a network, e.g., a hashtag. Diffusion degree was calculated using the *R* package centiserve.

Qualitative analyses were conducted to take a closer look at when the faux pas was first discussed and which strategies for spreading the hashtag could be identified. For this, samples of the posts that were authored by or sent to the most central accounts were inspected manually to be able to categorize the communication strategies of strategic actors and their role in the Twitter trend. In this way, three important strategies of artificial amplification could be identified (See 5.2.3). To enhance the transparency of the categorization process, selected tweets are cited as illustrative examples. These tweets were translated from German into English by the authors.

5. Results

We begin the presentation of the empirical findings by first examining the development of news coverage, particularly over the course of July 17. In doing so, we demonstrate how this coverage changed and highlight the relevance of references to outrage on social media (Section 5.1). We then turn to the dynamics of the Twitter trend and show the role that artificial amplification played in this context (Section 5.2). The temporal dynamics of reporting and the trending hashtag are visualized employing the 24-hour clock to allow for an unambiguous interpretation of time-dependent patterns.

5.1. Coverage of the Politicians' Visit to the Flood Area

When was Laschet's laughter brought up and to what extent did this change the number and content of the articles? This is visualized by Figure 1 which shows the number of articles per hour on the day of the incident. The lighter area represents all articles that reported on the politician's visit and the darker area those that addressed Laschet's laughter.

As the diagram demonstrates, the first peak in coverage was reached between 14:00 and 15:00, when the journalistic media reported on the visit of the two politicians to the flood area in general and the press statements in particular, which were broadcast live at 13:30. The articles in this period focused primarily on the content of the statements. Especially, the emotionally charged sentence "Their fate tears our hearts apart!," which Steinmeier expressed in his statement, was quoted by many reports or carried in the headlines,

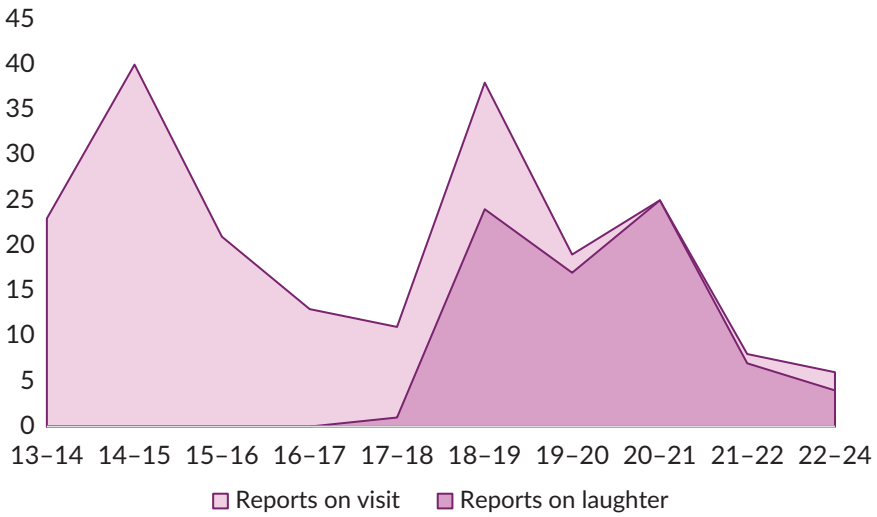

Figure 1. Number of news articles on the politicians' visit to the flood area on July 17th. Notes: Y line: number of news articles; X line: time in hourly intervals (24-hour time).

while Laschet was quoted as promising to send financial support quickly and unbureaucratically (see, for example, the headline in Figure 2a). In the first hours of reporting, not a single article referred to Laschet's laughter. The media outlets reported in a routine mode, and the news value of the visit and the accompanying statements predictably declined after the initial coverage, leading to a slowdown in reporting during the following hours (15:00–18:00).

From 18:00 on, however, the number of articles shot up again and reached a second peak in the early evening. As Figure 1 shows, this is directly related to the fact that reporting on Laschet's laughter had begun. Evidently, this aspect of the visit was deemed newsworthy several hours after the event and was picked up by numerous media outlets. According to our sample, at 17:50, the news portal *stern.de* was the first medium that reported on Laschet's laughter, using the headline "laughing Laschet in Erftstadt causes outraged reactions" ("Lachender Laschet," 2021). After that, other legacy media outlets began reporting on the incident as well. Figure 2 shows how the change in reporting took place. It shows a headline and caption (including a video of Steinmeier's statement) from *n-tv* the online platform of the news channel n-tv and one of the largest news portals in Germany. On the left is the afternoon report, and on the right is the evening report. The headline and caption were changed completely at around 18:00. While the headline on the left states "Laschet promises 'money very unbureaucratically,'" a few hours later, the headline says "Laschet-laughter causes outrage." Evidently, the news media became aware of the incident in the early evening of July 17, several hours after it occurred. As the results of the second step of the content analysis will show, the outrage that had emerged on Twitter in the meantime played a significant role.

For the second step of the content analysis, which focused on whether and how the news reports related to reactions on social media, articles that did not mention Laschet's laughter were excluded, as they were not relevant to it. In sum, 154 articles from 15 major news outlets were examined (see Section 4.1). Figure 3 shows the percentage of news reports that relate to social media data with a focus on the days following the incident.

Figure 2. Coverage of the visit on n-tv.de on July 17: (a) afternoon report. Source: "Mit Steinmeier in Erftstadt" (2021); (b) evening report. Source: "Besuch im Hochwasser-Gebiet" (2021).

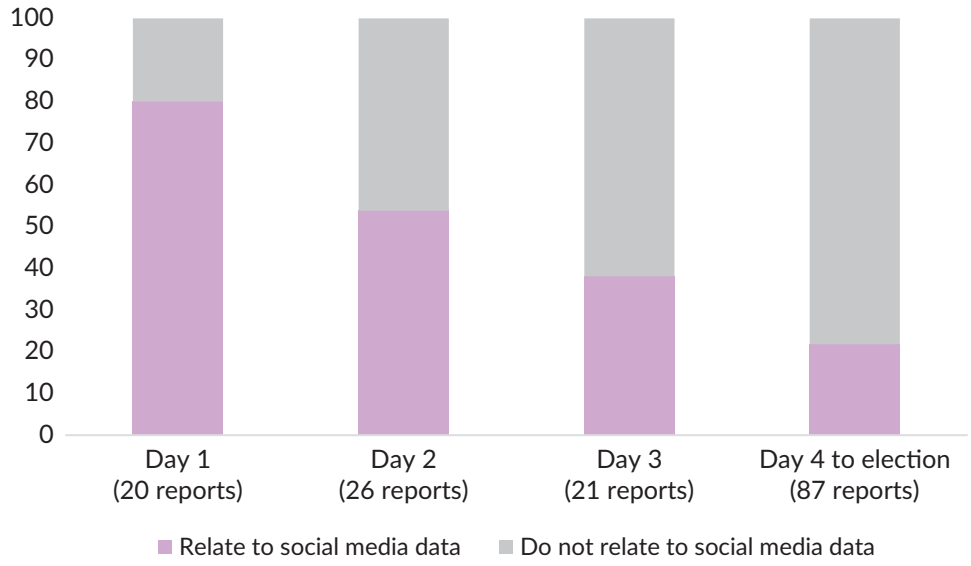

Figure 3. Share (in %) of news reports with reference to social media data related to Laschet's laughter.

As Figure 3 shows, especially at the beginning of reporting, a large proportion of the articles about the (mis)conduct of the chancellor candidate referred to social media data. On the first day, 80% (16 out of 20) of the articles, which were published by the 15 major outlets, included references to responses to Laschet's laughter on Twitter. These references served both as a hook and a means for contextualizing the reporting. Different types of references could be identified (see Figure 4), namely references to particular tweets from public actors (tweets), the hashtag trend #LaschetLacht (hashtag usage), and other aggregated activities on social media, such as multiple sharing or liking (aggregated activities).

As Figure 4 shows, tweets by well-known public figures played the most important role. On the first day, 75% of the reports referred to tweets from public elite actors in response to Laschet's laughter. In particular,

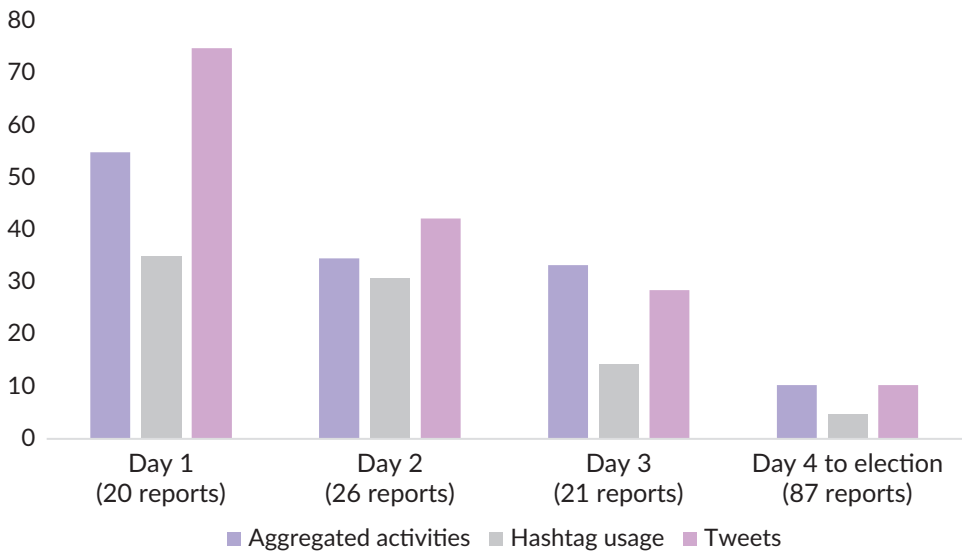

Figure 4. Share of news reports (in %) that address certain kinds of social media data related to Laschet's laughter.

tweets of two "primary definers," namely the well-known politicians Lars Klingbeil and Kevin Kühnert from the opposing party SPD, were cited at the beginning of the coverage. Later on, tweets from many other politicians and public figures were also mentioned. One example of this is an excerpt from an article of the Funke Media Group, published on July 17, at 18:26:

> The pictures had triggered clear criticism. "I am truly speechless," wrote SPD General Secretary Lars Klingbeil on Twitter. The pianist Igor Levit spoke of "undignified behavior." Peter Dabrock, the former chairman of the German Ethics Council, criticized the "irreverence" shown toward the victims. ("Armin Laschet lacht," 2021)

In addition, explicit references to the hashtag #LaschetLacht also played an important role. In an article published on the morning of July 18 by *RND*, a major news network and content provider for numerous regional newspapers, the article states, for example: "There was a great deal of excitement, especially on social networks. Hashtags such as #Laschetlacht or #LaschetDarfNichtKanzlerWerden briefly dominated German Twitter trends. It's a media super-disaster" (Cleven, 2021).

Similarly, the hashtag was explicitly mentioned in about one in three reports on the first day. This manner of referring to the trending topic was accompanied by other kinds of references to aggregated activities, which were made in more than half of the posts on the first day. For instance, *Spiegel*, the largest German-language online news portal, published an article on the evening of July 17, 2021, which says that "the video of the short scene, which lasted around 20 seconds, was shared thousands of times on Twitter." ("Lachen im Katastrophengebiet," 2021).

The numerous references to the online outrage indicate that journalists, in fact, became aware of the incident due to the Twitter trend. In accordance with the news factor of "public response" they began reporting on it, which clearly shows the responsiveness of news media to social media activities, particularly when "hot" topics are picked up by popular actors, and in times of election campaigns (see Section 2). Within just a few hours, the

faux pas of the chancellor candidate—initially unnoticed by traditional media and only discussed in scattered publics on social networks—became widely known to the general public and evolved into a significant topic of media coverage.

Unsurprisingly, overall reporting, including references to the outrage on social media, declined again in the following days (see Figures 3 and 4). At the same time, however, the issue remained virulent. As the bar on the right side of Figure 3 shows, the laughter remained a permanent theme in the coverage of the election campaign. In the two months between the incident and election day, there were 87 reports on the topic in the major outlets which contributed to keeping the issue persistently present in the public discourse.

Articles that were published in the aftermath of the event often described the laughter incident as the candidate's biggest mistake and interpreted falling approval ratings as directly linked to this, indicating that it had become the defining moment of the election campaign. The following example from *Tagesspiegel* (August 5, 2021) demonstrates this:

> Laschet was filmed laughing heartily—directly behind the head of state. It only lasted a few seconds, but the action still haunts the CDU/CSU leadership candidate. According to a Forsa survey for RTL and ntv, Laschet's poll ratings have been in free fall ever since. Although he apologized for the joke shortly afterwards, the impression of a lack of empathy and seriousness remains. On Twitter, the hashtag #Laschetlacht was trending. (Straub, 2021)

Overall, the analysis of the news coverage demonstrates how legacy media responded to the news value of the online trend and, in doing so, brought the incident to the attention of the general public, allowing it to unfold its full effect. The case thus stands as a compelling example of intermedia dynamics in the hybrid media system and demonstrates how, under certain conditions, social media activities can shape the public agenda.

5.2. The Twitter Trend and its Artificial Amplification on Twitter

How the Twitter trend came about, and which role artificial amplification played in the development and dissemination of the outrage, is the subject of the following analyses. They first show how the hashtag #LaschetLacht emerged and developed over time. Building on this, different strategies of artificial amplification and key actors who applied these strategies are identified.

5.2.1. The Emergence of the Twitter Trend

While journalistic media initially reported on the press statements in a routine mode (see Section 5.1), some viewers who followed the statements on television or on the online channels of media outlets very quickly pointed out Armin Laschet's laughter with critical intent. The hashtag #LaschetLacht was used for the first time at 13:33, almost as a live comment during the broadcast of the press statements. A common user who, according to his Twitter profile, is neither an activist nor has many followers, wrote, "Steinmeier talks Laschet laughs. Great guy" (germanni, 2021). This ironic comment was supplemented with the hashtags #laschetlacht and #ArminLaschet. Other users were also quick to point out the faux pas without using the hashtag. An example of this is a tweet published at 14:01 that stated, "There was just a press conference with President #Steinmeier in #Erftstadt: Two clowns in the background on the left. That's Armin

#Laschet…and Frank #Rock…from the #neveragainCDU" (Simon, 2021). Embedded in this post was a small video clip that the user took from the livestream of the statements on the Facebook channel of the news magazine *Spiegel*. Laschet's laughter could be seen in this clip.

Until around 16:00, however, there were only a few tweets on the topic. Up to this point, only 16 tweets used the hashtag #LaschetLacht. But from 16:00 onwards, a recognizable trend set in, and the messages using the hashtag multiplied (see Figure 5). Consequently, after 17:00, the hashtag made it into the top 10 trending topics in Germany. From around 18:30, it took first place for the rest of the day. By making it into the trending topics, the hashtag—and the outrage it expressed—became publicly visible, enabling journalists, who monitor Twitter activity closely (see Sections 2 and 5.1), to become aware of the trend.

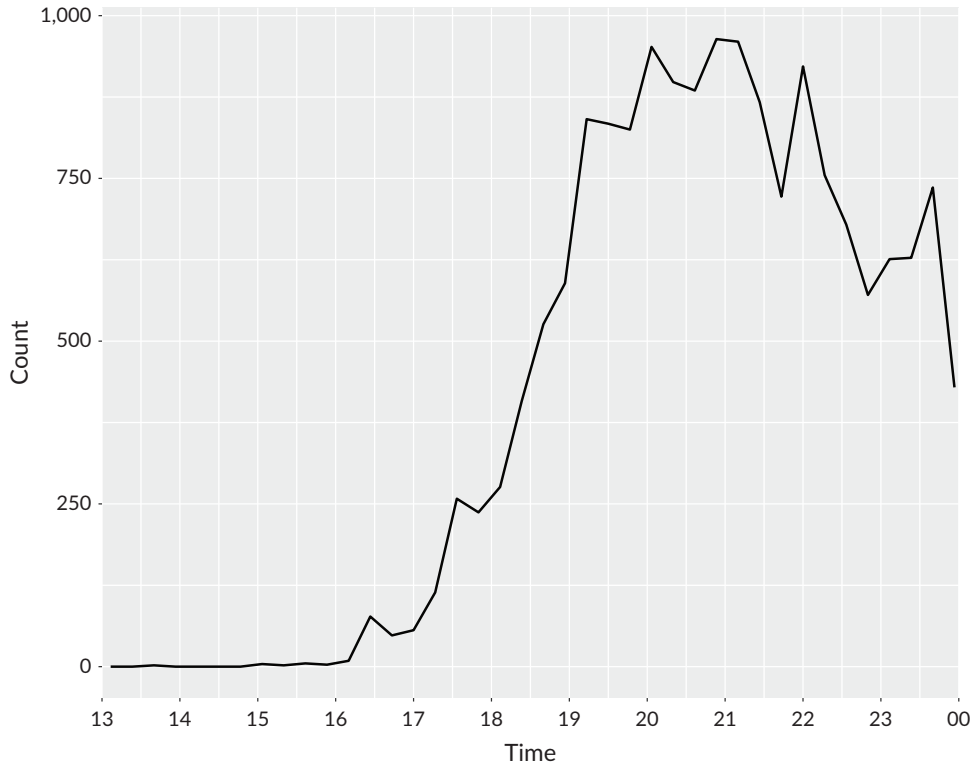

Figure 5. Dissemination of the hashtag #LaschetLacht.

But how did the hashtag gain momentum from 16:00 onwards? Of great importance here is that Twitter users began to use the hashtag strategically in the afternoon. On the one hand, popular accounts were made aware of the hashtag, including accounts from the established news media. On the other hand, the hashtag was also deliberately disseminated by hyperactive accounts, thereby amplifying the trend. Later, bot networks also appropriated the trend, hijacking the hashtag to disseminate spam and other content. In doing so, however, they also further amplified the trend.

5.2.2. Targeting Primary Definers

An important strategy to amplify the spread of the hashtag and to make the broader public aware of the incident was to address popular accounts, which can be seen as potential primary definers and therefore as multipliers that may be able to influence journalists' coverage (see Section 1). Popular accounts within the

Twittersphere played a particularly important role here. Politicians such as Ruprecht Polenz, a conservative politician who campaigns for more climate protection and criticizes his own party's policies in this regard, and Lars Klingbeil, the then secretary general of the SPD, were addressed particularly frequently to draw their attention to the faux pas and encourage them to make their own critical contributions. As Section 5.1 shows, in the case of Lars Klingbeil, legacy media in fact picked up on a tweet that was authored by him.

In addition, an account with the handle @watch_union was addressed en masse. This is a watchdog account that is critical of Armin Laschet's party and has many followers (over 56,700 followers in July 2021). At 15:38, this account was asked by another Twitter user to disseminate the hashtag #LaschetLacht. The tweet from this user explicitly addressed @watch_union, using the @ operator, and stated "After #LaschetLügt [#LaschetLies] and #LaschetKneift []#LaschetChickensOut], it's time for a new hashtag…#LaschetLacht" (Christine, 2021).

As demonstrated by a subsequent tweet published by @watch_union 30 minutes later, this aim was achieved. This tweet, in fact, included the hashtag, while stating, "#Laschet is mucking around while #Steinmeier expresses his #empathy. The man is unbearable on so many levels and his character alone makes him unsuitable to hold political office" (UnionWatch, 2021). Later, this tweet became one of the most shared tweets of the day, being retweeted 528 times. Moreover, the account @watch_union became one of the most central accounts within the Twitter trend. It ranks eighth among the accounts with the highest diffusion degree scores (see Table 1). In terms of its indegree, it ranks third. In numbers, this means that other accounts referred to it 869 times, which mainly happened through retweets, and hence contributed significantly to the dissemination of the hashtag.

Not only did users address accounts that are important within the Twittersphere, but they also strategically addressed accounts that belong to legacy media. Particularly, the accounts of the news programs *ZDF heute* and *WDR Aktuell* were targeted very often. *WDR Aktuell* is even the most addressed account within the whole hashtag trend, which means that in terms of indegree it ranks first. *WDR Aktuell* is a regional program of a public broadcaster, which was central to reporting from the areas affected by the floods. An exemplary tweet, addressed at *WDR Aktuell*, reads as follows: "Hello #wdr: Have a look at #laschetlacht. Should be worth new (critical) reporting on Mr MP #Laschet!" (Wetterau, 2021, no longer available). This example clearly shows how social media users explicitly aimed to get the news program to report on the faux pas—and thus spread the outrage.

In fact, in the evening, the Twitter accounts of both news programs published tweets that addressed the faux pas and hence further fueled the trend. @WDRAktuell even got actively involved in the debate on Twitter and published several posts on the topic. One post, which was published at 18:59, even became the most retweeted message within the Twitter trend. It reads:

> NRW Minister President @ArminLaschet has expressed his sorrow at the suffering caused by the flood disaster in #Erftstadt. While Federal President Steinmeier remembers those who have lost so much, Laschet can be seen joking in the background. This caused outrage. #LaschetLacht. (WDR aktuell, 2021, no longer available)

This tweet was shared 971 times on the evening of 17 July and thus significantly contributed to the fact that @WDRAktuell became a central node in the Twitter trend. As mentioned, in terms of indegree, it ranks

first, and in terms of diffusion degree, it ranks sixth (see Table 1). This not only demonstrates the success of the strategy of targeting popular accounts as potential multipliers, but it also shows how the established media, mediated through their own social media channels, were themselves becoming significant actors in the spread of the hashtag and the associated public outrage. What is important here is not only that they themselves became active with their own posts, but also that these in turn were disseminated en masse by other accounts, which practiced "metavoicing" (see Section 2) and in doing so significantly amplified the trend and its visibility. As the further analysis reveals, hyperactive accounts played an important role in practicing this strategy.

Table 1. Accounts with the highest diffusion degree, including their activity count.

Username	Activity Count
Soulfly_Germany	934
Krisloer	126
gjfortunas1966	120
KaRi57453570	110
OrangeUtane	67
WDRaktuell	5
KatzastrophenK	96
watch_union	10
peanut60418183	53
Crypto_Schurke	44

5.2.3. Amplification Strategies of High-Active Accounts

A total of 16,027 accounts were involved in spreading the hashtag #LaschetLacht on 17 July, sending a total of 34,300 tweets (see Section 4.2). This means that, on average, each account posted around two tweets. A look at the distribution of activities, however, shows that they were extremely unevenly distributed. While most accounts (approximately 85%) actually sent one to three tweets (of which the vast majority only sent one tweet), there are also a few extremely active accounts. A total of 85 accounts authored between 21 and 50 tweets, while 17 accounts sent more than 50 tweets. Five of these accounts were even active more than 100 times. The most active account authored 934 messages. It alone is responsible for almost 3% of activity.

The sheer activity of the accounts contributed significantly to the spread of the hashtag. The top 10 accounts with the highest diffusion degree values in the data set include seven accounts that were active 50 times or more. The first five places were occupied by corresponding accounts, followed by the @WDRAktuell account. In eighth place was the handle @watch_union, as described above. In 10th place was an account that was active 44 times (see Table 1).

If one takes a closer look at the posts of the highly active accounts, various strategies for pushing the hashtag can be identified, which, according to the literature, are typical for artificial amplification activities (see Section 2). The strategy of targeting popular accounts (see Section 5.2.2) can also be found here. This strategy was applied, for example, by the most active account in the data set, which posted identical content every few seconds and addressed it to different (popular) accounts. Table 2 shows six tweets from this

account, which were published in less than a minute. These tweets share the same content but were addressed at different accounts—most of them popular ones, including @watch_union and @larsklingbeil.

Table 2. Example tweets of the most active account.

Tweet Content	Time	Source
@ErwinLindeman20 @PaulZiemiak @ulfposh #LaschetLacht	18:34:56	Soulfly_Germany (2021a, no longer available)
@Christian_E_ER #LaschetLacht	18:35:05	Soulfly_Germany (2021b, no longer available)
@DaCo0609 @larsklingbeil #LaschetLacht	18:35:11	Soulfly_Germany (2021c, no longer available)
@xbutzemann64 @fridays_freedom @GerdLorsch #LaschetLacht	18:35:15	Soulfly_Germany (2021d, no longer available)
@wernerkeil @faust_birgit @MMittermeier @ArminLaschet #LaschetLacht	18:35:18	Soulfly_Germany (2021e, no longer available)
@matze2001 @watch_union #LaschetLacht	18:35:24	Soulfly_Germany (2021f, no longer available)

Highly active accounts also employed "hashtag bombing" (Woolley, 2020, p. 100) as an amplification strategy. Here, the hashtag is simply used en masse. This can also be seen in the posts shown in Table 2, as only the hashtag appears as content in the messages sent to other accounts. Addressing popular accounts and hashtag bombing are therefore combined here.

However, the dissemination of the hashtag via retweets is also a significant strategy that can be found in the data set. Tweets containing the hashtag were often retweeted by highly active accounts. The content of the retweeted posts was not always consistent, which suggests an automated form of dissemination. Examples of this are retweets from one of the most active accounts, which can be seen in Table 3. These are seven retweets that were sent within a period of one and a half minutes. Of these, however, only four retweets were explicitly critical. Three retweets, which were used to disseminate messages from the @WDRAktuell Twitter account, were more balanced. One of these posts (retweet 5) even contained an explicit defense of the chancellor candidate's behavior. Irrespective of this, however, the hashtag was further amplified with each retweet.

Finally, another notable form of strategic amplification by highly active accounts that could be found in the data is "hashtag hijacking." This strategy involves jumping on a trend to spread other content that has nothing to do with the trend (Mousavi & Ouyang, 2021). In other words, strategic players enter the trend dynamic to use the attention for the topic to place other content. At the same time, however, this pushes the hashtag used even further. In the case of #LaschetLacht, according to the analysis of a random sample of 200 tweets, this applies to about 10% of tweets. In some cases, spambots were simply active under the hashtag. However, most of the hijacking activity came from a botnet that fired messages in various languages advertising an imam who claims to be the "Mahdi" and thus a descendant of Muhammad who will redeem humanity from injustice in the world (see Figure 6). The bots belonging to this network were among the most active accounts in the entire data set. Some accounts sent original tweets, while other accounts disseminated them via retweets.

Table 3. Exemplary retweets of a highly active account.

Tweet Content	Time	Source
RT @JRehborn: In a just world, that would have been it for Laschet. #LaschetLacht	23:04:39	Krisloer (2021a, no longer available)
RT @watch_union: #Laschet is mucking around while #Steinmeier expresses his #empathy. The man is unbearable on so many levels and his character alone makes him unsuitable to hold political office #Hochwasser #LaschetLacht	23:04:44	Krisloer (2021b, no longer available)
RT @WDRaktuell: NRW Prime Minister @ArminLaschet has expressed his sorrow at the suffering caused by the flood disaster in #Erftstadt. While Federal President Steinmeier remembers those who have lost so much, Laschet can be seen joking in the background. This caused outrage. #LaschetLacht	23:05:37	Krisloer (2021c, no longer available)
RT @WDRaktuell: Many users rate #LaschetLacht as "irreverent" or "embarrassing." Among the critics is SPD Secretary General @LarsKlingbeil: "I am speechless." Several users question Laschet's suitability as a candidate for chancellor.	23:05:44	Krisloer (2021d, no longer available)
RT @WDRaktuell: @larsklingbeil But not everyone is criticising #LaschetLacht. BR journalist @BSchmeitzner, for example, tweeted: "Let he who has never reacted weird in an exceptional situation cast the first stone. Let's talk and argue about content, please."	23:05:51	Krisloer (2021e, no longer available)
RT @WDRaktuell: @larsklingbeil @BSchmeitzner NRW Minister President Laschet has now responded: He said he regrets the impression created by a dialogue situation. "This was inappropriate and I am sorry." #LaschetLacht	23:05:58	Krisloer (2021f, no longer available)
RT @TomGoesGreen: @WDRaktuell @ArminLaschet So, let's imagine #Laschet visiting #Israel's Holocaust memorial #YadVashem before.....	23:06:04	Krisloer (2021g, no longer available)
#Laschetlacht		
#LaschetDarfNichtKanzlerWerden		
#LaschetVerhindern #Hochwasser https://t.co/KrVZXJ3Y0S		

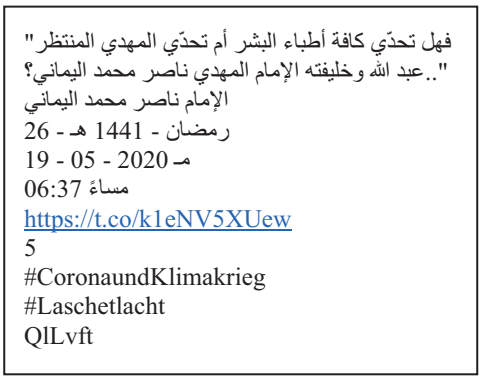
فهل تحدّي كافة أطباء البشر أم تحدّي المهدي المنتظر"
عبد الله وخليفته الإمام المهدي ناصر محمد اليماني؟.."
الإمام ناصر محمد اليماني
26 - رمضان - 1441 هـ
19 - 05 - 2020 مـ
06:37 مساءً
https://t.co/k1eNV5XUew
5
#CoronaundKlimakrieg
#Laschetlacht
QlLvft

Figure 6. Spam tweet from a bot account. Source: Ibrāhīm ibn Isḥāq (2021, no longer available).

In sum, the analysis reveals that artificial amplification strategies played an important role in the emergence and development of the Twitter trend. Not only did users strategically establish and disseminate the hashtag to popular actors, but hyperactive accounts also played a central role in amplifying it, thereby promoting the

trending topic. For the journalistic observers who monitored the Twitter activities, however, these strategic activities remained hidden. On their screens, they could simply see that the hashtag #LaschetLacht was trending without the composition of the trend being recognizable. In line with journalistic news values (see Section 2) and in combination with popular actors and political opponents who also commented on Laschet's faux pas online, this gave rise to reporting (see Section 3.2). The coverage brought the trend to the attention of the general public and, ultimately, turned journalism into a vicarious agent of strategic actors who deliberately fueled and amplified the trending topic.

6. Conclusion

The present article adds a case study to existing research on intermedia agenda setting and artificial amplification on social media. In line with the first strand of research, it shows how personal publics in social media and the general public sphere, which continues to be created by the legacy media, are deeply interwoven. On the one hand, media organizations and their editorial teams are themselves active on social media with their own accounts. These are used to disseminate content but also to be addressable to the audience on social media. On the other hand, newsroom staff observe what is happening on social media—always seeking topics that seem newsworthy. Journalists follow the accounts of elite actors in the Twittersphere but they are also interested in trends that are treated as indicators of public response (Fürst & Oehmer, 2021) and public opinion (McGregor, 2019), and are therefore considered newsworthy.

As the empirical findings show, media coverage can shift within a very short period of time, which serves as further evidence of the increasing speed and responsiveness of information flows in the hybrid media system (see Section 5.1). This is precisely what strategic players in social media are aware of. They try to exploit the attention and selection logic of journalism, as well as the time pressure under which newsrooms operate, to set and amplify trends and draw the attention of journalistic media to them. Through high activity, the use of bots, and strategic messaging, social media actors can succeed in drawing the attention of the legacy media (see Section 5.2) and thereby reach and influence a broader public. In research on artificial amplification, this aspect has so far received little attention. While much of the existing research focuses on specific online platforms, the findings of the present study highlight the importance of a broader perspective—one that also considers attention dynamics across different platforms and media spaces.

For the journalistic representation of public opinion, the empirical findings indicate that it no longer fulfils its own claim to balance and neutrality if journalists unquestioningly present artificially amplified online trends as public opinion. Instead, journalists unintentionally contribute to a distorted image of public opinion when they pick up manipulated online trends. On the one hand, this shows the importance of considering a stricter regulation of communication flows in social media to make the described amplification of online trends more difficult. In this sense, social media platforms should no longer be treated as "intermediaries 'without responsibility' " (Habermas, 2022, p. 159). On the other hand, journalists must increase their sensitivity to the problem of artificial amplification of online trends and develop a professional distance from them (Fürst, 2021). A first important step in this direction would be to view observable online trends not as "matters of fact" and thus as a given, but rather as "matters of concern" that need to be scrutinized more closely. This could be an important task not only for scientists but also for (data) journalists and fact checkers that have evolved as new journalistic roles in the hybrid media system (Cazzamatta, 2025; Hermida & Young, 2017).

However, existing research on artificial amplification and the journalistic skills in dealing with (manipulated) online trends has its limitations. The same holds true for the present article. While most research on intermedia agenda setting is designed as a longitudinal analysis, this study focused on a very short time frame and hence is very limited in this regard. In addition, the selected case is highly specific: it occurred during an election campaign, in the context of a natural disaster, and involved a candidate whose performance was already controversial—even within his own party. These factors likely contributed significantly to the observed dynamics and, as such, the findings cannot be broadly generalized. Moreover, the analysis of the observed intermedia dynamics remains open to further sophistication. For instance, it would be worth examining the role played by social media accounts of legacy media more closely in the spread of the online trend, and at what point they actively became part of it. Additionally, further research could explore when elite actors on social media began engaging with the topic and what strategies they employed to push it forward and position themselves as primary definers. Finally, a more comprehensive analysis could examine whether and how the media coverage of the conservative chancellor candidate in general changed following the faux pas. Such in-depth analyses could offer a much more nuanced picture of the communication dynamics in the hybrid media system.

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Data Availability

The data underlying the empirical analyses presented in this article are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

Microsoft Copilot was used for translating parts of the manuscript from German into English. The translations were thoroughly checked, modified, and refined by the authors.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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About the Authors

Florian Muhle works as a professor for communication studies with a focus on digital communication at Zeppelin Universität Friedrichshafen, Germany. One of the focal points of his research lies in the theoretical and empirical examination of various forms of automated communication.

Indra Bock is a research fellow at Zeppelin Universität Friedrichshafen, Germany. Her background lies in qualitative social research and media sociology. Her work surrounds human–robot interaction as well as automated communication in online social networks and its influence on political opinion formation.