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Journalism, Activism,  
and Social Media:  
Exploring the Shifts  
in Journalistic Roles,  
Performance, and  
Interconnectedness

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Editorial

## Editorial: Journalism, Activism, and Social Media: Exploring the Shifts in Journalistic Roles, Performance, and Interconnectedness

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### Abstract

The emergence of the Hybrid Media System (Chadwick, 2017) has changed the actor constellations between political journalism, active members of the audience, and sources. How journalism responds to activism, pressure from politics, and emerging forms of connective action around news events is an important theme in journalism research. This thematic issue brings together seven articles that look at these developments from different angles in a rapidly changing communication ecosystem. The focus is on journalistic authority and legitimacy, journalism and interpretive communities, and changes concerning journalistic roles and practices.

### Keywords

activism; journalism research; journalistic legitimacy; journalistic roles; political journalism; social media

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Journalism, Activism, and Social Media: Exploring the Shifts in Journalistic Roles, Performance, and Interconnectedness,” edited by Peter Maurer (Trier University) and Christian Nuernbergk (Trier University).

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### 1. Introduction

Journalists perform their task in an increasingly networked and politically fragmented public sphere, populated by old and new types of political actors who struggle for discursive power (e.g., Chadwick, 2017; Jungherr et al., 2019). Political interest groups often use social media to shape public opinion and, not least, present their agenda to professional journalists. Some argue that the very institution of journalism is being redefined in this hybrid, networked context (Reese, 2022). The changes in the political media ecosystem are profound, and political communication cultures are under pressure (Esser & Pfetsch, 2020). Media and journalists are increasingly drawn into struggles fought out on social media over the meaning of events. As various contributors nowadays shape contemporary media systems, the discourse about journalism is also being re-rendered. Journalistic practices and norms are being questioned

and challenged from within and through external forces. As a profession, journalism has come under attack, especially in more polarized environments, where journalistic authority and legitimacy are increasingly contested.

Against this background, this thematic issue aims to shed greater light on the place and role of journalism in this emerging ecosystem of political communication. We put the focus specifically on shifting journalistic roles, working routines, and information networks in different national contexts. Nowadays, journalists can easily become publicly involved in the political debate as individuals (Bruns & Nuernbergk, 2019). On the one side, this may blur the boundaries between their journalistic role and advocacy, but on the other, they can more actively participate against competing or delegitimizing narratives. If journalists adopt a more politically engaged style via social media (Schumacher et al., 2021), the journalistic norms of objectivity and impartiality might easily clash with the promotion of narrow interests and

political views. Hence, negotiating political and emotional engagement with professionalism becomes a challenge in journalism. This tension looms particularly large for valence issues, which are “hijacked” by activist-NGOs pushing for more radical policy. The creation of new forms of journalism whose declared aim is to actively promote (political) solutions epitomizes the influence of political pressure on journalism. Furthermore, journalism becomes more sensitive to the audience’s reactions to stories and topics, which are now measurable in real-time. This may induce a commercially driven uniformization of content that “sells” on social media platforms as well as new dynamics of agenda setting and framing in which journalists might become (all too) responsive to popular content among social media users.

In this thematic issue, we assemble contributions addressing the above-mentioned debates from different perspectives and cultural contexts.

## **2. Delegitimizing “Mainstream” Journalism and Journalists’ Reactions**

In their article, Schapals and Bruns (2022) examine how journalists perceive delegitimizing attempts and how they react to them. Based on interviews with journalists from mainstream and emerging digital-born outlets in Australia and the UK, they show that “fake news” accusations arouse “significant concerns” in the profession but also lead to concerted initiatives and counter-strategies to revive journalism as a trusted institution. These include self-reflection on how journalism itself might change through transparency efforts and how it explains the value of journalistic standards to audiences and provides them with insight into editorial operations. The interviewees consequently outline the importance of strengthening the audience’s media literacy to cope with the “fake news” phenomenon. Since competing forces from both within and outside journalism influence the audience, research must also be alert to how partisan actors are infiltrating political journalism.

The problem of delegitimation is also at the core of Dowling et al.’s (2022) study about two conservative/far-right podcasters in the polarized American political context who engage in critical metajournalistic discourse. Based on in-depth readings of a carefully drawn sample of the podcasts and other relevant texts, their analysis unravels the many references and continuities with ideologically close predecessors on talk radio. It also examines how popular podcasters attack and threaten the principles of journalism and even “advocate for the destruction of the institution of journalism” (p. 24).

Peres-Neto’s (2022) piece about Brazilian journalists confronted with Jair Bolsonaro’s administration shows that Twitter, in particular, can be an enabler for oppositional journalists. In essence, Peres-Neto digs out how journalists take advantage of different affordances of Twitter to influence political narratives. His interviewees observe that tweeting turns journalists partly into influ-

encers and allows them to rebut attempts at delegitimation of the media voiced on social media platforms. Using Twitter to comment on and contextualize news stories enhances journalists’ voices in a politically polarized environment where parts of the audience show no trust and politicians aggressively attack the press. With their Twitter handles, individual journalists try to counteract the shrinking credibility of their outlets with their personal reputations. This echoes the Reuters Digital News Report, according to which Brazilian news users expect journalists to express personal opinions (Newman et al., 2022).

## **3. The Handling of Emotions and the Formation of Networks in Political Journalism**

Responding to the “emotional turn” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020) in journalism and social media research, Medeiros and Makhshvili (2022) explore how Twitter communities establish an emotionally-charged counter-discourse to the tone of the TV coverage about a terrorist attack targeting people with a migration background in Hanau (Germany). They conceptualize emotion and affect as forms of public communication. Their study focuses on shared emotions in response to the event, which are performative, political, and discursively constructed. They compare how public broadcasters and Twitter users create distinct forms of shared emotions.

The thematic issue then shifts to networked communities emerging through the interaction with and the following of alternative media on Twitter. Nachman et al. (2022) study how key outlets covering Chinese politics exhibit differences in their framing and how these variations contribute to the formation of almost non-overlapping network audiences. Although the two media outlets under study both connect to left-wing issues and can be each considered as a part of left counterpublics, competing interpretive communities are likely to evolve around them. Nachman et al. found this by combining a qualitative frame analysis with a Twitter follower network analysis that included location and profile data. Their computational approach is an intriguing example for investigating the public forming around media discussing foreign policy on Twitter. It also sheds light on how Twitter can be used to shape political opinion on foreign authoritarian regimes through alternative media outlets in the diaspora.

## **4. Trends in the Professional Mindset and the Work Routines of Political Journalists**

The digital transformation of journalism potentially creates new professional role orientations that deviate from that of a neutral observer. This is explored in Krüger et al.’s (2022) article about the role orientations of constructive journalists in Germany. Constructive journalism is a strand of journalism that emphasizes reporting on solutions to societal problems. Constructive journalists

are almost inevitably under some suspicion that they mix their journalistic activity with political advocacy. However, their cognitive orientations and professional values are so far unknown. Krüger et al. reveal a remarkably high agreement with interventionist goals in this community of journalists. Concerning their political orientation, they place themselves clearly left of center.

The final article by Ruffio and Hubé (2022) probes the assumption that the availability of audience metrics for news stories increases the commercial pressure in journalism and induces changes in work routines. Focusing on the coverage of criminal cases, the authors base their analysis on a comparative qualitative survey with editors in France and Germany. They find that metrics are a double-edged sword: On the one hand, metrics induce a “sheepish” behavior among journalists in the sense that they follow the crowd and produce uniform content that attracts clicks. On the other hand, publishing on social media platforms enhances the autonomy of reporters vis-à-vis their editors.

## 5. Conclusion

Several articles in this thematic issue illustrate how journalism adapts to a changing media ecology. The scholarly work assembled in this issue illuminates the wide range of possible influences. Particularly alternative media outlets, whose independence is partly unclear, and partisan actors from within and outside journalism who challenge the established journalistic culture and authority in their attempt to control political information flows to serve their interests. Via social media, those new actors find and co-create affective publics. In these publics, competing (emotional) narrations unfold through connective action and within interpretive communities. All this together challenges the institution of journalism. Among the response patterns of journalists, there seems to be a more interventionist understanding of their role and more proactive communication of journalistic standards as a strategy to counter the attacks on journalism’s integrity. We also see an increased level of audience orientation within journalism. However, it seems that the broader socio-political contexts and media systems moderate the impact of these patterns.

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Article

# Responding to “Fake News”: Journalistic Perceptions of and Reactions to a Delegitimising Force

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## Abstract

The “fake news” phenomenon has permeated academic scholarship and popular debate since the 2016 US presidential election. Much has been written on the circulation of “fake news” and other forms of mis- and disinformation online. Despite its ongoing proliferation, less effort has been made to better understand the work of those engaged in daily news production—journalists themselves. Funded by the Australian Research Council project Journalism Beyond the Crisis, this study investigates how journalists perceive and respond to this phenomenon at a time when the industry has come under significant attack, and trust in news media has fallen globally. To do so, it draws on in-depth interviews with journalists in Australia and the UK, providing topical insights on their perceptions of and reactions to this profoundly delegitimising force. While on one hand, our findings show journalists expressing significant concern about the rise of “fake news,” they also proactively seek—and, in some cases, implement—deliberate counterstrategies to defend their profession. These strategies range from discursive means—such as stressing and re-asserting journalists’ professional authority and legitimacy—to tangible measures at an organisational level, including newsroom diversity and increased transparency in the news production process.

## Keywords

fact-checking; fake news; journalism; misinformation; news verification; objectivity; professional roles; Trump election

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “Journalism, Activism, and Social Media: Exploring the Shifts in Journalistic Roles, Performance, and Interconnectedness” edited by Peter Maurer (Trier University) and Christian Nuernbergk (Trier University).

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## 1. Introduction

It was a sombre scene on Capitol Hill. A group of people had gathered, motionless, and in complete silence, for several minutes. The only sound was the flicker of the candlelights they held—around 100, as night fell over the building behind them; the very same building that had been the scene of a deadly insurrection on this day one year ago. Fuelled by former President Trump’s inflammatory rhetoric in which he incited his crowd to “walk to the Capitol” and warned that “if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore” (“Capitol riots,” 2021), they had done just that: Right after mid-day, on 6 January 2021, an angry mob of Trump sup-

porters overwhelmed law enforcement, broke through barricades, and stormed Capitol Hill to stop the certification of the 2020 election results. Law enforcement only regained control over the rioters six hours later. But for some, it was too late: 138 police officers were injured, 15 of which were hospitalised with severe injuries, and five people died (Schmidt & Broadwater, 2021). Fast forward to 6 January 2022, when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi addressed the lawmakers on the steps of Capitol Hill directly, saying: “We prayerfully mark one year since the insurrection, and patriotically honour the heroes who defended the Capitol and our democracy that day” (Wagner et al., 2022). They were attacked, simply for doing their job.



While these physical attacks marked the end of Trump's dismal presidency, they were not the first of their kind: In 2017, the year of his inauguration, a white supremacy rally took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, resulting in one death, after which Trump remarked that there were "very fine people" on both sides of the rally (Holan, 2019). Likewise, verbal attacks by the president himself were a defining feature of his four-year term: He ridiculed female protesters at the Women's March (Quigley, 2017), denounced Mexicans as "drug dealers, criminals, rapists" ("Drug dealers, criminals, rapists," 2016), and labelled undocumented immigrants as "animals" (Korte & Gomez, 2018). Many of his verbal attacks, however, were targeted at a different group altogether, the very people supposed to report on him—journalists. In his eyes, journalists were "terrible," "nasty" purveyors of "fake news" who were "never going to make it" (Colarossi, 2020). Not *all* journalists, of course—only those he accused of a left-leaning, liberal "bias." Whenever Trump faced scrutiny he either did not like or did not agree with, he attacked journalists as "fake news"—again, simply for doing their job. This had its intended effect: In the US, trust in news by those on the political right fell sharply—from 17% in 2018 to 9% in 2019 (Newman et al., 2019).

But how did those at the forefront of daily news production—journalists themselves—perceive attacks on their profession during such significant political upheaval, and at a time when the authority and legitimacy of their work were increasingly put into question? What reasons did they see for its proliferation, and what consequences did such antagonistic discourse have on their work? Most importantly, what strategies, discursive or otherwise, did they develop to counter hostile accusations of illegitimacy? This study investigates precisely that: Using theories of journalists' professional roles as a theoretical framework, we explore their perceptions of and reactions to the rise of the "fake news" phenomenon, before moving on to the perceived consequences of and counterstrategies against "fake news." While on one hand, our findings show journalists expressing significant concern about its rise, they also proactively sought—and, in some cases, implemented—deliberate counterstrategies to defend their profession. These strategies ranged from discursive means—such as stressing and re-asserting journalists' professional authority and legitimacy—to tangible measures at an organisational level, including improvements to newsroom diversity and increased transparency in the news production process.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Journalism and "Post-Truth"

Although "fake news" is not a new phenomenon as such—the Merriam-Webster dictionary traces the use of the term back to the late 1800s ("Donald Trump

takes credit," 2017)—following the 2016 US presidential election it permeated public discourse significantly more. A search in the newspaper database Factiva yields 1,243 hits for 2015, 7,933 for 2016, and then on average 62,439 occurrences each year between 2017 and 2021. Interestingly, since 2018, when the use of the term reached its peak with 77,269 hits, its salience in public discourse has steadily decreased. This may be due to an increased public awareness of the problematic nature and "definitional ambiguity" (Funke, 2017) of the term, which not only connotes a broad range of false information from news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, and advertising to propaganda (Tandoc et al., 2018) but, more importantly, is also weaponised by anti-democratic politicians and other nefarious actors to discredit certain sections of the media. The scale of the problem is further evidenced by the fact that governments around the globe have set up independent working groups to combat its spread: In the UK, the House of Commons has examined the issue of disinformation and "fake news" since 2017, and, in 2018, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's Digital Platforms Inquiry examined audience exposure to less reliable news. In the same year, the European Commission set up a high-level expert group to advise on counterstrategies to fight the spread of "fake news" online. In its final submission, the group defined the term as "false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (High Level Expert Group, 2018, p. 3). Given the increased awareness of the dangerous normalisation and nefarious weaponisation of the term, scholars have since made a concerted effort to differentiate between different types of false information, especially mis- and disinformation. The main differentiating factor between these different types is *intent*: While both terms indicate "false information," only disinformation is *intentionally* deceptive and used as a deliberate political instrument with specific delegitimisation objectives.

According to Bakir and McStay (2018), five underlying features of the digital media ecology have contributed to the spread of the "fake news" phenomenon: the economic decline of legacy news outlets over the past two decades, the increased immediacy of the news cycle, the rapid circulation of "fake news" and outright propaganda through user-generated content, the increasingly emotionalised nature of online discourse, and the capitalisation on algorithms used by social media platforms and search engines. Similarly, Carlson (2018) lists as contributing factors for its rise a public prone to partisan, selective exposure; a media sector willing to provide partisan content; and traditional media already anxious and criticised for their delivery of the news. Since then, the information politics of journalism in a "post-truth" age have been described as "a major political battleground in which the American right-wing struggles with mainstream media" (Farkas & Schou, 2018, p. 307), attributed to "a fundamental shift in political and

public attitudes to what journalism and news represent and how facts and information may be obtained in a digitalized world” (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, p. 97), and even characterised as “symptomatic of the collapse of the old news order and the chaos of contemporary public communication” (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1868). More recent trends in the digital information environment appear to demonstrate that the phenomenon is here to stay: Advances in digital technologies adding to the proliferation of misinformation, the emergence of automated bots, and sophisticated, deep-learning techniques using forms of artificial intelligence to create deliberately distorted audio-visual material known as “deepfakes” are likely to intensify the issue of mis- and disinformation—which the Trump presidency made especially visible in public discourse—even further. His frequent labelling of reporters critical of his leadership as “fake news” not only sought to attack individual reporters but, consequently, to delegitimise journalism as a democratic institution in general.

## 2.2. The “Fake News” Label

According to Van Dalen (2021), who investigated specific delegitimation strategies by outsider politicians, such strategies can be broadly summarised as attacking journalists’ character, connecting their work to other institutions that are perceived to be “illegitimate,” questioning their ethical standards, casting doubt on their claims to be working in the public interest, and questioning the benefits of their work more broadly. Such strategies are also apparent in Trump’s anti-press rhetoric, which ultimately seeks to sow doubt in the media as a central pillar of democracy, specifically by claiming that “mainstream media companies are biased and [are] deliberately attempting to promote liberal agendas instead of representing ‘the people’” (Farkas & Schou, 2018, p. 306). Such perceived disenchantment by regular voters has given rise to the “silent majority,” a term first popularised by former US President Richard Nixon which later became a defining image of the Trump presidency: During his frequent rallies, some supporters held placards stating, “The silent majority stands with Trump.” Pitting “the people” (i.e., the “silent majority”) against “the elite” is a delegitimation strategy rooted in populist politics, which not only includes antagonistic discourses against “the elite” in general terms but specifically discourses of antagonism against “the media,” perceived as part of the “establishment” and thus not representative of “the people.” Such trends might explain record low levels of trust in the media towards the end of the Trump presidency, exemplary of a broader trend of distrust in institutions, elites, and experts. According to Hanitzsch et al. (2017, p. 7), “the erosion of trust in the media is broadly connected to a public disenchantment with and widespread disdain for social institutions more generally, but for political institutions most particularly.”

Needless to say, then, such levels of eroding trust can have damaging and potentially lasting consequences for journalistic work, consequences which are so stark that they go well beyond academic, niche discussions, and to the very heart of public trust during times of political upheaval or global health emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Already in 2017, the United Nations, along with the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, the Organization of American States, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights expressed concern “at instances in which public authorities denigrate, intimidate and threaten the media, including stating that the media is ‘the opposition’ or is ‘lying’ and has a hidden, political agenda” (United Nations et al., 2017, p. 1). On a higher level of abstraction, such developments also have the potential to threaten journalistic authority and associated legitimacy claims of the profession (Carlson, 2017). According to Lischka (2019, p. 291):

Trump’s fake news accusations can be regarded as a means to retain direct interpretative authority about his political legitimacy....When political actors take up fake news accusations, they seek to damage news outlets’ sovereignty of interpretation and legitimacy and attempt to gain interpretative power for themselves.

Consequently, such delegitimation strategies may have the intended effect of negatively influencing audience perceptions of news media as credible purveyors of information.

## 2.3. Impacts on Journalism

These credibility attributions rest on journalists having gained discursive authority and legitimacy associated with the “noble” characteristic traits of their profession (Deuze, 2019). Such discourse is grounded in normative perceptions of journalism’s positive benefits to a functioning democracy: “It is through discourse that practices gain legitimacy [as norms] by becoming attached to a language of virtue associated with journalism’s institutional mission” (Vos & Thomas, 2018, p. 2003). According to Tong (2018), claims to journalistic authority and legitimacy rest on three pillars that maintain and sustain its hegemony: the establishment of professional norms and the public’s subsequent acceptance of them, the discursive construction of professional norms and ideals to maintain journalism’s boundaries and legitimacy, and the coupling of professional norms and readers’ trust to grant journalism legitimacy and cultural authority. However, it is important to remember that claims to journalistic authority are by no means static—They are dynamic and embedded in a constant process of negotiation and re-negotiation as journalism *as an institution* is either subject to general scrutiny or specific legitimate or illegitimate media criticism. As such, journalistic authority

is a site of struggle between those wanting to sustain it, and those intent on destroying it. Put differently, “maintaining journalistic authority is an ongoing project that rests in part on journalists’ discursive construction of their roles in the midst of discursive struggles with others who also lay claim to such authority or who challenge that of journalists” (Lawrence & Moon, 2021, p. 157).

Traditionally, claims to journalistic authority and legitimacy rested on an almost dogged pursuit of the ideal of objectivity. According to Schudson (1978), “the belief in objectivity is a faith in ‘facts,’ a distrust in ‘values,’ and a commitment to their segregation.” In journalism, the objectivity norm is based on a commitment to reporting “the truth,” requiring journalists to present all sides of an argument and to let audiences draw their own conclusions. By adhering to the notion of objectivity, discursively highlighting that journalistic work is in the public interest (Van Dalen, 2021), and underscoring journalism’s ethical standards (Tong, 2018), claims to authority and legitimacy are upheld. However, the objectivity norm in journalism is both a contested and vexed topic, rooted in a somewhat simplistic belief that there is such a thing as one objective, absolute truth. Instead, journalists often “acknowledge that their informed opinion cannot lay claim on the absolute truth, but instead remains tentative, contested, and open to revision whenever new information comes forth and doubts about the correctness of the available information are raised” (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021, p. 1342). Not least thanks to the subsequent proliferation of the “fake news” phenomenon, scholars have since begun to question what could emerge “after objectivity” (McNair, 2017). Increased transparency in journalism—such as by giving audiences more insights into the news production process, demonstrating, in detail, *how* stories were produced and *what* sources were consulted in the process—has gained traction as an alternative to the outdated objectivity norm. For example, the live blog as a journalistic format may well be so popular with readers because it is defined by its increased transparency measures (Thurman & Schapals, 2017).

More broadly, however, increased transparency measures may not suffice to safeguard journalism from discursive threats to its authority. Critics bemoan that, while well-intended, their real value remains at best symbolic (Lischka, 2021). Nonetheless, measures that enable journalism to enter into a conversation with itself as a form of self-reflective practice (Wang et al., 2018) are on the rise: Such measures go hand-in-hand with an increase in fact-checking initiatives (both by independent entities, as well as through operations internal to a newsroom), coordinated editorial campaigns by US newspapers to counter the “fake news” narrative (Lawrence & Moon, 2021), and even wholesale re-branding strategies by major US news brands whenever the profession is threatened by external forces.

External forces threatening journalism’s jurisdiction also include unrelated developments such as the rise of

peripheral actors (Schapals, 2022; Schapals et al., 2019), a development which has seen traditional actors discursively defend existing norms and values characterising their profession. Specifically, “through isolating and expelling deviant actors, scorning deviant practices as ‘un-journalistic’ and policing the boundaries of their field, journalists maintain their cultural authority and the privileges that accompany it” (Vos & Thomas, 2018, p. 2003). In such instances, journalists engage in field repair, fixing the profession from *within*. However, in the context of the “fake news” phenomenon, journalists are rather upholding the profession’s institutional myth: Its *internal* norms are not breaking down; rather, an *external* crisis is threatening the profession (Koliska et al., 2020). The severity of this external crisis is such that the rise of “fake news” has been described as a real watershed moment—a critical incident (Tandoc et al., 2019)—prompting journalists to reconsider the central tenets of journalistic practice. This not only includes stressing and re-asserting the profession’s *institutional* value as a public good but also journalists’ *individual* role conceptions as they are faced with a profoundly delegitimising force. This emphasis on journalistic roles is even more critical “at a time when journalism’s social legitimacy and epistemic authority are being existentially questioned” (Standaert et al., 2021, p. 920).

Scholarly work on journalistic roles in both Western and non-Western contexts dates back several decades. Helpfully, and most recently, Standaert et al. (2021) offered an elaborate framework focusing specifically on the roles of journalists in political (as opposed to everyday) life. This includes six roles: the informational/instructive role (journalists providing citizens with relevant information to enable them to participate in political life), the analytical/deliberative role (journalists directly intervening in the political discourse, e.g., through news commentary), the critical/monitorial role (journalists acting as a “fourth estate,” a role most pronounced in Western contexts), the advocative/radical role (journalists taking a stance in political matters and having that stance reflected in media coverage), the developmental/educative role (journalists’ profoundly interventionist role, actively promoting change and contributing to public education), and the collaborative/facilitative role (journalists acting as constructive government partners). In their analysis of journalists’ roles in political life, they find a largely unquestioned *doxa*—the system of rules governing the journalistic field—and contend that, “despite the manifold, and in some places dramatic, changes in the profession, journalism’s normative mythology seems to be surprisingly intact” (Standaert et al., 2021, p. 932). Similarly, in a study of German journalists’ role perceptions in the face of the “fake news” phenomenon (Koliska & Assmann, 2021), journalists continued to defend their best practices in news reporting, roles, and values, and, as such, discursively insisted on traditional journalistic principles.

In this study, we focus on Australian and British journalists' responses and reactions to the delegitimising force of the "fake news" phenomenon. Specifically, and in referring to the above theories on journalists' professional roles as a reference point, we ask: How do journalists perceive attacks on their profession during such significant political upheaval, and at a time when the authority and legitimacy of their work were increasingly put into question? What reasons did they see for the proliferation of such attacks, and what consequences did such antagonistic discourse have on their work? Most importantly, what strategies, discursive or otherwise, did they develop to counter hostile accusations? In so doing, we heed the call both for more research on the fake news "label" as a political instrument to delegitimise news media (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019) as well as for a better understanding of whether and how journalistic roles evolve in response to a profound professional threat (Balod & Hameleers, 2021). As already noted, harassment, intimidation, and threats towards journalists ought to be newly considered within a Western context (Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016), even in places that were long perceived as stable democracies.

### 3. Method

In order to capture Australian and British journalists' perceptions of and reactions to the delegitimising force of the "fake news" phenomenon, in a first step, it was necessary to carefully devise a list of news organisations in each country. For this study, this primarily included mainstream media organisations with a significant online audience, but also some emerging outlets having attracted a significant online following over time. To determine audience reach in the UK, data was

gathered from the digital marketing intelligence service SimilarWeb; in Australia, such data was gathered through Hitwise, an audience insights marketing tool. In addition to audience reach as a determining factor, in some cases, the researchers also relied on convenience sampling of staff they already had an established rapport with. Following this initial identification of outlets, in a second step, staff working at these outlets were identified. Excluded staff included those covering only one beat (e.g., sports) or otherwise specialised reporters (with the obvious exception of the "politics" beat). This consultation process was aided through Cision, a media database of journalists' contact details frequently used for PR purposes. Staff were contacted via email, and, if necessary, with a follow-up email to remind them of the opportunity to take part in the interview. While some staff at both mainstream and emerging media outlets were unavailable for an interview, in total, N = 33 in-depth interviews were conducted, 15 of those in London and 18 in Sydney and Melbourne (Table 1). Interview participants were de-identified and assigned a code so as to ensure anonymisation.

Two deliberately broad research questions were asked: (a) "How do you perceive the rise of the 'fake news' phenomenon?" and (b) "how should journalism deal with 'fake news'?" Upon elaborating on the first question, journalists also provided more detailed responses on the possible *reasons* they saw for its rise, as well as identifying potential *consequences* the phenomenon could have on their work. Importantly, in answering the second question, interviewees focussed on specific *counterstrategies*—discursive or otherwise—that they believe could address the issue. This observation validated the study's methodological approach: Using in-depth interviews, participants would take the

**Table 1.** Sample of interviewees including media outlet and position held.

Australia		UK	
1A	The Australian	1U	Al Jazeera English
2A	Sky News Australia	2U	BBC News
3A	Techly	3U	The Guardian
4A	The Age	4U	Bellingcat
5A	BuzzFeed Australia	5U	openDemocracy
6A	The New York Times	6U	BuzzFeed UK
7A	New Matilda	7U	The New European
8A	BuzzFeed Australia	8U	The Guardian
9A	Junkee	9U	The Mirror
10A	ANZ Bluenotes	10U	Daily Record
11A	VICE News Australia	11U	The Telegraph
12A	The Herald Sun	12U	The Independent
13A	Australian Financial Review	13U	The Guardian
14A	The Saturday Paper	14U	The Telegraph
15A	The Age	15U	The Times
		16U	The Guardian
		17U	The Mirror
		18U	The Guardian

opportunity to elaborate freely on the issue at hand, prompting the researchers to ask follow-up questions, and thus allowing “for a much freer exchange between interviewer and interviewee” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87). Interviews in general, and semi-structured, in-depth interviews in particular, are widely seen as “one of the most effective methods for collecting rich data on newsroom practices and attitudes among decision-makers in news organisations” (Koliska & Assmann, 2021, p. 6).

Following the interview transcription process, the transcripts were read several times to distil possible themes in the interview data. Known as thematic analysis, this approach allows for qualitative, exploratory research to take place (Boyatzis, 1998) and to identify and analyse patterns within the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following this identification process, the data were subsequently clustered and analysed further using the qualitative research software package MaxQDA. Overall, this analysis has resulted in four broad themes: (a) *perceptions* of “fake news,” (b) *reasons* for the proliferation of “fake news,” (c) *consequences* of “fake news” for journalistic work, and (d) *counterstrategies* to fight the spread of “fake news.” Within these four broader themes, several sub-themes emerged, such as trust in news more generally, or the issue of online polarisation more specifically.

It is important to point out here that the interviews were conducted within a two-year time span: from early 2017 to late 2019, which is when research for the much broader Journalism Beyond the Crisis project funded by the Australian Research Council took place, and of which this article is an excerpt. This means that the interview data reflect these themes at the beginning, and at the very height of the Trump presidency. Consequently, on the one hand, our findings show journalists expressing significant concern about the rise of “fake news,” but on the other, they also proactively seek—and, in some cases, implement—deliberate counterstrategies to defend their profession. These strategies ranged from discursive means—such as stressing and re-asserting journalists’ professional authority and legitimacy—to tangible measures at an organisational level, including newsroom diversity and increased transparency in the news production process.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Perceptions of “Fake News”

Broadly speaking, the vast majority of journalists expressed significant concern about the rise of “fake news” and other forms of misinformation (a theme most dominant in the interviews conducted at the time of Trump’s inauguration), while some journalists also felt empowered by the “Trump bump” experienced in the aftermath of his election.

For example, a journalist at the corporate-sponsored financial journalism website *ANZ Bluenotes* described

the rise of the “fake news” phenomenon not just as a challenge for journalism and journalists, but also for society as such. He said:

It does worry me because what it shows is that you have participants...who have a vested interest in the public not knowing the truth. He [Trump] and other opponents of transparency have succeeded in convincing people that news is not legitimate....That’s a sort of societal challenge. It’s a challenge all around; it’s a more existential challenge than just journalism. It’s the nature of truth. (10A)

A journalist at the Australian *Saturday Paper*—a long-form, narrative journalism publication—mirrored this sentiment and stressed that, frequently, high-ranking politicians themselves were guilty of spreading misinformation and pushing their agenda for their own, nefarious reasons, not just in the US, but also in Australia. He said:

At the moment, purveyors of fake news are politicians we need to report on, so it’s very difficult in the case of people like Trump and a lot of right-wing Australian politicians who are knowingly perpetuating myths and division. So, when they’re citing fake news sources as verified news sources—that’s a very difficult thing to get around. (14A)

In Australia, this even includes backbenchers of the Liberal Party, who continue to knowingly perpetuate falsehoods about Covid-19 vaccinations under the guise of exercising their right to freedom of speech. In the UK, a journalist at *The Guardian* underscored the dangers of the fake news “label” to a functioning democracy, highlighting its potential to act as a delegitimising force. He said:

Trump has done a great disservice to not so much journalism alone, but journalism as functioning in a democratic society. He does this in two main ways: By calling things fake when they are not fake, it puts in danger the idea that there can be an approximation of truth. And unless a society accepts for the purpose of public debate that you can have facts, and that you can have an approximation of truth, society finds it difficult to make correct decisions. (8U)

His colleague at *The Guardian* concurred, and referred to the “destructive” nature of the “fake news” phenomenon when he said:

The whole “fake news” discourse has really poisoned the environment for journalists. If something as authoritative as the NYT [*The New York Times*]...can be dismissed as “fake news” by the president of America, then that seems to be really, really not a good scenario....I think that in the short term, this is going to continue, and I’m sure that the same treat-

ment is being given to all kinds of other serious journalism offerings....I don't expect that situation to get any better for a bit. (18U)

Empowered by the "Trump bump" phenomenon experienced in the aftermath of Trump's inauguration, however, some journalists discursively stressed the value of journalism as a public good, and, in so doing, defended their profession (see also Jahng et al., 2021). One journalist at *The Age* newspaper in Australia stressed the normative role of journalism as a pillar of democracy—a role she believed had become even more important at the height of his presidency. She said:

I do believe in journalism as a pillar of democratic society. There is absolutely no doubt that that is the case....So, to me it's very clear journalism has a duty of care to society, and I think that's part of the reason why journalists do what they do: They believe they're being useful. (4A)

Similarly, a journalist at the Australian version of *The New York Times* provided a more nuanced answer when he referred to the rise of the "fake news" phenomenon as a double-edged sword. In his words:

To some degree, Trump and the argument of fake news has undermined faith in journalism for a lot of people. But I think on the other hand, it's also brought a lot of people back to journalism and made them see the value of it. So, I think it's sort of a mixed bag in that regard. (6A)

#### 4.2. Reasons for "Fake News"

Frequently, whenever journalists were asked about their perceptions of the "fake news" phenomenon, they also explained what they believed led to its rise in the first place. Overall, journalists identified three reasons for its proliferation: first, the use of the term by politicians to distract from unwanted scrutiny; second, the use of the term as discursive means to sow distrust in authorities and institutions as a whole; and third, the rise of the broader issue of online polarisation.

On the former, a journalist at the Australian masthead *The Age* newspaper said: "There's no doubt that people in power are afraid of journalists, afraid of negative or untoward coverage—so much so that the first thing that dictators do is to crush the press: They don't want any scrutiny" (4A). A journalist at *The Telegraph* newspaper mirrored this sentiment and expressed concern about Trump's verbal attacks on journalists who were simply doing their job in holding his office accountable. He said:

I do find that very worrying. Especially this ratcheting up against journalists—it's his way not to respond to the story but to attack the journalists, and that's what

I've found: People attack you because they don't want to answer what you're asking. And Trump is playing this really, really dangerous game. I would be worried about any minority or profession being made the scapegoat in any situation. (14U)

For the second reason, journalists stressed that the "fake news" phenomenon was part of a broader trend seeking to sow distrust in authorities and institutions more broadly. For example, a journalist at the lifestyle and tech publication *Techly* said that people "distrust politicians, which is where you've seen lots of dis-establishment sentiment. So, people are turning against tradition, and perhaps turning against media....There's obviously a sentiment that's sitting around there—There's distrust, there's a lack of understanding" (3A). Similarly, a journalist at *The Guardian* referred to the same broader, eroding trend when he said:

The discrediting of the reliability of news has been around for a very long time, and it goes hand in hand with a general erosion of confidence in institutions in the United States and in governments. So, I don't necessarily think it's a passing phase—I think it's a reflection of a broader kind of attitude towards institutions and authority, and the press really is institutional anyways. (13U)

Third, journalists expanded on factors they believed had contributed to the broader issue of polarisation and were surprisingly self-critical of their own trade when doing so. For example, a journalist at the masthead *The Australian* believed that certain sections of the media were to blame for people's distrust, thus enabling the "fake news" accusation to take hold so effectively. She said: "I think we have lived, unwillingly, in a cocoon of our own making....But the notion that you have to recognise is that some people have got different realities, and that is really, really important" (1A). Similarly, a journalist at *The Guardian* blamed sections of the media for the polemical nature of their reporting, which he believed led to widespread misrepresentation and polarisation. In his words:

From a reporter's point of view, I notice it in certain places that when you say you're a reporter, you're met with a hostility that you wouldn't have had ten years ago. And the other things are the attacks on the media and the credibility of mainstream media, not just by Donald Trump, but generally. To which I think the media has a lot to answer for....They've all gone a long way to undermine journalism through their lies and misreporting and hate campaigns. (13U)

Another journalist at *The Guardian* specifically referred to a lack of diversity in major news organisations when he said:

To a large extent, I think it's something that journalism has brought on itself...The idea that the media is distrusted is something that the media has to take a lot of blame for because it has gone along and has been lazy. It used stereotypes to vilify certain parts of the population and it's ignored even greater parts of the population. So, when people say, "I don't trust what the press says," I don't blame them. (16U)

Another *The Guardian* journalist based in the US bemoaned a lack of newsroom diversity, too, and believed that such conversations would go a long way to aid public understanding of *who* counts as a journalist in a contemporary news environment. He said:

We get into diversity and all its forms [here], and the US has been very bad on class diversity....So, I think it's forming the assessing of who becomes a journalist in the United States, which can only be a good thing" (13U).

These accounts are in line with a recent report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism on newsroom diversity, which found that only 15% of the top 80 editors across five countries (including the UK) were non-white (Robertson et al., 2021).

#### 4.3. Consequences of "Fake News"

The interviews demonstrated a noteworthy dichotomy between journalists' palpable concerns about the rise of "fake news" and their firm confidence that the present moment of crisis could be turned into an opportunity for journalism: for the profession to reassert its professional authority, and for audiences to return to trusted, established news brands (a feature especially pronounced in the later interviews). For example, a journalist at *The Age* newspaper said:

Two years ago [in 2017], everybody was in a state of flux because of Trump and fake news, and there was this period where he almost succeeded in making people believe that all media are untrustworthy. And I think that actually made people realise—after a little stumble—that you need to pay for good journalism, and...you need to be able to trust them. (4A)

Similarly, a journalist at *ANZ Bluenotes* believed that the present moment would force journalists to be more self-critical and self-reflective in their work and to communicate the public value of the profession to audiences. He said: "It's positive that people have started to realise, particularly post-Trump, that good news matters....I think that's positive: the idea that journalists have had to think more about what they do" (10A). Similarly, a journalist at the *Australian Financial Review* concurred when she said:

I don't think [fake news] is something that is going to go away very quickly. But I think, as traditional media, if we continue to provide good quality journalism that people can trust, I think that will stand traditional media in good stead. Because people know, "okay, I can turn to x news organisation for credible news." (13A)

Despite the present moment of crisis, another journalist at *The Age* newspaper put it bluntly when he said: "I think the whole industry of fake news has actually been a good thing for the [legitimate news] industry" (15A). This underscores these journalists' belief that, by highlighting and re-asserting journalism's authority, the delegitimising crisis brought about by the "fake news" phenomenon may well be turned into an opportunity to emphasise the value of journalism as a public good (Balod & Hameleers, 2021).

Similarly, in the UK, and buoyed by the "Trump bump" experienced in the aftermath of the Trump inauguration, when traditional news outlets registered record levels of digital subscriptions, journalists were positive about a return to established journalism mastheads. For example, a journalist at *The Mirror* felt that the consequences of the "fake news" phenomenon were not actually a reason for concern for journalism—but quite the opposite. He said: "In some regards, I'm really optimistic. There's some really good journalism out there. It's holding people to account. It's exploring new streams. It's listening to concerns. It's championing people. It's a service....So, that gives me cause for optimism" (9U). A journalist at *The Telegraph* similarly saw a return to established journalism mastheads and believed that people would consequently be more willing to subscribe to and pay for respectable news brands. He said: "There has been a rebound in the last year or so, with people returning to newspapers....People are willing to pay small amounts...and there's a slow move back towards trusted and mainstream news sources" (11U). His colleague at *The Telegraph* put it especially eloquently when he said:

I do think that in this era things can be quite scary in terms of some of the volatility we're seeing. But I do feel that we're valuing journalism again. We're making the case again why journalism is so important. And it is important. Sometimes there's this feeling where the best days are all behind us and everything's in decline, but I don't buy that for a minute. Journalism is now more important than it's ever been. (14U)

Such narratives show an interesting dichotomy between journalists expressing significant concern about the proliferation of "fake news" on the one hand, and a great deal of optimism on the other that such concern has led to a revaluing of journalism as a profession. In a similar vein, they also came up with relatively specific strategies to counter the spread of online misinformation.

#### 4.4. Counterstrategies for “Fake News”

Five strategies stood out from the journalists’ accounts whenever they referred to specific strategies to counter misinformation. This included both general and specific recommendations: on a general note, higher journalistic standards, including verification; on a more specific note, improved editorial standards such as increased transparency in the news production process, more investment into and training of staff in open-source intelligence, and strengthened media literacy among news consumers.

On the former, a journalist at *The New European*—a pro-European, hardcopy newspaper established after the Brexit referendum—believed that:

We need to make sure that...standards are lifted. If that happens to the fake news scandal, then that’s all well and good. For me, as a journalist, I think we’ve just got to...carry on making sure that our standards are the very highest possible so that our readers know that we’re not fake news....If we carry on doing that then actually the whole thing is an opportunity for us. (7U)

Similarly, a journalist at *The Guardian* believed that the proliferation of “fake news” forced media organisations to take a look at themselves and to re-examine their relationship with audiences. He said:

On the whole, [fake news] has been a very good thing for journalism. I take an optimistic view, but I think that it forced proper journalism to up its game. The Guardian has been forced to carve out a very specific place for itself in journalism as a way of saying: “This is what we do, and this is why you need to take notice of us.” (13U)

On a more specific note, other journalists felt that increased transparency in the news production process—a reinvigorated measure in light of the outdated notion of objectivity—could serve as a useful countermeasure so as to provide audiences with detailed insights into editorial operations. The *ANZ Bluenotes* journalist suggested that:

The way to combat it is just a ground war [of] constantly reminding people of “this is where this comes from.” This analysis relies on this evidence, [and] even if you don’t believe our conclusions, you can go back to the evidence and follow it through. (10A)

A journalist at *Bellingcat*—known for its in-depth investigations into events such as the shooting down of flight MH-17 using transparent means—agreed, and specifically referred to the rise of open-source intelligence, which he would want to see more widely used across news organisations. He said:

If all these organisations start to do this kind of work, it would be good. But traditional news organisations struggle to integrate this kind of work into their day-to-day team. Often, we find it difficult to find content and stuff to write about every single day, and that might not be how news organisations want content on a regular reliable basis. I think this is a big issue. (4U)

Other journalists were hopeful that strengthened digital literacy across audiences would help people distinguish “real news” from “fake news” and made a point of stressing its value. For example, a journalist at *VICE News Australia* said:

I think audiences will get smarter, just naturally....It’s a technological evolution, we’re just going through the baby steps of the kind of effect the internet has on our culture. I think it will continue to evolve....We’re just starting to see it and it will increase. (11A)

A journalist at *BuzzFeed UK* concurred and said: “Fundamentally enough, people are not so stupid as to constantly believe fake stuff if the truth is reported well....I just sort of think the truth will come out in the end” (6U). In a similar vein, a journalist at *The Daily Record* believed that “I don’t really think we can fight fake news. People just have to get better at recognising it” (10U).

#### 5. Conclusion

This study was motivated by an effort to better understand the work of those engaged in daily news production—journalists themselves—at a time when the industry as a whole has come under significant attack, and individual journalists were subjected to a profoundly delegitimising force at the height of the Trump presidency. Using theories of journalists’ professional roles, we sought to highlight these journalists’ perceptions of and reactions to accusations of “fake news.” In our interviews, we explored the possible reasons they saw for its proliferation, the consequences they had observed, and the potential strategies they believed could act as a defence mechanism to counter the spread of online mis- and disinformation. It is worth reminding the reader that theories of journalists’ professional roles were used as a reference point—or guiding principle—in this study, rather than as a strict, theoretical framework examining specific roles.

In terms of journalistic *perceptions*, the journalists’ narratives pointed to an interesting dichotomy between initial concerns and subsequent optimism in light of the “Trump bump.” While initial accounts referred to the “destructive” weaponisation of the term, subsequent interviews suggested renewed levels of confidence, affirming the institutional value of journalism as a public good. The longitudinal nature of this study—with interviews carried out between early 2017 and late 2019—may well explain this imbalance, a noteworthy



finding also evident whenever journalists referred to the *consequences* of “fake news”: On one hand, there was palpable concern that attacks and forms of hatred were increasingly directed at journalists in otherwise stable democracies (Nilsson & örnebring, 2016). On the other hand, again, there was a newfound, noticeable confidence amongst journalists interviewed in the latter stages of the study, who were upbeat that audiences would re-orient themselves back to established journalistic mastheads when faced with prolonged periods of public crises. For journalism as an industry, the developments brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic are thus a reason for careful optimism: The significant upheaval caused by the global health emergency has made audiences return to trusted news brands during periods of isolation, and trust in news has increased slightly year-on-year (Newman et al., 2021).

Journalists also referred to the *reasons* they believed had allowed the phenomenon to take hold so effectively. This included the use of the term by politicians to distract from unwanted scrutiny, as a discursive means to sow distrust in authorities and institutions as a whole, as well as the broader issue of online polarisation. Their accounts referred to the “fake news” label and its deliberate weaponisation (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), and its longer-term effects on public distrust and disdain towards social and political institutions more generally (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). They revealed a surprisingly self-critical stance when it came to polarisation, a development they believed could at least partly be attributed to a lack of organisational diversity in the news industry (Robertson et al., 2021) and a sense of disenfranchisement amongst audiences.

Importantly, when it came to *counterstrategies*, journalists identified a range of measures they sought to implement. This included both general and specific measures: on a general note, a call to raise journalistic standards, including verification; on a more specific note, increased transparency in the news production process, investing into and training staff in open-source intelligence, and strengthening media literacy among consumers of news. As such, while journalists engaged in a form of self-reflective practice (Wang et al., 2018) when it came to their profession—and the challenges it was subjected to—they also highlighted issues with the audience’s reception of and engagement with news and noted the need for substantial improvements in news users’ ability to detect mis- and disinformation.

While these findings do raise significant concerns—the delegitimising effects of being labelled as “fake news,” an introspective self-critique of journalism as not being sufficiently representative of the public and increasing attacks on and hatred towards journalists in previously stable democracies—journalists also made a concerted effort to highlight specific countermeasures they believed to be valuable. These included collective US newspaper editorials as a defence strategy (see also Lawrence & Moon, 2021); increased fact-checking

and verification, including the use of open-source intelligence; and increased transparency in the news production process, explaining to the public *how* journalists work in an attempt to reduce perceptions of bias in their reporting. In addition, journalists stressed the value of existing standards and best practices, affirmed the authority and legitimacy of their work, and, in doing so, emphasised the value of journalism as a public good overall—irrespective of whether they worked for a mainstream or emerging outlet. As such, these findings align with similar studies in the US (Jahng et al., 2021) and Germany (Koliska & Assmann, 2021) which have found editors defending their best practices when faced with the external force that the “fake news” phenomenon represents. In the authors’ words, “the editors’ discursive practices...aim to shore up trust and justify journalistic authority and legitimacy, but especially to ensure institutional survival” (Koliska & Assmann, 2021, p. 2742). Overall, journalists thus held on “to their democratic roles as normative anchors in unsettling times” (Vos & Thomas, 2018, p. 2007).

Our findings from this study are limited in that both countries—Australia and the UK—are major parliamentary democracies; with regards to media systems, both can generally be grouped within the liberal media model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), thus operating within broadly similar media environments. It is therefore unsurprising that the journalists’ narratives most closely resembled the critical/monitorial role (Standaert et al., 2021) we have also seen in studies emanating from the US (Jahng et al., 2021), thus underscoring that the implications of the “fake news” phenomenon are also broadly applicable in other Western contexts. Elsewhere, however, and perhaps especially in countries where democratic structures are currently even more significantly threatened by a slide towards populism and illiberalism, we may well have found different perceptions of and responses to external threats. Important work already exists in this space: For example, Prager and Hameleers (2021) have looked at the role perceptions of Colombian journalists facing conflict; similarly, Balod and Hameleers (2021) have investigated the role perceptions of Filipino journalists in an age of mis- and disinformation. More such work is needed, particularly outside the US where the phenomenon has attracted significant scholarly attention—a natural consequence of the popularisation of the term “fake news” in the wake of the Trump presidency.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

## Hijacking Journalism: Legitimacy and Metajournalistic Discourse in Right-Wing Podcasts

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### Abstract

Whereas personal expression has become a core practice of journalism whose merits can include greater attention to context and interpretative analysis, these freedoms from the constraints of traditional broadcast conventions can pose serious risks, including the ideological hijacking of journalism by partisan actors. In popular right-wing podcasts, such as those hosted by Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino, the element of opinion amplifies the tendency of the podcast medium to relegate news to a secondary concern behind the emotional impact. Not only do podcasters like Shapiro and Bongino contribute to a fractured media environment of hyper-partisan news and commentary, but they also utilize social media platforms and transmedia networks to undermine traditional journalism and replace it with an alternative conservative media ecosystem—a multiplatform, full-service clearinghouse of news and commentary afforded by the publishing capabilities of the internet and the distribution algorithms of social media platforms like Facebook. This study charts the evolution of conservative audio production, from the influential work of talk radio star Rush Limbaugh through the latest innovations by conservative podcasters, as exemplified by Shapiro and Bongino. Our study builds on previous scholarship on metajournalistic discourse to examine how right-wing podcasters use exclusionary language to delegitimize the institution of journalism and offer a self-contained, ideologically conservative version of journalism as a replacement.

### Keywords

Ben Shapiro; conservative media; Dan Bongino; metajournalistic discourse; right-wing podcasts; Rush Limbaugh

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Despite its emancipatory promise to abet free speech as one of the world’s least censored media forms, podcasting’s democratic function is uneven and highly contested (Jarrett, 2009; Sienkiewicz & Jaramillo, 2019; Sterne et al., 2008). Podcasting’s greatest assets of aural intimacy and expressive power through the human voice also alternately carry “a great risk of exploitation” (Lindgren, 2016, p. 38). Whereas “speaking personally” has become a core practice of journalism whose merits include greater attention to context and interpretative

analysis (Coward, 2013), these freedoms from the constraints of traditional broadcast conventions can pose serious risks. As Nee and Santana (2021, p. 12) explain, “an outcome of the emphasis on form and storytelling” in podcast journalism “is that the dissemination of new news becomes less important than the packaging and emotional impact.”

The intimacy and informality of the podcast medium reach listeners at deeper emotional levels than traditional radio reporting due to freedom from constraints of time, format, and content regulations. Freedom from such constraints “presents both opportunities and

dilemmas for news podcast producers within the context of journalistic norms” (Nee & Santana, 2021, p. 2), thus posing challenges to the storytelling process (McHugh, 2016; Spinelli & Dann, 2019; van Krieken & Sanders, 2019). The first-person perspective can be used as a tool of propaganda wielded by persuasive and charismatic hosts, thus “creating tension between podcast journalism and the boundaries of traditional journalistic practices” (Nee & Santana, 2021, p. 2). Despite journalistic values and professional practices being a part of podcasts, metajournalistic discourse and podcasting are rarely linked, with the notable exception of Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau’s (2021) study of *The New York Times*’ series *Caliphate*. The emotional connections afforded by podcasts can serve as opportunities for right-wing podcasters to enact exclusionary practices through metajournalistic commentary and victim positions (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019) or through attachments to class-driven, populist rhetoric (Peck, 2019) to goad their audiences to distrust mainstream journalism.

Certainly, podcasting did not invent personal attacks, over-the-top commentary, and emotional packaging. Rush Limbaugh used these strategies to great effect while hosting the highest-rated talk radio show in the US from 1988 to 2021. His influence is evident in the conservative podcast industry where right-wing podcasters like Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino have adopted Limbaugh’s political positions, media strategies, and even vocal inflections. Not only do podcasters like Shapiro and Bongino contribute to a fractured media environment of hyper-partisan news and commentary, but they also use social media platforms and transmedia networks to undermine mainstream journalism and replace it with an alternative conservative media ecosystem. Following Limbaugh, contemporary conservative podcasters criticize the institution of journalism, rail against “the media,” and cast doubt on the value systems of mainstream journalists. Shapiro and Bongino leverage the publishing capabilities of the internet and the distribution algorithms of social media platforms to create a multiplatform, full-service clearinghouse of news and commentary Limbaugh could not. Our study builds on scholarship about metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016) to examine how right-wing podcasters use exclusionary language to delegitimize the institution of journalism and offer a self-contained, ideologically conservative version of journalism as a replacement.

This study first reviews metajournalistic discourse literature, focusing on legitimizing discourses, exclusionary language, and conservative media. Next, we trace the origins of right-wing podcasting from the Fairness Doctrine to the conservative radio revolution led by Limbaugh in the 1980s and 1990s. We then analyze two of the most influential conservative podcasters of the early 2020s, Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino, through an interpretive critical analysis of their podcasts, news coverage, and digital media infrastructures. Our analysis highlights the ways the two hosts discursively delegitimize main-

stream journalism while propping up alternative media infrastructures that reflect their ideological perspectives. In conclusion, we explore the future of far-right podcasting in the context of conservative media.

## 2. Metajournalistic Discourse and Conservative Media

As an institution, journalism is quite reflexive. The ability to interpret one’s own production practice along with its social and cultural implications constitutes one of the most important facets of the institution (Zelizer, 1993). News organizations and journalists work to commune their values, purposes, and norms through several practices that help discursively define journalism. This metajournalistic discourse allows for journalism to strengthen, challenge, and reinforce its institutional boundaries (Carlson, 2016). A core component of Carlson’s (2016) original typology is legitimacy, which is closely attached to a journalist’s authority. While it is common to assume that authority can be lost, Carlson (2017) contends it instead is negotiated through journalistic roles and practices that legitimize the institution and its actors. Seeking legitimacy is historically important for the press, especially in relation to new media. For example, the print journalists covering the Hutchins report worked diligently to insert their authority and legitimacy. Through their coverage, they sought to distinguish themselves from radio and the new medium of television by inserting themselves as the true medium with an understanding of its audience (Walters, 2021). As new media emerge, attempts to prove legitimacy are also tied to a need for the institution of journalism to negotiate its relationship with professional values like transparency (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2021) and broader, more systemic values like democracy and truth (Vos & Thomas, 2018). Seeing authority and legitimacy as a relationship is important to the context of this study. We argue right-wing podcasters engage in a relationship with their mainstream media counterparts that works to delegitimize the institution of journalism through exclusionary discourse.

Boundary-building is often studied as exclusionary discourse, particularly through the ways journalists definitionally situate actors, sites, audiences, or topics outside the boundaries of journalism to strip them of cultural authority (Johnson et al., 2021). Exclusionary discourse typically is used to excise deviant actors (Carlson & Lewis, 2019; Cecil, 2002). Outsiders can also use exclusionary discourse to attack journalism and its ethical and democratic foundations. Such outsiders, like right-wing podcasters, seek to redraw the boundaries of journalism to promote their own methods and values as superior to established professional practice. In one example, Eldridge (2019) explores how a digital-peripheral media outlet, the sports and entertainment blog *Deadspin*, was welcomed to the journalist fold after it published a video takedown of conservative media owner Sinclair’s “must run” programming.

In some respects, the right-wing media, specifically, and right-wing populism, broadly, serve as catalysts for mainstream media to reinforce their boundaries (Nygaard, 2021). According to Krämer and Langmann (2020), journalistic norms like objectivity are reinforced when engaging with discourse about right-wing media and right-wing populism. Although other forms of media struggle to position themselves as legitimate authorities—cultural critics as an example (Whipple, 2022)—the contention between the *elite* mainstream press and the common man approach in right-wing media lends itself to conservatives challenging journalistic authority. Media producers on the ideological right use five distinct positions as means to perform both an exclusionary discourse and to delegitimize their mainstream journalism counterparts. These include performing an insider position by focusing on their knowledge of the field, an expert position through the use of facts, a victim position to share how the mainstream press victimizes them, a citizen position to enforce more populist ideas of representation through comment and criticism, and an activist position that reinforces their opposition to the elite press they attack (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). This is clearly seen in Reece Peck’s 2019 book *Fox Populism*. In it, Peck argues that Fox’s rhetoric is undoubtedly populist, both through its visuals and its language. And, when Fox engages in metajournalistic discourse within this framework, they do so by elevating exclusionary tactics as attack strategies. The confrontational right-wing discourse employed by Fox is an early manual for far-right podcasters to adopt. Peck (2019) believes Tucker Carlson serves as the thread between the populism of right-wing Fox News and the nationalist and combative discourse of far-right podcasting. One way this can be interrogated further is by looking at the rise of partisan media, podcasting, and their associated journalistic practices.

### 3. The Origins of the Right-Wing Podcast

Established by the Federal Communications Commission in 1949, the Fairness Doctrine mandated balanced, equitable, and honest treatment of controversial issues. It aimed to control an unwieldy pattern in manipulative radio content, the most dangerous of which resounded in the brutal antisemitism of Father Charles Coughlin, the Nazi sympathizer with 15 million listeners in the mid-1930s (Hilmes, 2014). The National Association of Broadcasters originally banned Coughlin from radio in 1939, two decades before the federal mandate. At the time, the capacity for radio networks to act swiftly in defense of democracy was enabled by a leaner, more centralized industry capable of reaching consensus for developing, amending, and enforcing its own professional code of ethics.

The Fairness Doctrine effectively prevented ideologues from winning an undue share of the radio audience, as witnessed in the culture of civil on-air political discourse that prevailed from 1949 to 1987. Among

President Ronald Reagan’s widespread cuts to federal programs and government regulations, the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 stands out for its lasting and profound impact on the media climate, the nature of political discourse, and the trajectory of the “Grand Old Party” (GOP). Originally spearheaded by Republican lawmakers who argued that the regulation served to silence conservatives (Barbaro, 2021), the removal of the Fairness Doctrine ushered in a boom in conservative talk radio (Rosenwald, 2019). Without responsibility for equitable treatment of controversial issues, hosts like Limbaugh were unleashed to foment against liberals, leveraging extremist rhetoric that became the cornerstone of conservative talk radio. The effort to make politics entertaining drew on a base element in the listening audience that savored meanspirited attacks and crass humor. Analysis and independent critical thinking were willingly abrogated for blind compliance, as Limbaugh’s followers dubbed themselves “ditto-heads.”

Limbaugh’s 1992 book *The Way Things Ought to Be* cemented his credo that recast the GOP’s self-concept toward a more extreme and unrelenting posture readily apparent in his 1994 “Address to Incoming House GOP Freshmen” (Limbaugh, 1994). Moderation, Limbaugh claimed, was a sign of weakness and no quarter should be given to liberal values such as compassion for the working class (Barbaro, 2021). He advised them to anticipate and actively resist appeals to their humanity in phrases like, “The war on the poor,” and in allegations that the removal of social programs is “cold-hearted, cruel to the poor” (Limbaugh, 1994). All are tactics, he warned to the newly elected GOP House members, “designed to get you to moderate, to maybe not follow through as you intended to on welfare reform and other cultural issues” (Limbaugh, 1994). This reinvention of the GOP as entrenched and militant resonated with a wave of extreme conservatism that denigrated feminism, affirmative action, disability rights, and the environmental movement. Limbaugh’s ideological positions, his routine assaults on the mainstream press as a liberal propaganda mill, and his repeated dalliances with conspiracy theories provided a roadmap for right-wing podcasts that carry Limbaugh’s legacy forward in the podcast industry (Nadler & Bauer, 2019; Rosenwald, 2019).

### 4. Industrial Context and Method

Despite early indications to the contrary, podcasting is no longer a predominantly liberal-leaning media space. A large and rapidly expanding number of the top 200 titles on Apple Podcast charts brand themselves as right-wing podcasts (Quah, 2020). In addition to shows by Republican elected officials such as *Verdict with Ted Cruz* and *Hold These Truths with Dan Crenshaw*, the most downloaded conservative podcasts include *The Dan Bongino Show*, *The Ben Shapiro Show*, *The Glenn Beck Program*, *The Sean Hannity Show*, *The Rubin Report*, *The Michael Knowles Show*, and *Bill O’Reilly’s No Spin*

*News and Analysis* (Quah, 2020). Many lean far-right, embrace extremist ethno-nationalist perspectives, and include a “combination of serious discussion of political, cultural, and social issues along with satirical and biting humor, which parodies previously ‘untouchable’ personalities and topics” (Travis & Sexton, 2021).

Fueled by false allegations of voter fraud and the Stop the Steal movement, several right-wing podcasts broke into the top rankings after the 2020 US Presidential Election. For example, *The Dan Bongino Show*, which typically hovered between 20 and 40 on Apple Podcast charts, became one of the top two most-downloaded shows (Quah, 2020; Roose, 2020). Bongino’s popularity surged on Facebook, driven by his ability to drive headlines and set the agenda for the right on the national level (Roose, 2020). This ascent of right-wing podcasts is due in part to their unique historical moment during the Election Day 2020 buildup and the ensuing firestorm of conservative voter fraud allegations that followed. Listeners commune with conservative talk show personalities from four to five hours per week, heightening the parasocial relationships fostered by the medium’s unique technological affordances (Zuraikat, 2020). Additionally, as a senior executive at Westwood One claimed, “right-wing podcasting nowadays seems purposefully integrated with the broader right-wing infrastructures and are themselves individual assets of much larger multi-platform presences” (Quah, 2020). Figures like Bongino marshal “attention between his multiple media outputs, from his broadcast radio show to his social media feeds to his podcasts to his various media appearances” (Quah, 2020). In 2018, Westwood One repackaged *The Ben Shapiro Show*, consistently a top-10 podcast, for radio broadcast, an instance of a born-digital podcast expanding its audience through terrestrial radio.

Within this context, we offer a close reading of the two most popular conservative podcasters today, Dan Bongino and Ben Shapiro. The qualitative method of interpretive critical analysis of production practice, media texts, and digital consumption allows for examination of the ways the principles of journalism are threatened and/or transformed in various media contexts (Brennen, 2017; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) in the example of right-wing podcasters. Interpretive critical analysis is methodologically deployed in our case studies as a historically informed close reading, a type of textual analysis that, “beyond the manifest content of the media, focuses on the ideological and cultural assumptions of the text” (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240). Thus “context is an important part of interpretive analysis” (Brennen, 2017, p. 22), particularly as applied to media texts selected strategically and parsed to build analysis in support of a broader argument (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240). Additionally, our method leverages Caliandro’s (2018) approach appropriate to digital ethnographies that suggests *following the thing*, *following the medium*, and *following the natives*. This paradigm helps guide our examination of each show’s impact on social media and information flows across plat-

forms, particularly in terms of tracking or “following the circulation of an empirical object within a given online environment or across different online environments and observing the specific social formations emerging around it from the interactions of the digital devices and users” (Caliandro, 2018, p. 560). This process brings the *thing* (podcasts), *medium* (devices and digital spaces where they are consumed and discussed), and *natives* (hosts and listeners) into sharper focus.

We gathered a variety of different types of content as we followed the podcast hosts across multiple digital spaces, resulting in a large collection of podcast episodes by Bongino and Shapiro, news stories about them, editorials written by them, their television appearances, and their digital media infrastructures. Given the vast amount of audio content produced by Bongino and Shapiro—each distributes five or more hour-long podcasts every week—we focused specifically on podcast episodes where they engage with the journalism industry broadly or individual journalists specifically. Such criterion sampling is common in interpretive qualitative studies in which the amount of data is far too large to allow for close, in-depth analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). To identify podcast episodes in which the hosts engage in the metajournalistic process of defining the journalism industry, specific journalists, and themselves in relation to “the media,” we read summary descriptions for every podcast episode released between January and September 2021. After identifying and listening to the most relevant episodes, we collectively compiled notes to “chunk” our dataset into appropriate categories (Lofland et al., 2006), before engaging in the interpretive process of developing second-order concepts through pattern recognition (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). The following analysis draws from topics and critical incidents that best illustrate Bongino’s and Shapiro’s efforts to delegitimize the journalism industry and offer themselves as suitable replacements. For Bongino, this dynamic is exemplified by his response to the January 6 attempted insurrection, his campaign against fact-checking, and his algorithmic prominence on Facebook. For Shapiro, our analysis focuses on Shapiro’s liminal position as a conservative pundit, journalists’ reaction to Shapiro guest-editing *Politico* “Playbook,” and *The Daily Wire*’s success on Facebook.

#### 4.1. *The Dan Bongino Show*

In the wake of the insurrection of the US Capitol, Dan Bongino, former secret service agent and erstwhile guest on Alex Jones’s *InfoWars* who once hosted a program on NRA TV, vigorously defended the mob on his podcast. Bongino framed the riot as an extension of political violence normalized by the left, especially those who supported the Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of George Floyd’s murder. On January 7, 2021, episode “About Yesterday,” Bongino (2021a) asserted that “media hypocrisy regarding political violence is impossible to

watch” because liberal media celebrated violence committed by protesters on behalf of racial justice during the summer and fall of 2020. Bongino (2021a) also took aim at Twitter for blocking then-President Trump’s account “after he calls for peace,” claiming it is a liberal organization bent on destroying conservative values. Calling for a virtual uprising through social media, Bongino (2021a) asked, “is the digital media revolution coming?” before exhorting his listeners to rebel against media totalitarianism.

Although Bongino (2021a) made explicit on the show that he does not endorse political violence, he nonetheless laid the blame for the insurrection on liberal media’s alleged support of Antifa riots on behalf of racial justice in Washington, D.C. He reported that his former secret service colleagues feared that the liberal protesters would storm the Capitol. These agents were “legitimately concerned that the White House would fall...if 100 or 200 people stormed the fences of the White House, they wondered what would happen.” He claimed to have “never heard that conversation before, even as an active agent,” suggesting that liberals normalized political violence first and thus were the true cause for the insurrection. “There are liberal media people,” he insisted, “who say don’t you bring up BLM and Antifa. We’re going to keep the conversation solely on what happened with a limited group of people yesterday.” Relishing the occasion for defiance, he lashed out at the collective enemy in a voice rising to a shout, “If you’ve been in the media and have been dismissing political violence for the last four years, you should sit down and shut up!” (Bongino, 2021a). Throughout his coverage of January 6, Bongino claimed mainstream journalists were not allowed to condemn Capitol insurrectionists after what he perceived to be their failure to criticize those who marched for racial justice months earlier. In doing so, Bongino questioned the legitimacy of mainstream media coverage of the attempted insurrection by accusing them of covering up the true origins of the January 6 violence.

Bongino’s critique of mainstream media also emerges in his repeated attacks on fact-checkers, who he claims either focus on insignificant stories or get the “facts” wrong. In one episode, Bongino introduced a recurring segment called “Fact Check Clown Show” to highlight the worst offenses of fact-checkers (Bongino, 2021b). In another episode, Bongino called fact-checkers “a filthy bunch of losers” responsible for “ushering in this moment of totalitarianism” of the Biden presidency (Bongino, 2021c). Bongino also engages in ad hominem attacks against individual fact-checkers, criticizing one by name as an “embarrassment to humankind” (Bongino, 2021b) and another as a “loser of epic proportions” (Bongino, 2021c). In the September 6, 2021, episode, Bongino encouraged listeners to block fact-checkers on social media, presumably to ensure Bongino’s listeners were never exposed to contrary views unless appropriately framed and refuted by Bongino on his show. Through his regular critiques of fact-checking and

fact-checkers, Bongino presents mainstream journalists as hostile toward conservatives as well as professionally incompetent. This positions Bongino as the only trusted arbiter of truth. In both his attacks on fact-checkers and media coverage of January 6, Bongino attempts to discredit reportorial concern for accuracy, a bedrock principle of journalism. This denigration of production routines dedicated to the principle of accuracy attempts to further delegitimize mainstream journalism while also positioning himself outside its institutional boundaries. He by no means identifies as a journalist, but the public positioning of his program and concern for shaping public opinion continue to blur the lines between how his far-right media community sees him and the institutional boundaries of ethical journalism.

Bongino’s criticism of Twitter and Facebook for discontinuing Trump’s account underscores the podcast host’s own colossal presence on social media, and dependence on it for his massive listenership. His total number of Facebook interactions nearly doubled that of Ben Shapiro and Sean Hannity in October 2020 (Roose, 2020). Monthly engagement on Bongino’s Facebook page is greater than the pages for CNN, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times* combined. During a 24-hour period in October 2020, Bongino accounted for eight of the top-10 performing link posts by US Facebook pages (Roose, 2020). The content of these posts echoes his podcast arguing against mask-wearing as an effective means of preventing the spread of Covid-19, spearheading election fraud conspiracies, and inculcating fear of a coup led by Democrats. He functions as one of the most potent agenda-setters on the far right, generating arguably more viral headlines and misinformation than any conservative podcaster. Roose (2020) observed that Bongino “is skilled at a certain type of industrial-scale content production, that is valuable on today’s internet, flooding social media with a torrent of original posts, remixed memes and videos and found footage.” His *Bongino Report* aggregates right-wing news stories as an extremist alternative to *The Drudge Report*, the conservative online news outlet that debuted in 1995. On his podcast, Bongino referred to *The Drudge Report* as a “disgusting site” that has become a “full-blown liberal attack machine,” using exclusionary language to encourage listeners to abandon it in favor of the *Bongino Report* and other ultra-conservative alternatives (Bongino, 2021c). Through the podcast, which is often cut into shorter segments and distributed on social media and the *Bongino Report*, Bongino creates an alternative information ecosystem that consistently affirms a far-right worldview and uses traditional journalistic practices against mainstream media to delegitimize any media outlet that dare challenge that worldview.

#### 4.2. *The Ben Shapiro Show*

Shapiro’s podcast episode published the day after the Capitol insurrection offers an illuminating contrast to



*The Dan Bongino Show*. In his signature rapid-fire staccato delivery—displaying far more sheer verbal agility and intellectual precision than Bongino—Shapiro (2021a) urged that “Trump is not guilty of directly causing or directing violent actions”; yet Shapiro added that Trump was guilty of “raising the temperature” through his accusations that Congress was stealing the election, “falsehoods” that set the stage for insurrection. Shapiro’s lack of loyalty to Trump did not mitigate his partisan fervor, as he lashed out at the way “the left blames all Republicans for the insurrection” (Shapiro, 2021a). Although Shapiro’s show reflects his anti-gun control, anti-abortion stances, and staunch opposition to the LGBTQIA+ community, he condemns alt-right ethnonationalist and extremist groups such as Proud Boys and is a vocal critic of Trump’s voting fraud claims.

Shapiro holds a different position relative to mainstream journalism than Bongino. While Bongino is dismissed largely as a conspiracy theorist or far-right agitator, Shapiro has appeared as a guest on MSNBC’s *Morning Joe*, CNN’s *Reliable Sources*, and HBO’s *Real Time With Bill Maher*, and is a frequent presence on public panels. This is not to say that all journalists are willing to include Shapiro within their boundaries. Journalists’ ambivalence toward Shapiro was most evident on January 14, 2021, when *Politico* invited Shapiro to guest edit “Playbook,” the site’s morning political news briefing that is widely read by prominent journalists and politicians. Several journalists criticized *Politico* for granting Shapiro control over the site’s signature offering given Shapiro’s “long history of bigoted and incendiary commentary, particularly in the aftermath of last week’s violence” (Izadi, 2021). “It’s not just that he’s incendiary or conservative,” one reporter told the *Washington Post*. “It’s that he sells falsehoods as an incendiary persona” (Izadi, 2021). These journalists sought to define Shapiro as an extreme and “incendiary” right-wing figure and, thus, an unacceptable choice to edit one of the industry’s go-to news roundups. In response, Shapiro claimed the incident provided further evidence of the media’s efforts to demonize and silence conservatives. “I’m completely unsurprised by the blowback,” Shapiro told the *Washington Examiner*. “The staff at *Politico* actually proved my point: that the goal for much of the Left is complete ostracization of the Right from cultural and political life” (Van Dyke, 2021). In Shapiro’s response, he characterized journalists critical of *Politico*’s decision as “the Left,” claiming their goal was to target and marginalize all conservatives. Thus, while some journalists sought to delegitimize Shapiro as someone who does not belong within the boundaries of respectable journalism, Shapiro, in turn, sought to define mainstream journalists as partisan actors, no different from himself. Shapiro questioned the media’s willingness to engage with alternative viewpoints, thereby attacking their commitment to balance and fairness.

Shapiro consistently casts traditional journalists and “Big Tech” as supporters of and apologists for Democrats

and President Biden. After social media companies limited the spread of a thinly sourced story about Hunter Biden weeks before the 2020 Presidential election, Shapiro cried foul. In a column headlined “The Media Officially Becomes the Communications Department for Joe Biden,” Shapiro claimed that mainstream media outlets and tech companies were protecting Biden because of their own liberal biases: “At a time when our trust in media is already low, the media have thoroughly debunked themselves as neutral arbiters of fact” (Shapiro, 2020). Days after Biden’s inauguration, Shapiro again warned readers to prepare for “four years of media sycophancy,” claiming declining trust in the media was a result of “their own journalistic malfeasance for years on end during former President Barack Obama’s administration...followed by their aggressive repetition of even the most thinly sourced scandal regarding Trump” (Shapiro, 2020). Similarly, on his podcast, Shapiro (2021c) framed a story about the US Surgeon General working with Facebook to reduce Covid-19 misinformation as part of an effort by the White House “to bring Big Tech under their control...to use these as instruments of the Democratic party.” Predicting a future in which the Left succeeds in bringing about “monopolistic control of mainstream media,” Shapiro (2021b) suggests in one column that disenchanted news consumers would seek out alternative information sources. By defining mainstream media and Big Tech as one-sided propagandistic tools of the Democratic party, Shapiro questions the legitimacy of news outlets and social media sites as spaces for competing viewpoints. By asserting that conservative perspectives can only be found elsewhere, Shapiro’s self-serving metajournalistic rhetoric positions himself as precisely such—an alternative information source.

Shapiro’s podcast is an extension of the online news publication he founded, *The Daily Wire*, which NewsWhip identifies as “by far” the top right-wing publisher on Facebook (Nicholson, 2020). Although Shapiro resigned as editor-in-chief in June 2020, *The Daily Wire* still hosts Shapiro’s podcast and his writings on its site. Shapiro’s commanding following on Facebook depends on a network of *Daily Wire*-affiliated Facebook pages to generate traffic. The clandestine network consists of “14 large Facebook pages that purported to be independent but exclusively promote content from *The Daily Wire* in a coordinated fashion” (Legum & Zekeria, 2020). The method entails identifying incendiary news items preying on bigotry and fear, stories that are months or years old and thus out of the current daily news cycle. *The Daily Wire* is actively promoted by the rewriting of these stories (with no indication that they are old) for right-wing pages titled Mad World News, The New Resistance, The Right Stuff, American Patriot, and America First. What appear to be new links to *The Daily Wire* on these sites are actually repurposed to both readers and Facebook’s algorithm, thus artificially inflating its numbers. At typically no more than 500 words in length with no original reporting,

these stories propelled *The Daily Wire* to the seventh spot among Facebook's top publishers (Legum & Zekeria, 2020). Social media strategies like this have allowed *The Daily Wire* to expand its reach, add to its growing podcast lineup of conservative figures, and launch new media ventures, including a book imprint and a film production company.

The ideological agenda behind Shapiro's podcast is best understood through the combined function of social media distribution and media ownership. Bentkey Ventures's Farris C. Wilks owns *The Daily Wire*, which Shapiro launched in partnership with Jeremy Boreing in 2015. Wilks, who made his fortune through the sale of his fracking company to a Singapore firm, is a GOP supporter (Vickers et al., 2019). The Texas fracking billionaire donated \$10 million to GOP Super PACS during the 2016 election and runs a politically conservative church (Vickers et al., 2019), which supports his views of abortion and homosexuality as crimes. These perspectives intersect with the political principles of Shapiro's podcast, and this funding has allowed *The Daily Wire* to become a conservative news enterprise offered as an alternative to what Shapiro views as Leftist media.

### 5. Affirming Politics, Asserting Boundaries

Our findings show that Dan Bongino seeks to delegitimize mainstream journalists as corrupt and incompetent by using exclusionary discourse to position himself as a trusted truth-teller. He does so by wielding mainstream journalistic practice against itself, casting its own institutional code rooted in the principle of verification as the thing that makes it untrustworthy. Ben Shapiro similarly seeks to delegitimize traditional journalists as partisan actors working on behalf of the Left. Relative to that characterization, Shapiro positions himself as equally legitimate and justified in attacking traditional journalistic practice. Although he acknowledges his role as a partisan actor, he legitimized himself as a necessary counterweight to the mainstream media, which he characterizes as a proxy for the Left, a strategy that both serves as commentary and as a way to help his audience to see him as a victim (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Although Shapiro is rhetorically closer to mainstream media than Bongino, both have leveraged their podcasts and social media to hi-jack journalism's core function through self-legitimizing and exclusionary rhetoric navigated through inflections of metajournalistic discourse (Carlson & Lewis, 2019; Eldridge, 2019). While questioning the legitimacy of traditional media is a strategy perfected by Limbaugh, the publication and distribution affordances of digital media have allowed Bongino and Shapiro to create conservative media ecosystems that serve as alternatives to mainstream journalism. These alternatives, as our analysis shows, reflect a current divide both in how journalism is understood and seen, as well as how political discourse has evolved. It is also reflective of the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, which

allowed for more extreme views to be voiced without fairness and balance.

Podcasting's intimacy and informality can be leveraged for what Kovach and Rosenstiel (2011) call the "journalism of affirmation." This relatively new form of neo-partisan media caters to audiences interested in reinforcing their own pre-existing political perspectives. The journalism of affirmation lends color, theater, and even valor to one's ideological self-concept. It offers "the security and convenience offered by faith, as opposed to fact and empiricism" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011, p. 47). Rush Limbaugh was a master practitioner of the journalism of affirmation. In his 1994 address to Congress, Limbaugh described his method accordingly: "What happens on talk radio is real [sic] simple: We validate what's in people's hearts and minds already" (Limbaugh, 1994). Radio's original public service ideal of "mixed programming designed for the listener to encounter something unheard of" has yielded to "increasing specialization and formatting" often "tailored to fit the most precise personal tastes" (Lacey, 2013, p. 15). Listeners seek affirmation of their own pre-existing political values as "an expression of a desire to have the world reflect back and echo the listening subject, either as some sort of narcissistic extension and self-confirmation, or an expression of anxiety about difference or the unknown" (Lacey, 2013, p. 15). This process reflects the information ecospheres Bongino and Shapiro have both created.

The media empires of Bongino and Shapiro are not simply about the podcast creators themselves, but the affirmative publics they have built and serve. This is seen in their dominant presence in social media spaces, particularly their placement in the top-10 in both daily Facebook shares and podcasting charts. Their discourse capitalizes on traditional right-wing politics, but they have moved beyond the populist identity originally reflected in conservative media, especially Bongino. While Shapiro tends to affirm the beliefs of more mainstream conservatives through his attacks on elite media, social welfare, and social justice, Bongino shifts the discourse from right-wing to far-right. His affirmations focus on more extreme nationalist identities and bolster the opinions of his audiences. This is exemplified by his commentary before, on, and after the January 6 insurrection. He elevated his listeners, and his listeners elevated him to the top of the podcasting charts.

Bongino's and Shapiro's podcasts transform politics into an entertaining spectacle for audiences combining the journalism of affirmation with the *journalism of assertion* in which "what were once the raw ingredients of journalism—the rumor, innuendo, allegation, accusation, charge, supposition, and hypothesis—get passed onto the audience directly" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011, p. 40). In this sense, journalistic leads become subject to speculation and are delivered directly to audiences as published content, in the process removing the importance of reporting. Bongino and Shapiro both delegitimized mainstream journalism following the January 6

Capitol insurrection. Bongino's attack was more forceful, falsely sharing information that Antifa was responsible for the rise in political violence and that Antifa was an arm of the elite, leftist press. Shapiro, while not as severe in his attack, condemned journalists for reporting on the Trump presidency with intense critical scrutiny while consistently giving Obama and Biden a free pass. In both cases, there was a reliance on speculation for the sake of assertion and audience affirmation.

This method is anathema to the *journalism of verification*, an approach steeped in documentary and interview evidence that entails thorough fact-checking prior to publication (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Instead, the journalism of assertion is prone to factual errors because "it is easier to assert misinformation" in this mode of discourse, a tendency that grows with the number of outlets practicing it as the norms of the profession shift (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011, p. 44). Because of Shapiro's reputation among the journalism community, many journalists believed his guest editing of *Politico's* "Playbook" would lead to a lack of verification. But the fact that he was invited to serve as guest editor for *Politico* indicates Shapiro was granted some level of legitimacy by his journalistic peers. On the other hand, the journalistic community has marginalized Bongino for his journalism of assertion, even though his audience rewards him for it. Bongino's goal is to dispel the reporting of traditional journalism as a mechanism for legitimating the extreme and often unverified ideas he exposes on his show.

The two utilize exclusionary discourse to delegitimize journalism and its actors. In doing so, they both rely on journalism of affirmation to build their audiences, which in turn reinforces to their audiences that (a) traditional journalism is not legitimate and that (b) their ideologically-right version of journalism is the right journalism. The exclusionary discourse also provides cannon-fodder for Shapiro and Bongino's attachment to assertion. Shapiro's tightrope walk between attempts at ethical journalism as a right-wing pundit and his dance with disillusion and distrust in his far-right assertions make him a complicated case. While he certainly does not want to be included within the boundaries of journalism, he attempts to utilize the traditional roles and responsibilities of the institution in order to legitimize himself. In this process, he also exemplifies the journalism of assertion in an effort to delegitimize his peers. Bongino heavily depends on the tactics of assertion not only to delegitimize journalism but to advocate for the destruction of the institution entirely. The combined utilization of the journalisms of affirmation and assertion provides a looking glass into what the future holds for right-wing podcasting and, perhaps, right-wing media more broadly.

## 6. The Future of Right-Wing Podcasts: The Far-Right

The right-wing editor and podcaster Matthew Sheffield commented on the loss of journalistic credibility among

many conservative news media producers, observing that "they don't see journalism the way that more traditional journalists do" (Bauman & Chakrabarti, 2020). Historically, this began with the populist turn in conservative media. With Fox's Murdoch at the helm, and original conservative stars like Bill O'Reilly and Limbaugh building relationships with the common man, there has continued to be a need to delegitimize the mainstream press in favor of building a coalition (Peck, 2019). What began as a need to be a place for conservative voices is now shifting from purely populist recitation toward nationalist ideologies (Peck, 2019). The shift is bolstered by a deep-seated distrust in the institutional press (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Vos & Thomas, 2018), and a need for these far-right media leaders to instead "see their media enterprise as [being] about activism and about supporting whoever is their top Republican" (Bauman & Chakrabarti, 2020). Sheffield added, "they see [this] as their duty," a dedication tracing "from the very beginning of conservative media in this country," one "heavily linked to political electioneering" (Bauman & Chakrabarti, 2020). A major challenge exists in holding right-wing media accountable, particularly in the new digital space of journalism of affirmation that drives partisan podcasting. Sheffield urged that "the funders of right-wing media need to face social business consequences for what they do" (Bauman & Chakrabarti, 2020). Ownership with doctrinaire leanings in the age of conglomeration raises the specter of figures such as Murdoch, who "has been enabling a growth of a fanatical movement in this country," according to Sheffield (Bauman & Chakrabarti, 2020). Conservative media owners funding far-right publications are poised "to grow radicalization over and over" (Bauman & Chakrabarti, 2020).

Conservative media ownership may not be well suited to a gatekeeping role, however, since in several instances it is indistinguishable from the on-air personalities. This increasingly self-serving system now places hosts in a supervisory role with the editorial power of a publisher, as evidenced by Dan Bongino's co-ownership of Parler and Ben Shapiro's editorial oversight of *The Daily Wire*. Rush Limbaugh's 15 million listeners per week who tuned into his three-hour per day show have been readily absorbed by Bongino, Shapiro, and Sean Hannity. This generation of podcasters is the latest remediation of conservative talk radio, particularly Limbaugh's legacy that Hannity credited for the development of Fox News (Grynbaum, 2021). The extraordinary reach of conservative media's conglomerate ownership structure, as well as the proliferation of voices in the podcast universe directly patterned after Limbaugh's, is evident in the ownership of Limbaugh's show by iHeartMedia, which also syndicates Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity's programs. The intersection between old guard talk radio and the new wave of conservative podcasting is perhaps best captured in Bongino's dedication of an entire episode to Limbaugh. In a *Fox News* interview, Bongino reprised his sentiments from that episode,

paying homage to Limbaugh and crediting him for setting the standard for conservative podcasting. Identifying the origins of contemporary conservatism in Limbaugh's show, Bongino commented that "every conservative I know...has had that Rush Limbaugh moment where they were listening and heard an idea for the first time ever" (Lanum, 2021). Acknowledging that he now works within the same space Limbaugh "created," Bongino explained that "Rush Limbaugh invented the national conservative talk radio space—he invented the game" (Wulfsohn, 2021). It is fitting, therefore, that *The Dan Bongino Show* took over Rush Limbaugh's radio time slot on May 24, 2021 (Wulfsohn, 2021).

Bongino's allusion to conservative podcasting as contiguous with "the game" of "conservative talk radio space" (Wulfsohn, 2021)—one as carefully attuned to the ideological hyperbole as to market share—captures precisely how its rhetorical conventions of caustic, pejorative attacks on rivals and overt misinformation have become normalized (Meltzer, 2020). The journalism of affirmation in this instance has fueled partisan extremism capable of inverting reality to rally support. Brian Rosenwald observed that "without Rush Limbaugh, there is no way you get from the party of George H. W. Bush to Donald Trump" (Peters, 2021). The Trump presidency—through the final stages of denial of the election result and support for the insurrectionists—could be understood as the political apotheosis of Limbaugh's legacy (Rosenwald, 2019). Over the 32 years Limbaugh was on the air, "he conditioned his audience as to what they wanted to hear and what they had an appetite for," Rosenwald explained. "And it thrilled them to hear someone who said what they might have thought, but felt uncomfortable saying" (Peters, 2021). That sense of affirmation galvanized the far-right, particularly through emotionally-charged conservative news-related podcasts, and now the mantle is carried forward by Bongino, Shapiro, and the conservative digital media infrastructures they command.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

## Journalist-Twitterers as Political Influencers in Brazil: Narratives and Disputes Towards a New Intermediary Model

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### Abstract

The ascendancy of Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency of Brazil in 2018 put the role of traditional media companies and journalists under the spotlight. Bad news or opinions against his government have been officially treated as fake, inaccurate, or false information. In this context, data show a decrease in news trust and growing news consumption through platforms. According to the 2021 Reuters Institute report on news trust, only 21% of Brazilians trust the press as an institution, with 71% using social media platforms to be informed. As part of a broad and complex crisis of the traditional intermediary model, several journalists appeared in the Brazilian public sphere as influencers on social media platforms such as Twitter. Based on a qualitative perspective, this article aims to research the role of journalists as political influencers and their use of Twitter to express their voices. A sample of 10 journalists with more than 10,000 followers on Twitter, five working for traditional media and five from native digital media, were interviewed in depth. We realized that they use their digital capital in two political directions. On the one hand, as part of a digital strategy promoted by media outlets to gain attention and call the audience, journalists share their spots and comments on daily issues. On the other hand, in a polarized political context, journalists have found Twitter a means to express their voices in a context of increasing violence and restrictions on free expression among this collective.

### Keywords

Brazil; freedom of the press; influencers; Jair Bolsonaro; journalists

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Journalism, Activism, and Social Media: Exploring the Shifts in Journalistic Roles, Performance, and Interconnectedness,” edited by Peter Maurer (Trier University) and Christian Nuernbergk (Trier University).

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### 1. Introduction

The Brazilian 2018 election and Bolsonaro’s political communication strategy represent an important case to discuss the crisis of journalism and the consolidation of new structures of informational powers. After his inauguration, the violence against journalists increased by 218%, with President Bolsonaro himself being responsible for 34% of these cases in 2021 (Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas, 2022). According to the Report Without Borders Index, between 2020 and 2022, Brazil has become “the second most lethal country in the region for reporters” (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Also, censorship in all its manners (persecutions, threats, lawfare) has increased, making Brazil a country classi-

fied as having “restricted” freedom of expression and media (Article 19, 2021). In addition, to Human Rights Watch (“Brazil: Bolsonaro blocks,” 2021), the Brazilian President’s action across social media—blocking opponents or influential political journalists’ critics of him—corroborates the downplaying of free speech in Brazil.

This article assumes that journalists’ precarious and vulnerable position in Brazil has forced them to use or combine social media platforms, such as Twitter, to express and share their production and views. To discuss this, we designed the following research questions:

RQ1: Are Brazilian political journalists using Twitter to influence political narratives due to Bolsonaro’s communication strategy?

RQ2: What are Brazilian political journalists' concerns and perceptions of free expression using Twitter on political issues?

Although citizens still recognize journalism as a crucial contributor to understanding the complexity of our times, the press is an institution that struggles to inspire sufficient confidence in several countries such as Brazil, Spain, Mexico, and the US, among others (Toff et al., 2021). The use of social media by former US President Donald Trump and its relationship with journalists from traditional media (until his banishment from Twitter and Facebook) should be mentioned as a paradigmatic example (Gutsche, 2018; Morini, 2020; Ouyang & Waterman, 2020), with connections to the Brazilian case.

In fact, Trump's communication strategy, designed by Steve Bannon, has changed the basis of political communication, not only during an electoral campaign but before, during, and after it (Morini, 2020). As explained by Feffer (2021), Bannon, based on his experience as creator and editor-in-chief of Breitbart News, idealized an international movement of right-wing leaders. Most of them, such as Bolsonaro in Brazil, adopted his strategies. Based on a populist, fragmented and partial edition of facts, manipulation of truth, and against everything that ethical journalism stands for, the idea was to create propaganda instead of news, to engage the social media audience by offering supporters shareable material to legitimize their political views; paraphrasing Petre (2021), news designed as clickbait to polarize, despite the moral consequences. All these right-wing leaders, such as Trump or Bolsonaro, continuously discredit traditional journalism critics or report on politically sensitive topics. They blamed it for not being neutral and supporting new media outlets or traditional media that expressively helped them, such as Fox News TV or Record TV, in the US and Brazil (Almeida, 2019; Morini, 2020).

In turn, journalists' presence on social media changed their traditional roles as gatekeepers. Some of them assumed the category of political influencers (Casero-Ripollés, 2020), and journalistic outlets stimulated an apparently win-win process, incorporating journalists-influencers in newsrooms as well as encouraging their employees to use their reputation and credibility to create active profiles on social media platforms (Pérez Serrano & García Santamaría, 2021). Progressively, journalists are becoming an essential part of the message. Reframing and mixing McLuhan's thesis with enunciation theory, the medium, and the enunciator is (also) the message. In particular, in this article, we assume the statement that Twitter is now a central intermediary place—although not the only one—for political debates (Bouvier & Rosenbaum, 2020).

Taking this context as a background, as mentioned earlier, this article aims to explore the role of journalists as political influencers using Twitter in Brazil after Jair Bolsonaro became President (in January 2018). As part of the populist spectrum of extreme right-wing politi-

cians, even before his election to the presidency of Brazil, Bolsonaro has had a hostile relationship with the press, openly supported censorship, and suggested throughout his digital platforms, including Twitter (where he has up to 7,2 million followers), actions against media outlets or journalists considered subversives, communists, or bad professionals. As sustained by Article 19 (2021, p. 33), "populist leaders and those who seek to entrench their own power hate accountability, which is why we have seen attacks on journalists and online censorship intensify in many countries," and Brazil was mentioned as a paradigmatic exemplum of these threats. After the arrival of Bolsonaro, as argued by Silva and Marques (2021), Brazilian journalists became more vulnerable to harassment and violence. Brazil's situation goes beyond merely being a parallel of "Trumpism." According to Nemer (2021), Bolsonaro's supporters could attempt to reproduce the US Capitol invasion if he were defeated in the 2022 Brazilian presidential election.

The extensive available literature mainly discusses Bolsonaro's tactics of using WhatsApp to share disinformation (Canavilhas et al., 2019; Chagas, 2022; Chaves & Braga, 2019; C. Machado et al., 2019; Moura & Michelson, 2017). However, news production, distribution, and consumption in a polarized public space like Brazil have changed (J. Machado & Miskolci, 2019). As a result, social media platforms appeared as a real-time source of information for Brazilians. Consequently, political journalists have become more attached to their social media networks. As in many other countries and contexts, Twitter has become a new form of interaction with political journalism and its audiences (Bruns & Nuernbergk, 2019). Based on a qualitative perspective, we questioned journalists on their use of social media as political influencers to control narratives and hold on to their voices under rampant violence and increasing restrictions on free expression.

## 2. Literature Review

In this article, the epistemological lens requires different layers to achieve the designed objective. Hence, firstly, we will review social media's impacts on news production, distribution, and consumption, particularly on political journalism. Secondly, we will also discuss it based on the idea of influence or the creation of an indirect system of influence. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, among others, have created the category of influencers. However, we argue that this peer position, applied to political journalists, can be better explained by the "two-step flow" theory. Finally, we will review studies on how political journalists have been using social media platforms, especially Twitter, to circumvent restrictions on freedom of expression in critical regimes.

As an institution, journalism faces a defining moment while being in a state of disarray. According to Zelizer et al. (2021, p. 14), "in journalism, the institution ends up being disconnected from the everyday realities of



everyone who matters,” which means failing to keep in tune with journalists, sources, and subjects of news, and audiences. Many layers can be employed to explain it. Social media’s impact on news presentation is an essential one, as explained by Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019). Among other social media platforms, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp transformed journalism and its effect on society, from production to consumption (Steensen & Westlund, 2020). Social media turned the agenda-setting and the meaning of public interest (Napoli, 2019), opening up the struggle to set a new intermediary model. Also, it changed the gatekeeper process. In the US context, Singer (2014) explored and described how editors of digital newspapers understood the role of users as secondary gatekeepers. According to his study, social media, journalists and editors perceive the value of users in news production, resulting in a “two-steep gatekeeping process,” in which one editor’s decision to include a topic as news is followed by users’ participatory capacity—allowed by technology—to downgrade or upgrade the visibility of the information piece.

Social media impacts on political journalism have been framed from different angles in this context. For example, Bruns and Nuernbergk (2019) suggest creating new structures and forms of power relations, influence, and information flows among political journalists, their audiences on Twitter, and other stakeholders. Although circumscribed to Germany and Australia, they identified that journalists’ voices throughout social media competed with experts, commentators, and other sources for the same space. These new power structures are part of a new media ecology or a “hybrid media system” in which boundaries between traditional and new media are blurring. As a consequence, both are becoming more interdependent, and taking politics as an example, the “news cycle” should be replaced by the “political information cycle” (Chadwick, 2017).

Mainstream media accepted new forms of collaborations from citizens, blurring the frontiers of news production in the context of alternative platforms’ and alternative media’s growing credibility (Salaudeen, 2021). Moreover, under the empire of networked society and the rampant social media presence in daily life, digital influencers appeared and got the capacity to battle to set public opinion on matters of interest (Fernandez-Prados et al., 2021).

Before defining what a digital influencer—or political journalist influencer—is and what is their capacity to influence (the public opinion or the public or political agenda), the meaning of influence must be contextualized in the light of media studies. Katz and Lazarsfeld (2017) offer an opening view. Published originally in 1955, *Personal Influence* proposed that the mass media effect should not be explained in terms of a direct effect on the audience. Instead, they defended the thesis of the existence of an “indirect system of influence,” turning the focus from general media effects to what people do with it as an audience. Therefore, the so-called two-step

flow of communication defends that the primary group of socialization in a given community or group is decisive in building opinion on any specific topic. This primary group of opinion leaders is responsible for receiving and processing information from the mass media and interacting with it. This group is responsible for mediating and sharing (ideas or information) with the other audience members, the second flow. As Livingstone (2006) explains, although it proposes a shift from direct to an indirect system of effects based on a mass media mindset, it is not limited to it. In the age of media convergence, with a globalized and even more personalized media environment, some insights should be considered, especially that “processes of media influence are mediated by social contexts, including community and face-to-face interactions” (Livingstone, 2006, p. 243). In addition, to support the inquiry on contextual-textual mediation in the new media environment, Livingstone suggests the importance of including artifacts or devices, activities and practices, and social arrangements employed to communicate or share information.

O’Regan (2021) suggests that Katz’s assumptions constitute an essential raw material for discussing how social media influencers emerged and have become, in some cases, political influencers nowadays. Social media, according to Lindgren (2017, p. 29), “enables the co-creation and constant editing by multimodal content, that is, content that mixes several modalities (written text, photographic images, videos, and sounds).” The revolutionary possibilities generated by web 2.0 created a new media ecology or, as mentioned before, a hybrid media system where information and its circulation gained a central place. Reviewing it with a sociological lens, Manuel Castells (2009) coined the idea of “self-mass communication” to explain the potential capacity that web 2.0 and social media gave to individuals to make their voices reach a mass audience. As an optimist, the same author analyzed how these voices became capable of organizing social movements and taking actions that trembled political structure during the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, or the 15-M Indignados Movement (Castells, 2012). However, he did not explain what it is to be a relevant figure in social media or an influencer in a networked society.

In the context of new media ecology, while limited to a profit-driven theory, marketing analysts figured out earlier new media potentiality and developed a tiny theory of influencers. In the early days of Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, Paul Gillin (2007) offered an attempt to explain the emergent role of digital influencers, the majority of whom at that point were bloggers. It goes on a similar marketing theory, such as Keller and Berry’s (2003) thesis that there is an indirect system of opinion leaders able to persuade others on a micro-scale his peers. According to Taillon et al. (2020, p. 768), “social media influencers are social media users who have built a substantial network of followers by posting textual and visual narrations of their everyday lives and hold

influence over a group of viewers.” In addition, it is considered essential that these influencers must use their networks to show their “human brands.” Advertising a product or presenting a political opinion is considered the same “selling” process, based on platforms’ capacity to “earn profit from the human brands they create.”

If digital influencers were able to manufacture a particular audience of followers, engaging them with their content production and influencing and persuading them to consume any product, political leaders and their spin-doctors visualized a fertile field to conquer. The connections between marketing and politics are not new. However, social media has changed the way it is done. According to Highfield (2016), it has politicized the personal on an everyday scale and made politics even more personal. Throughout social media, politicians got an audience to comment daily on news and any occurrences, from the most serious to the most trivial fact.

By extension, political journalism also turned. Casero-Ripollés (2020) argues that, recovering Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (2017) thesis, one of the most relevant changes introduced by social media in the field of political communication “is the emergence of political influencers or digital opinion leaders” (p. 171). The two-step flow re-appeared in a more complex relationship between producers and audiences. Lou (2021) argues for the need for a “trans-parasocial relation—to capture a collectively reciprocal, (a)synchronously interactive, and co-created relation between influencers and their captive followers” (p. 3). In the social media age, the audience was classified by many as fragmented by new technologies, interactional opportunities, and pitfalls. But, as Huertas Bailén (2021) explains, more than this, we face an even more personalized consumption experience.

Hence, news media outlets and journalists are reframing social media in many ways. On news production, Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019) highlight how Twitter and Facebook made news presentations more interpersonal and subjective. Canter (2015), focusing on Twitter, supports the thesis on how it has affected news-making, news-gathering, live reporting, verification; although the uses of Twitter to drive traffic to news companies did not feature in her study, she did present the idea of “personal branding and journalists presenting a personalized—but not personal—account of their job via their tweets” (p. 888). Studies on journalists’ personal branding on Twitter identify a new form of social capital for journalists in a field of dispute for the audience attention and visibility among peers and media outlets (e.g., Brems et al., 2017; Lawrence et al., 2014).

Also, Twitter or the activity of microblogging has become part of the journalists’ routine and provided them with a new way to be accountable and to share and engage with user-generated content (Lasorsa et al., 2012); however, with a transparency paradox, whether they disclose more about how news is produced and less on their personal lives they get fewer interaction claims (Hedman, 2016). To Saipera and Iliadi (2015),

Twitter has opened an affective news relation redefining the boundaries between audiences and journalists into one in which professional authenticity, personal repertoire, and responsibility become central pieces of journalists’ labor and presence on digital platforms.

Twitter and social media platforms have allowed a new space for dissident voices to reach an audience to express their thoughts (Castells, 2012). According to Hintz (2016), the paradox of using commercial social media to express dissident voices has generated an intermediary model where protestors or activists articulated social mobilization by it. Though, these private companies can restrict the circulation of messages and surveil them. In short, what was a public right—free expression—becomes subordinated to a private interpretation and will. However, as explained by Price (2015), the new architecture of information flows allowed a reshaped marketplace of ideas where social media can contribute to journalists, and activists, among others, to circumvent political and authoritarianism temptations to limit free expression. Undoubtedly, a side effect of it is that journalists become more exposed to private and public (including police) surveillance (Thurman, 2018) in an ambiguous context where, apparently, they can express their opinions more freely.

### 3. Methods

This article aims to research the role of Brazilian journalists using Twitter to become political influencers. A sample of 10 journalists with more than 10,000 followers on Twitter, five working for traditional media outlets, and five with labor activities in native new media were interviewed in depth.

#### 3.1. Sampling Procedures

As a qualitative study, the number of interviews (10) was defined by saturation. To reach the journalists, we used a snowball technique. We must point out that we did more than 60 contacts with potential participants until we achieved the sample. Most journalists contacted declined, and anonymity was a natural condition requested by participants. Since 2018, the Federal Police, the Ministry of Justice, and other institutions from the Brazilian government have started to pressure or intimidate activists, journalists, scholars, and internet influencers, among others, who publicly show critical positions with Bolsonaro’s government. Bolsonaro’s hostility especially targeted female journalists. A historical barometer on violence against journalists in Brazil, released in 1990, has indicated that since Bolsonaro’s inauguration, the number of cases has been increasing: 58% more in 2019 and 105% more in 2020 compared with the previous years, respectively. The President himself, in 2021, was considered responsible, in person, for 34% of the 430 cases (Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas, 2022).

Therefore, to protect participants of the study, we took some measures: a) all the interviews were conducted using an encrypted open-source videoconferencing system to avoid external interference or unauthorized recording; b) a pseudonym was attributed to all participants in any materials, including this article; c) all data that could potentially identify any participant were encrypted and protected by passwords; d) hence, along with this article, any mention that could professionally compromise any participants was omitted. For this reason, in Table 1 and throughout this article, we avoid linking any name to the company or independent project that participants were collaborating on. Interviews were carried out from 26 October till 28 November, 2021. All the discursive material produced was in the Portuguese language.

The sample from traditional media includes at least one journalist from *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Globo*, and *Estadão*. These are the three most influential newspapers in Brazil. Participants from native new media include journalists from *UOL* (the most significant content site), *Agência Pública*, and *The Intercept.br*, among other independent journalists. In this sense, although there is a historical field of alternative and popular community media in Brazil (including radio and newspapers), it is important to point out that, in Brazil, most alternative media in recent years has used new media or born as native (Cavalcante, 2021). For that reason, the new media sample included journalists from digital native alternative media projects. All the journalists interviewed had from eight up to more than 30 years of experience. Regarding gender, six were men, and four were women.

### 3.2. Analysis Procedures

We adopted Thompson's (2011) depth-hermeneutics (DH) as a methodological perspective considering that it allows an extensive articulation between the theoretical framework mobilized and its analytical possibilities. The DH incorporates the socio-historical conditions of production, circulation, and receptions of discourses as symbolic forms. Following that, we divided

the methodological proceedings into three stages (socio-historical analysis, formal or discursive analysis, and re-interpretation), "which must not be seen as separate stages of a sequential method but rather as analytically distinct dimensions of a complex interpretative process" (Thompson, 2011, p. 137). Therefore, we articulate the findings' explanation with the results of the interpretative analysis. To do so, using Atlas.ti software, we classified hermeneutic units according to their relevance for the analysis. Interviews were analyzed individually and then in relation to each other and in light of the socio-historical context. Theories mobilized in the previous section offered the epistemological lens to interpret the data and create clusters. Figure 1 summarizes the analysis procedure under the DH perspective.

Thompson (2011) sustains that DH is not a research method but a perspective that allows theory-method articulation and the creative combination of different research techniques. Thus, we could combine a discursive analysis with contextual/historical interpretation in the light of the theories reviewed.

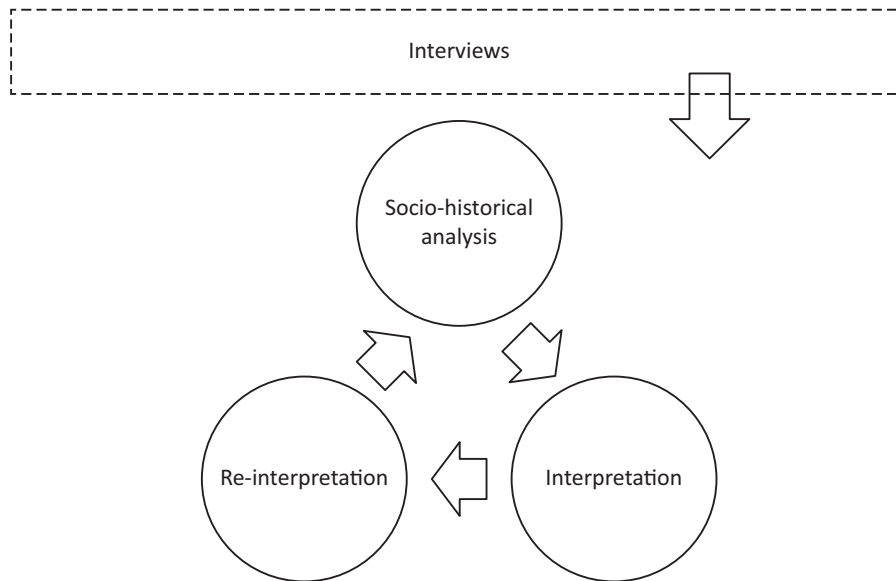
### 3.3. Scope and Limitation

As Bourdieu (1999) argues, qualitative interviews are an interactive procedure. Therefore, the discourse produced results from a social interaction process between researcher and participant. It is a constructive social process where the meanings of a linguistic exchange are negotiated.

Qualitative analyses are essential to offer a close view of an object but do not allow generalization. Moreover, although necessary to access participants, anonymity reduces the possibilities for interpretation and discussion. Therefore, the analysis does not include participants' social networking analysis. Nevertheless, findings and discussion offer possibilities to figure out the uses of Twitter by Brazilian journalists in the context of a right-wing authoritarian government as part of an accentuated dispute to control political narratives and change the intermediation model, but they are also limited.

**Table 1.** Sampling profile.

Code	Name (Fake)	Experience	Media Company	Twitter Followers	Day of Interview (2021)
1	Gabriel	< 18 years	New media	140 K	26 October
2	Pedro	13 years	Traditional	10.7 K	31 October
3	Carlos	< 25 years	New media	70.8 K	4 November
4	Amanda	< 10 years	New media	11.7 K	8 November
5	Cesar	33 years	Traditional	13.1 K	8 November
6	Ronaldo	< 30 years	Traditional	18 K	9 November
7	Roberta	19 years	Traditional	22 K	9 November
8	Juliana	11 years	New media	19.1 K	10 November
9	David	20 years	Traditional	22.4 K	10 November
10	Mariana	8 years	New media	49.6 K	28 November



**Figure 1.** Depth-hermeneutics and analysis procedure.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1. The Context of “Bolsonarism” and Its Social Media Uses in a Polarized Brazil

Explaining why Bolsonaro got elected, in 2018, as President of Brazil and his political movement known as “bolsonarism” is a complex endeavor and goes beyond the objective of this article. However, some contextual elements can be highlighted. Brazil faced a unique election process for several reasons. A few years before, in 2013, massive protests occurred when young people went to the streets to protest against all the established political institutions and parties (Machado & Miskolci, 2019). In 2016, a parliamentary coup d’état impeached president Dilma Rousseff from the Worker’s Party and a former prisoner of the dictatorial military regime in Brazil (1964–1985; Fagnani, 2017). Polarization and political hate divided Brazilian society. During the mentioned impeachment, Bolsonaro, a former military member, and an MP with more than six consecutive mandates without any political achievement, praised the members of the military who had tortured Rousseff with a misogynist tone (Possenti, 2018). In addition, an anti-corruption judiciary operation targeted the former Brazilian President, Lula da Silva, also from the Worker’s party, using lawfare tactics (Santoro & Tavares, 2019). Lula was sent to jail in 2018 when he was his party’s candidate and led all the polls for the 2018 presidential election (“Lula se entrega,” 2018). Without Lula as a real competitor, Bolsonaro used the polarization and the hate against the Worker’s Party (and the political establishment) in his favor, framing himself as a political outsider because he had never been in a major political party. Ideologically, he generated a narrative of anti-corruption, ultraconservative (anti-LGBT rights and misogyny) fitting with evangelism perspectives, and

painted himself as a victim after having suffered an assassination attempt in September 2018, one month before election day (Almeida, 2019).

Bolsonaro also used social networks and a systematic method of spreading fake news to gain attention, support, and control the narrative during the 2018 presidential campaign (Canavilhas et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2019; Statista, 2020). In this context and since, alongside his continuous threats to traditional media outlets (Silva & Marques, 2021), he did not attend any debates or interviews with professional journalists. Rather, his social media profiles were used to comment on any topic of his interest (Lopes et al., 2020).

##### 4.2. The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Journalists and the Influencer Paradoxes

Not only the internet but social media appearance changed the daily activities of journalists. “It’s not easy” was a common argument used by participants to explain daily activities, both in traditional and native digital newsrooms. Pressure and the convergence of modalities made journalists multimedia. Digitalization was a significant event for those with more than 20 years of experience. Downsizing, which was considered a natural consequence, occurred to an even greater extent. As Ronaldo explained:

When I was editor, in the first decade of this century, I remember sending a journalist and a photographer to a political event and my colleague, editor of the site, doing the same. Now, we have both lost our position, there are fewer editors in all newsrooms, and we send only one journalist, and s/he feeds our site, digital TV, platforms, and print paper with all the content. In addition, s/he also tweets!

Being resigned to this state of affairs was a common feature of all participants' opinions.

With this context as a given fact or a background, many good aspects of social media, in general, and Twitter, in particular, emerged in the field. "Twitter is the most journalist social media," said Carlos. "For me [César], it is a great source of information and keeps me up-to-date." According to informants, forecasting issues and scoops is another good aspect. In other words, to Pedro, Twitter allows him "to set a kind of information playlist to monitor facts and sources, and then, to reply or share it with my audience." Not only in the political context of Brazil, where many politicians, including Bolsonaro, use social media to make firsthand statements. "Press conference? I never attended," said Mariana. The political spectacle takes place in the digital sphere.

Becoming an influencer, however, for all of them was a natural happening in their professional lives. None of them assumed the role of influencer in terms of "human brand," as marketing theories described (Taillon et al., 2020). "Journalist can never be the news," said Carlos. To Amanda, "we are not celebrities; we inform!" However, after some discussion, the interviewees described what being an influencer means to a political journalist. Although all of them made a vigorous defense of information as a protagonist, they recognized the journalist's role in explaining or influencing people in their growth. All interviewees mentioned the information disorder and the growth of fake news in Brazil to explain "my responsibility to explain better and help people to get the meaning of the news," as said by Pedro. The liberal mindset that shapes most journalism theories also came up. "Yes, in some way, I am an opinion leader. But I just bring my view. People need to make their own conclusions. But in Brazil, the educational divide and the polarization make it hard," explained Roberta.

In this context, all of them expressed how Twitter helped them to produce more personalized content. "I don't look at metrics. But I learned empirically, tweeting, what my followers like and engage with," said Gabriel. However, the personalized or sectorial specialization shaped in Twitter is not enough to be an active influencer. All of the participants convey the idea that the more you use your personal touch, the more followers, reputation, and influence you get. The two-step flow model seems to be an accurate model to explain how using Twitter journalists influence political opinions as part of an indirect system of influence.

Although for those working on traditional media outlets, it seems easier to establish a boundary between personalized content and personal life, the Brazilian political landscape, since 2018, due to Bolsonaro's communication strategy, makes it hard. "You lose the right to be human," says Gabriel as he explains the bad side of being a twitterer who is considered a political influencer. This perception was shared by all participants working for new media. According to Juliana, "the journalist's online life is much more fragile and susceptible to harm than in

other physical spaces." She added that when reporting on government scandals, for example, the journalist must be prepared to receive a huge amount of virtual attacks.

The ugliness became clear when all participants from new media described virtual harassment, canceling, and continuous aggression. "Brazil's reality is ugly. It is not a safe place for journalists. Especially if you are women, gay, black, or other minority groups that the President and their digital militia continuously attack," said Amanda. She describes how she receives daily threats of sexual violence, among other violent acts. Gabriel, who was attacked several times by what he called "Bolsonaro's digital militia," added that reporting these issues in Brazil requires strong mental preparation.

#### *4.3. Social Capital, New Intermediaries, and the Political Information Cycle*

"I don't know when it has happened, but Twitter in Brazil has become the journalist curriculum vitae," said Amanda. All of the interviewees agreed upon this to some degree. Some explained their decision to erase old posts, considering that someone could use them to cancel, discredit, or harass. However, political volatility in Brazil puts journalists under constant scrutiny. "When you disclose some political scandal of this [Bolsonaro] government, you know that you become the target immediately," explains Pedro. If this could happen in the past, all participants agreed that it has become more violent in the present. Protecting reputation seems to be a core issue for all of them to hold on to their positions as influential journalists.

New media journalists are proud of their social capital and their potential audience on Twitter. All the participants, however, identified a "new intermediary model." David criticized those journalists who become bigger than the media companies, but in general, all of them explained from their field Chadwich's thesis on a "hybrid model" where the news cycle was replaced by the political information cycle. The way to inform about politics has changed. In a more polarized and informed social media, Roberta explains that she takes notes from sources, during interviews, in the format of tweets. Similar practices were described and, in general, participants explained that they first publish the headline, then expand the narrative in a fluid content relation from/for social media. According to all, reporting becomes a real-time activity. Hence, similar to Singer's (2014) findings, a secondary gatekeeper seems to articulate editors/journalists and user's roles, making them more attentive to this collaboration on the re-distribution of news and, as mentioned by Mariana, "building the news in a real-time mood, with more transparency," in line with Hedman's results (2016).

For that reason, it was no surprise when journalists from traditional media outlets explained that "the newspaper (traditional media) helps us to tweet what is good. Twitter Brazil, for example, has an agreement with the

company. They organized a course in our newsroom to help us to be (or act) as influencers,” said César. Despite that, as Gabriel expressed, “traditional media companies used to see social networks and digital media as enemies, as one who has stolen something that belongs to them.” New media journalists—even those who are not in new media outlets—agreed that traditional media still uses the mindset of competitors. As Mariana says:

When you publish a political issue using Twitter and your media site, you can expand it and connect with others’ work...and the story can become bigger. But traditional media still wants all the audience for them, all the credits, etc.

#### 4.4. *Tweeting and the Journalism Crisis in a Collapsed Democracy*

The continuous attacks perpetrated by Bolsonaro harassing journalists, as described earlier, created a sort of precaution or self-care protection feeling when talking about them. Without mentioning Bolsonaro’s name, carefully, Pedro said that “this government crossed a red line on institutionalism. Since 2018 (maybe a bit before), in Brazil, the press and journalists have lived a sort of permanent under-pressure state.” In this context, as expressed by Juliana, “people in Brazil tweet very passionately.” All participants mentioned that, because of these elements, they do not polemicize on Twitter, which means they do not answer unpolite comments or engage in rhetorical disputes with followers or other twitterers. “I have my voice and, as a public figure, I need to act responsibly,” said Ronaldo.

Yet, traditional media have “style manual” and compliance guidelines for their journalists on what they can and cannot do in their personal social media profiles. It was expressed as something natural or a professional agreement by those who work for traditional media. Contrarily, journalists from new media criticized that. “Social media profiles must have our face! I would never ever accept censorship,” said the youngest participant, Mariana. For some, the existence of guidelines is a way to censor and control what can be published. “I still have colleagues working on traditional media, and they call these ‘documents’ ‘Social Media AI-5,’” explained Gabriel. During the military dictatorship period (1964–1985), the AI-5 was an institutional act imposed to suspend rights and freedoms, particularly those related to press and expression.

It was not unanimous. On the contrary, the idea that all journalists have a responsibility embodied in their function, especially when they become influential figures on Twitter, indicates that the discussion is not precisely on the existence of rules but its legitimacy (imposed by employer or platform). Moreover, for those who work for new media companies, the perception that Twitter profiles are part of themselves is stronger than for those who work for traditional media. Also, political

journalists settled in new media naturalized the perception that their Twitter profiles are something exchangeable with news outlets.

Some convergent views on the weakness of Twitter’s terms of use appeared in all interviews. Hate speech and the platforms’ incapacity to control attacks on journalists emerged in all interviews. “The law exists. Crime is crime inside or outside Twitter. But it seems that for some people, they will never be punished by Twitter or by the authorities,” explained Mariana. It arose in all interviews that platforms and Twitter contain disinformation, hate speech, and all types of continuing violence against journalists, and anyone who expresses a political opinion in Brazil has to deal with it.

Amanda, Ronaldo, Gabriela, Pedro, Paulo, and Roberta explained violent situations with credible details, including one in which they suffered a coordinated digital attack on Twitter by the “hate cabinet” after comments that criticized or disclosed a scandal regarding Bolsonaro, his government, or family. The existence and actions of a “hate cabinet” are under investigation by Brazilian Supreme Court (STF Inquire Nº 4.781, under secret). Furthermore, it was the object of analysis by a Special Parliamentary Commission in the Brazilian Congress (*CPI das Fake News*). In short, it would be a complex of sites and trolls used to attack Bolsonaro’s opponents since the electoral campaign in 2018.

The “hate cabinet,” according to the participants mentioned above and the available information released by institutions, can spread fake news about a person or change the truth using a disinformation technique. We consider it a nightmare for democracy which exemplifies the attacks on journalists and journalism as an institution. Also, it illustrates that audiences are no longer confident in the traditional intermediary model. Under this kind of attack, as said by informants, the only thing that works is to have a prominent position on Twitter where you can explain your situation, sources, and views. Therefore, being an influencer helps a lot.

## 5. Conclusions

Although it is not a novelty, it is convenient to point out that social media has changed political journalism. In a globalized world with new information flows and networks, extreme right-wing political leaders such as Bolsonaro in Brazil followed the Bannon–Trump strategy to set new forms of political communication. In the Brazilian context, this includes the extensive use of fake news, hate speech, harassment, and other forms of violence against journalists.

Journalism, as a practice or an institution, and democracy, in Brazil and other parts of the globe, are at a defining moment. Social Media in general, and Twitter in particular, are playing a core role. As Bruns and Nuernbergk (2019) suggested, new power structures emerged from political journalists’ relations with social media audiences. Brazilian journalists who participated in this study

exemplify different forms of Twitter's use to influence political narratives (setting the public or political agenda or building the public opinion). It has become part of their daily role, changing news production routines, offering a secondary gatekeeper to distribute news, and providing a more transparent process in the context of rampant fake news and pressure from the government.

Results indicate the existence of a similar two-step flow system, similar to Katz and Lazarsfeld's (2017), based on journalists/influencers–audiences/followers relation as part of a new intermediary model. We have identified that participants use their digital capital in two political directions. On the one hand, journalists share their spots and comments on daily issues as part of a digital strategy promoted by media outlets to gain attention and call the audience. On the other hand, in a polarized political context, as we inquired about in RQ1, journalists found in Twitter a path—although not the only one—to fight on the same battlefield (social media platforms) that Bolsonaro uses to communicate. The fluid connections between different media are reshaping the intermediary model. As we inquired in RQ2, participants indicated threats to freedom of expression in the digital landscape and the importance of being a digital influencer, which means having a prominent position across social media platforms. They indicated it as the best, and sometimes, the only way, to control narratives about their productions or themselves while they are faced with continual harassment, hate, and a fake news storm promoted by Bolsonaro and his supporters against journalists and media outlets.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Article

## United in Grief? Emotional Communities Around the Far-Right Terrorist Attack in Hanau

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### Abstract

Drawing on theories of affect, emotion, and new institutionalism, we analyze discourse around the right-wing terrorist attack in Hanau, Germany, to identify the different ways in which emotions and affect circulate on legacy media and Twitter and how they help establish varying emotional communities. Building upon an understanding of journalism as an affective institution, our article takes a close look at how journalism attempts to assert its role in public spheres not only by circulating information but also by providing emotional interpretations of events. Journalism's emotional interpretations, however, do not remain unchallenged. With the emergence of the hybrid media system, users engage in various forms of interaction on social media platforms, forming “affective publics” by connecting through their affective reactions to current issues and events. In these interactions, distinct emotional communities may emerge, built around performative, political emotions. Our data comprises various news shows aired on the German public service broadcaster ARD as well as a dataset of tweets about #Hanau that were collected in the immediate aftermath of the attack. The results of our mixed-methods analysis reveal that different performances of grief played a central role both on TV news and on social media. On TV, grief was nationally connotated and aimed at uniting Germany's population. On social media, it fueled anti-racist activism, as seen on the hashtag #SayTheirNames, honoring the victims of the attack.

### Keywords

affective publics; emotional communities; far-right terrorism; Hanau; journalism; new institutionalism; social media; social network analysis

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

In February 2020, a far-right terrorist attack in the German city of Hanau triggered nationwide—and even transnational—debates about racism, right-wing extremism, and collective responsibility after a man shot and killed nine people, specifically targeting those he believed to be of migrant descent. He then drove home, where he shot his mother and himself. The attack took place outside a convenience store and two bars that had either Turkish owners or were gathering places for local Kurdish and trans-cultural communities (“German prosecutors say,” 2020).

The federal police found a website registered in the perpetrator's name, a homemade YouTube video, and a confession letter filled with nationalist and racist conspiracy theories. On the basis of these factors, the attack was qualified as a right-wing extremist one (RND, 2020). The public debates concerning the attack involved a myriad of intense emotions that were displayed at vigils, solidarity rallies, and in actions offline and on social media as well as on political talk shows devoted to making sense of the collective emotions the attack triggered.

As a result of the “turn to affect” (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010) in the humanities and social sciences, journalism

studies have experienced a surge of research exploring the role of affect and emotion in journalists' reporting practices (Glück, 2021; Stupart, 2021), professional norms (Schmidt, 2021), and media production (McConville et al., 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). This constitutes an "emotional turn" in journalism studies, which has occurred in parallel to the consolidation of digital technologies and social media platforms in journalists' and audiences' everyday lives (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). With the concept of "affective publics" (Lünenborg, 2020; Papacharissi, 2015), scholars further emphasize the role of affect and emotions in mobilizing publics in networked media environments. Among affective publics, social media users acquire agency, providing their own emotional interpretations of current issues, but also mobilizing "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) around shared emotions. This scholarship brings to light the contradictions between journalism's normative understanding of affect and emotions as something to avoid and journalists' and publics' various uses of affect and emotions in their professional and everyday social practices.

In this article, we analyze the discourse around the right-wing terrorist attack in Hanau to identify the different ways in which emotions and affect circulate on legacy media and Twitter—as two distinct and competing forms of public communication—and how their circulation helps to establish varying emotional communities "in the heat of affective experiences" (Knudsen & Stage, 2015, p. 5).

Drawing on affect theory (Slaby & von Scheve, 2019) and new institutionalism (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017), we first outline the key concepts that theoretically inform our study. We then review the scholarship on legacy media's coverage of right-wing extremism. Afterwards, we introduce our research questions and describe our two separate datasets and the corresponding methods we used to analyze them. Finally, we discuss our findings and outline how legacy media and Twitter encourage different emotional communities centered around expressions of grief to emerge.

## 2. Journalism Vis-à-Vis Emotional Communities Online

Our article draws on a relational understanding of affect and emotions (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019) that highlights the interactions between bodies as these become involved in processes of mutually affecting each other. Unlike operationalizations common in the field of psychology (e.g., Ekman & Friesen, 1975), our methodology does not focus on the individual cognitive aspects of affect and emotions. Instead, our approach is part of a broader scholarship that focuses on "situationally bound, relationally affective occurrences in contemporary societies" (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018, p. 2). Thus, we are interested in the social and cultural aspects surrounding affect and emotions and how they are collectively negotiated in today's societies, in particular, through media.

According to our understanding, affect and emotions are in constant interaction. Emotions can be defined as "episodic realizations of affect" (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019, p. 46). Those experiencing such episodes can clearly name them drawing on culturally and historically established categories such as anger, fear, or joy. Affect, in turn, may contribute to the triggering of emotional episodes, or intensify or mitigate them (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019, p. 44).

Connecting these concepts, in particular, to discursive institutionalism (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Schmidt, 2010), we conceptualize journalism as an affective institution (Lünenborg & Medeiros, 2021). Thus, journalism's functions as an institution consist not only in circulating and mediating information according to the Habermasian conception of the public sphere, but also in providing emotional interpretations of current events and making certain affects and emotions (in)visible in public discourse. Thus, journalism as an institution co-constitutes cultural understandings of emotions as part of its coverage of events. In a similar sense, Jukes (2020) describes journalism as a "community of affective practice." However, in today's hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), journalism can no longer claim exclusivity over either of these functions.

The concept of discursive institutionalism contends that institutions are constantly in the throes of discursive negotiation, as different actors engage in exchanges around their legitimacy or need to change. Digital media has intensified this process, with the rise of affective publics that are permeated by "modes of relational interaction among citizens and between citizens and (digital media) technology, enabling and restraining public articulations" (Lünenborg, 2020, pp. 30–31). Such affective publics form in increasingly decentralized and ever-shifting contexts, such as social media platforms. In these settings, information, opinions, feelings, and interpretations become part of an affective stream of varying intensities.

Affective publics enable interactions between actors with various emotional interpretations of events, which may lead to challenges to those interpretations legacy journalism proposes. Activists, in particular, explore the increasingly blurred boundaries between debates on social media and news coverage to disseminate their own takes on current events among broader publics, as exemplified by the interplay between social media and legacy media around hashtags such as #MeToo (e.g., Starkey et al., 2019). Journalists' own individual presence on social media may also contribute to this development. While they become more visible as (private) individuals, they are also challenged to defend their journalistic authority in their interactions with activists and audiences on social media (e.g., Bentivegna & Marchetti, 2018).

We argue that such dynamics are also due to the formation of multiple emotional communities (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) within broad affective publics. While

affective publics describe forms of public spheres permeated by the exchange of affective reactions around a certain issue or event, emotional communities constitute the various subgroups inside those affective publics which cluster around shared emotions. These shared emotions are different from individual emotions in the sense that they are “performative, discursively constructed and usually collective and political” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 49). Thus, emotional communities are formed by users whose shared political views permeate their emotional interpretations of issues and events in public debates. By highlighting the way in which politics and performativity are deeply embedded in how users interact as part of affective publics, emotional communities provide a helpful lens for analyzing the formation of distinct networks around the same event on social media, which is what our study aims to do. Focusing in particular on performativity as something that occurs between bodies when they collectively engage in political action (Butler, 2011) brings to the fore the relationality that permeates the formation of emotional communities: These communities are continuously (re-)constituted through interactions between human and non-human bodies, e.g., social media users and their media-technological environments. The formation of emotional communities, however, is not exclusive to social media. Research on how legacy media cover far-right violence, which we explore in the next section, exemplifies this.

### 3. Covering Right-Wing Extremism

Analyzing German print news articles about the crimes the National Socialist Underground, a neo-Nazi terror cell in Germany, committed in the early 2000s, Graef (2020, p. 516) illuminates how the news media reproduced police interpretations of the series of murders as an “intra-milieu” crime within the Turkish community, even coining the infamous label “*Dönermorde*” (kebab murders). In addition, German newspapers contributed to othering the victims by linking their deaths to migrants’ economic struggles, alleged engagements in drug dealing, as well as their cultural values and “unwillingness or inability to integrate themselves” (Graef, 2020, p. 516). After the National Socialist Underground was uncovered, the narrative shifted to othering its members by referring to them as a minority with “immoral political values” (Graef, 2020, p. 521), as opposed to the ideals of tolerant, democratic Germany, thus demarcating the perpetrators as outsiders despite their German nationality.

Focusing mostly on the US press, Bell and Cervantez (2021, p. 1151) contend that it is eager to downplay right-wing terrorist threats, focusing more on Islamist terrorism, which is in fact rarer. The authors further review how the adherence to the normative ideal of objectivity usually does not result in unbiased reporting, but rather reinforces colonial, hegemonic ideas, especially in news coverage of Black Americans, Indigenous Peoples,

or women. Moreover, when racist crimes are recognized, they are described as a rarity located outside of what is considered to constitute the US as a nation (Bell & Cervantez, 2021, p. 1146).

Also, within the US context, Zdjelar and Davies (2021) conducted a thematic analysis of news articles about five cases of right-wing extremism published by *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. The authors found that news articles predominantly avoided labeling these as cases of terrorism as well as labeling the perpetrator a terrorist. Instead, the perpetrators were humanized, for instance, by offering details about their friends or describing one perpetrator, for example, in a way that portrays him “as a normal person who posted racist statements online rather than someone who is, in fact, a white supremacist” (Zdjelar & Davies, 2021, p. 302). Their study further reveals that the news coverage sought out other possible motivations and only portrayed right-wing ideology as a secondary motive. Powell (2011, 2018) uncovered similar themes when comparing US news coverage of right-wing to Islamist terrorist attacks. While the terrorist attacks Muslims perpetrated were likely to be labeled as terrorism and linked to religious or cultural reasons, in cases of right-wing terrorism, the news media often searched for other causes or motivations, such as gun violence culture or mental health issues.

Humanizing perpetrators and depoliticizing violence are thus common in Western news coverage of right-wing terrorism (see also Falkheimer & Olsson, 2015). While there are many meaningful academic contributions to the news coverage of right-wing terror, how emotions drive and constitute these narratives remains largely unexamined. In our study, we aim to empirically address this question.

### 4. Case Study and Methods

On the evening of 19 February 2020, an armed man stormed a convenience store and two bars in the German city of Hanau, killing nine people and injuring five others. All the victims were either German nationals of foreign descent or migrants who had been living in Germany for many years. This act of terror was widely covered both in German and international media and likewise elicited massive reactions on social media worldwide. In our study, we focus on the affective dynamics permeating these discourses by posing the following research question:

RQ: How do emotional communities emerge in journalistic news coverage and on Twitter in response to the terrorist attack in Hanau?

In order to answer this research question, we employed a mixed-methods approach to two types of material: journalistic TV programs and a Twitter dataset, both dating from the first days after the attacks. Both types

of material are uniquely useful for analyzing two different forms of public communication. Public service broadcasters' news shows are among the most popular journalistic products in Germany. The primetime edition of *Tagesschau*, for example, reached an average of 11 million viewers in 2020, with a market share of 39.5% among German news shows ("Neuer höchstwert," 2021). Meanwhile, Twitter constitutes 20% of German users' online activities (Statista, 2020). The platform is also particularly helpful in analyses of affective dynamics, as "news streams generated on Twitter function as affect modulators for people using them to connect with others and express their understanding of a particular issue" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 118).

Our selection of journalistic coverage of the terrorist attacks in Hanau consists of 11 programs aired on ARD, one of Germany's public service broadcasting networks, between 19 and 26 February 2020. The selection includes four episodes of the primetime news show, *Tagesschau*, three episodes of the late-night news show, *Tagesthemen*, and one episode each of the television journalism feature programs, *Zapp*, *Brennpunkt*, *Monitor*, and *Kontraste*.

As part of our qualitative video analysis (Mikos, 2015), we performed a sequence analysis (Faulstich & Strobel, 2013) of the entire body of material. Then, we coded all videos using the software MAXQDA, focusing mainly on the *affective registers* employed in journalistic TV coverage of the attacks. Examining affective registers allows for an empirical assessment of the ways in which emotions and affect are performed in audiovisual media by aesthetic and discursive elements, "steering reception processes on the corporeal level and creating mechanisms that connect or exclude bodies" (Töpfer, 2021, p. 119, our translation). Empirical analysis of affective registers takes place by focusing on three dimensions of broadcasts: bodies, practices, and discourses. Finally, with the aid of shooting transcripts (Faulstich & Strobel, 2013), we were able to zoom in on particular sequences that represented in detail typical examples of the affective registers present in the episodes.

It is important to highlight that affective registers do not describe how audiences interpret audiovisual texts. Rather, they provide insights into how audiovisual texts offer possible ways to affectively relate to the human—in the sense of actors portrayed—and non-human bodies—e.g., objects, spaces, other living beings—on the screen. Thus, our main focus in this part of the analysis is on how the affective registers employed in the coverage suggested the formation of certain emotional communities in the aftermath of a racist terrorist attack.

By analyzing tweets, we examined how emotional communities emerge on Twitter and how they relate to legacy media's emotional interpretations of the event. We collected 210,176 tweets featuring the hashtag #Hanau/#hanau between 20 and 23 February 2020. We used the Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet, a web-based tool that permits the gathering of up to 3,000

tweets per hour directly from Twitter's application programming interface. Our first analytical step was to conduct a social network analysis (SNA; Knoke & Yang, 2020) using the open-source software Gephi. As a fundamentally relational method, SNA provides a useful empirical tool for analyzing affective publics, as it connects actors' practices and attitudes to their belonging to certain groups, while simultaneously demonstrating how centralized, polarized, or fragmented a network is, likewise thus revealing potential antagonisms in discourse about a topic.

Finally, we selected the tweets of the 50 most influential actors in our network for qualitative text analysis, resulting in a sample of 551 tweets. Drawing on the approach of "reading for affect" (Berg et al., 2019) as a method for analyzing emotions and affect in text, we analyzed the tweets according to three dimensions: (a) expressions and attributions of emotions; (b) linguistic collectivization, i.e., how expressions of emotions elicit communities; and (c) the materiality of discourse, which refers to how emotions materialize as a result of various linguistic styles and multimodal practices.

## 5. United in National Grief: Television Coverage of the Terrorist Attack in Hanau

Our analysis revealed that the affective register of national grief dominated TV coverage of the attack. The register aimed to establish an emotional community to unite Germany's population in shared grief for the victims of the attack. This affective register emerged from our qualitative video analysis, which tracked patterns across our selected material. Its existence reveals the particular interplay between discursive and aesthetic elements that permeated the journalistic emotional interpretation of this event.

Throughout the coverage, as part of the formation of this emotional community, Hanau and Germany became more than geographic locations, transformed into "discourse bodies." Discourse bodies are one dimension the method of "reading for affect" helps to identify (Berg et al., 2019, p. 50)—i.e., actors attribute emotions to non-human bodies such as geographical places, thus assigning them qualities that, in theory, are exclusive to humans. For instance, by describing the city of Hanau as "grieving" and "wounded," a news anchor introducing a news clip on *Tagesthemen* produced a discourse body (Miosga, 2020, 00:00:15–00:00:51).

In terms of human bodies, politicians played a key role in personifying the grieving nation. Their visits to Hanau and their statements occupied a central role in the incident's news coverage. Their individual emotions were discursively enmeshed with those of the German state itself. This became clear when the state of Hesse's interior minister answered a critical question posed by *Tagesthemen's* news anchor by saying: "We are also very, very sad. Hesse's state government, but also the federal interior minister, the president were in Hanau

today and we expressed our grief together with the relatives of the victims” (Beuth, 2020, 00:08:24–00:08:36). Hesse’s minister-president even said that his and other politicians’ expressions of grief and compassion towards the relatives were “the most important thing” (Bouffier, 2020, 00:07:39–00:07:50).

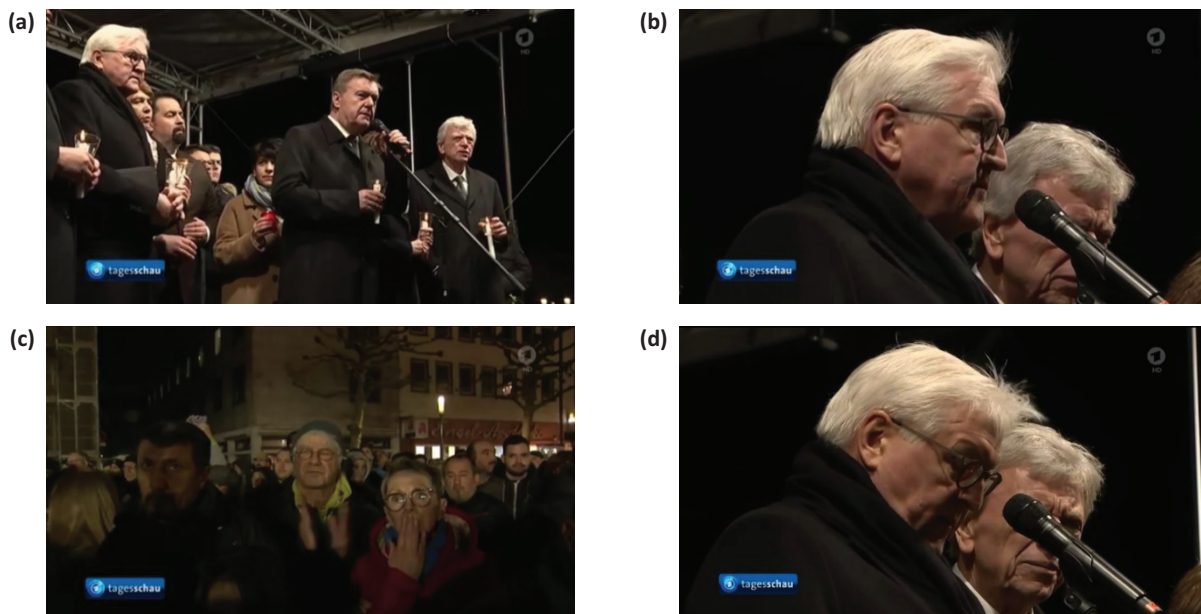
The affective register of national grief was also generated through various aesthetic means, for instance, in sequences that combined shots of politicians and regular people participating in the same vigils or performing similar practices to pay their respects publicly, such as laying flowers at improvised memorial sites. One example from *Tagesschau* on 20 February 2020 made this particularly clear (Figure 1). The news clip showed a vigil in Hanau, during which various politicians and members of civil society gave speeches. These actors stood on a stage, each holding a candle in their hands, and were filmed from below in low-angle shots, which usually suggest power (Figure 1a). The sequence cut to Germany’s President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Figure 1b), who was also filmed in a low-angle shot which, combined with a close-up of his facial features, assigned grave weight to his solemn words: “We remain united as a society. We will not be intimidated. We will not be drawn apart. We grieve” (Jakubowski, 2020, 00:01:27–00:01:37). At this point, a J cut—which blends the audio from the next shot into the current one—introduced supportive applause from the public, which was shown in the following shot in medium close-up, making visible to viewers audience members’ body language—and, thus, their emotional reactions to the speech (Figure 1c). The next shot, again taken from a low angle, returned to Steinmeier in close-up (Figure 1d). He continued to discursively construct an emotional com-

munity to which the emotions he indirectly assigned to the terrorist did not belong: “We grieve and we see that we are united in our grief and against hate, racism, and violence” (Jakubowski, 2020, 00:01:25–00:01:52).

As this sequence exemplifies, TV news represented politicians as performing the role of gathering the grieving nation together in public acts of sorrow. Ordinary participants in the vigils were rarely interviewed. However, their visible displays of emotion constituted another important part of this affective register, reinforcing a message of unity through grief and potentially offering viewers at home, presumably likewise regular citizens, a way to identify with those taking part in the vigils.

While the affective register of national grief was present in almost all programs we analyzed, there were differences between the daily news show *Tagesschau* and more interpretative formats, such as *Tagesthemen* and television journalism feature programs. In particular, the predominance of political actors in the news coverage acquired nuance in the latter, as they presented a greater diversity of quoted sources, with soundbites from members of civil society and relatives of the victims, which featured much less or not at all on *Tagesschau*. This brought to light questions about the formation of a national, grieving emotional community, particularly since the victims’ relatives and members of minority groups positioned themselves in relation to this emotional community in various ways.

A young woman was introduced through a medium shot that showed her standing in the middle of a crowd of people, talking. A voiceover described her as an engaged member of Hanau’s Kurdish community, who had been living in Germany for 18 years. In a soundbite, she vowed that she and other migrants would not hide like far-right



**Figure 1.** (a) Politicians and civil society representatives share a stage at a vigil in Hanau on 20 February 2020 (00:01:27); (b) President Steinmeier gives a speech (00:01:37); (c) the public’s reaction is briefly shown (00:01:39); (d) and then the camera returns to Steinmeier (00:01:46). Source: Jakubowski (2020).

terrorists wanted them to do. The camera zoomed in on her resolute features in a close-up shot, while she emphasized, “We are part of this society and we will stand up for that” (Clement & Elele, 2020, 00:07:26–00:07:46). Thus, the woman took politicians up on their statements regarding national unity, while explicitly asserting migrants’ belonging to German society. The head of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany warned that a “lot of trust” in the state had been lost in his community as a consequence of the attack and that “we need to gain it back together” (Meerkam, 2020, 00:02:47–00:03:05). He thus implicitly adhered to an idea of the national community comprising different sectors of society, while assigning the specific emotion of loss of trust to members of the Muslim community. His features were also filmed in a close-up shot, highlighting his worried expression.

Finally, a relative of one of the victims explicitly challenged the formation of an emotional community of national grief. In a close-up shot in which he first looked to the side, as if searching for words, and then directly at the reporter, who was standing adjacent to the camera, holding a microphone, the man stated: “It’s not we who should be thinking about what happens next, but rather Germany should be thinking about this” (Bernier & Zimmermann, 2020, 00:03:54–00:04:02). Here, Germany as a nation was rendered as a discourse body, to which the victim’s relative assigned the task of thinking about what response should follow the attacks. He seemed to equate this discourse body with the country’s white majority while including himself in a “we” separate from it, in stark contrast with the statements of other members of minority groups quoted in the coverage we analyzed. This contrast may arise from his belonging to the group of relatives who lost a loved one, which differentiated his emotional response as someone being directly affected by terrorism from the more abstract, nationally connotated grief of the emotional community constructed throughout the coverage. Thus, although the affective register of national grief dominated the news programs, it did not remain unquestioned, particularly since members of minority groups introduced their own perspectives. This diversity of perspectives was even more visible on Twitter.

## 6. The Conversation Network Around #Hanau

In the second part of our study, we examined the emotional communities that emerged on Twitter around #Hanau as a hashtag. We started by conducting an SNA, as this would allow us to discern different communities and their structures in the network we were studying, but also is an important preliminary step in performing qualitative analysis.

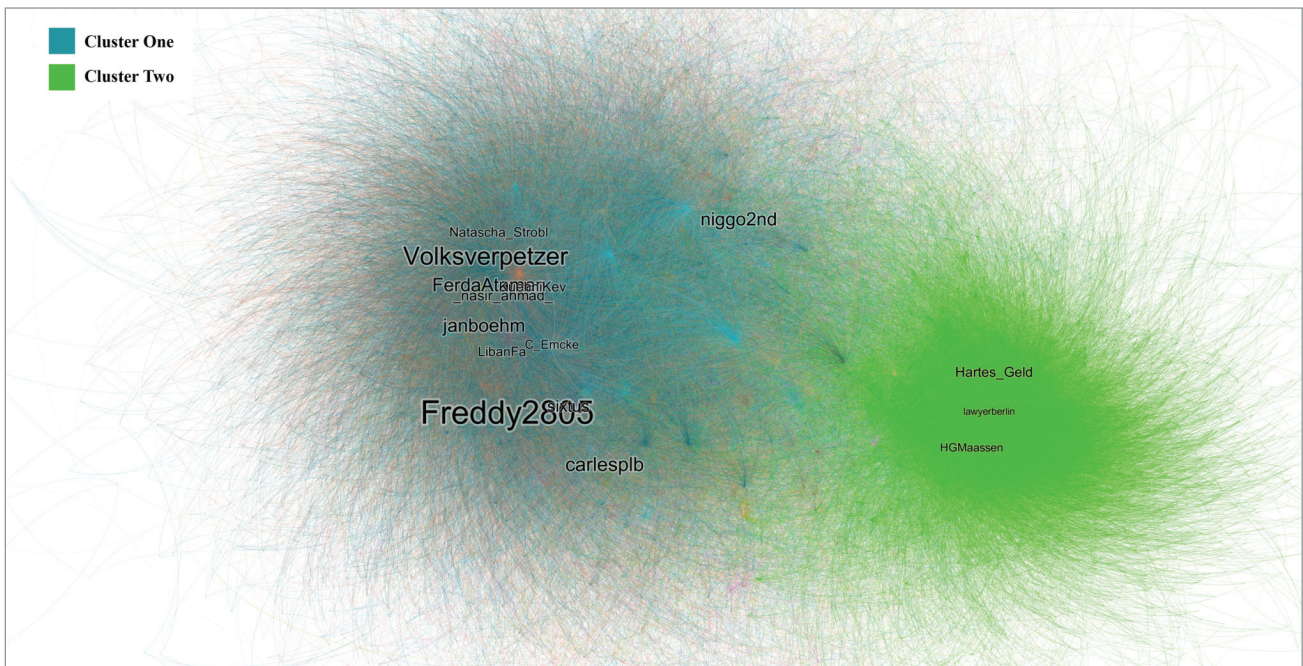
In our SNA, we first extracted retweets, mentions, and replies between Twitter users in our dataset. Mentions in retweets, as well as self-loops, were not included. The result was a total of 82,863 nodes and

176,655 edges. Retweets comprised the largest number of interactions (95.73%,  $n = 169,120$ ), followed by replies (2.54%,  $n = 4,480$ ), and mentions (1.73%,  $n = 3,055$ ). This distribution is common in hashtag-based samples since replies and mentions usually address a particular user, rather than aiming to reach large publics and thus rarely feature hashtags (Bruns & Moe, 2014). Retweets—although temporary and low-level—can be considered “signs of affective investment,” representing “a performative affirmation of the contents of a particular tweet and a way of spreading a conversation more widely” (Geboers & Van De Wiele, 2020, p. 751). Accordingly, we will discuss how influential actors in our network gained prominence specifically as a result of emotional alignments that mobilized different communities.

We used PageRank (Brin & Page, 1998) to identify influential actors. This is a built-in algorithm in Gephi, which provides an importance score for each node based on its incoming ties. We then categorized 50 users with the highest scores as follows: (a) legacy media, (b) political actors, (c) activists, (d) public experts, and (e) others. A political editor at the conservative newspaper *Welt* occupied the most influential position in the network. We found a total of 17 accounts belonging to legacy media (including individual journalists), 11 to political actors, seven to activists/activist organizations, and three to public experts, all of whom were scholars. Others ( $n = 14$ ) included the accounts of local police, several alternative media and citizen blogs specialized in monitoring right-wing extremism and radicalism, and some spam accounts. In addition, two actors were coded as both journalists and activists, due to their hybrid activities. We thus found that while institutional actors were central, their influence was paralleled by actors that were “crowdsourced to prominence” (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2016, p. 99) within this specific discourse.

We then ran a modularity algorithm in Gephi that measures the extent to which a network is divided into communities (Blondel et al., 2008). In total, Gephi found 1,759 small- and large-scale communities that had emerged around one or several influential nodes also referred to as “hubs” (Smith et al., 2014, p. 3), which represented the main sources of information within those communities. The network has a relatively high score of 0.63, which means that the interactions were somewhat stronger within communities than between them. In the following paragraph, we focus on the two largest communities we found in the network.

Cluster one is the largest community, comprising 15.21% of the nodes ( $n = 12,605$ ) and 15.43% of the edges ( $n = 27,262$ ). The most central position within this cluster was occupied by *Volksverpetzer*, a citizen blog that counters especially far-right disinformation. Among influential actors, we also found several journalists and legacy media accounts, as well as some anti-racist activists and politicians from the German center-left SPD and leftist Die Linke parties. In cluster two, we found 9.02% of all nodes ( $n = 7,472$ ), but 16.04% of the edges



**Figure 2.** Network visualization of #Hanau using Yifan Hu algorithm in Gephi. Notes: k-core = 3; 16,761 nodes (20.23%) and 100,635 edges (56.97%); label size according to PageRank score.

( $n = 28,331$ ), indicating that this community was somewhat more active. Among influential actors in this cluster, we found the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), along with one of its leaders, Alice Weidel, and former director of Germany’s intelligence agency, Hans-Georg Maaßen—who was forced to retire in 2018, in part for remarks downplaying far-right violence—as well as several spam accounts, one of which interestingly gained the most attention in this community, more than the institutional actors.

The visualization of the network core illuminates the polarization that emerged in the discourse around Hanau. On the one hand, we found a large subnetwork, mainly mobilized around well-known anti-racist organizations and activists and professional journalists reporting on right-wing extremism. On the other, there was a rather isolated community comprised of known far-right political actors along with far-right spam accounts. Several legacy media accounts were also positioned in the middle of the network, connecting different communities as “bridges” (Smith et al., 2014, p. 7), meaning that actors from different communities engaged with them. While network analysis reveals such conversation patterns, we draw on qualitative text analysis to examine the emotional alignment of and contestation in these tweets and how they allow for emotional communities to surface.

### 7. #SayTheirNames: Connecting Grief and Social Activism

As our network visualization showed, a large community consisting of activists and individual journalists emerged at one end of this discourse. We found *grief* circulating

on Twitter in myriad ways as the central emotion. Firstly, grief was narrated with regard to bodies and spaces: For instance, users expressed having goosebumps and tears, while participating in or even just watching the innumerable funeral marches and solidarity rallies taking place. These comments also included descriptions of bodily reactions to collective acts of solidarity. At the same time, grief was also expressed through references to pain and its intensity, for instance as in an activist’s tweet citing the mother of one of the victims: “The pain is indescribable. Please, do everything so no mother has to endure such pain” (Aymaz, 2020).

Moreover, condolences and grief were almost always accompanied by expressions of shock, outrage, and shame. Connecting these emotions elicited and intensified discussions around collective responsibility, with most users assigning blame to the far-right AfD and the conservative CDU/CSU political parties, for perpetuating racist culture in Germany. However, legacy media were also heavily attacked for the language used in news coverage of Hanau, as well as other far-right terrorist attacks, and the (implicit) racism in their coverage of migration and migrants in general. The use of the word “*Fremdenfeindlichkeit*” (xenophobia) was especially criticized, as it marked the victims in Hanau as “foreign” and “other.” One activist further pointed out how past media discourses often criminalized migrant spaces such as shisha bars, which had been targeted in the Hanau attack. Many users contended that shisha bars, as well as mosques, synagogues, and refugee shelters, were now full of fear and anxiety due to the many racist attacks in the past few decades, thus attributing affective meaning to physical locations.



Twitter users perceived the absence of victims and survivors of racist attacks in legacy media as a deliberate choice to render them invisible, which invoked wide-ranging outrage. Users especially pointed to the presence of mostly white guests and even far-right politicians on talk shows about Hanau. The TV news material we analyzed also revealed a predominance of white actors, especially politicians, as we described in the previous section. These reactions materialized in the hashtag #SayTheirNames and in the extensive sharing of the victims' photographs, names, and stories, which, at the same time, became a symbol of solidarity. It should be noted, however, that individual journalists played a central role in establishing the community of grief and solidarity: For instance, a political editor at *Welt* gained the most attention in our network, as he shared short stories about the victims, which were then widely retweeted. As opposed to the grief constructed as *national* on TV, the emotional communities on Twitter engaged in expressions of grief that acquired intensity precisely because they negated the nation as a collective body and emphasized instead the anxieties and feelings of insecurity that the nation causes in minority groups.

Influential far-right actors, for their part, performed generalized grief and even anxiety, purporting that all German citizens were threatened and thus *everyone* should be equally afraid. Politician Alice Weidel asked a series of rhetorical questions about why the attacker had not been sent to a mental health institution "for the safety of the general public" (Weidel, 2020). In this community, the tweets were aimed at ridiculing allegations of right-wing extremist motivations for the attack and instead emphasizing the perpetrator's alleged mental health problems, referring to him as "mentally deranged," "the madman," or "insane." Warnings that the attack would be falsely categorized as right-wing extremism or terror, thus, offered a sense of belonging and reassurance to deniers of widespread racism in Germany.

## 8. Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Hanau, grief was a central emotion both in TV coverage and in the discourse on Twitter, albeit in quite different ways. Our qualitative video analysis disclosed that the affective register of national grief was central to the emotional interpretations in journalistic coverage of the attacks. This emotional interpretation may be regarded as part of how journalism as an affective institution seeks to fulfill its social function of assessing reality. In particular, the affective register of national grief centered around discourses and representations of practices of collective grieving that politicians and regular citizens shared, such as vigils. This aimed to create an emotional community uniting Germany's whole population through grief and in opposition to far-right violence, portrayed as alien to this community. Thus, TV news

adopted a depiction of the nation as united against an external threat, instead of portraying far-right extremism as an element inside the nation, which resonates with previous studies of how legacy media covers far-right terror (Graef, 2020).

With burgeoning right-wing extremist attacks in many countries, activists on social media increasingly express discontent with legacy media's coverage of this issue, as our Twitter analysis illustrates. On Twitter, grief served as a catalyst for activism, permeating calls to fight racism and assume responsibility for the racist social climate that enables this kind of violence. In this sense, legacy media were criticized as contributing to this climate by reproducing racist discourses in coverage of migration and by using terms such as "xenophobia" to describe the Hanau terrorist's motivations, thus othering victims of the attack. Some Twitter users further urged refraining from describing the perpetrator as "confused" or "crazed" and the attacks as "shootings" to avoid depoliticizing the incident. Furthermore, Twitter users directly addressed public broadcasters' talk shows with explicit accusations that they were making the feelings of Turkish, Kurdish, and other affected communities invisible. At the same time, individual journalists also took part in this discourse. They criticized discriminatory language, as well as legacy media's focus on institutional actors while using their own Twitter accounts to heighten the visibility of the victims of the attack. Far-right actors, on the other hand, actively aimed to disrupt and counter this discourse by denying that the terrorist had racist motivations. Moreover, some far-right users also explicitly accused public broadcasters of framing the attack as far-right. These findings highlight the blurred boundaries between journalistic and activist actors on social media and reveal how emotional communities are constituted relationally through affective exchanges within and between them.

It is important to highlight that our selected material does not encompass all of the journalistic or social media discourse that circulated at the time. Instead, it provides a glimpse into the overall discussion. In addition, a known limitation of hashtag-based samples is visible in our material, as the actual volume of replies and mentions may be underestimated and some portions of conversations may get lost (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013, p. 75). However, as others have pointed out, this usually applies to network peripheries, while the network's core is well represented. Beyond this, although searching using hashtags may yield only a limited portion of the whole discourse, it serves as a helpful tool to condense otherwise large amounts of data (Shugars et al., 2021).

Our analysis emphasizes how complex the affective dynamics of emotional communities are. On TV news, these dynamics contribute to journalism's emotional interpretations of events through affective registers that viewers may or may not adopt. Online, they are not mobilized around a single political emotion, but rather connect people temporarily through shared

attitudes, intense experiences, and moods, often transforming what is shared into different forms of connective actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), as the hashtag #SayTheirNames illustrates. Such fluid formations on social media contest legacy journalism's prior near exclusivity with regard to mediating affect and emotions in public communications.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

## How China Divides the Left: Competing Transnational Left-Wing Alternative Media on Twitter

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### Abstract

Twitter has pushed public opinion on foreign policy into partisan bubbles that often value alternative media sources over traditional media or political elites. Public opinion on China is no exception. On the left, some alternative media outlets support China as a socialist ideal, while others criticize it as a key player in global capitalism and neoliberal order. This leads to an important puzzle: How and why do some transnational left media disseminate pro-China messaging while others do not? We focus on two leftist alternative media outlets: the Qiao Collective and Lausan. Both organizations claim to offer a variety of counter-hegemonic-oriented discourses. We first qualitatively analyze the differences in how these two organizations frame key topics in contemporary Chinese politics including Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the Hong Kong protests. We then use quantitative social network analysis to show how their communication efforts lead to different follower audiences. In the last step, we analyze what issues the Qiao Collective is using to achieve its inward- and outward-oriented goals. Our study shows how both outlets focus on the transnational left, but each reaches distinct audiences that do not overlap. We find that the Qiao Collective jumps on traditional left-wing issues in the US to extend its reach while regularly posting positive, often revisionist perspectives about Chinese politics. This specific element conflicts with its claim of supporting anti-imperialist and pro-democracy politics and distinguishes the Qiao Collective from other transnational left outlets.

### Keywords

alternative media; China; counterpublic; public opinion; Twitter; transnational

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

While alternative media and “counterpublics” have often been studied in comparison to the dominant mainstream public, few studies have focused on competing counterpublics (cf. Lien, 2022). This article looks at two contemporary alternative media outlets that focus on East Asian politics: the Qiao Collective (also sometimes referred simply as Qiao) and Lausan. Qiao and especially Lausan focus on contemporary Chinese politics including Chinese labor, the Hong Kong protests, and Uyghur

oppression in Xinjiang. At a time when Twitter increasingly pushes public opinion on foreign policy in partisan directions (Baum & Potter, 2019), this article addresses several key questions related to alternative media on the left and its dissemination of content: How and why do some transnational left media disseminate pro-China messaging while others do not? How do these leftist alternative media’s politics and audiences vary?

Qiao and Lausan have become key alternative media outlets covering contemporary Chinese politics. Their main website for creating and contributing to discourse

is Twitter. Although both organizations self-identify similarly as leftist and anti-imperialist, they each have different and often contradictory views about Chinese politics. Subsequently, alternative media discourse is often divided among leftists based on which of these two organizations you follow. We are interested in several connected questions regarding these organizations: First, how do activists use their alternative media for collective identity formation and influence the broader discourse about Chinese politics? Second, what role does alternative media play in the international space of East Asian politics regarding China from a left-wing perspective? For analysis, we mainly rely on counterpublic and framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018). While studies have focused mainly on the conflict between counterpublics and dominant publics (e.g., Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018), we are interested in competing counterpublics within the same communication space (Lien, 2022).

We first begin by explaining these various leftist alternative media organizations and how they became relevant to contemporary politics. We then explore the existing literature on counterpublics and what role alternative media play in political discourse. We then begin by exploring how the two organizations vary in their political stances by using qualitative analysis of their communication on Twitter. Using Twitter data, we then show how these leftist alternative media organizations reach different audiences with almost no overlap. Finally, we show the makeup of each organization's audience and conclude by showing with what content Qiao achieves its inward- and outward-oriented goals on Twitter.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

### 2.1. *Alternative Media and the Left*

While alternative media is historically associated with left-wing media (Atton, 2007; Downing, 1984), few studies have analyzed their role in today's information ecosystem (cf. Cushion et al., 2021; Dowling, 2021; Yung & Leung, 2014). In recent years, several new transnational alternative media have been established that position themselves as left-wing. However, as China becomes an increasingly salient global political issue, some transnational leftist media support China while others criticize it. This article focuses on two alternative media that operate in this ideological space.

These two alternative media outlets are rather new. Lausan was formed in 2019 and Qiao followed in 2020. They have similar goals in that they both offer different versions of counter-hegemonic discourse from a leftist perspective. They are counter-hegemonic because they see themselves as challenging hierarchical, established systems of politics and culture (van Leeckwyck, 2019). Lausan was formed in the wake of the anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong in June 2019 (Chan et al., 2021). Lausan describes itself as "build[ing] transnational

left solidarity and struggle for ways of life beyond the dictates of capital and the state. To that end, we hold multiple imperialisms to account" (Lausan, 2022). They offer primarily commentary but also some reporting on contemporary political events in Hong Kong. Qiao was also formed in a similar timeframe, seemingly to counter many of the ideas put forth by Lausan. Qiao describes itself as "[aiming to] challenge rising US aggression towards the People's Republic of China and to equip the US anti-war movement with the tools and analysis to better combat the stoking of a New Cold War conflict with China" (Qiao Collective, 2022).

Since their growth over the last years, these two organizations have become key alternative media commentators on contemporary Chinese politics and US–China relations. Ever since their foundation, both outlets have primarily relied on Twitter as their primary means of communication. Both Lausan and Qiao share a diasporic orientation in that content is primarily produced in English and perspectives on Hong Kong or China are sometimes evinced from the outside. Both compete over an English-speaking audience, particularly hoping to shape Western leftists' views of China. In this sense, the journalism and commentary of both outlets are meant as a form of intervention, though both seek to provide alternative perspectives to major English-language media outlets. Both have also sought to politically educate their followers on Hong Kong and China, as observed in webinars or syllabi offered by the two platforms. Although both groups self-identify as leftist and anti-imperialist, how well their actual politics align with these views can vary and is the subject of criticism from both within and outside their readership. Consequently, this is an object of contestation between both groups.

### 2.2. *Alternative Media and Counterpublics*

Alternative media plays a key role for left-wing activists, who in our case may view mainstream international English-speaking media sources as oppositional to leftist causes (Atton, 2007). In addition, an essential aspect of alternative media is their counter-hegemonic discourse in contrast to mainstream media (Holt et al., 2019). These organizations can range from being run by experienced journalists to amateur hobbyists who desire to present perspectives from protest groups, dissidents, or marginalized communities, and can play an essential role in social movements (Lee, 2018). In the case of alternative media such as Unicorn Riot, which heavily relies on live streams, the boundary between activism and journalism becomes blurred (Dowling, 2021). Such media outlets routinely combine reporting and commentary, sometimes in the same article. For example, their content is focused on promoting critical change (Rauch, 2016) and offers "alternative accounts and interpretations of political and social events" (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862).

Alternative media have a strong conceptual connection with counterpublics. As with many studies, we utilize

Fraser's (1990, p. 68) definition of counterpublics "as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment...[and] as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" that challenge the political status quo. Different authors have built on Fraser's conception but shifted their focus away from the "subaltern" (Warner, 2010) to the question of what makes a "counter" in counterpublics (Asen, 2000). Asen (2000) highlights the feeling of exclusion as a defining element of counterpublics. Alternative media thus plays an essential role for counterpublics, especially in the networked public sphere, where counterpublics can consist of globally dispersed communities (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020; Heft et al., 2021). The transnational aspect is relevant for our study as Lausan ("our dispersal across the world") and Qiao ("comprised of ethnic Chinese people living across multiple countries") both have transnational elements. Furthermore, as prior research has shown, alternative media take a central position within online counterpublics (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020; Rucht, 2004).

Alternative media run by activists can play different roles for a counterpublic. Toepfl and Piwoni (2015, 2018) differentiate between inward- and outward-oriented communication goals. A counterpublic's communication can be inward- or outward-oriented, where inward-oriented communication mainly aims to strengthen the collective identity. In contrast, outward-oriented communication aims to influence the broader discourse and reach a wider audience. Alternative media have been both described as mainly inward- (Rucht, 2004) or outward-oriented (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019) depending on the context. In the context of the internet, the clear distinction between internal and external orientation concerning alternative media is obsolete (Rucht, 2004), as social media platforms with their affordances can also potentially contribute to outward-oriented goals (Poell & van Dijck, 2019; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018).

### 2.3. *Competing Counterpublics and Their Frames*

Few studies have explicitly focused on competing counterpublics. Most studies focusing on alternative media and counterpublics usually have a stronger focus on the unifying elements of counterpublics (Heft et al., 2021; Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020). Furthermore, regarding the outward-oriented communication of counterpublics, the conflict between the mainstream and the counterpublic is usually highlighted in studies (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018). Lien (2022), however, focuses on his study of Islam-related counterpublic discourse in the comment section of Facebook on competing counterpublics originating from different ideologies. Our study builds on this view by focusing on two potentially competing counterpublics within the same communicative space. However, in our case, they are ideologically adjacent and not, as in Lien's study, at different ends of the political spectrum. Instead, the counterpublics in our

study are competing over the same political space on the same side of the political spectrum. By using competing frames, these two organizations reach two different audiences despite overlapping political views. These organizations compete through their use of frames and the audience reached by these different counterpublic framing discourses.

Framing is a central part of any activist or social movement organization's strategy, and alternative media is no exception. Scholarly literature broadly posits that for an organization to achieve its goals either through discourse, policy, or mobilization, successful framing is paramount. Frames need to resonate culturally and be considered credible by their target audience (Berbrier, 1998; Hipsher, 2007; Snow & Benford, 1988). The goal of an organization's frame is to shape the discourse around a certain identity community and the broader public to promote a particular set of ideas and motivate collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000; McAdam et al., 1996). It is to diagnose the issue and offer some prognosis for its followers to adhere to.

Under certain conditions, framing can drastically change public opinion on certain political issues (Borah, 2011). Elites, whether politicians or media leaders, can change the way the public understands and supports an issue based on the language, metaphors, and imagery used to describe the issue (Rein & Schön, 1996). For example, language such as "estate tax" versus "death tax," or "homosexual marriage" versus "gay civil union," will cause support for connected causes to vary (Price et al., 2005). These framing effects can often be partisan, for example, Republicans are less likely to believe in "global warming" than they are to believe in "climate change" (Schuldt et al., 2011). Different media outlets and politicians often compete to control the narrative of a certain political issue through framing, to "rebut, undermine, or neutralize a person's or group's myths, versions of reality, or interpretive framework" (Benford, 1987, p. 75).

Subsequently, framing is a contested process (Benford & Snow, 2000). The framing and the counterframing process is a central part of media strategy and media discourse (Benford & Snow, 2000; McCaffrey & Keys, 2000). While the dynamic frame-counterframe contention between alternative media and mass media is well studied by social movement scholars (Cissel, 2012; Downing, 2008; Rooke, 2021), how alternative media frames compete with each other as opposed to mass media, especially in contemporary Chinese political issues, remains understudied. How do alternative media framings in China vary? How do these effects influence their followers? These are critical initial questions that will allow future research to better study how these framing effects might influence public opinion and discourse on China. This leads us to our first research question: What frames are Qiao Collective and Lausan using in their communication on Twitter and how do they vary? (RQ1)

### 3. Twitter Communication Frame Analysis

Even though Qiao and Lausan both claim to promote leftist politics, their political stances still vary. We can study and measure these variations in particular by looking at their different stances on Chinese politics. We first downloaded all tweets posted by the Qiao Collective (n = 8,444) and Lausan (n = 4,430) accounts. We then conducted qualitative content analysis to identify and describe the key framing strategies used by each organization. Finally, we paired our initial descriptive frame analysis with quantitative analysis of their audience on Twitter to show how these different frames create different online followings and exclusive, separate online communities. Our combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis gives us a clear and robust understanding of how Qiao and Lausan see themselves. This combination of analyses highlights how they present themselves online and what types of netizens follow each organization.

Since Qiao and Lausan often cover the same contemporary Chinese political topics, comparing how they frame the same issue from two different leftist perspectives highlights the similarities and differences between these two organizations. These organizations compete with each other by framing and counter-framing the same issues to try and control the leftist narrative around these topics. Identifying frames in these tweets does not cover all the topics these organizations cover, but rather helps shape our understanding of how these outlets shape their contributions to political discourse. The tweets selected below are not meant to be representative of all framing strategies or political stances. Rather, they show how these two organizations cover the same topic through contrasting, often contradictory lenses.

Qiao and Lausan share similar stances and theoretical orientations regarding global leftist issues. Topics like labor rights and anti-imperialism are prominent in both organizations. The two organizations even see eye-to-eye on certain leftist political issues, such as support for Palestine:

Israel has just shut down a Palestinian Covid-19 testing site, while the US has shipped 1 million masks to Israel for IDF soldiers. Meanwhile China has just sent 10,000 tests and ventilators to Palestine, and Chinese doctors are sharing COVID19 expertise with Palestinian Doctors. (Qiao Collective, 2020a)

We stand with Palestinians in their decades long resistance to the ongoing colonial violence of the apartheid state of Israel and its partners including the US and Britain. Liberation for Palestine is liberation for all. #SaveSheikhJarrah (Lausan, 2021a)

In these two tweets, both organizations express solidarity with Palestine and condemn the US for its role in contributing to the ongoing suffering of the Palestinian people. Qiao, unlike Lausan, however, adds an additional line about how China is an ally to the Palestinian cause. This is where the key political difference between Qiao and Lausan begins to emerge. The frames described in Table 1 are used in tandem and are by no means exclusive. Both Qiao and Lausan often mix frames, especially regarding specific issues like Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

#### 3.1. Frame No. 1: China and the US as Similar or Different

It is the promotion of China's role as a global ally to leftist causes that differentiates the two organizations. Qiao sees China as a socialist state that internationally leftists ought to support and champion as a leader of their political causes. Lausan meanwhile sees China as authoritarian in nature and just as much part of the global capitalist order as the US. As a result, Qiao is defensive of China and often portrays any commentary or critiques of China, its history, or its politics as inherently orientalist in nature:

It's Orientalism, racism, and chauvinism to project onto China [sic] the U.S. framework of race and empire onto China. China is a real place with millennia [sic] of indigenous cultural, political, and ethnic dynamics. You're not an expert on China just because you understand the U.S. (Qiao Collective, 2020c)

The Western fetishization & weaponization of the Tiananmen protests are an insult to the memory of the Chinese people who were involved, and it has become a weapon to bludgeon China and the Chinese people with and to serve the West's own imperialist interests to attack China. (Qiao Collective, 2020d)

Lausan, however, does not see critiques of Western commentary on China as inherently orientalist. Instead, Lausan often frames critiques of China as necessary for the left as critiques of the US; that these two states are

**Table 1.** Topical frame differences between Qiao and Lausan.

Topic	Qiao Frame	Lausan Frame
Comparing US and China	Inherently Orientalist	Valid and often necessary for analysis
Connections with the US left	The US left should critique the US and stand with China	The US left should critique both the US and China and not be beholden to any state
China's character	China is benevolent/socialist	China is repressive/capitalist



hegemonic in nature and both contribute to the structures that leftists push back against:

Not only is China's economy capitalist, the state now rules in the general interest of capital. The CCP's [Chinese Communist Party] claim that China is socialist is simply not borne out of reality. Its false promise to guide the world into a socialist future must be rejected. (Lausan 2020a)

The Strategic Competition Act has been approved by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. This bill disingenuously exceptionalizes [sic] Beijing's authoritarian violence and poses the further build-up of the US military-industrial complex as the solution, which we condemn in full. (Lausan, 2021b)

### 3.2. Frame No. 2: Connections With the US Left

Both organizations fight for authority over leftist understandings of contemporary Chinese political issues. One key way each tries to do so is by connecting events with those in the US, specifically leftist movements. This framing tactic is particularly prevalent when either organization discusses the 2019 Hong Kong protests. Qiao was adamantly against tying the Hong Kong protest to any sort of leftist cause and condemned any attempt to do so. Instead, they try to frame the Hong Kong protests as a far-right cause:

The Hong Kong protests are driven by anti-mainland racism & enforcing US imperialism. To compare them to Black and Indigenous liberation is an insult & an obscuring of their racist, classist, imperialist interests. (Qiao Collective, 2020e)

It is deceptive & dishonest for Westerners to inordinately focus on a very minor handful of "unionists, workers, & leftists" in the HK protests to brand the protests as "having left potential" when the vast majority of the protest is right-wing, racist, & exclusionary of workers. (Qiao Collective, 2020b)

Lausan approached the Hong Kong protests as having the potential to be part of a larger leftist global movement, often writing pieces connecting Hong Kong to other movements around the world, including Black Lives Matter:

Standing in solidarity with Hong Kong is not about deciding which nation-state is worse; it's about rejecting this false binary crafted by the ruling elites, and resisting the adoption of Western colonial frameworks by all states alike, especially China. (Lausan, 2020d)

State repression knows no borders. It's time to amplify and learn from Black liberation and other

anti-establishment struggles—to build power from the bottom up across the world. Solidarity is about fighting for justice together, even if our histories and realities differ. (Lausan, 2020b)

### 3.3. Frame No. 3: China's Character

The final frame that differentiates the two approaches is how each portrays China in its messaging. Beyond simply seeing China in a sympathetic light, Qiao further argues that the West's perceptions of China as a human rights violator are actually the opposite; China is benevolent in helping marginalized people.

When events involve China as a primary actor, the state is framed as benevolently acting in a way that is caring about its citizens and operates for the well-being of all Chinese people. China is seldom portrayed in a negative or critical light. Instead, it is seen as a sympathetic actor in the international community trying to positively contribute to the global order. In particular, regarding Xinjiang, this is to assert that "re-education camps" in which over one million Uyghurs are thought to be imprisoned do not exist and that the Chinese Communist Party has the interests of Uyghurs in mind with its policies in Xinjiang:

So China built these camps to deradicalize extremists and give them the proper training to thrive on their own. People in these camps are taught Mandarin to better function in the economy, taught technical skills to make it easier for them to enter the workforce, are allowed to go home once or twice a week to visit their families, [are] offered mental guidance to overcome radicalized ways of thinking. (Qiao Collective, 2021a)

So it's "slave labor" if Chinese factories employ Uyghurs and "employment discrimination" if they don't hire Uyghurs? Western media can't keep its story straight, but it is clear that unilateral sanctions will disrupt economic development and poverty alleviation in Xinjiang. (Qiao Collective, 2021b)

Lausan, however, does not see China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims as benevolent. Instead, they see it as an oppressive policy:

The existence of the camps is by now undeniable, with the basic details largely corroborated by the Chinese state itself. But debates over Xinjiang continue to intensify and foster extreme nationalist responses, from anti-China fear mongering to pro-China denialism. (Lausan, 2020c)

We need to adopt an internationalist perspective toward the Xinjiang camps to resist cynical appropriation by the cold warriors and China apologists, and enable a more self-reflective conversation about their truly modern and global causes. (Lausan, 2020c)

The key divide between the organizations, then, is their view of China. Why does it matter that these two organizations portray China and Chinese politics differently if they are both left alternative media? These two sets of frames begin in a similar place, but their conclusions end in fundamental, irreconcilable opposition to each other.

By following Toepfl and Piwoni's (2018) conceptual framework, we conclude that they use the same emphasis frames but have diverging second-level argumentative frames. We assume that this difference on the supply side shapes the audiences that can be reached. Although both of these groups' followers may self-identify as leftist or anti-imperialist, ultimately, what matters is how they perceive China. This variation in approach to China and differences in the framing of contemporary politics potentially leads to two completely different audiences and interactions online. Even though we can identify these qualitative differences, we subsequently want to know whether these framing variations produce quantitative differences in online audiences and communities. We then pose: What kind of audience is the Qiao Collective reaching and how distinct is it from the follower audience reached by Lausan? (RQ2)

For the third research question, we are specifically interested in whether the issues identified in our frame analysis are more inward- or outward-oriented when analyzing who is reached by the communication as both goals can be achieved on social media platforms by alternative media outlets (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Poell & van Dijck, 2019; Rucht, 2004; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018). We pose: What issues communicated by Qiao reach which part of the audience on Twitter? (RQ3)

## 4. Twitter Communication Audience Analysis

### 4.1. Data and Methods

To answer our research questions, we rely on different data sets scraped from Twitter. We mainly focus on Qiao but also on Lausan. We downloaded all the information for followers of the two accounts at the end of November 2021 (Qiao = 49,784; Lausan = 19,140). We then collected the follower information for all the 87,569 unique users over the standard Twitter API in the following two weeks. Eventually, we could download the follower relations for 62,304 accounts that are not set to protected and follow at least one other user in our sample.

Additionally, we downloaded all tweets ( $n = 8,444$ ) ever posted by the Qiao account, including replies and retweets of other accounts. Since we are interested in the specific reach of Qiao, we also downloaded over the historical Twitter API all retweets of their tweets ( $n = 153,717$ ).

All statistical analysis and visualizations were conducted in R. Only the network visualizations were created in Gephi. We relied on the location field that Twitter users can identify. We used this information and checked on OpenStreetMap in which country a

user is located: 36,557 (54.3%) users added information to their location field (see the Supplementary File, Appendix 1, for an overview and validation). To identify the differences between the two audiences, we analyzed the "keyness" (Bondi & Scott, 2010) of words used in the account description. We thus combined the descriptions of all users and created a corpus. We then compared the descriptions from users following Qiao with descriptions of the users following Lausan. The keyness is then calculated based on the relative overrepresentation of words within a corpus. To identify different communities in the follower networks, we analyzed how all of the 62,304 accounts follow each other. For community detection, we relied on the Leiden algorithm implemented in Python (Traag et al., 2019). For our third research question, we used a keyword-based approach to identify issues covered in tweets (see the Supplementary File, Appendix 2, for an overview and validation). Furthermore, we used a Bayesian regression analysis with weakly informative priors with the R package *brms*. For the model, we used four chains with 4000 iterations in total and 1000 warmup iterations. All chains converged and Rhat are all 1.

### 4.2. Results

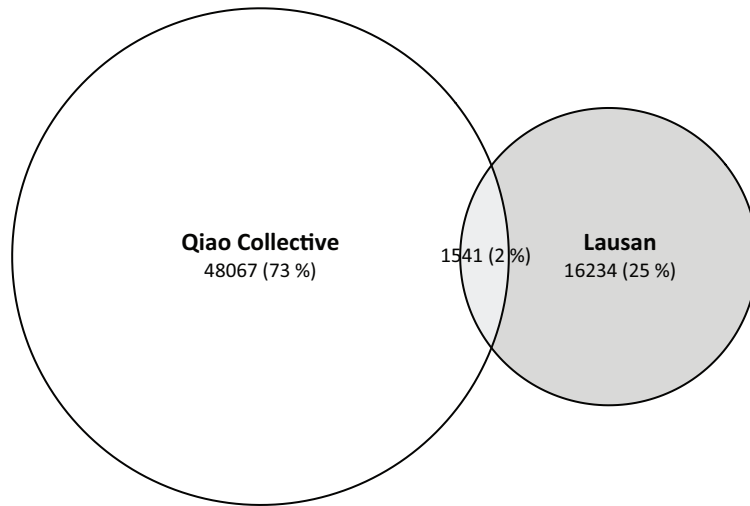
#### 4.2.1. Follower Audience Analysis (RQ2)

In the first step, we analyzed the overlap between the different follower audiences of the two accounts (Figure 1). Our analysis shows that there is only minimal overlap between the followers of the two accounts.

This first analysis indicates that the two accounts have distinct follower audiences with a slight overlap between Qiao and Lausan. They reach different audiences with their communication. Despite their similar origins as leftist organizations, their contrasting approaches to China separates the left online into different camps that do not overlap or interact with each other.

In a second step, we were interested in what background users have that belong to one of the two distinct follower audiences. As we are interested in the differences between the two audiences, we analyzed the keyness (Bondi & Scott, 2010) of words used in the description field of accounts. The most overrepresented words and emoji in the description of users following Qiao all have a connection to Communism (Figure 2). For example, the "hammer and sickle" emoji is not only the most overrepresented word but also, overall, one of the most used symbols or words in the description of Qiao followers: 1,854 followers of Qiao use the emoji in their description, whereas only 110 Lausan followers added the emoji to their description. Other words such as "communist" or "Marxist-Leninist" (or the short form "ml") also directly refer to Communism as an ideology.

The over-represented words show a strong emphasis on ideology for Qiao. Emphasizing Marxism-Leninism or Communism is important for Qiao's audience.

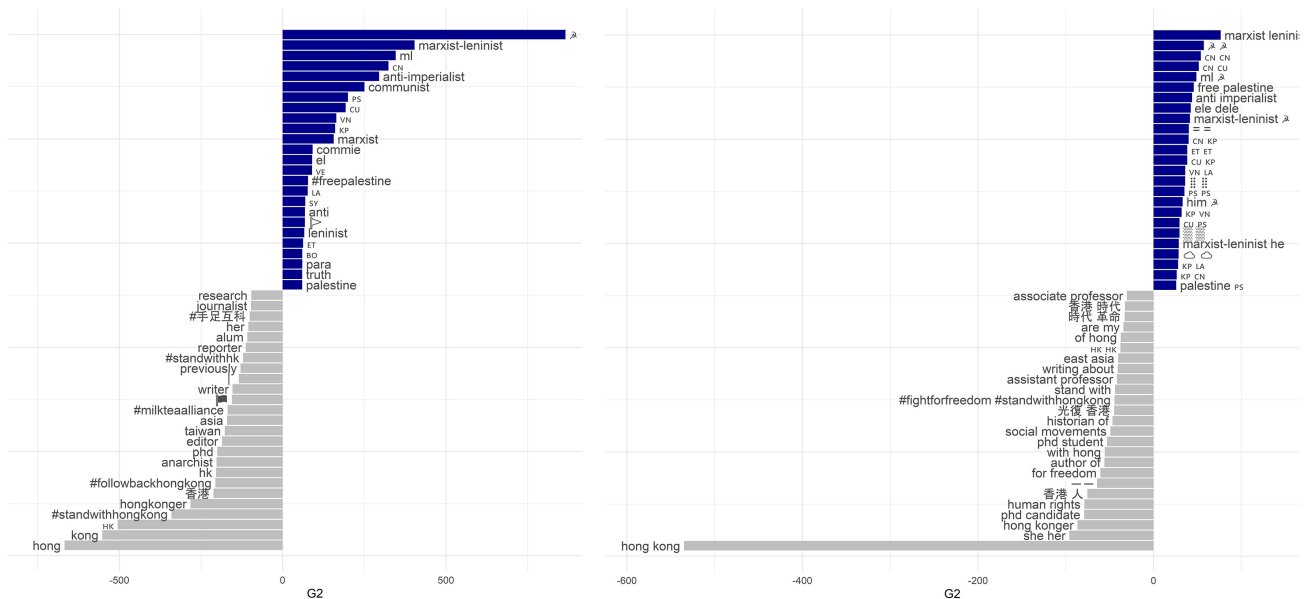


**Figure 1.** Euler diagram of the follower audiences (n = 67,383 unique users) for Qiao and Lausan.

However, one more commonly sees references to Hong Kong or the prevalence of hashtags such as #standwithhongkong with Lausan. Besides these direct references to Communism, users following Qiao are more likely to add emojis of country flags for China, Palestine, Cuba, Vietnam, or North Korea. Lausan’s followers, in contrast, are more likely to make references to Hong Kong or Taiwan. The black flag emoji and several hashtags refer directly to the HK protests. As a direct ideological reference, only the word “anarchist” is over-represented but only used by 222 followers in absolute terms. The other most overrepresented words indicate the professional background of users. “Reporter,” “journalist,” and “editor” all have a connection with journalism. Words like “PhD” or “research” indicate that aca-

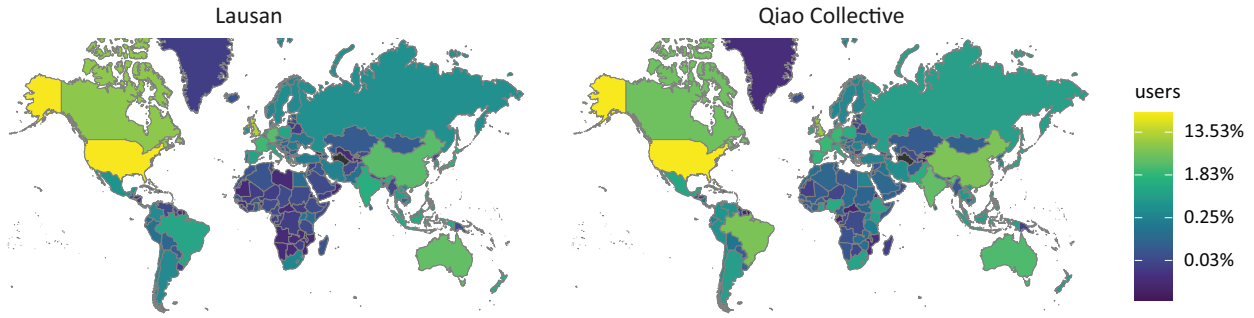
demics have a higher prevalence among the follower audience of Lausan in comparison with that of Qiao.

Although both Lausan and Qiao have a global reach, some geographic differences quickly emerge. Both have the most followers in the US and English-speaking countries, but Lausan has more followers in Hong Kong and Taiwan than Qiao. On the other hand, Qiao has more followers in China and South America. As geographic differences seem to be relevant for both follower audiences, we focused on users’ location in the last step. Although this step can only be used for users who added information to their location field, it still allows us to identify major differences between the different audiences. The results confirm the findings of the prior analyses (Figure 3). Compared to the Qiao follower audience



**Figure 2.** The most over-represented words (keyness—x-axis with likelihood ratio) for the description of users following Lausan (left—negative likelihood ratio) and users following Qiao (right—positive likelihood ratio). Notes: All words  $p < .05$ ; analysis with unigrams are on the left and analysis with bigrams are on the right.

World Map



Hong Kong and Taiwan

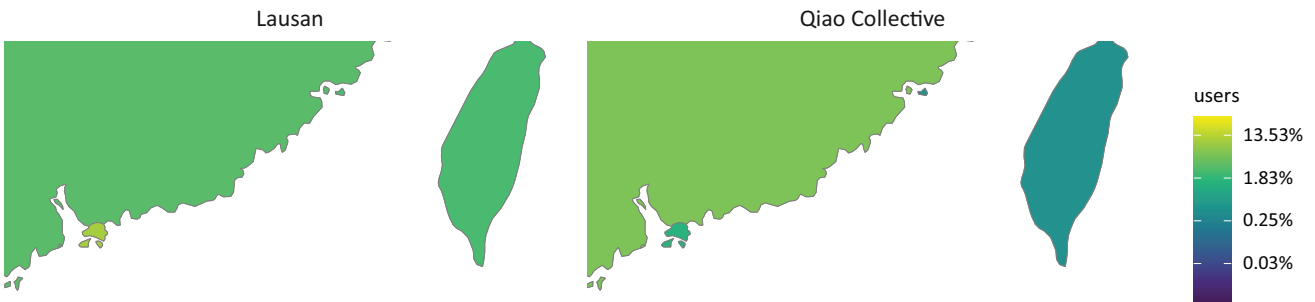


Figure 3. Percentage of users for each account from a specific country. Note: The color scale is log-transformed.

(HK = 1.4%; Taiwan = 0.4%), a larger share of users following Lausan comes from Hong Kong (10.1%) or Taiwan (2.5%). Furthermore, only a few of Qiao’s followers are located in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore <1%). Noteworthy is also that the share of users from the US (Qiao = 32.2%; Lausan = 32.8%) is the same for both outlets, but there is a striking difference in the percentage of followers from Brazil (Qiao = 5.3%; Lausan <1%).

For the next part of the analysis, we first created a follower network including all users who follow at least one of the two accounts (n = 62,304). Then, we first used the Leiden algorithm to identify communities (Traag et al., 2019). The algorithm identifies communities consisting of users with more follower relations with other users in the same community than with users from other communities. We then manually checked the most prominent accounts within each community and scanned the complete list of users for each community. As a result, we could identify eight distinctive communities (see Table 2 and Figure 4). Qiao’s follower audience mainly consists of users promoting Communism and socialism as ideology in the US (US communism and socialism) but also internationally (International Socialism). Besides these almost purely ideological communities, Qiao also reaches mainly Chinese state-aligned accounts and the business community connected to China. On the other hand, Lausan’s follower audience mainly consists of China’s international expert community members and Southeast Asian users. In this context, the most interesting community is the mainstream left-wing US commu-

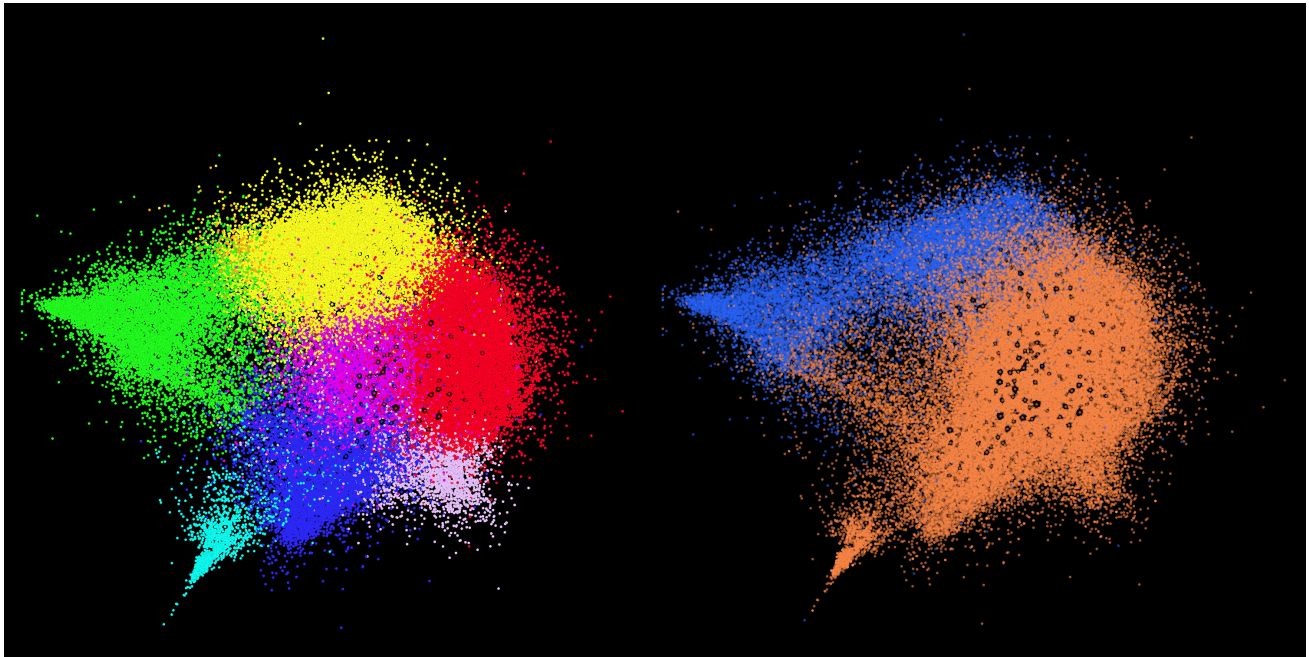
nity, which is divided between users following Qiao or Lausan. It is the community in which they are directly competing with each other. Besides this community, there is also a competition within China’s international expert community, but to a lesser extent (only 22.7% follow Qiao).

4.2.2. Retweet Reach of Qiao’s Twitter Communication (RQ3)

To answer our third research question, we first checked with keywords (see Supplementary File, Appendix 2) which issues and topics are covered in tweets that were retweeted at least ten times. We then checked for each tweet how many retweeting users are followers of Qiao and used this as our outcome variable. Our model (see Figure 5) shows that tweets about Covid-19, Black Lives Matter, or the US lead to more retweets by non-followers compared to all other tweets without the issue or topic. On the other hand, tweets focusing on the Tiananmen protests, Uyghurs and Xinjiang, or Communism and socialism lead to more retweets by followers compared to all other tweets without the topic.

5. Discussion

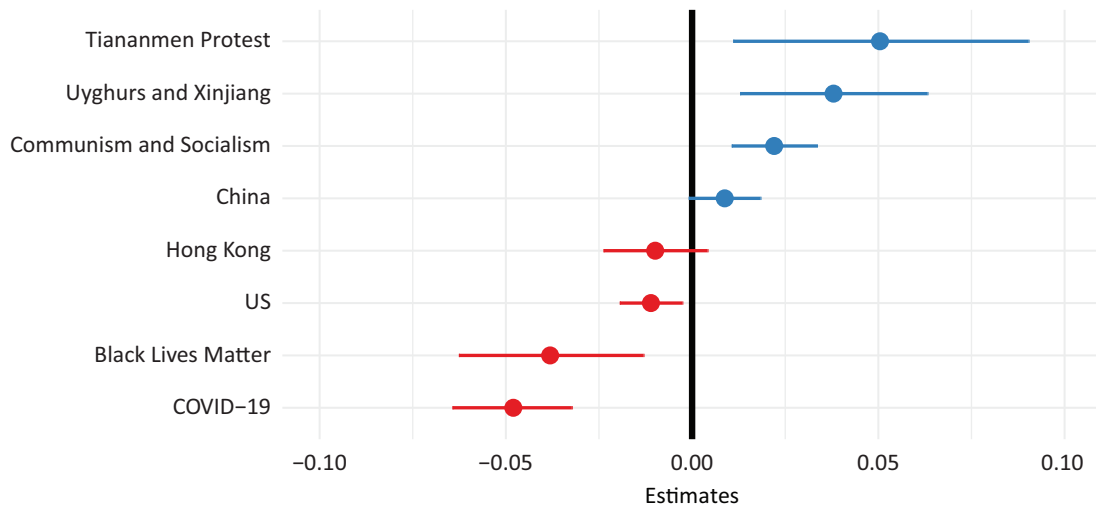
Even though Qiao and Lausan both come from a similar ideological background, each approaches contemporary Chinese politics from two irreconcilable perspectives. Qiao sees the Chinese state as a leader in leftist values and encourages its readers to sympathize and



**Figure 4.** Follower network analysis. Notes: For the layout, the Force Atlas 2 algorithm was used in Gephi; on the left, colors indicate community (see also Table 2); on the right, red nodes follow Qiao, blue nodes do not follow Qiao.

**Table 2.** Overview of the identified follower communities.

Name of the Community	No.	Qiao Following	Location	Prominent User
US communism and socialism (red)	15309	97.6%	USA = 47.1% UK = 7.2% Canada = 4.5%	RevLeftRadio
Mainstream left-wing US (yellow)	14457	43.2%	USA = 46.5% UK = 13.6% Canada = 8.4%	NaomiAKlein
China state-aligned (blue)	8564	98.5%	China = 21% USA = 19.3% UK = 6.2%	zlj517
China international expert (green)	8469	22.7%	USA = 23.2% Hong Kong = 19.4% UK = 9.6%	ChuBailiang
International Socialism (violet)	8424	96.1%	USA = 30% UK = 13.2% Canada = 4.9%	VillegasPoljak
International China Business (turquoise)	3640	99.5%	India = 14.1% Nigeria = 13.5% Ghana = 7.5%	Huawei_Europe
South America socialist (pink)	2990	95.7%	Brazil = 57% Spain = 14.6% Portugal = 4%	—
South East Asia (orange)	421	29.9%	Indonesia = 54.7% USA = 8% Philippines = 5.1%	—



**Figure 5.** Estimates for Bayesian regression model using topics as a predictor and internal orientation as the outcome variable. Notes: Internal orientation was measured as the percentage of retweeting users who are Qiao followers; the number of retweets was also used as a variable (not shown here); 95% CIs are shown.

stand with China. Lausan, however, sees China as part of the global capitalist neoliberal order that contradicts leftist values. These two organizations constantly frame and counter-frame each other’s political stances to control the dominant leftist narratives over Chinese politics. These two sets of contradictory frames of Chinese politics are not simply a matter of differing opinions but speak more to the effect of leftist audiences and ideologies online.

These varying frames have effects on how leftists follow and consume alternative media on Chinese politics. We see that following one organization leads to not following the other, creating two distinctive online communities of leftists. We also see Qiao’s followers in closer connection with Chinese state media, Lausan tends to connections with dominant Western public figures, including journalists and mainstream news outlets. While Qiao might fail with their outward-oriented communication (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018) to influence the dominant Western public with their counter-frames, they still have an influence on certain leftist communities. However, within these communities, they compete with Lausan, which also offers counter-frames that are different from frames communicated by the Western mainstream. In conclusion, Qiao is partly followed by an ideologically homogeneous interpretive community that has a shared interpretation of events. However, our analysis also shows that some social communities (e.g., mainstream left-wing) do not completely overlap with the follower audience as an interpretive community (Schrøder, 1994). Future research with ethnographic methods should focus on these contested spaces.

What do our findings say about the role of ideology with these varying leftist alternative media organizations? Both emphasize the same leftist politics of anti-imperialism, labor rights, and socialism. When it comes

to their followers, however, Qiao’s followers are much more inclined to performatively attach their identity online to ideology. Qiao’s followers tend to self-describe on more ideological bases, including key terms in their descriptions like “Marxist-Leninist” or “Communist.” Lausan’s followers, however, emphasize the specific issues within Chinese politics more than ideological standings, including having “StandWithHongKong” or “MilkTeaAlliance” in their bio. Those who emphasize these ideologies in their community identity, therefore, tend to be more apologetic towards China, while those who follow issue-specific subjects tend to be more critical, despite all identifying along the same original leftist political base. Our analysis of the topics covered in Qiao’s tweets shows that they mainly reach their follower audience with strong ideological and China-related issues. In contrast, the tweets with more general topics allow them to achieve their outward-oriented goals (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018) as they reach users that are not following them.

There is also some critical discussion to be had about Qiao’s ability to offer such strong pro-China messaging on Twitter, a platform that is banned in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Qiao’s funding and background is not transparent, which has led to some suspicion about their potential proximity to the PRC government itself. Ever since its launch, it has never stated who its members are or who contributes to their posts. However, there is no conclusive evidence that Qiao is funded by the PRC and its messaging sometimes diverges from state-run media outlets, despite drawing on a number of English-speaking sources from PRC state-run media (Hioe, 2020). There is a real possibility that those running Qiao genuinely feel an unironic level of support for the PRC and its politics regardless of their paradoxical use of Twitter and other banned platforms. For example, Qiao once tried to join the popular Chinese blog website Zhihu,

but because of the “sensitive” nature of their posts, they were banned from the Chinese website and their posts were initially blocked. While their Zhihu account is now active again, this still shows that perhaps Qiao is not necessarily so well connected to the PRC to have free access to post on the Chinese internet, but instead is subject to the censorship apparatus they defend. Lausan on the other hand is more transparent about its membership and who writes for the outlet. Ever since their launch, their key membership has been traceable and interactive on Twitter, though it should be noted that Hong Kong organizations generally face security issues related to national security legislation passed by China. Neither organization is explicit about their funding, where it comes from, and potential conflicts of interest. And while this divergence between the two organizations in terms of their transparency and accessibility to their membership calls into question the legitimacy of each’s status as a bonafide alternative media outlet, they both see themselves as voices that offer counter-hegemonic discourse (Holt et al., 2019; van Leeckwyck, 2019).

As our frame analysis indicates, there is also the open question of whether Qiao can be classified as left-wing just because they are anti-imperialist. At the same time, they promote frames that are contradictory to a left-wing ideology. However, within their world view, it is not contradictory as they see China as a “vanguard of the global socialist revolution” (Robertson & Roberts, 2021). Furthermore, while the whole argumentation resembles the debates in the 1960s when some of the Western left saw China as a viable alternative, the situation today is different as China’s status as a socialist country is challenged by experts (Naughton, 2017). Still, Qiao sees China as a socialist country (Lanza, 2021).

There is also a possibility that the PRC may use Qiao indirectly or discreetly, similar to how WikiLeaks was tied to Russian foreign influence operations in the US (Hosenball, 2020). WikiLeaks was in its early stage, heralded as a new form of journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2014), but is now seen as a platform that advances Russian interests. While perhaps not directly tied or funded by the PRC, by ideologically aligning with the PRC, Qiao provides organizational legitimacy as a US-based organization defending China from the US. How Qiao develops should be closely observed in the future, especially its potential ties to the PRC.

## 6. Conclusion

Our study is not without limitations. From a data perspective, we accessed the historical Twitter API to get Qiao’s retweets, and thus we might miss deleted retweets. Furthermore, our focus on Twitter leads us to miss out on other forms of social media outreach done by either organization. We also do not look in-depth into the specific content published on each website but instead focus on what is shared on Twitter in the form of concise tweets. Still, Twitter is in this context the most impor-

tant social media platform and reflects available content on its pages. Twitter, being a transnational platform, is a key tool for alternative media focused on global politics to reach an international audience. It is also the space where they directly compete with each other.

Our study also speaks to journalism and political studies more broadly. In an age where misinformation online has become a serious threat to democratic regimes around the world, understanding how media that shines a sympathetic light on authoritarian regimes can grow in popularity and spread is in need of further research within the field. As Baum and Potter (2019) note, Twitter has pushed public opinion on foreign policy into a less informed and more partisan realm. Rather than looking to sources from elites or established journalists, our foreign policy stances can be shaped by anyone on the internet, including people or organizations “sometimes by masquerading as domestic sources, sometimes even without such pretenses” (Baum & Potter, 2019, p. 754). We advance Baum and Potter’s call to better understand how Twitter as a platform shapes partisan foreign policy opinions. Tracking this form of communication requires some of the computational methods we have used in this study. We also hope our mixed-methods approach will serve as a useful framework for other political journalism studies and scholars interested in further investigating questions of misinformation, foreign policy partisanship, and democratic backsliding.

Our research suggests a potential future research subject for those interested in polarization and online communities. For scholars of polarization, our case shows that polarization does not only happen between counterpublics with different ideologies (Lien, 2022). Future studies should focus on possible cleavages between ideologically adjacent counterpublics within the same communication spaces. Even though both of these organizations are on the political left, their variation subsequently leads to distinctive communities at odds with each other. Instead of framing and counter framing from a left-right dynamic, we see this contentious back-and-forth play out within the same spaces on the left. How polarization within the left affects online communities and alternative media may provide more novel research directions for multiple fields. From a framing perspective, we see that the continuous process of framing–counter-framing is not just between mainstream versus alternative media, but that various alternative media fight for the “proper” framing of their political stance (Downing, 2008). Unlike most studies of alternative media framing that focus on alternative media versus mainstream (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018), our study suggests that more attention ought to be spent looking inward at these various alternative media communities and how they deliberate and navigate their conflicting political frames (Cissel, 2012). Those interested in these questions of alternative media and the left should focus more on competing counterpublics, as Lien (2022) has done. Future research should extend our analysis by

including as many left alternative media as possible to evaluate the level of fragmentation and what different interpretive communities emerge.

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### Conflict of Interests

Brian Hioe has contributed several articles to *Lausan* before this study.

### Supplementary Material

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

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Article

## Neutral Observers or Advocates for Societal Transformation? Role Orientations of Constructive Journalists in Germany

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### Abstract

Since the 2010s, a new type of journalism has emerged, especially in North America and Western Europe, called constructive journalism. Its basic idea is to complement classic problem-centered reporting by covering problem-solving approaches that could inspire the recipients. It has been harshly criticized, especially for its alleged proximity to advocacy or activism. To clarify the role orientations of the protagonists of this trend, a survey of all German journalists that call themselves constructive or solution-oriented was conducted (n = 79). The results show that constructive journalists are as diverse in age as the total of all journalists in Germany, but tend to be more women journalists, freelancers, formally higher educated, and politically leaning toward green and left-wing positions. Regarding role orientations, the field of constructive journalism not only represents a new facet of the entire journalistic field but also consists of several nuanced approaches itself: In factor analysis, we found eight role dimensions, of which the most important were the Social Integrator, the Transformation Agent, the Active Watchdog, the Emotional Storyteller, and the Innovation Reporter. In comparison to the average German journalist, the German constructive journalist shows stronger ambitions to control political and business elites, to motivate people to participate, and to contribute to social change. This can be explained as a countermovement not only to a possible negativity bias in the news but also to an increased attitude of detachment in German newsrooms.

### Keywords

constructive journalism; Germany; professional role orientations; solutions journalism; value attitudes

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Journalism, Activism, and Social Media: Exploring the Shifts in Journalistic Roles, Performance, and Interconnectedness” edited by Peter Maurer (Trier University) and Christian Nuernbergk (Trier University).

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### 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 2010s, the approaches of constructive and solutions journalism have been the subject of much debate in both the media industry and academia. Its basic idea is the following: In order to avoid negative media effects on the audience such as apathy or cynicism, to increase commercial success and audience reach, and also to foster societal progress, a new type of journalism should complement classic problem-centered reporting by covering problem-solving approaches that could inspire recipients (Ahva & Hautakangas, 2018;

Mast et al., 2019). With this philosophy, a large number of new magazines and online portals have been founded, as well as new sections in general interest news media, and organizations have been created to promote the idea: the Solutions Journalism Network in New York City (since 2013), the London-based Constructive Journalism Project (2014–2020), the Constructive Journalism Network (since 2017), and the Constructive Institute at Aarhus University in Denmark (since 2017).

Both terms—solutions and constructive journalism—did not originally come from academia but began as strategic terms of a reform movement coming from

journalism practitioners, the former being preferred in the US, the latter in Europe (Lough & McIntyre, 2021, p. 3). Scholarly research then worked to analyze and define these terms. Studies on solutions journalism often use the definition of the Solutions Journalism Network—“rigorous reporting on responses to social problems” (e.g., Walth et al., 2019, p. 180)—while constructive journalism was conceptualized in a more academic way as an umbrella term that includes solutions journalism and has a theoretical foundation in psychology: McIntyre and Gyldensted (2018, p. 663) define constructive journalism as “journalism that involves applying positive psychology techniques to news processes and production in an effort to create productive and engaging coverage while holding true to journalism’s core functions.”

There is a growing body of work from researchers on five continents on several aspects of the topic. In their systematic review of 73 peer-reviewed articles and 21 theses/dissertations on solutions and/or constructive journalism, Lough and McIntyre (2021, p. 9) found that half of the studies focused on the production and processes of such coverage, one third examined its effects on the audience, and some of the research was purely conceptual, connecting the approach “with positive psychology, framing, social responsibility and normative roles” (Lough & McIntyre, 2021, p. 14). Obviously, a reform movement calling for a more encouraging type of reporting and for recalibrating selection criteria or news factors would be accompanied by the creation of a reformed journalistic role. But thus far, this new role has been unclear and inconsistent.

For US proponents of the movement, Aitamurto and Varma (2018, p. 695) found that they often send “strategic rhetoric signals...to situate constructive journalism within the boundaries of a traditional monitorial role of journalism” and to present themselves as neutral, detached observers—apparently to avoid accusations of doing activism, advocacy, or PR (Beiler & Krüger, 2018). Among European protagonists, a plurality of role understandings seems to exist: The respective books of Ulrik Haagerup (founder of the Constructive Institute) and Cathrine Gyldensted (founder of the Constructive Journalism Network) were analyzed by Bro (2019) against the background of his “journalistic compass” model that differentiates forms of journalism on a continuum from activity to passivity, among other things. It is shown that Haagerup advocates a more passive and Gyldensted a more active role. Another distinction within the field was made by Krüger (2017, pp. 410–411) who identified two factions: a pro-objectivity and system-affirming “Ashoka faction,” named after an organization that connects social entrepreneurs around the globe, and a pro-subjectivity and system-critical “Jungk faction,” named after the German futurologist and publicist Robert Jungk who was a pioneer of constructive journalism with his *Good News Bulletin* in 1948 and later influenced the environmental, anti-nuclear, and peace movements in West Germany.

However, there is still a lack of empirical data on which role conceptions are present in the field and how widespread they are. The present study contributes to filling this gap: It examines the role orientations of constructive journalists in Germany and, moreover, attempts to understand which journalistic milieu has emerged here and how the proponents position themselves socio-demographically and politically.

## 2. Research on Role Orientation and Research Questions

In the social sciences, the concept of the role describes the sum of norms, ideals, privileges, and duties associated with a social position. For this study, we apply Hanitzsch and Vos’ (2017, p. 116) conceptualization of journalistic roles “as discursive constructions of journalism’s institutional identity, and as a struggle over discursive authority in conversations about the locus of journalism in society.” The role gives meaning and legitimization to the journalists’ work.

The scholarly discussion of different role perceptions in journalism essentially began with Cohen’s (1963) distinction between a *neutral* and a *participant* understanding of the profession. Later, Johnstone et al. (1976) classified *objective* and *advocative* reporting. A series of studies on The American Journalist (first, Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986) and later The Global Journalist worked with four categories: Disseminator, Interpreter, Adversarial, and Populist Mobilizer. In the international Worlds of Journalism Study, Hanitzsch (2011, pp. 484–486) identified four journalistic milieus: Populist Disseminator, Detached Watchdog, Critical Change Agent, and Opportunist Facilitator. More recent work has increased the complexity and diversity of the construct: In the international project Journalistic Role Performance, the initial distinction between *neutral* and *participant* becomes a meta-role (the “journalistic voice,” which can be present or absent) through which five other role dimensions (Watchdog, Loyal-Facilitator, Infotainment, Civic, and Service) can each be divided into 10 sub-dimensions. For example, the Watchdog role can be thought of as “detached” or from an “adversarial” stance (Mellado, 2021, pp. 38–39). Besides this, Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) presented a theoretical model of 18 journalistic roles in the domain of political life and seven in the domain of everyday life.

The wealth of theoretical and empirical work on the subject can hardly be represented here due to space constraints. But for this study another differentiation is important: Hanitzsch and Vos (2017, p. 118) have stressed that “journalists’ roles may be studied with regard to normative ideas (what journalists *should do*), cognitive orientations (what they *want to do*), professional practice (what journalists *really do*), and narrated performance (what they *say they do*.” They summarize the first two aspects under “role orientations” and the last two aspects under “role performance.” We focus on

cognitive orientations, that is “the communicative ideals journalists are embracing in their work” (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 123) and the goals they want to achieve.

To date, little empirical research about the role orientations of constructive and solutions journalists exists. For the US, McIntyre et al. (2016) investigated the compatibility of constructive journalism with the current role perception among newspaper journalists: especially younger and women journalists highly valued constructive and solutions journalism. Correlations were found between approval of these genres and approval of activist values such as setting the political agenda and pointing to possible solutions. Abdenour et al. (2018) conducted a similar survey among local TV journalists in the US, showing an even higher affinity for constructive reporting styles.

In Rwanda, the role model of journalists strongly leans toward constructive journalism (McIntyre & Sobel, 2018). In this African nation, where a genocide took place in 1994, guideline interviews revealed that while they strongly value traditional roles such as informing and educating the audience, they also regularly use constructive journalism techniques to promote peace and reconciliation in the country. Li’s (2021) content analysis captured the role performance of solutions journalists in reporting the Covid-19 pandemic in 25 countries and regions, revealing predominantly interventionist, facilitator, and civic-oriented roles and a failure to implement service and watchdog roles in a crisis when the public needs advice and accountability.

In Germany, two studies have used semi-structured interviews with proponents of the genre to describe the concept of constructive journalism and the practice in different newsrooms (Heinrichs, 2021; Kramp & Weichert, 2020), but they did not do so explicitly against the backdrop of research on journalistic role orientations. Especially for Germany—home of the “founding father” Robert Jungk and of a lively scene of constructive media—we see a large research lacuna regarding role orientations and the general nature of the milieu of constructive and solutions journalists, also in terms of sociodemographic data and in contrast to the entire field of journalism in Germany. Therefore, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the dominant sociodemographic characteristics of constructive journalists in Germany?

RQ2: How long have German journalists been working constructively, by whom were they inspired, and with which organizations have they been networking?

RQ3: Which political and value attitudes do constructive journalists in Germany exhibit?

RQ4: Which role orientations can be found among constructive journalists?

RQs 1, 3, and 4 include a comparison with the total of all German journalists. For RQ2, there is no comparative data, hence, it solely aims to better understand the development and structure of the specific milieu.

### 3. Methodology

To answer these questions, a standardized online-based survey consisting of 16 multiple-choice questions and three open-ended questions was conducted. The understanding of the role was surveyed with 30 items, many of which were based on previous studies to allow comparisons. Twelve items were adopted from the German Worlds of Journalism questionnaire (Steindl et al., 2017), seven items from the earlier study Journalism in Germany (Weischenberg et al., 2006), three items from Journalistic Role Performance (Mellado et al., 2021), and one item from The American Journalist (Willnat et al., 2019). We newly developed seven items; six of them to capture a possible constructive role that the other studies had not explicitly asked about. We also developed items to test value attitudes, so that political orientation can be measured not only in terms of inclination toward a political party and one’s own classification on a simple left-right axis. Pretests were conducted with a cohort of journalism students at Leipzig University and with a long-time constructive journalist. This helped to improve the questionnaire.

Our goal was to reach all people who consider themselves constructive- or solution-oriented journalists and work for news media based in Germany to give them the chance to complete the questionnaire. We attempted a full survey, where the population is unknown, and the criterion is self-selection. We applied a two-step sampling procedure: identifying key persons and news media dedicated to this genre followed by snowball sampling with participants. First, we captured all German media outlets that presented themselves as constructive- or solution-oriented in their self-description or had special sections or programs dedicated to this genre (e.g., *Enorm*, *Perspective Daily*, *Mut—Magazin für Lösungen*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Quarterly*, *NDR Info Perspektiven*, and *ZDF Plan B*) and individuals who have been known to work as constructive journalists who we identified at literature and journalism conferences. We contacted these media (via editors-in-chief or editorial managers) and people by e-mailing 113 individuals working for a total of 39 media or as freelancers. We asked them to complete the questionnaire and to share the invitation with other potential subjects within their own editorial team or professional networks.

Additionally, we contacted six journalistic associations, mailing lists, and freelancer communities to forward our invitation to all their members to include even more constructive journalists: Netzwerk Weitblick—Verband Journalismus & Nachhaltigkeit (Network Thinking Ahead—Association for Journalism & Sustainability), Netzwerk Klimajournalismus Deutschland

(Network Climate Journalism Germany), Degrowth-Journalismus, Freischreiber (Freelance Writers), Zeitspiegel Reportagen (Time Mirror Reports), and Bach Rauf! (Up the Drain!).

The survey ran from September 14 to December 10, 2021. Some media participated enthusiastically, with editors-in-chief answering the mail and forwarding it to all editorial members (and others); in other cases, we received no answer and do not know what happened with our request. Some addressees regretted not having time for it, and one medium had internal instructions for the employees not to participate in surveys in order to invest their time solely in journalistic content.

It is unclear if we achieved our goal of giving all constructive journalists in Germany the chance to participate. Some journalists may work for media which are not known for using a constructive approach and might not be connected with like-minded colleagues or organizations. Also, some journalists work constructively without accepting the term as a self-description or even knowing the term. This may have discouraged some journalists from completing the questionnaire. On the other hand, four subjects completed it but afterwards added in a comment section that we provided that they would like to distance themselves from the term or said that they only had a vague idea of what the term means (e.g., one participant wrote: “I don’t see myself as a ‘constructive’ journalist. Actually, all good journalism is constructive”). Nevertheless, we are certain to have reached at least the core of the milieu: 101 people accessed the questionnaire and felt addressed; and 79 fully completed the questionnaire, which were the ones that we used for analysis.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Demographics

Working constructively is by no means just a concern of the younger generations: Respondents were between 22 and 73 years old and the mean age was 46 years ( $n = 79$ ). In terms of age structure, the sample corresponds exactly to the totality of all German journalists as presented in the last representative survey in 2015 (mean of 46, range from 22 to 71 years; Steindl et al., 2017, p. 414). This is different for gender and formal education. Our sample included more women: 54% of the respondents self-identified as women, 46% as men ( $n = 78$ ), whereas among all German journalists in 2015

only 40% identified as women. Additionally, our sample is more highly formally educated (see Table 1) which indicates that the reform movement at stake is driven by well-informed individuals.

Seventy-five percent of the respondents worked full-time and 25% part-time ( $n = 79$ ). Regarding employment relationships, 48% were permanently employed, 46% were freelancers, and 17% were permanent freelancers for particular news media (*Feste Freie*; multiple answers possible). The average German journalist is much more likely to work in a permanent position (82%; all kinds of freelancers: 18%; Steindl et al., 2017, p. 417).

When respondents were asked what type of media their constructive pieces have been published in, the ranking of the genres was as follows: online media (67%), magazines (43%), social media (34%), newspapers (25%), radio (19%), television (19%), news agencies (3%), and others, which included books, motion picture/documentary film, podcast, and customer magazines/brochures (5%;  $n = 79$ ; multiple answers possible). A question about the forms of ownership of the media revealed that 56% worked for privately-owned media, 35% for public broadcasting, and 18% for cooperatively organized media; 11% indicated “other” which included, for instance, university media, an association, book publishers, or self-governed media ( $n = 79$ ; multiple answers possible). A question about the status of constructive journalism in the media for which respondents worked, showed that 48% worked for media practicing constructive journalism more so as an add-on. Only 25% worked for media specializing in it, and another 25% said they were working for both types of media ( $n = 78$ ; multiple answers possible).

### 4.2. Duration, Inspirers, and Networking Organizations of Constructive Work

The field of constructive journalism in Germany is quite new: When asked which year they started reporting constructively, over half cited the decade of the 2010s (see Table 2). The years between 2014 and 2020 saw the highest number of journalists joining, with four to 10 each year (the peak was 2017); 91% of the respondents have practiced the approach since 2000 or later. This is in line with previous literature, as the founding of most media or sections specializing in constructive journalism falls into this period (Heinrichs, 2021; Kramp & Weichert, 2020; Krüger, 2021; Meier, 2018), and the

**Table 1.** The educational level of German constructive journalists in comparison to all German journalists.

Highest educational qualification	%	% in Steindl et al. (2017)
PhD	10	4
University degree	77	72
High school diploma	10	22
Graduation below high school diploma	3	2

Notes:  $n = 78$ ; question—“What is your highest educational qualification?”

**Table 2.** Starting year of constructive reporting in the own professional biography.

Period	Number	Percentage
1980–1989	3	4
1990–1999	4	5
2000–2009	17	22
2010–2019	44	58
2020–2021	8	11

Notes: n = 76; question—“First, we would like to know when you actually started reporting constructively. In which year (approximately) did you get the idea?”

book *Constructive News* by Ulrik Haagerup—triggering a debate in the industry—was published in German in 2015. Interestingly, some of the respondents seem to have practiced the genre long before there was any discussion about it and before the term even existed.

When asked if there was anyone who inspired them to do constructive journalism, 59 respondents gave a wide range of answers: from a “no” to “zeitgeist at the time” to naming media organizations or people. Forty-four respondents named a total of 61 people, between one and eight persons per respondent. Eight individuals were named more than once (see Table 3). The wide variance of responses and the low degree of concentration indicate that the field has grown organically and egalitarian and has not been shaped primarily by a few individual masterminds only.

Interestingly, the US-based Solutions Journalism Network was named most often (11 mentions) when German journalists were asked: “If you are a member of an organization or network for constructive journalism, or use one for exchange (e.g., via mailing list, newsletter, or conferences), which are they?” (n = 37, multiple answers possible). A total of 21 institutions were named. The Netzwerk Klimajournalismus Deutschland (Network of Climate Journalism Germany) ranked second, with five mentions and the Netzwerk Weitblick

(Network Thinking Ahead) ranked third, with four mentions. The Constructive Institute in Denmark, the Culture Counts Foundation, and the newsletter *Good News* were named three times each and the mailing list Degrowth-Journalismus, the Peace Counts Project, and the journalism platform Bach Rauf! two times each. Consequently, these entities can be seen as the central network nodes of the milieu in 2021.

#### 4.3. Political and Value Attitudes

The political worldview was assessed with the help of several questions. The subjects were asked to rank themselves on a left-right axis from 1 (*left*) to 11 (*right*), with a midpoint of 6. The results show a clear positioning to the left of center: The mean is 3.6; the standard deviation is 1.3 (n = 62). Thus, constructive journalists in our sample tend to be more progressive than the totality of German journalists, for whom Steindl et al. (2017, p. 414) determined a mean of 4 with a standard deviation of 1.3 (on a scale of 10 points). When asked which party they felt closest to, 57% said the Green Party, 13% the Social Democratic Party (SPD), 4% the Left Party, and 1% the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP); 15% said they did not lean toward any party (n = 74). It is striking that the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which

**Table 3.** The most influential inspirers of German constructive journalists.

Mentions	Name	Function
11	Ulrik Haagerup	Founder and director of the Constructive Institute at Aarhus University (Denmark)
5	Maren Urner	Co-founder of <i>Perspective Daily</i> and professor of media psychology (Germany)
5	Michael Gleich	Publisher of <i>Mut—Magazin für Lösungen</i> and director of the Culture Counts Foundation (Germany)
3	Ute Scheub	Co-founder of the newspaper <i>taz</i> and of Netzwerk Klimajournalismus Deutschland, freelance journalist (Germany)
3	Tina Rosenberg	Co-founder and vice president for Innovation of the Solutions Journalism Network (US)
2	Amanda Ripley	Journalist and conflict mediation trainer associated with the Solutions Journalism Network (US)
2	Tilman Wörtz	Editor-in-chief of <i>Mut—Magazin für Lösungen</i> (Germany)
2	Thomas Friemel	Co-founder of the alternative business magazine <i>enorm</i> (Germany)

Notes: n = 59; question—“Are there people you consider role models, or who have inspired or influenced you, who perhaps gave you the idea to report constructively in the first place? Please name them.”

set the political tone from 2005 to 2021 and provided the German chancellor, was not mentioned by anyone. Unfortunately, there is no current comparative data for all German journalists in Steindl et al. (2017); the latest available data dates to 2005 (Weischenberg et al., 2006, p. 71).

The party inclinations were also reflected in a closer look at the subjects' fundamental values. In order to record these more precisely, we presented a battery of 11 items containing values or guiding principles for societies. Respondents indicated that ecology and climate protection were most important to them, followed by equality of all people, democracy, and peace (Table 4). Clearly below the center of the scale were a free market economy, national sovereignty, and the preservation of German national culture (we used "*Deutsche Leitkultur*," a term from the migration debate in Germany with conservative connotations).

These findings also correspond to the answers in the open-ended question section regarding which social problems currently appear to be the most important. The climate and environmental crises lead by a wide margin, followed by social inequality and the division of society (Table 5). Concerns that one would expect to find more in liberal or conservative circles were expressed very rarely, such as "migration" (two mentions) or "lack of innovation" (one mention).

We asked respondents what their basic attitude was toward the need for change in society and confronted them with two opposing statements and a scale from 1 (*I do not agree at all*) to 5 (*I fully agree*). With the item "our society is largely fit for the future and only needs to be improved in certain areas," only 3% fully agreed, while a further 14% tended to agree ( $M = 2.4$  and  $SD = 1$ ). By contrast, 30% fully agreed with the opposite statement, "our society must be fundamentally restructured

**Table 4.** Fundamental values of German constructive journalists.

Item	M (SD)
Ecological sustainability and environmental and climate protection	4.7 (0.7)
Equality of all people, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, origin, religion, or disability	4.7 (0.7)
Democracy as equal political freedom and co-determination for all	4.6 (0.7)
Peace and international understanding	4.5 (0.9)
Solidarity and commitment to the well-being of others	4.3 (0.9)
Social justice through redistribution by the state	3.6 (1.1)
Individual freedom and autonomy	3.6 (0.9)
Securing prosperity through economic growth	2.3 (1.1)
Free market economy without state intervention	1.8 (0.9)
Strengthening national sovereignty	1.8 (0.9)
Preservation of the German national culture (" <i>Leitkultur</i> ")	1.6 (0.9)

Notes:  $n = 78-79$ ; question—"Generally speaking, there is a whole series of possible fundamental values and guiding principles for society. Please indicate how important each of these is to you"; scale from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*).

**Table 5.** The most pressing societal problems in the eyes of German constructive journalists (number of mentions).

Problem	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Total
Climate and environmental crises (climate change, global warming, species extinction, soil degradation, etc.)	53	26	10	89
Social inequality (injustice, income inequality, poverty, exploitation)	10	16	16	42
Division of society (polarization, discourse crisis, democracy crisis)	3	13	12	28
Lack of education and science rejection	3	4	9	16
Racism, right-wing populism, and right-wing extremism	1	4	7	12
Wars, violence, and conflicts	1	3	2	6
Lack of gender equity	1	2	3	6
Fake news and hate speech	0	4	1	5
Digitalization	0	1	3	4
Restructuring of the economy	1	0	3	4

Notes:  $n = 234$  answers from 79 respondents; question—"In your opinion, what are the most pressing problems or challenges facing our society? Please note up to three in order of urgency."



in order to be fit for the future,” and a further 37% tended to agree ( $M = 3.7$  and  $SD = 1.3$ ;  $n = 79$ ). Thus, a great openness to fundamental societal transformation was evident.

#### 4.4. Role Orientations

As we have seen, our sample is politically quite clearly oriented toward far-reaching societal changes under the primacy of ecology and social issues. Consequently, a question arises: Are these political aspirations reflected in the understanding of the profession, in the sense that one wants to work actively toward such changes with journalistic means? Or do they state that neutral information and impartial observation are the most important goals for them, as it was the trend among all German journalists in 2015 (and is the self-description of leading constructive journalists, as described above)? The results (Table 6) show that constructive journalists are much less likely to agree with those items that indicate a neutral, detached, mirror-like depiction of reality (“inform as neutrally and precisely as possible,” “depict reality exactly as it is”). Instead, they claim to a greater extent to want to criticize and control the powerful (“control political elites,” “control business elites”) and, in turn logically, to “motivate people to participate in political activity” and to “provide information people need to make political decisions.” The most impressive differences between the constructive journalists and the representative sample of all German journalists are found in the items of an interventionalist role model that emphasizes social engagement and influencing the political discourse (“contribute to social change,” “influence public opinion,” “influence the political agenda and set issues”). Amazingly, our newly developed item “contribute to a fundamental transformation of society,” meant as an increase of the classic item “contribute to social change,” received more approval than the latter one.

What was not surprising, however, was that such items received high approval ratings with which we specifically wanted to query a constructive role described in the literature (“present new ideas and approaches to solutions,” “encourage people and show them possibilities for action,” “accompanying topics and developments over the long term instead of just highlighting current events,” “counteract the disenchantment with journalistic reporting”). Only the items “report positive things to cheer people up” and “present new products and technical developments” got a significantly lower agreement, maybe because they point to a less political and more consumer-centric understanding of the profession.

A principal component factor analysis was performed in order to discover dimensions of professional role orientations among the respondents ( $KMO = 0.700$ ). The results showed that constructive journalism not only represents a new facet of the entire journalistic field but is also composed of nuanced approaches in itself. Although nine factors would have to be extracted

according to the eigenvalue criterion, a solution with eight dimensions was chosen because it was more feasible to interpret. Nevertheless, the total explained variance is still high at 69.7%; the scree plot supports the procedure. Despite very few cross-loadings, the rotated component matrix of the 30 items had a simple structure that allows for a plausible interpretation (Table 7). The first role dimension can be labeled Active Watchdog (explained variance of 11.1%): The items “control political elites,” “control business elites,” and “criticize grievances” load strongly, but the label also includes the ambition to “influence the political agenda and set issues,” that speaks for an active (“adversarial”) instead of a “detached” watchdog (Mellado, 2021, p. 39). With the same explained variance comes the second role dimension which we call Innovation Reporter. This role contains a business-friendly and technology-centered understanding of the profession (“support business enterprises when they promote growth and innovation” and “present new products and technical developments”) as well as the willingness to entertain and cheer up the audience. Next, role dimension three, which we label Transformation Agent (explained variance of 11%), is characterized by the goal to “contribute to a fundamental transformation of society” and to “social change,” to “influence public opinion,” and to “show people possibilities for action;” a rejection of the fast news business is visible (the item “convey information as quickly as possible” loads strongly negative).

A fourth dimension emerged which we call the Social Integrator (explained variance of 9.2%): For this role, it is most important to “counteract a polarization of society” under the auspices of cultural diversity, tolerance, and democratic participation. Factor five is the Emotional Storyteller role (explained variance of 8.3%) which contains the goals “tell the world in stories” and “depict the emotions of people,” but also “communicate commonly shared values and norms.” With less variance explanation come the last three factors: The Populist Disseminator role aims to publish for a wide audience and to give ordinary people the chance to articulate themselves; the Everyday Life Helper role is concerned with advising people and giving orientation for the individual daily life, with a long-term time horizon; and, finally, a role which we call Neutral Observer shows the attitude of a classic objective news reporter.

We calculated mean values based on the items which had their primary loadings on each of the respective factors. The factor means show the importance of the eight dimensions of role orientations on the underlying five-point scale. The most important dimensions among the interrogated journalists are the Everyday Life Helper ( $M = 4.3$ ), the Social Integrator ( $M = 4$ ), the Neutral Observer ( $M = 4$ ), and the Transformation Agent ( $M = 4$ ). Somewhat less pronounced are the Populist Disseminator ( $M = 3.8$ ), the Active Watchdog ( $M = 3.6$ ), and the Emotional Storyteller ( $M = 3.4$ ). Clearly, the least important is the Innovation Reporter role ( $M = 2.8$ ).

**Table 6.** Role orientations of German constructive journalists in comparison to all German journalists.

Item	<i>M (SD)</i>	%	<i>M (SD)</i> in Steindl et al. (2017)	% in Steindl et al. (2017)
Present new ideas and approaches to solutions	4.5 (0.9)	89.9		
Encourage people and show them possibilities for action	4.5 (0.8)	91.1		
Accompany topics and developments over the long term instead of just highlighting current events	4.5 (0.7)	96.2		
Provide information people need to make political decisions	4.4 (0.9)	87.4	3.4 (1.5)	56.2
Indicate how events, decisions, or actions might influence the daily lives of people	4.2 (0.9)	78.5		
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	4.1 (1)	79.7	3.8 (1.2)	66.7
Depict reality exactly as it is	4.1 (1)	75.9	4.6 (0.7)	90.7
Contribute to a fundamental transformation of society	4.1 (1.2)	74.7		
Counteract the disenchantment with journalistic reporting	4 (1.2)	72.2		
Counteract a polarization of society	4 (1.1)	74.7		
Motivate people to participate in political activity	4 (1)	79.7	3.1 (1.4)	44.9
Inform as neutrally and precisely as possible	4 (1.1)	62	4.3 (1)	82.5
Provide advice, orientation, and direction for daily life	3.9 (1)	72.1	3.8 (1.1)	66.1
Criticize grievances	3.9 (1.1)	67		
Contribute to social change	3.9 (1.2)	67.1	2.8 (1.2)	29.5
Focus on topics that are interesting for many people	3.8 (1.1)	63.3	4 (1)	73.5
Give people the opportunity to articulate their views on important issues	3.7 (1)	63.3	3.3 (1.2)	46.9
Tell the world in stories	3.7 (1.2)	58.2	3.6 (1.2)	57.3
Communicate commonly shared values and norms	3.5 (1.2)	49.3		
Influence public opinion	3.4 (1.3)	45.6	2.7 (1.1)	22.7
Influence the political agenda and set issues	3.3 (1.2)	50.6	2.1 (1.1)	9.8
Control political elites	3.2 (1.3)	44.3	2.8 (1.5)	36.3
Report positive things to cheer people up	3.2 (1.2)	45.5		
Control business elites	3.1 (1.4)	40.5	2.8 (1.4)	34.2
Depict emotions of people	3 (1.1)	27.9		
Present new products and technical developments	3 (1.3)	36.7		
Convey information as quickly as possible	2.7 (1.4)	29.1		
Provide entertainment and relaxation	2.4 (1)	14	3.5 (1.1)	51.4
Support government policies when they contribute to prosperity and progress	2.2 (1.1)	11.4		
Support business enterprises when they promote growth and innovation	2 (1.1)	12.7		

Notes:  $n = 78-79$ ; question—“On this and the next page, we are interested in what goals you personally would like to achieve with your professional work. For the following statements, please indicate how important each goal is to you”; scale from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*); the column “%” indicates the proportion of respondents who indicated 4 or 5; the last two columns indicate the proportion of respondents in the last survey of all German journalists (Hanitzsch & Lauerer, 2019, pp. 141–142; Steindl et al., 2017, p. 420) who indicated 4 or 5 for the same or similar items (the item “depict reality exactly as it is” then was “report things as they are,” and the item “inform as neutrally and precisely as possible” was “be an impartial observer”).

**Table 7.** Dimensions of professional role orientations of constructive journalists in Germany: Principal component analysis (factor loadings of the rotated component matrix).

Item	1. Active Watchdog	2. Innovation Reporter	3. Transformation Agent	4. Social Integrator	5. Emotional Storyteller	6. Populist Disseminator	7. Everyday Life Helper	8. Neutral Observer
Control political elites	0.874							
Control business elites	0.858							
Criticize grievances	0.767							
Influence the political agenda and set issues	0.466							
Provide information people need to make political decisions	0.464			0.415				
Support business enterprises when they promote growth and innovation		0.825						
Present new products and technical developments		0.766						
Support government policies when they contribute to prosperity and progress		0.641						
Provide entertainment and relaxation		0.631						
Report positive things to cheer people up		0.524			0.448			
Provide advice, orientation, and direction for daily life		0.522					0.466	
Contribute to a fundamental transformation of society			0.777					
Encourage people and show them possibilities for action			0.761					
Contribute to social change			0.728					
Influence public opinion			0.553					
Convey information as quickly as possible		0.472	-0.522					
Present new ideas and approaches to solutions			0.486	0.443				
Counteract a polarization of society				0.815				
Motivate people to participate in political activity				0.667				
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity				0.588				
Counteract the disenchantment with journalistic reporting				0.575				

**Table 7.** (Cont.) Dimensions of professional role orientations of constructive journalists in Germany: Principal component analysis (factor loadings of the rotated component matrix).

Item	1. Active Watchdog	2. Innovation Reporter	3. Transformation Agent	4. Social Integrator	5. Emotional Storyteller	6. Populist Disseminator	7. Everyday Life Helper	8. Neutral Observer
Tell the world in stories					0.786			
Communicate commonly shared values and norms					0.692			
Depict emotions of people					0.681			
Focus on topics that are interesting for many people						0.742		
Give people the opportunity to articulate their views on important issues						0.696		
Indicate how events, decisions, or actions might influence the daily lives of people							0.840	
Accompany topics and developments over the long term instead of just highlighting current events			0.440				0.618	
Depict reality exactly as it is								0.763
Inform as neutrally and precisely as possible								0.677
Explained variance in %	11.1	11.1	11	9.2	8.3	6.4	6.3	6.2
Factor means ( <i>SD</i> )	3.6 (0.9)	2.8 (0.8)	4 (0.7)	4 (0.8)	3.4 (1)	3.8 (0.9)	4.3 (0.7)	4 (0.9)

Notes:  $n = 77$ ; scale for all items and factor means from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*); varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization; factor loadings  $< |0.4|$  not shown; total variance explained—69.7%; KMO = 0.700, Bartlett = 0.000.

We checked the internal consistency of the mean indices formed using Cronbach's alpha. This yielded acceptable or good values for factors 1 to 5 (ranging from 0.737 to 0.804), but poor or questionable values for the factors 6 to 8 (ranging from 0.377 to 0.635). This should be taken into account when interpreting the mean values: Factors 1 through 5 are much more stable, they contain more items that also fit together well, and they have a higher explained variance. Therefore, if factors 6 to 8 are not taken into account any further, the Transformation Agent and Social Integrator dimensions have the highest mean values. As a result, these can be considered the most characteristic of the journalists we surveyed.

## 5. Summary and Limitations

This survey presents a small and relatively new milieu within the journalistic field in Germany which is as diverse in age as the entire field but is characterized by containing more women, formally higher educated journalists, freelancers, and journalists who are leaning toward green and left political perspectives. Regarding role orientations, we found lower agreement with a neutral-objective and detached understanding of the journalistic role than in the whole field. The constructive journalists clearly show stronger ambitions than the average German journalist to act as a watchdog of political and business elites, motivate people to participate, and contribute not only to social change but to a fundamental transformation of society. Factor analysis showed that the understanding of the constructive role has a number of facets. We found not only the pro-business "Ashoka faction" (here, the role dimension Innovation Reporter) and the system-critical "Jungk faction" (here, the role dimension Transformation Agent) that Krüger (2017) suspected—eight factors were needed to explain two-thirds of the variance in the responses. Among them, the dimensions Social Integrator and Active Watchdog are also of great importance, as the number of included items, the explained variance, the factor means, and the internal consistency of the mean indices show.

This study has a number of limitations. Some of them are explained in the methodology and results sections. The population ("all German journalists that call themselves constructive or solution-oriented") is unknown, and although we tried hard to reach all relevant persons directly or via snowballing, the sample did not cover the entire population of such journalists. In the factor analysis, the last three of the extracted eight factors were plausibly interpretable, but not stable. Besides that, this study is limited to the analysis of cognitive role orientations (what journalists *want to do*). It is neither about what they *do in practice* nor what they *say they do in practice*, neither did we observe their work nor did we ask them whether they are achieving their goals. Thus, scholarly work on the role performance of our participants remains a desideratum.

## 6. Discussion

Any reform movement within journalism can be interpreted as a reaction to perceived undesirable developments or states in mainstream journalism: Investigative journalism emerged more than 100 years ago to supplement the "objective" reporting on established institutions with revelations about corruption and abuses of power. Since the 1970s, precision journalism, and later data journalism, have made media discourse more exact and evidence-based with independently collected, analyzed, or visualized social science statistics (Beiler et al., 2020). In the 1990s, civic or public journalism competed to counter journalists' fixation on elites; it addressed "people as citizens, potential participants in public affairs, rather than victims or spectators" (Rosen, 1999, as cited in Bro, 2019, p. 510). Constructive journalism, then, has made its own critical point: Countering the preponderance of negative news factors such as conflict, damage, or aggression, its proponents call for a different weighting of news factors in journalistic selection decisions in favor of societal progress, problem-solving, and future-orientation.

This survey shows that, at least in Germany, journalists who describe themselves as constructive are not only solution- and future-oriented, but at the same time are consciously working normatively, politicized, and attached to certain issues and goals instead of striving for detached and neutral observation. Here, the role of the interventionist change agent shines through, which research has found to be more common among representatives of "development journalism" in the Global South. At the same time, there seems to be no danger of taking on the role of the opportunist facilitator from development journalism "which provides support to political leadership and government policy" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 148)—German constructive journalists also want to be watchdogs of political and business elites in a Western tradition. This may show a combination of solutions and investigative reporting approaches by which "journalism can create greater impact by putting pressure on leaders to solve problems and by showing readers that problems are not intractable" (Walth et al., 2019, p. 178).

From our point of view, the formation of this cognitive role orientation can be explained by two factors, one factor within the professional field and one factor outside. Constructive journalists, at least in Germany, seem to respond not only to a possible negativity bias in the news but also to a trend of increasing detachment in the newsrooms. According to three representative surveys conducted in 1993, 2005, and 2015, German journalists have understood their role increasingly to lay in the neutral dissemination of information and in impartial observation and, in turn, decreasingly in a sense of criticism, social commitment, intervention, political articulation, and participation (Hanitzsch & Lauerer, 2019). Thus, constructive journalists might counter the charge

of “activism” with the countercharge of “passivism” in the general journalistic profession.

This is where the other factor comes in: Journalistic role orientations and the relationship between journalism and society are always renegotiated whenever social realities change (Hanitzsch & Lauerer, 2019, p. 138); and the recent years have been marked by an intensification of multiple crises and a greater societal awareness specifically of the ecological crisis which has been undermining the natural foundations of human life. This is exactly the most pressing societal problem in the eyes of German constructive journalists, and when they see a necessity to fundamentally restructure society in order to be fit for the future, they do so in agreement with respectable research groups that combine findings of earth system research with political consequences and the demand for a “great transformation” toward sustainability (e.g., German Advisory Council on Global Change, 2011). According to Brüggemann et al. (2020), today’s “post-normal situation” with the urgency for rapid action is already leading parts of science journalism and academia to increasingly behave as advocates for public goods and reject the role of the detached observer. It is plausible to assume that constructive journalism is also emerging for exactly the same reason—and in this context might be better understood by the term “transformative journalism” (Brüggemann et al., 2021; Krüger, 2022) because it ultimately aims to fundamentally change socio-economic structures. This study might thus be seen as a snapshot of boundary work within a process of renegotiating journalism’s identity and place in a society facing an existential crisis.

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### Conflict of Interests

The corresponding author Uwe Krüger is a member of the above-mentioned association Netzwerk Weitblick—Verband Journalismus & Nachhaltigkeit (Network Thinking Ahead—Association for Journalism & Sustainability). One of the eight founders of Netzwerk Klimajournalismus Deutschland (Network Climate Journalism Germany), Lorenz Matzat, is guest professor at the MSc in Journalism program at Leipzig University which is headed by co-author Markus Beiler.

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Article

## Digitalization, Standardization, and Diversification: Crime News Under Online-First Pressure in France and Germany

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### Abstract

Based on a qualitative survey (comprised of interviews with 42 journalists) in French and German mainstream media (print and TV), this article aims to compare the effect of the digitalization process on editorial choices and journalistic roles concerning crime news. Crime news appears to be particularly revealing of the new journalistic constraints: tabloidization and high-speed publishing, but without jeopardizing the ethical requirements of an ongoing legal investigation. Three main changes can be identified, namely regarding (a) the use of social media and its audience as a legitimate source and as a key factor of newsworthiness, (b) the importance granted to online metrics for planning media content and editorial meetings, and (c) the transition observed toward the “online-first model,” which encourages journalists to publish all content online first, updating it to the minute before any print publication. The article first underlines the importance of the digital conversion of newsrooms. Interviewees point out that this pressure has counterintuitive effects, giving them room for autonomy and journalistic creativity in crime news reporting. Finally, and more worryingly for them, journalists are concerned that their professional practices may be undermined, since the online-first model has affected the organization of newsrooms and the structure of the media market in both countries. This structural process is somehow stronger in France than in Germany, but this is more a matter of degree than of structural model differences.

### Keywords

audience metrics; crime news; division of work; journalism practices; online-first model; social networks

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

While numerous structural transformations in communication processes and practices have been identified by the international literature (such as a greater polarization of the media, an exacerbated race for audiences and scoops amplified on digital networks, the weight of anti-elitism and populism in public spaces, or the lack of interest in political subjects and the search for soft news; see Blumler, 2016; van Aelst et al., 2017), current research is still divided on the impact of these changes on the media, and especially the effect of digitalization.

A first set of transformations highlighted by the literature raises the question of the increased commercialization, i.e., tabloidization (Esser, 1999; Hubé, 2008), of the media. For some, the two continental European models (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), also known as the polarized pluralist model (including France) and the democratic corporatist one (including Germany), seem to have been converging toward the liberal model under the growing weight of commercial and financial imperatives over the last decade. For others, the Internet and digital platforms became the new economy, blurring the line between producers and consumers of information (Humphrecht

et al., 2022). A consensus seems to be emerging that traditional media content in these systems is relatively unaffected by their respective national evolution, moving more slowly than their digital contents (Benson et al., 2012). The digitalization of the traditional media seems to have encouraged a “sheep-like journalism,” characterized by the homogenization of all media news. The “circular circulation of information” due to pure commercial pressure, as analyzed by Bourdieu (1998, pp. 22–29), is now reinforced by permanent public control over content and its imitation process (Boczkowski, 2010).

But these generalizations about media systems sometimes tend to overshadow the concrete effects of these developments on the organizational aspect of journalistic work. Digitalization has impacted the work of journalists over the past two decades (Boczkowski, 2004). Newsworthiness and news selection are influenced by this process (Anderson, 2011; Christin, 2018; Grossi, 2020; Parasie & Dagiral, 2013) since social networks and websites help reporters and their bosses to know exactly what contents generate traffic. However, this process is not univocal. In some newsrooms, editors may be engaged in an alternative use of metrics, thus leading to disagreements about the roles and functions of each person within the editorial team (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). Reporters can sometimes take advantage of these metrics to become less dependent on their hierarchy, thus turning metrics into something other than a “marketing trojan horse” (Amiel & Powers, 2019; Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2019). Moreover, Internet users and social networks may now even be considered by journalists as singular and legitimate sources of information that are highly valued in the context of increased competition between media looking to publish faster and faster, to be the best ranked online, and thus generate more traffic (Benson et al., 2012; Esperland & Sauder, 2007; Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2019; Ruffio, 2020). Public participation thus contributes to the agenda-setting and politicization of certain subjects in the newspaper to gain audience share (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022). In other words, this public participation is both a useful marketing tool and a professional tool to ensure the accountability of the media outlet, allowing it to make content corrections transparently (Chung & Yun Yoo, 2008; Joseph, 2011), even if this can lead to a strengthening of media distrust when these corrections are too frequent (Karlsson et al., 2017). One effect of this process is its direct contribution to the diversification of journalistic formats and genres to differentiate media outlets from their competitors in this highly competitive market.

Both the widespread use of online audience measurement devices (Christin, 2018) and commercial pressure may explain the increasing attention paid to crime news by the media as a whole. Crime news ranks among the topics most frequently covered online by all kinds of media, conversely to the news published offline (Berthaut, 2013; Esser, 1999; Jewkes, 2004; Sécaïl, 2012). Meanwhile, though crime news is profitable, it also cov-

ers highly sensitive issues that sometimes encourage editors to be more cautious and to show more professionalism in order not to polarize debates too much (Rowbotham et al., 2013; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994). In Western Europe, rather than adopting a punitive stance driven by the liberal model (Simon, 2007), editors prefer to frame crime news as a society-wide issue rather than a pure crime-related issue (M’Sili, 2000). Concerning crime news, digital networks affect journalists’ work in the same way as a structural logic would do, by helping to redefine their professional practices (Patterson & Smith Fullerton, 2016; Rowbotham et al., 2013). As part of the study of these structural transformations in national media systems, crime news appears to be a relevant indicator of changes in journalism. Crime news is not confined to a particular journalist or department, which is why it is referred to in French as *faits divers* (news in brief). In this article, the expression “crime news” refers to all journalistic content published on crime-related topics, both court cases (corporal and non-corporal offences, financial crime, drug trafficking, etc.) and issues related to criminal matters and their judicial, political, and social treatment (judicial policy, counter-terrorism policy, feeling of safety, prison and punishment, etc.).

## 2. Research Questions

Looking at discussions on the recent transformations within media system models, it appears that the economic weakness of the media belonging to the polarized pluralist model (including France) makes them more prone to commercialization logics (Amiel & Powers, 2019; Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2019). In France for instance, crime and soft news occupy a relatively important historical place in the mainstream media (M’Sili, 2000; Sécaïl, 2012), although not to the same extent as in the North American press (Benson, 2013). One could therefore suggest that the French media system is at the interface of the liberal and corporatist-pluralist models in terms of the race for audiences, with the French mainstream media being more tabloid-oriented (Esser, 1999) through crime reporting (Hubé & Ruffio, in press) than their German counterparts (Hubé, 2008; Leidenberger, 2015). Tabloidization must be understood here as a general process of transformation of content and professional practices affecting all media outlets, placing a greater emphasis on scandals (especially those involving celebrities), crime and soft news, sports, and solution journalism for commercial purposes. In the meantime, the transition to an online-first model based on audience metrics (Lamot et al., 2021) implicitly raises questions about how the speed of publication has accelerated (Joseph, 2011). Characterized by the need for new developments (in the investigation, in the backstory of the protagonists), crime news is already, by its subject and format, conducive to quick journalistic work, driven by the search for a scoop for mainly commercial reasons

(Grundlingh, 2017; Young, 2016). The present contribution aims to investigate the impact of digital journalism on the practices and roles of mainstream journalism in the context of increasing information flows and competition. One may assume that the increasing prominence of online media and social networks has contributed to promoting crime reporting, which is said to appeal to the broadest audience. About international patterns (Amiel & Powers, 2019; Christin, 2018), French journalists may be expected to be more receptive to these changes. But in this regard, the comparative analysis of television channels in eleven European and North American countries carried out by Walgrave and Sadicaris (2009) shows how the competition between media outlets has an impact on the way television channels deal with crime news. More specifically, they observed that the French and German television models tended to be quite similar to each other, but different from the US one. This reluctance to assume a punitive stance (Hubé & Ruffio, in press; Simon, 2007) may, conversely, bring journalists from the two media systems closer together.

Our first research question consists in understanding whether digitalization is bringing the two journalistic models closer together, toward the liberal one (RQ1).

A second major question arises. Since digitalization adds to the pressure already felt by journalists, who are now urged to consider online audience data (Christin, 2018; Lamot et al., 2021), one might ask how journalists react to this growing pressure exerted by metrics: Do they play the game or do they try to resist it? Journalists are asked to work faster and to satisfy the widest possible audience at the same time. They tend to produce shorter and less analytical articles. As a result, it can be considered that they are encouraged by their managers/supervisors to publish exclusive information online first in order to remain competitive, even if this sometimes means infringing journalistic ethics. This is particularly relevant to crime news, which is considered more politically sensitive than other types (Cook, 1998). Content changes online are now made under audience control (Chung & Yun Yoo, 2008; Joseph, 2011; Karlsson et al., 2017). In the current context of widespread distrust of the media (Newman et al., 2021) and far-right populist success in both countries (AfD in Germany and FN/RN in France), one may thus expect journalists to proceed cautiously to content corrections in order not to validate any criticism that they are not working seriously. But the online-first strategy is not only a matter of attracting the audience. It can be explained by two other dimensions. On the one hand, it is a question of not being outpaced by competitors. This inclination to imitate rivals seems to be accentuated in the context of the acceleration of information (Boczkowski, 2010) and by the online ranking issues previously mentioned. The determination not to be accused of being a “secretive press” (Lilienthal & Neverla, 2017; Parasie, 2019) seems to influence the propensity among media outlets to imitate their competitors. On the other hand, under the supervision of

news editors convinced that audience analytics support rather than harm their journalism (Lamot & Paulussen, 2020), one could even suggest that the acceleration of information, accentuated by the digitalization of newsrooms, could lead to the disappearance of the notion of periodicity of traditional newspapers and media in favor of continuous publication modeled on the 24-hour media. Finally, due to tighter deadlines in the context of real-time reporting, reporters and columnists are also increasingly forced to take editorial initiatives because they do not have time to consult with their supervisors, thus blurring the line between their respective functions and statuses.

Thus, digitalization appears to contribute indirectly to the process of standardization of media content, by its effects on the representation of the public’s expectations in newsrooms in the digital age (RQ2).

### 3. A Qualitative Methodology

To answer these questions, forty-two interviews were conducted with journalists and their supervisors (22 in France and 20 in Germany; see Table 1) between 7 February 2018 and 21 September 2018, using a semi-structured, theory-guided topic list with a fixed set of questions we asked each editor. Four main topics were discussed: the importance of crime and penal issues in the media and for their career; how journalists decide (not) to cover and frame this type of news; how news sources and other external stakeholders influence journalists’ daily work; and how journalists view changes in criminality and judicial work. We chose to target journalists in charge of crime and justice issues in order to examine the influence of the digitalization process on the media treatment of these topics.

We retained the following six criteria in order to select the general news media to be covered: media sector (print or TV), type of media (newspapers, news-magazine, TV journal, or 24/7 news channel), frequency (daily, weekly, or non-stop), circulation territory (national or regional), editorial line (conservative, progressive, or neutral), legitimacy of the media within the field of journalism (quality press, tabloid, or popular press; see Table 2). On this point (and in particular for the audience and editorial line), we proceeded on the basis of the main selection criteria used in international comparative surveys (see, for example, de Vreese et al., 2017; Mellado, 2022; Picard, 2015). One of our objectives was to study a representative panel of the main media sectors in each country. The main difference between the two media systems at this stage is the presence of private 24/7 news channels in France and of a tabloid press (*Bild Zeitung*) in Germany that does not exist in France. Due to the definition of “crime news” retained, we decided to interview any forms of journalistic specialization in criminal matters. More specifically, we intended to meet legal columnists as much as reporters who published on police, justice, and prison

issues. Occasionally, depending on the internal organization of the editorial offices and departments studied, we met with some journalists dealing with topics such as “security” (asked about terrorist issues) and “gender/women” (asked about sexual violence issues) in order not to exclude these specific subjects from our sample.

The interviews took place face-to-face and were digitally recorded, with an average length of one hour per interview. Since the interviewees were all guaranteed anonymity, we decided, when quoting them in the following sections, to specify and qualify only the media to which they belong. Using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo 11, all transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis, in which we searched

for recurring themes within the data using both codes that were set a priori to look for particular aspects and new codes that emerged from the data. The interview excerpts cited were chosen for their exemplary nature, as they are more complete, detailed, or clear than other comparable excerpts, which were all previously identified and listed.

#### 4. Findings

In our sample, the importance of the digital conversion of newsrooms is without question. All have opted for an online-first audience strategy in order not to be outdone by their media competitors. However, the interviewees pointed out that this pressure has “counterintuitive

**Table 1.** French and German journalists interviewed (N = 42), according to their hierarchical rank and specialty.

		Media section		
		Police/Security	Justice/Court trials	Other
France	Editor/Reporter	8	5	
	Head of department	6		1
	Editor-in-chief/Managing editor	2		
	Total	16	5	1
Germany	Editor/Reporter	7	3	3
	Head of department	2		
	Editor-in-chief/Managing editor		1	4
	Total	9	4	7
Total		25	9	8

**Table 2.** Type of media selected in both countries, according to the six criteria used for the comparison.

		France	Germany
Media sector	Print	7	9
	Private TV	2	2
	Public TV	2	3
Type of media	Newspaper	5	6
	Newsmagazine	2	3
	TV Journal	3	5
	24/7 News channel	1	—
Periodicity	Daily	8	9
	Weekly	2	5
	Non-stop	1	—
Circulation territory	National	8	11
	Regional	3	3
Editorial line	Liberal	3	4
	Conservative	4	5
	Neutral	4	5
Type of audience	Quality	6	9
	Popular	5	3
	Tabloid	—	2

effects,” since in some ways it leaves them room for autonomy and journalistic creativity in their crime news reporting, which appears to be contrary to the very principle of pressure and constraint. Finally, and more worryingly for them, journalists are concerned that their professional practices may be undermined.

#### 4.1. Generating Traffic With Crime News

The journalists interviewed emphasize the standardization of online news content due to the quest for the widest possible audience. In some newsrooms, giant screens have been put up on every wall so journalists cannot be unaware of topics that are currently getting a lot of attention in digital spaces. To keep them aware of their online audience’s interest in published contents, comments and messages from Internet users are also now taken into consideration, and, in some cases, must be answered, adding to the journalists’ workload. These digital reviews can even directly influence what the media will choose to publish in the future, in order to respond to their readers’ particular demands:

You shouldn’t make a blind offer, like “I’m the journalist, and that’s how it’s going to be, and I won’t take people’s opinions into account.” It turns out that, with social networks, people give us much more feedback than before. (regional public TV station, France)

Moreover, all media began to cover these topics more frequently, including those that tended to look down on crime news, as the latter was thought to be “popular” and “vulgar.” As we noted in our quantitative content analysis, this process started in France and Germany two decades ago (Hubé, 2008; Hubé & Ruffio, in press). Digitalization has thus encouraged journalists to feed a story, sometimes even artificially (i.e., in the absence of new items), to keep an audience captive for several days or weeks (or even more), depending on the possible twists and turns of the case. The objective is to write at least one line about the story that other media are talking about. “I want this information to be available under the brand name [our newspaper],” confessed a French local journalist.

However, this process does not affect all the media in the same way. For the regional press, the online and offline audiences seem to be merged, registered as a continuum during the day, while for the national or upmarket media, the two audiences seem to be clearly distinct for the journalists interviewed. Unlike their national competitors, local media (both print and TV) do not have “a reputation to uphold,” said a regional newspaper journalist from France, at least not to the same extent. Most of the local journalists interviewed were more likely than their colleagues from national media to say that the professional culture has changed; that, for instance, it is now considered possible to publish unverified information in order to be *the* first (answering RQ2):

And the first thing I have in mind is the online version and not the paper version for the next day. First comes online, everything has to go out as quickly as possible and then be updated....There is not just one text that stays there, it is constantly updated. And then comes the print version. (regional newspaper journalist, Germany)

Conversely, national and upmarket media appear to dissociate their online and offline audiences: Online content aims to attract a large audience for economic purposes, while offline (print/TV) articles are meant to reflect the “seriousness” and the “reliability” of the media. As this German journalist puts it: “We have...two different audiences: online and print.” To sum up, crime news tends to be published online where one piece of information replaces another, contributing to “[forgetting] today’s news,” something which is said to be particularly appreciated in the event of a journalistic error. This increased attention paid to crime news can even lead to the partial reorganization of certain editorial offices, as happened with an upmarket newspaper’s society department, which is now designed to promote crime reporting, as explained by one of the newspaper editors:

The editorial management said that it would be great to find an assistant who was more interested in “more general” news, in other words, in crime news. [Journalist] had been reporting on these topics for quite a few years [he covered crime news, trials, and terrorism for eight years]....So we thought it would be great to have two profiles, a kind of two-headed head department: one interested in social issues, me, and the other one in [hesitation] “general information,” let’s say....There is indeed a desire to treat more crime news, in particular on the Internet, because it is successful....Crime news is very popular online. (national newspaper journalist, France)

In the current context of general distrust of the media, according to some readers and Internet users, traditional media do not publish everything, but instead conceal certain information for ideological and political purposes. Journalists anticipate this criticism by copying their competitors in order not to be associated with the list of media which are thought not to have relayed the information. For instance, a French regional newspaper journalist explained that readers now tend to seek answers directly from journalists—via online comments and messages—when they do not understand why the information relayed by different media on a particular event is sometimes inconsistent, or even contradictory:

We are questioned by our readers in online comments about why we didn’t talk about this or that. This often happens with important crime news, especially everything related to terrorism. They don’t understand, because they watch [a 24/7 TV channel]

which relays certain things, and we don't because we know that the information is not reliable at the moment. But as a result, our readers don't understand why we don't mention this topic. Their questions quickly turn into conspiracy theories.

Journalists tend to take into consideration the criticism about a "secretive" press all the more in that crime news captures a very large audience, and is thus likely to be interpreted politically, often in quite a controversial way. They anticipate any mistakes that might serve some conspiracy theory, as this journalist points out (answering RQ2). For this reason, they feel that they have to take even greater responsibility when covering crime news in a rush. Especially in Germany, the media are pressured by the new populist criticism of being a "lying press" (*Lügenpresse*), mostly coming from far-right movements (AfD, PEGIDA) and sometimes from the far left (Holt & Haller, 2017):

Certain circles are continuously bombarding us with online comments and e-mails, and it's this nasty term, "lying press," as if we were hiding something...But this enormous public pressure according to which we would keep silent about crimes committed by foreigners incites us to mention it more often now than we did in the past. And that is also a problem that the police press offices have. (regional newspaper journalist, Germany)

This was obvious in Germany during the gang rapes and assaults that occurred on the 2015 New Year's Eve in Cologne. The media decided to partially change their usual practices in the days after the event to satisfy particular demands on social media, and thus retain their audience:

It changed because the AfD sprang on it and because the police didn't speak to us....Because the AfD made it an issue we had to be careful: Here comes this criticism about the lying press....This meant that journalists, whether they are working for print or television media, were globally insulted and pilloried. (national newspaper editor, Germany)

But the media were criticized by the German Media Council (*Deutscher Presserat*) because they published the nationalities or religions of the defendants without hard facts (Haarhoff, 2020). "New Year's Eve in Cologne" had a lasting effect on various journalistic routines within editorial offices.

While the online-first process looks similar, there is one important difference between the two countries. In matters of crime news as well as in solution journalism, the economic vulnerability of the French media has forced reporters to take on these transformations in person (Amiel & Powers, 2019). On the contrary, in Germany, the lower economic pressure and, above all, the influ-

ence of the tabloid *Bild*, have led reporters to adopt a more distant approach. Everything is as if it is always the other media competitor who has behaved badly. But *Bild* is an agenda-setter. Typically, this is what this journalist says:

The *Bild* newspaper has a strong agenda-setting effect, not so much in the general population as amongst the media. If they make it big, you can't get past this thing at all. You can write it up differently...but to leave a topic out completely when they're really serious about it? That's difficult, yes! (national upmarket journalist, Germany)

#### 4.2. An Instrument for Journalistic Genre and Format Diversification

Unsurprisingly, our interviews show that this traditional division of journalistic work is evolving due to the increased digitalization of newsrooms. According to the journalists interviewed, the once-clear line separating digital and "editorial" (print and television) offices has been blurred over the past decade, despite the organizational (and symbolic) distinction being maintained between digital and print departments and specialties. In both countries, in newsrooms where the two departments still exist, reporters and columnists are now asked to check and supplement information identified online by digital journalists, or to produce joint publications. These increasingly frequent collaborations make it possible to save time during rush periods by bringing together the various individual resources these journalists have to offer (sources and address books; expertise in a specific subject; specific techniques and practices, such as computer graphics, data journalism, etc.). While these results are in line with our research questions and previous studies (Boczkowski, 2004; Christin, 2018), it could be argued that a new journalistic division seems to be emerging in most digitalized newsrooms, where print or television reporters and columnists tend to verify and investigate the news pre-selected by desk journalists in charge of digital monitoring. As a French court reporter working for a local newspaper said: "Our editorial management is now more focused on the Internet...[which implies] an increasingly significant contribution from journalists who usually work on the paper edition. [This implies] an increasingly significant collaboration between the print team and the digital team."

The paradox of this pressure to work together is that these more frequent interactions give digital and print/television journalists the opportunity to discover each other's respective department's standards and expectations. During these collaborations, digital journalists, most often young recruits freshly graduated from journalism schools, are thus trained by more experienced journalists in the "traditional" editorial rules and ethics governing the coverage of crime news. For their part, the more senior reporters are asked to adapt to

digital formats, forcing them to unlearn some of the fundamental journalistic standards acquired during their studies and careers (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2019). While this process of mutual learning points to the standardization of content—since digital and print journalists share each other’s publication standards—it appears that all journalists are concerned about the risk of producing lower-quality information. For instance, and backed up by most of the journalists interviewed, a German reporter working for a national newspaper confessed: “We [print reporters] have nothing to do with the online publishers....They sometimes take over our stories....In order to generate better click rates, they also rephrase our texts. And then all of a sudden they are no longer correct.” In sum, crime reporters are permanently concerned with maintaining their independence when covering crime news (Ericson et al., 1989), but still feel the huge pressure to publish these best-selling stories as soon as possible.

Both in Germany and France—and in response to both our research questions—the main objective is to attract readers using digital tools to redirect them to the media’s own social networks and website. While some reporters are opposed to the editorial transformations resulting from the digitalization process, others emphasize the opportunities that it offers to propose and experiment with new journalistic formats by juggling with print space and airtime constraints. A news-magazine journalist reported that, on their media’s website, journalists “can publish whatever [they] want [like] very short papers of two thousand characters, and others of twenty thousand signs...which would never have fit into the magazine, because it doesn’t have twelve thousand pages.” This also offers the huge additional advantage of enabling up-to-the-minute correction following factual changes in a case. Journalists have adapted their work on a whole new platform to drive crime-related traffic into the newsroom. Amongst all the current innovative aspects offered by digitalization, journalists spontaneously cited live-tweeting as a new journalistic practice particularly suited to covering crime news in a rush, experimented with most notably since Dominique Strauss-Kahn’s arrest for sexual assault in 2011 (Pignard-Cheynel & Sebbah, 2015). In the event of crime news, live-tweeting does not only involve using social networks as sources (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Hernández-Fuentes & Monnier, 2020) or as a means to fact-check a story (Coddington et al., 2014). Live-tweeting helps journalists compensate for the absence or lack of images and testimonies, both of which are essential for television and print reports, more in France than in Germany. In other words, live-tweeting “allows [journalists] to be at the trial in real-time” (private TV journalist, France), while giving them the choice of publishing short, occasional tweets or posting long sequences of tweets (“threads”), thus changing their investigation methods:

Now I only have to reread my tweets to see the highlights of the hearing: a strong statement from the accused, or an impassioned plea from a lawyer....So I take fewer and fewer notes during trials, I’m on my phone more and more, tweeting about what is being said....Then our media publishes our tweets, [referring to] our live-tweets. (private TV journalist, France)

Nonetheless, it appears that the increasing use of Twitter to cover crime news has coincided with the gradual disappearance of court reports in the traditional media. As a result, the reporters we interviewed explained that they tend to use social networks and digital tools to promote their own individual added value and expertise, by doing what they call “pedagogical work” online. This specific use of Twitter allows them to re-specialize their publications by providing explanations deemed essential to a full understanding of the events and judgments reported, but also to depoliticize certain cases that have been politicized through media coverage. They tend to expand their role as a knowledge-broker to online platforms in order to reinforce some of the most basic journalistic standards that have been abandoned online (mainly for commercial reasons) and, at the same time, to attract audiences to the media outlet:

[Regarding two cases that received a lot of media and political attention in France in the 2010s] In these two cases I considered that the role of the reporter was really to put things into context and to go beyond or even against public opinion. I was shocked! I know the case, I know in what context Jacqueline Sauvage killed her husband. Yes, there was obvious domestic abuse, but we must not turn her into a saint, we must not make her a symbol....It is up to us to explain that if the court did not wish to grant her parole, it is because there are reasons in the law. There are legal arguments against it. And instead of saying things without being familiar with the case, you read the legal grounds. So I put that on my Twitter account, saying “read them, it’s explained, it’s six pages, it’s not long.” (private TV station journalist, France)

This observation appears to be particularly salient in relation to court reporters and journalists in charge of day-to-day police and justice stories. Due to their respective specialties, these reporters are highly accustomed to hearing the views of justice professionals on specific court cases, as well as on the judicial, political, or media treatment of crime. Journalists from other departments (politics, society, economy, or international, for example) who are occasionally asked to cover cases to help their overworked colleagues, therefore deal with these topics from a more descriptive and factual point of view than their colleagues, who are specialists and therefore capable of explaining:

I think that [non-specialist journalists] tend to pick a specific case and try to make it emblematic of something bigger, greater....But most of these reporters do not know the law or how the justice system works, so they do not really talk about cases in full knowledge of the facts....For instance, when the alleged rapist of an eleven-year-old girl is finally judged not for rape but sexual assault, and is finally not sentenced, one could think that the justice system does not protect children and thus does not work correctly. In fact, this means, above all, that the legal rules of the judicial process are not known. (national newspaper journalist, France)

#### 4.3. From Sheep-Like to Inaccurate Journalism

Our interviews confirmed what the existing literature has already pointed out: Publishing in real-time raises the question of the disappearance of the *periodicity* of publications, and consequently redefines the organization and routine of the newsroom. By shortening deadlines before publication, the digitalization process accentuates the overload already described by reporters in charge of crime news: "I think that [other] departments' reporters are under less pressure....They have schedules and know more or less what's going to happen in the next few months....When you cover crime news, anything can happen at any time" (private TV journalist, France). But more specifically, publishing in real-time also creates challenges in terms of editorial authority: Who is considered legitimate, within a newsroom or department, to decide whether or not to publish an article on the media website in the rush? An important difference emerges from our comparison. French journalists, who work under greater commercial constraints (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2019), try to maintain control over the processing of their stories, whereas the better-kept hierarchical division of labor tends to prevent German journalists from doing so (answering RQ1). In a hurry, French journalists increasingly need to decide for their bosses because they often do not have enough time to ask them for a decision. This situation can lead to tensions between journalists and their bosses, since it indirectly calls into question their respective functions within the editorial team:

In the morning I'm often in charge of our website's news feed, so I may have to decide to relay certain news that hasn't been validated by my bosses. Most of the time, this is not a problem, but sometimes it can lead to disagreements. What is paradoxical is that our bosses can reproach us for having published something without having asked them, even though we had no choice because we were alone in the newsroom at the time. And if we hadn't published it, we could have been criticized for that too. (national newspaper journalist, France)

In contrast, German journalists seem to remain more distant from audience metrics, fully leaving the choice of publication to the editors and/or webmasters. German reporters thus appear to be more likely to be critical of this development, which they consider to be a threat to quality (answering RQ1). As a result, in both countries, and contrary to journalistic rules, the risk taken by the media outlet is to publish information that has not even been checked in order to be the first to relay it online. Commercial considerations thus prevail over professional principles and ethics, characterizing the shift from sheep-like to erroneous journalism:

Because there is an increasing number of online readers whose main priority is speed and not accuracy...this is where a lot of fake information can circulate. The main point is that it should be published quickly, first, and then investigated....The most important thing is to bring the topic to the audience. Then we make a few phone calls....That's exactly how it shouldn't be. (regional Newspaper journalist, Germany)

According to the reporters we interviewed, journalistic mistakes are sometimes even rationalized and monetized by certain journalists, who choose to publish new content to rectify the original errors to generate more clicks and traffic online.

## 5. Discussion

In line with previous studies, we find that digitalization enhances crime coverage in traditional media (print and TV), and crime appears to be the most popular (hence profitable) topic consulted online by Internet users. But perhaps more surprisingly (and answering RQ2), this trend may have less to do with digitalization per se than with competition between newsrooms, which has become sharpened by digitalization. This increasing attention paid to metrics reflects the management's desire to constantly remind journalists of the media's commercial objectives. In the context of accelerating online and offline information, editors, and more particularly crime reporters, say that they are under ever greater pressure to publish more stories, ever faster, leading to the gradual disappearance of regular deadlines in favor of 24/7 publication. As they have to be responsive in real-time, digital and print/TV teams have to collaborate more and more regularly to share their (re)sources in order to publish faster in line with their supervisors' expectations. Reporters tend to relay shorter, more descriptive articles, based on news already published by competing media, in order to profit from the buzz and traffic generated. This tendency to imitate their peers contributes to the standardization of news, which can be described as "sheep-like journalism," and can lead to inaccurate or even erroneous journalism when media choose to publish unverified, and therefore potentially



fake information. Journalists are thus concerned about the resulting criticism of their outlet's reputation.

Paradoxically, a second interesting finding is that the endorsement of this logic by crime reporters (especially French ones) seems to give them autonomy and legitimacy through this organizational evolution. It first appears that, paradoxically, both digital and print/TV journalists have gained in autonomy. They have to make editorial decisions on their own when they do not have enough time to ask their managers. While it could be argued that reporters now get to make (editorial) decisions in a rush and can thus publish content on their own with no prior approval from their supervisors. They are also now more than ever constantly reminded what topics are currently the most popular online thanks to metrics and live statistics. Encouraged to write less analytical articles online to please their digital audience, journalists can nonetheless experiment with new journalistic formats and genres (e.g., live-tweeting and "threads") on their own personal Twitter accounts. By distinguishing their own posts from those written in the name of their outlet ("my tweets are my responsibility"), journalists extend to themselves the dissociation already made by some traditional (especially national and upmarket) media between their digital editorial line (focused on crime news that generates the most traffic) and their print edition (supposed to reflect and guarantee the outlet's reputation and reliability).

Finally, concerning comparative media system theories (answering RQ1; see Hallin & Mancini, 2004), unexpectedly, the discrepancy between French and German models is not one of structure, but of degree. Audience pressure through digitalization is an analogous process in both countries. The systematic differentiation between digital and conventional (print and TV) editions shows that the symbolic distinction between various media in the field is at stake. While experimentations with format and topic as well as mistakes are allowed online, they are still not tolerated in conventional editions, which are associated with the outlet's reputation. Errors, guesswork, and experiments are not permitted in order to preserve their legitimacy. This distinction between conventional and digital publications is particularly significant for media that do not usually cover crime news. This observation is particularly true for upmarket newspapers and periodicals, which may prefer to publish crime stories online. It is also more systematically the case for German media seeking to distance themselves from the repulsive figure of the tabloid *Bild*.

In order to verify and extend this qualitative research, it would be worth comparing our results to quantitative analyses of media coverage of crime news over the longer term (Hubé & Ruffio, in press). This would measure and qualify more precisely how journalistic practices and standards have changed over time. Another approach would be to conduct ethnographic observations of journalists covering crime news to study their daily routines and to better understand how they select

and frame this specific news (or not), depending on constraints and demands. This qualitative survey would also make it possible to characterize the evolution of decision-making logics within editorial offices, as described in this article.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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