Eroding Truth and Trust:
The Far-Right Counter-Public's
Pandemic Media Criticism

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Submitted to Central European University
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In partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts, Vienna, 2021

Abstract

Contemporary far-right actors attribute great weight to media and information wars in their striving for political influence. The Covid-19 pandemic has presented them with a new field to do so. Analysing discourses and structures of a German far-right online media platform, this thesis explores how far-right media producers relate and react to mainstream media in the context of the pandemic, aiming at a better understanding of how this contributes to the solidification and radicalization of different publics. The discussion of mainstream media content on alternative media presents a point of intersection of different arenas in a fragmented public sphere. Drawing from theory about publics and counter-publics, this research project illuminates how far-right media lay claim to being the voice of the people and the voice of truth. By tracing the way far-right media position themselves in relation to society and the general media landscape and criticise established media, it brings into focus capacities of the far-right counter-public beyond identity formation and agenda setting. Thus, my thesis concentrates on how the public sphere is constructed, questioned and negotiated on the level of truths and facticity. I argue that, ostensibly relying in their argumentation and media criticism on pitting facts and versions of reality against another, far-right media attack the authority and integrity of the mainstream media, and thus contribute to the production of mistrust and a distinct set of beliefs, masked as facts. Embedded in further reaching controversies sprouting in the Covid-19 pandemic, this presents them with an opportunity to expand their sphere of influence, by establishing ties to other Covid-denying publics feeding into and drawing from the same truth market.

Key words
Alternative media, far-right, extremism, public sphere, post-truth, disinformation, media mistrust, pandemic, coronavirus

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Introduction

People with German flags and others in black, white and red stripes – colours of the German Reich and distinctively popular among right-wing extremists – surmounting the barriers of the German parliament building in Berlin. They are crowding on the steps in front of the entrance, until the police manages to get the situation under control. More than 300 people, many of them associated with different right-wing extremist movements, were arrested. This incident took place on August 29 2020 and was soon labelled the "storming of Reichstag" across media. It was the sad highlight of a protest day in Berlin counting about 38 000 participants overall, which had been organised by a movement brought together by their vehement rejection of the German government's Covid-19 policies. Right-wing extremists certainly did not represent the majority of the participants, yet they took over the protest. Although rarely in such a blatant way, the infiltration of the Covid-denier movement by the far right has been a phenomenon since the protests' emergence.

That the protests are indeed strategically used by the far right becomes evident also in the words of an influential activist and intellectual of the New Right in Germany and Austria, who wrote about the opportunity the pandemic and the protests present to far-right "patriots." He calls them "proxy-protests," asking his fellow far-right ideologues to just give it a bit more time and wait for the protest to grow: "What has to happen now, and what has been my advice for every patriot for months now, is to play a part in the protest, to make oneself useful, recruit people there and build up peaceful, local pockets of resistance. That a great number of people came together in the capital, who could anytime join migration critical chanting, is a risk for

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the experiment of the elites. Their hope is that those people don't become aware of this. It is our task to make them aware of it!"[1]

Such ideas justify concerns about the far-right instrumentalization of the protest. The pandemic and the related protests have, if not exacerbated, at least made right-wing extremism yet more visible in Germany. This lends renewed urgency to the examination of the far right. My thesis aims at a better understanding of the strategies and discourses of the rising far right against the background of the pandemic. For that purpose, it looks at the media by means of which they pursue their goals of gaining political influence through mainstreaming their positions and increasing their discursive dominance. Specifically, I turn the attention to far-right online media and the ways in which they challenge mainstream media as institutions of opinion-formation. By analysing discourses found on the far-right online news outlet JW, my thesis aims at illuminating how far-right alternative media react to mainstream media and their coverage of the pandemic, and the role they thereby award to themselves as a public.

I argue that through their media criticism, far-right media producers draw a dystopian picture of a totalitarian society and media system and position themselves to it as defenders of freedom of opinion and truth. In this narrative, they constitute the alternative to an authoritarian alliance of elites and mainstream media whose function lies in propaganda and deceit. It serves as an important source from which they draw their own authority with regard to claims of presenting the real facts. Rather than only contesting the values and policies represented in mainstream media, JW contributors attack established media by criticising their journalistic practices and their veracity, and build their own narratives on pretence of adherence to facticity. Against the allegation of mainstream media serving as propaganda tools for elite interests, the integrity they construct for themselves in opposition functions as the capital that lends them

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[1] All translations by author unless otherwise indicated.
For the purpose of anonymisation, several references are omitted in this copy. A separate list of references is available upon request.

authority. Two strategies are crucial in this: A form of media criticism that criticises unwelcome perspectives on an ostensibly technical basis, and the challenging and thus eroding of practices and standards of journalism. Accusations of censorship further help to build their own claim to truth upon others' alleged attempts to silence them.

After outlining the socio-political and theoretical context of the German far right in the Covid-19 pandemic, I give a brief introduction into the case of JW and the methods employed for this thesis. Based on the findings of my discourse analysis, I then expound how far-right media producers construct their authority as the bearers of reason and realism based on two main discourses: Chapter 2 traces JW's depiction of the media landscape and the political system as the backdrop against which just its position authenticates their integrity and narratives. Chapter 3 investigates JW's practices of corrupting established media's credibility and its role in further paving the way for the claim of owning access to the facts. I conclude by presenting an outlook at what this could mean with regard to new-right attempts of extending their reach into the general public.

1. Examining far-right strategies of media criticism in the pandemic

1.1.   The New Right in the post-truth pandemic

Although the terms radical or extreme right-wing still evoke associations with the historical National Socialists and Adolf Hitler's Third Reich, the post-WW2 far right in Germany is not limited to Swastika-wearing skinheads. While such 'old-style' neo-Nazis still exist, a new form of right-wing extremism has developed. Its representatives hold equally anti-egalitarian, anti-liberal, anti-pluralist and anti-migrant positions and centre ethnically or racially defined peoples. Yet, the so-called 'New Right' has complicated the picture of the far right in terms of ideology and appearance. It is distinguished by the rhetorical disassociation from National Socialism, reformulations of racist ideology in terms of culture, and a less straight-forward embrace of authoritarianism, instead formally promoting democracy but without supporting liberal values connected with it.[2] This development is borne by a sense of intellectualism and elitism and lets the new-right stream of the far right more easily blend into the mainstream. Regarding theory, they borrow left ideas, taking inspiration form Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. They strive for a "cultural revolution from the right" as instrumental in achieving change in power, thus aiming their strategies at attempting to impact discourses and shift societal mainstream further to the right.[3] In the light of those strategic and ideological ideas, far-right media are especially relevant to pursue those goals, and thus require particular attention.

On the political plane, the party AfD (Alternative for Germany) mirrors the rise and visibility of this superficially more socially acceptable new form of right-wing radicalism. AfD

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[2] E.g. Volker Weiß, *Die autoritäre Revolte: Die Neue Rechte und der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Klett-Cotta, 2017), 27-28; Hans-Georg Betz and Carol Johnson, "Against the current—stemming the tide: The nostalgic ideology of the contemporary radical populist right," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, no. 3 (2004), 312-313.

[3] Helmut Kellershohn and Wolfgang Kastrup, eds., *Kulturkampf von rechts: AfD, Pegida und die Neue Rechte*, 1. Auflage, Edition DISS Bd. 38 (Münster: Unrast, 2016), 116.

has been the strongest opposition party in German parliament since the federal elections in 2017, and in some states presents a serious competitor to the governing parties. Such formal successes of the extreme right present somewhat of a novelty in the light of the German National Socialist past, which due to its legal and public ostracising has to some extent prevented far-right actors from benefitting from existing anti-immigrant sentiments in Germany.[4] Nonetheless, it seems like it is not necessarily the prevalence of such or other right-wing extremist or populist opinions that has changed,[5] but their conversion into votes for far-right parties, and thus their visibility and the degree to which they are accepted as legitimate. This speaks for the importance of understanding the ways in which the far right renders itself increasingly tolerable to the mainstream.

While the discourses and topics of the far right usually mostly revolve around debates about migration, the pandemic has provided them with a new discursive field. According to a report about populist responses to the pandemic in 16 countries, populists in governments as well as in the political opposition can benefit from the pandemic.[6] The stances they take, however, differ. While populists on the left have emphasised the importance of social cohesion and protection of the vulnerable, populists on the right prioritise the economy or use the pandemic to forward their anti-migration discourses.[7] But also among right-wing populists, the approaches vary. In the Netherlands for example, right-wing populists criticised the government for measures being too lax, whereas the German populists, most visibly assembled in the party AfD, are taking the opposite route.[8] The discussion about appropriate responses to the pandemic is especially impacted by the formation of groups which deny the pandemic, in its totality or

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[4] Bert Klandermans, "Extreme Right Activists: Recruitment and Experiences," in *The populist radical right: A reader*, ed. Cas Mudde (London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 239-240.

[5] See Andreas Zick, Franziska Schröter and Beate Küpper, *Verlorene Mitte - feindselige Zustände: Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland 2018/19* (2019)

[6] Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsampekis, eds., *Populism and the pandemic: A collaborative report*, 7th ed., Populismus (Thessaloniki, 2020)

[7] Ibid. 6-7.

[8] Ibid. 6.

severity, and strongly oppose the measures taken to curb the virus. This involves criticism of constraints like contact restrictions, curfews, or mandatory use of facemasks, often a vehement rejection of vaccinations, and sometimes conspiracy theories about the origins and alleged intentions behind the pandemic. While protests take place all over the world, the situation in Germany, where protest regularly bring large numbers of people from various backgrounds onto the streets, seems to stand out. A variety of factors, like the individual responses of national governments to the pandemic, or the severity of the situation itself, add to the differences in Covid-related protest movements across countries. Although to my knowledge no systematic comparative study exists to date, it has been suggested that the alliance of protesters with conspiracy theorists and right-wing extremists in Germany is peculiar, with the Q-Anon influenced protests in the US presenting the most similar case.[9] A possible explanation for the popularity of conspiracy theories about the pandemic in Germany is its historical background; the GDR and the Third Reich having resulted in a deep-rooted fear of political systems being transformed into totalitarian regimes.[10]

Adherents to conspiracy theories and right-wing extremists present a small but influential part of the protests against the Covid-measures that take place almost every week in several German cities, organised mostly under the names "Querdenker" ("contrarian thinkers") or "Hygienedemo" ("hygiene protest"), with sometimes more than 10 000 participants. They are marked by a strong mistrust and aggressive attacks not only at the government but also at the media. According to a study by the European Center for Press and Media Freedom, the number of physical attacks at journalists at protests in Germany has quintupled from 2019 to 2020, with almost 50 percent of them having a right-wing background, and about 70% occurring at protests

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[9] David Ehl, "Corona-Proteste - ein deutscher Sonderfall?," *dw*, May 14, 2020.
[10] Julia Lösch, "Sind Verschwörungstheorien typisch deutsch?," *ZDF*, May 19, 2020.

about the pandemic.[11] Those numbers not only speak for the grave media distrust in those scenes, but also hint at an overlap of actors and movements of the far right and of Covid-deniers. After having struggled with finding its position in the beginning of the pandemic, when the coronavirus suddenly overshadowed all other topics of public discourse, the anti-Covid measures opened a window of opportunity for the far right to talk about the pandemic in their own terms.[12] Accordingly, the coverage of the pandemic, and the aggressive questioning of media, experts and the government, has become the dominant topic also in the far right. The proximity in positions makes the relationship between Covid-deniers and the far-right an interesting case for the investigation of overlaps and interrelations between different publics.

While some of the participants at the Covid-denier protests hold anti-Semitic and anti-migrant positions,[13] their primary common interest is the rejection of the dominant discourse about the pandemic. Consequently, they can hardly all be subsumed under the far right. In a discussion of the impact of the pandemic on far-right populism, Vieten describes the protesters as "(white) middle-class citizens foregrounding their interest in going back to (or keeping) the previously enjoyed 'normal life' and privileges without COVID-19 restrictions," holding anger against elites, being willing to walk side by side with neo-Nazis.[14] She argues that the protests thus also indicate an increasing normalisation of far-right orientations. In fact, according to a questionnaire-based study by Nachtwey et al., only 15% percent of the polled participants at "Querdenken" protests in Germany indicated having voted for the far-right AfD at the last federal elections. The largest groups of protesters stated to have voted for the centre-left leaning

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[11] Kai Laufen, "Wut auf Journalisten: "Querdenker" und ihr Problem mit der kritischen Presse," *swr.de*, August 4, 2021.

[12] Verena Stern, "Covid-19 als Themenfeld der Rechten?," *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 33, no. 3 (2020)

[13] Oliver Nachtwey, Nadine Frei and Robert Schäfer, *Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste* (Basel: Universität Basel, 2020). doi:10.31235/osf.io/zyp3f, 28-30.

[14] Ulrike M. Vieten, "The "New Normal" and "Pandemic Populism": The COVID-19 Crisis and Anti-Hygienic Mobilisation of the Far-Right," *Social Sciences* 9, no. 9 (2020), 165.

party The Greens, followed by the Left.[15] However, only 1% of them indicate that they would vote for The Greens again in upcoming elections, whereas the number of participants who would elect the AfD rose to 27%.[16] This is hardly surprising, seen that AfD, in stark contrast to all other parties, supports the protesters' movements and positions. Moreover, some of the organisers and important figures of the protests have ties with the far-right scene, and the movement rarely distances itself from the far right with clear words.[17] The ongoing radicalisation of the movement even resulted in its observation by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution,[18] and calls for an ongoing examination of its relationship with the far-right.

Media scepticism, defined by Tsfati as "a subjective feeling of alienation and mistrust toward the mainstream news media," that "journalists are not fair or objective in their reports about society and that they do not always tell the whole story,"[19] thus is a salient feature of the Covid-denier movement. But also in the far right, strong distrust and criticism of media are widespread. As for instance Bhat and Chadha point out, anti-mainstream media sentiments have become a key characteristic among contemporary right-wing populists worldwide.[20] They demonstrate on the example of an Indian right-wing news-site how media are criticised for being biased, pro-elite and anti-Hindu, and how media outlets and journalists are called out for mistakes and biases. Similar far-right media outlets exist all over the world. In a comparative study of right-wing digital news infrastructures in six Western countries, Heft et al. attested lesser need for alternative news outlets in countries where the political environment and the general media landscape are generally favourable to right-wing positions.[21] Accordingly, they

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[15] Nachtwey, Frei and Schäfer, *Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste* 9.
[16] Ibid. 10.
[17] Erik Peter, "Alu mit Bürgerrechtsfassade: Köpfe der Corona-Relativierer," *taz*, May 7, 2020.
[18] Florian Flade, "Wie umgehen mit den "Querdenkern"?," *tagesschau.de*, March 19, 2021.
[19] Yarif Tsfati, "Media Scepticism and Climate of Opinion Perception," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 15, no. 1 (2003), 67.
[20] Prashanth Bhat and Kalyani Chadha, "Anti-media populism: Expressions of media distrust by right-wing media in India," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 13, no. 2 (2020)
[21] Annett Heft et al., "Beyond Breitbart: Comparing Right-Wing Digital News Infrastructures in Six Western Democracies," *Policy & Internet* 12, no. 1 (2020)

identified a comparably strong necessity for alternative media for the production and dissemination of right-wing news in Germany, where the radical right has been rather marginal in the last decades up until the formation of AfD.[22] They remark that they found the actual supply of far-right media content to be weaker than presumed, which might be explained by the comparably high number of Austrian right-wing media outlets which also have a large audience in Germany. Among the outlets within the German right-wing media landscape which Heft et al. describe as most relevant in terms of audience demand is the news blog and aggregator JW, which was also selected as a case for this thesis. As indicated in its name, it defines itself mostly by its critical stance towards journalism and provides rich material for examining anti-mainstream media sentiments in the German far right.

The far right has established a considerable network of media outlets, most of which are online based but some also existing in print versions. In contrast, the relatively young scene of Covid-deniers is known for their organisation and exchange of information mostly through the messenger service Telegram and social media, which also present important channels and possible points of intersection for the far right.[23] In general, the internet has become an important means of political communication, but especially so for right-wing extremist parties.[24] Alternative media, defined as "different from mainstream media as the content is either critical of dominant power structures, produced in ways that are different from mainstream media, or interpreted by the audience to be alternative and different from the mainstream,"[25] have always existed, but take new forms today. The internet facilitates a wide reach with little resources and thereby allows to countervail missing access to established media

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[22] Ibid. 31.

[23] See e.g. Patrick Stegemann and Johanna Bentz, "Radikale Rechte erreicht neue Milieus," *ZDF*, April 28, 2021.

[24] Birgit Sauer, Mojca Pajnik, and Susi Meret, "Media Populism in Post-Democracy: The Crossroads of Right and Left Political Parties," in *Populism and the Web: Communicative practices of parties and movements in Europe*, ed. Mojca Pajnik and Birgit Sauer (London, New York: Routledge, 2018), 163.

[25] Joshua D. Atkinson, *Journey Into Social Activism: Qualitative Approaches* (Fordham University Press, 2017), accessed December 18, 2018. doi:10.26530/OAPEN_626395, 44.

outlets. Often, alternative media do not produce much original content but see their function in counter-balancing and criticising established media outlets' coverage. As pointed out by Haller et al., alternative media research has long mostly concentrated on progressive and left-wing social activism.[26] In the last years, however, interest has turned towards right-wing and far-right media as "the 'other' alternatives."[27] My case study of a German far-right alternative media outlet's media criticism adds to this strand of research. In particular, I examine the far-right engagement with mainstream media in the context of the Covid-19-pandemic, on which due the novelty of the discursive field few publications exist to date.[28]

Not surprising regarding the prominence of the topic for the far right, research has generally highlighted the role of far-right alternative media especially in promoting anti-migration discourses.[29] As the driving forces and motivation of anti-immigration right-wing alternative media, mistrust towards established media, a sense of marginalisation of their own opinion, and the perception of a limited "opinion corridor" have been identified.[30] In line with that, researchers have also noted a paradoxical dependence of alternative media on mainstream media.[31] Regarding their relationship to established media, Haller and Holt found references to both, mainstream and alternative media, almost equally often employed on a far-right movement's Facebook page.[32] This indicates their dependence on established media, despite

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[26] André Haller, Kristoffer Holt, and Renaud de La Brosse, "The 'other' alternatives: Political right-wing alternative media," *Journal of alternative and community media* 4, no. 1 (2019)

[27] Ibid.

[28] For a notable contribution, see Svenja Boberg et al., *Pandemic Populism: Facebook Pages of Alternative News Media and the Corona Crisis -- A Computational Content Analysis* (2020)

[29] Gerret von Nordheim, Henrik Müller, and Michael Scheppe, "Young, free and biased: A comparison of mainstream and right-wing media coverage of the 2015–16 refugee crisis in German newspapers," *Journal of alternative and community media* 4, no. 1 (2019), Denitza Kamenova and Etienne Pingaud, "Anti-migration and Islamophobia: Web Populism and Targeting the 'Easiest Other'," in *Populism and the Web: Communicative practices of parties and movements in Europe*, ed. Mojca Pajnik and Birgit Sauer (London, New York: Routledge, 2018)

[30] E.g. Elina Noppari, Ilmari Hiltunen, and Laura Ahva, "User profiles for populist counter-media websites in Finland," *Journal of alternative and community media* 4, no. 1 (2019), Kristoffer Holt, *"Alternativmedier"? En intervjustudie om mediekritik och mediemisstro* (Institutet för mediestudier, 2016)

[31] Ibid.

[32] André Haller and Kristoffer Holt, "Paradoxical populism: How PEGIDA relates to mainstream and alternative media," *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 12 (2018)

all mistrust. In an explorative study of Norwegian far-right alternative media, Figenschou and Ihlebæk note that those media outlets employ different strategies to legitimise their criticism of legacy media, positioning themselves as insiders, experts, victims, citizens, or activists.[33] My research finds all these aspect, often at the same time, present on the German far-right media outlet I examine. Moreover, I zoom in on the strategies with which media criticism is extended to the accusation of misrepresenting not only people's opinion, but also facts.

The expression "lying press" has become a popular political catchword in the German far right.[34] Similarly, former US-president Donald Trump helped the term "fake news" to great success. Additionally, AfD and other right-wing parties antagonise against public broadcasting services. All this speaks of media mistrust being especially significant within the far right. Moreover, disinformation is circulated on a large scale, facilitated through social media and with the help of bots. The spread of conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, can often be traced back to coordinated efforts of far-right partisan groups.[35] Against the background of such challenges to trust in media and other traditional distributors of information, Harsin describes a turn towards a "post-truth society," marked by compromised beliefs in objective truths and obscured distinctions of facts and opinions.[36] He suggests that the mechanisms of the internet, as well as broader political and social transformations related to globalisation, neoliberalism, and changes in political and mass communication, distinguished by changes in news and journalistic practices and values, result in increasingly fragmented and segmented publics, audiences and power structures.

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[33] Tine U. Figenschou and Karoline A. Ihlebæk, "Challenging Journalistic Authority," *Journalism Studies* 20, no. 9 (2019)
[34] See e.g. Haller and Holt, "Paradoxical populism," 1666-1667.
[35] E.g. Timothy Graham et al., "Like a virus: The coordinated spread of Coronavirus disinformation" (The Australia Institute, Canberra, A.C.T, 2020)
[36] Jayson Harsin, "Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 8, no. 2 (2015)

Harsin draws from Foucault's conceptualisation of truth and facts as created through discourse and controlled by regimes of truth, which Foucault defines as "the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true."[37] What people accept as right or wrong thereby also strongly depends on the institutions and experts they trust.[38] Along with processes of fragmentation and polarisation, Harsin suggests that societies today are governed by a "regime of posttruth," having undergone a "regime of truth change," and being now constituted by a multiplicity of "truth markets." He argues that the dominant role of the state thereby gets increasingly side-lined, with "multiple marketed [regimes of truth]" emerging instead, which are "designed to manage citizen-consumers by having them (a) accept that there is no way ultimately to verify truth, (b) believe their won truth arbiters in their markets, and subsequently (c) engage in vigorous counterclaiming and debunking."[39] As I will show throughout my thesis, this confusion of facts, disinformation and opinion is also at the heart of far-right alternative media outlets' activities.

1.2. Case study: JW

JW is a news-blog that is owned and run by a registered association with the same name, which describes itself as an "association for media criticism and counter-public."[40] It was founded in 2011 by a former journalist who used to work for established and moderate newspapers and today functions as a secretary of a right-wing populist and anti-Islamic

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[37] Michael Foucault, "Truth and Power" (1976/2000), quoted in ibid., 328.
[38] Jayson Harsin, "Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, ed. Jayson Harsin (Oxford University Press, 2018), 20-21.
[39] Harsin, "Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies,", 332.
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association that is observed by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution.[41] Until 2019, JW held a status as a charitable and therefore tax-exempt association.[42] It receives financial support by the anti-Islamic US-think-tank "Middle East Forum," an association which states as its mission to "promote[s] American interests in the Middle East and protect[s] Western values from Middle Eastern threats."[43] This hints at the internationally networked character of the far-right public. JW does not disclose its finances and sources of income, but according to its founder, it is mostly financed through advertisements and donations.[44]

JW's audience is mostly located in Germany, but the site also gets views from other German-speaking countries. It is active on several social media platforms, particularly on Twitter, Facebook, VK and Telegram, and according to Alexa estimations[45] reaches thirty percent of its traffic via social media. Visible audience engagement in the form of comments is rather weak. During the research period in October hardly any comments could be found below the articles. JW is very active and usually publishes between twenty and thirty posts a day. Apart from articles, those also include videos and protest announcements. Not all of it is original content is written by JW authors, some of it consists of articles that have been published on other media before. Especially regarding videos, JW mostly shares content from other media outlets and YouTube channels. The website of JW does not provide a list of editorial staff, or any information about its organisation, but most of the original content seems to be provided by the same four authors. Although not all of them sign with their full name, most of them seem to have been associated with the right-wing populist and anti-Islamic fringe party "Die Freiheit." The party started to dissolve in 2013, ending its activities declaredly for the benefit

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41 Abteilung Verfassungsschutz, *Verfassungschutzbericht Bayern 2015* (München, 2016)
42 Christian Fuchs, "Hetze ohne Spendenquittung," *Zeit Online*, July 18, 2019.
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44 Christian Fuchs and Paul Middelhoff, *Das Netzwerk der Neuen Rechten: Wer sie lenkt, wer sie finanziert und wie sie die Gesellschaft verändern* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: rowohlt Polaris, 2019), 171.
45 Alexa is a marketing tool estimating website traffic.

of the then newly founded AfD.[46] Also JW clearly has strong ties with AfD. Under the heading "AfDay," it publishes daily news about the party, and among its regular columnists, also an AfD politician and current member of the parliament can be found.

JW regularly shares other far-right media outlets' content. Although all are clearly right-wing populist, they cover a range between national conservative and radical anti-migrant and anti-Muslim positions. Also in reliability and professionalisation, they range between weekly print newspaper with an official editorial team, blogs with mostly anonymised authors, and YouTube channels of prominent far-right figures. For instance, some of the contributors published on JW are associated with the so-called Identitarian Movement. The group stylises itself as a new-right youth movement. It provoked a lot of attention with sensationalist performances of anti-migrant activism and has been classified as right-wing extremist.[47] JW also re-posts articles from ostensibly more moderate, conservative newspapers like the German version of *Epoch Times* whose right-wing populist positions inconspicuously take the form of sober but one-sided newsflashes about crimes committed by immigrants.[48] JW occasionally features guest articles from well-known far-right intellectuals, but also shares the content of less prominent far-right blogs and channels. The outlet thereby likely supports them in reaching a wider audience. Since the protests against Covid-19 measures, JW moreover not only promotes events by Covid-denier groups, but also shares videos published on the "Querdenken"-movement's YouTube channel. Thus, JW compiles a broad range of sources, and thereby potential audiences, from young vloggers and influencers to more established media that have long been an institution in the far-right intellectual scene, and from moderate to radical.

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[46] Christina Hebel, "Anti-Islam-Partei will sich der AfD anschließen," *Spiegel Online*, January 10, 2013.

[47] Michael Stempfle, ""Identitäre" als rechtsextremistisch eingestuft," *tagesschau.de*, November 7, 2019.

[48] Benedikt Herber, "Eine stetige Quelle der Wut: Epoch Times," *Zeit*, September 14, 2021.

On its website, JW states to have up to 1.5 million readers every month, about 200 000 views per day, and to hold an Alexa-rankof 400, "higher than many mainstream media."[49] In July 2018, the newspaper *Zeit* in a critical article about JW indicated an Alexa-estimation of even 300 000 views per day.[50] Since July 2019, the site' rank has significantly decreased, a development which seems to correlate with the revoking of JW's charitable status. At the end of 2020, JW was not among the 1000 most visited sites in Germany anymore. Yet, JW is of ongoing relevance. It is one of the alternative media outlets whose articles are highlighted in the morning press review of the German chancellor's office.[51] The diverse sources and types of content disseminated on JW illustrate the intricate network of the right-wing spectrum. As it aggregates content with a focus on media criticism from a variety of outlets, JW provides a good lens into a whole array of far-right media and discourses. The way it brings different voices from the far-right spectrum together and puts them in conversation with each other lends it the character of a condensed public.

1.3.   Methodology

JW brings together an assemblage of voices of various actors and media outlets of the far-right spectrum. Together with its strong focus on media criticism, it presents a perfect site to examine strategies and narratives of the far right. I conceptualise the far-right alternative media scene as a counter-public which is in a complex relationship of subversion and dependency with a general public. Underlying this idea is an understanding of media as both reflexive and formative of ideology and power structures. Correspondingly, my analysis is based on Critical Discourse Analysis. This approach regards discourse not only as socially conditioned, but also as "socially consequential," i.e. constitutive of situations, relationships

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[50] Fuchs, "Hetze ohne Spendenquittung"

[51] Jost Müller-Neuhof, "Rechtsextreme Medien auf Merkels Schreibtisch," *Der Tagesspiegel*, September 30, 2020.

and knowledge.[52] Critical Discourse Analysis emphasises and asks about the ideologies and power relations underlying discourses and calls for a critical analysis of "the totality of society in its historical specificity."[53] Therefore, it considers not only formal and linguistic structures and patterns, but also implicit or indirect meanings evoked by presuppositions and context. In line with this, my analysis carves out the topics, discursive strategies, linguistic means and broader socio-political and historical contexts of the engagement with mainstream media on JW. Due to the multi-modal character of JW, my material includes different forms of media, text-based articles as well as videos. Yet, the main focus of my analysis is on the textual level.

Moreover, I examine the original mainstream media sources referred to on JW. They not only provide further context for the analysis, but also allow to direct attention to the ways in which mainstream media gets dissected, subverted, recycled and thus translated to their own audience in its use by far-right media producers. I analyse all content published on JW within a month (October 2020) which had media-related references in its headline or keywords. Those include articles originally published on JW, as well as videos or articles from other sources. Without the videos which were not accessible anymore at the time of retrieval (October/November 2020) the collected material amounts to a total of 73 articles and videos. Thematically, the great majority of them engages with the pandemic. Some others cover migration-related topics, or just focus on media criticism.

JW served as my starting point to locate a sample of actors and material. Some indications of the relationship between different contributors and with JW can be found on the media outlets themselves or identified with the help of additional sources. Yet, the structures of content selection and cooperation sometimes remain opaque. It is beyond the scope of my thesis to provide a detailed examination of the differences between the contributors published on JW.

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[52] Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, "Critical Discourse Analysis: History, Agenda, Theory, and Methodology," in *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (SAGE, 2015), 6.
[53] Ibid. 7.

While I do not intend to conflate the various contributors into a single voice, my analysis foregrounds their common participation in the discourses presented on JW.

2. Self-portrayal as resisting the elite's authoritarian ambitions

2.1. One mainstream, one alternative: The far-right counter-public

If Habermas' famous coffee house is the prototypical public sphere, JW is maybe a shady backstreet bar popular with the far-right scene. Observing it for a while does of course not reveal the totality of actors and occurrences in the milieu, but it gives a glimpse into their topics and networks. Habermas coined the concept of the public sphere as a discursive arena in which people come together as private individuals to negotiate politics and common interests.[54] His idealised conception of the public sphere as a space to which everyone has equal access and in which people come together to deliberate on their common interests has been criticised and adapted a lot since. Other models imagine a multiplicity of publics, some of which overlap, some of which are more or less secluded, relating to another in different degrees of subordination and dominance.[55] Most influentially, Fraser has pointed out that access and participation are in fact dependent on factors like gender, race, or class, which are tied to structural inequalities and in fact cannot simply be bracketed to allow for deliberation among equals in the public sphere.[56]

Arising as a response to marginalisation and barriers to participation, Fraser describes subaltern counter-publics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[57] Warner and Asen argue against subalternity being a relevant condition for counter-publics.[58] They suggest that the 'counter' in counter-public relates to the

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[54] Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft; mit einem Vorwort zur Neuauflage 1990*, 14. Aufl., Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 891 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2015), Zugl.: Marburg, Univ., Habil.-Schr., 1961.
[55] Robert Asen, "Seeking the "Counter," in Counterpublics," *Communication Theory* 10, no. 4 (2000), 441.
[56] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990)
[57] Ibid. 67.
[58] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002)

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recognition of its favoured discourses and interests being excluded from the dominant public, and to the consequent oppositional or conflictual relationship of the counter-public to it. This understanding of counter-publics as "[p]roceeding not from exclusion but the recognition of exclusion"[59] can be applied to publics like the far right, which are not demographically marginalised,[60] yet predicated on their experience of a discursive exclusion.

Media outlets like JW are key institutions within the far-right public. While engaging in an oppositional way with topics in general public discourse and other media, they provide a rather secluded discursive space for far-right actors, writers, and their audience. Thus, they function as a counter-public and play an important role for discussion, deliberation, spread and exchange of information for the far-right scene. Such counter-publics have a dual character. According to Fraser, on the one hand they function as spaces of "withdrawal and regroupment," on the other hand allow for agenda setting for trying to introduce their own discourses into the wider public sphere.[61] In fact, many far-right alternative media producers refer to themselves as counter-public. Also the registered association legally owning JW describes itself as an "association for media criticism and counter-public" to the "big media."[62]

In face of the often quite intellectualised discourses of media producers from the ranks of the New Right, their self-labelling as a counter-public and as alternative media lends itself to the assumption that they might be aware of the generally positive discussions surrounding those concepts and their emancipatory potential. The choice of self-presentation in such terms aims at associating and legitimising themselves by referring to the function of counter-publics as offering space for perspectives and discourses that are excluded from the dominant public sphere. Seen that the term has been mostly used regarding emancipatory groups and

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[59] Asen, "Seeking the "Counter," in Counterpublics," 437.
[60] See e.g. Oskar Niedermayer and Jürgen Hofrichter, "Die Wählerschaft der AfD: Wer ist sie, woher kommt sie und wie weit rechts steht sie?," *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* 47, no. 2 (2016)
[61] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 68.
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movements, the self-description in those terms mirrors the general picture painted by JW. They present themselves as the only alternative to one dominant general mainstream public, in reaction to which they are needed for the authentic representation of reality and people's opinion.

Across articles and videos published on JW, the antagonism to mainstream media, presented as a unified bloc, is a major theme. To label the array of non-far-right media, the terms "established", "conventional," "mainstream" and, in ironic allusions, "quality" media are applied quite interchangeably. While they are often used by JW contributors to refer to specific examples of media or articles, those terms have a quite generalising tone. In line with that, mainstream media are depicted as a united front, with phrases like "*the* mainstream wrote" or "now all the conventional media are surprised,"[63] or by insinuating that they have certain "communal standards," without specifying the supposed form or content of such standards.[64] All these media outlets, as part of the mainstream media as well as individually, in their coverage on JW are typically characterised as leftist, green-left, or even as sympathising with left-wing extremism. This is despite the fact that media outlets which actually identify as leftist are barely mentioned or covered at all on JW. By conflating a broad spectrum of all media left of the far-right, they create the impression of one concordant dominant public, to which they stand in opposition. Thus, despite JW's focus on relatively centrist media outlets, their category of a leftist mainstream is a largely relative classification from the far-right perspective.

Regarding themselves, JW and its contributors usually claim to be "the centre", "conservative" or "bürgerlich"[65] – labels which are typically used to describe centre-right parties like CDU (Christian Democratic Union). In line with declaring themselves the centre, they claim that not only the mainstream media, but also the German government is leftist,

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[65] Roughly translates to something between "middle-class" and "bourgeois", "centrist" and "conservative."

despite its Christian-Democrat chancellor. This reflects general tendencies of the New Right. According to Benthin, the New Right should not only be understood as a modernisation of the old radical right, but also as an attempt to radicalise conservatism.[66] He describes a blurring between the far-right and conservatism, that is partly due to shared positions, but also results from attempts of the far right at appearing more moderate and thus acceptable to larger parts of society. Thereby, they try to muddy the line between extremism and opinions acceptable in a democracy. The self-positioning as conservative, and the simultaneous denial of this label to traditional conservatives, recur on JW. They discursively reflect the endeavour of appropriating the middle ground between ideological radicalism and conservative semblance. Moreover, by pushing the spectrum from the extreme right, the entire spectrum to their left is conflated into one mainstream. Thus, JW and associated far-right alternative media draw a media and political landscape that presents the backdrop to their self-positioning. They portray themselves in opposition to a unified mainstream media elite symbiotic with the political elites, against which they present the only alternative and a corrective to their allegedly one-sided coverage.

Fraser notes that "differentially empowered publics are as likely to take the form of contestation as that of deliberation."[67] The discourses found on JW imply a greater role of the former for the case of the far-right counter-public. While the different media producers and outlets certainly vary in their individual perspectives, they are held together by agreements on some clear positions, in particular the rejection of immigration, established media outlets, and the anti-Covid measures. Consequently, they act and speak very much in concert. The key function of their public, thus, does not seem to lie in deliberating on their identity or agenda, but in presenting an opposition to the general public. Rather than trying to lend greater visibility to topics that are usually marginalised in the mainstream, JW contributors propagate specific

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[66] Rainer Benthin, *Auf dem Weg in die Mitte: Öffentlichkeitsstrategien der neuen Rechten* (Campus Verlag, 2004), 45-46.
[67] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 68.

opinions about topics that are already present in public discourse. Strictly disqualifying all other opinions, JW contributors do not seem interested at all in deliberation in a democratic sense. Instead, they present the far-right public and its positions as the only legitimate one, entitled to replace and therefore obliged to contest the dominant public.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I first trace how far-right media producers portray the mainstream media as corrupt and deceptive by alleging their role within authoritarian elite aspirations, and how they in turn justify their own integrity by opposition against them. I then address two key ideas for their self-conception as a counter-public: the sense that they fight for the authentic representation of a marginalised majority, and the insinuation that their disassociation from the mainstream is the result of and evidence for their uprightness despite the pressures of the domineering mainstream.

2.2.   Conjuring up conspiracies and totalitarianism

The depiction of the public sphere as being split into a synchronised, leftist, pro-government media establishment and themselves as the resisting, independent alternative is sharpened by the representation of the political system, media and society as threatened by authoritarianism. The dystopian picture of a totalitarian menace allows them to present themselves as defenders of freedom of opinion and truth. Narratives of an eroding democracy and restricted freedom of opinion underlie all media criticism on JW. It is emphasised with the help of comparisons and allusions to the historical cases of Nazi-Germany, USSR, and GDR. Especially regarding allegations of censorship, JW contributors for instance state that the methods "are in the tradition of secret service operations for discrediting, especially the security agencies of dictatorial regimes such as Gestapo, NKVD and Stasi."[68]

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[68] Secret services in 3. Reich, USSR, GDR, respectively.

The many Nazi-comparisons are particularly striking. Referring to mainstream journalists or generally proponents of anti-Covid measures, contributors use terms such as "Coronahitlers"[69] or "Nazi-Niveau."[70] This has two functions: Firstly, it puts the current government close to one of the most notorious totalitarian regimes. Such comparisons are also popular throughout the Covid-denier scene. Time and again, Covid-deniers liken themselves to anti-Nazi resistance fighters, or stylise themselves as victims of a totalitarian regime by using the Yellow Star, an antisemitic badge Jews were forced to wear during their persecution by Nazis (and at other times in history), to mark them as outsiders.[71] In Germany, like in many other countries, the Third Reich serves as the ultimate negative example, used to signify the absolute evil.

At the same time, the drawing of such analogies is often criticised as trivialising the atrocities committed during historical National Socialism. Thus, whenever words like "Nazi" or "Hitler" come up in public discourse in Germany, they present a provocation. The inflationary use of such comparisons, which in general public discourse are applied extremely cautionary, contributes to earing off the severity and singularity of their crimes. This speaks of the New Right's general attitude to historical National Socialism.[72] They distance themselves from it, acknowledging that it was wrong. In contrast to other extremist right-wing groups which still adorn themselves with Nazi-symbols or openly deny the Holocaust, the New Right rhetorically erases the unacceptable from its own history and ideology, which renders them more mainstreamable. At the same time, they still do not commit to condemning it in the same unambiguous way that is the norm in Germany but pave the way for relativising it. The flippant use of such expressions as labels for people or situations who do not have any ideological

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[71] Christoph Hasselbach, "Sophie Scholl und Anne Frank: Was haben NS-Opfer mit Corona zu tun?," *dw*, November 25, 2020.

[72] See e.g. Weiß, *Die autoritäre Revolte*, 27-28.

proximity to National Socialism, makes it appear ordinarily incorporated into the vocabulary of far-right media's own public, and possibly effectuates the changed meaning of terms like "Nazi" spreading to the general public sphere, detached from its association with the far right.

Bringing measures or people in connection with National Socialism is a rhetoric strategy that automatically turns those opposed to the reputed Nazis into victims, or even heroes. Talking about the pandemic and opponents of Covid-measures, MM, who used to work for established newspapers and magazines but became a well-known author and journalist in the far right media scene after having been dismissed at a middle-class conservative newspaper, in an interview published on JW claims: "Suddenly, totalitarianism repeats itself, in different terms, but with the same structures: minorities are excluded and segregated, they are persecuted with all the power of the state, and bashed."[73] Not only with regard to the pandemic, but also with regard to opinions or the marginality of their own media outlets, the public represented by JW is often ascribed the role of the victims and the marginalised. In line with this, AfD politicians tried to take legal action against them being called "Nazi." Also JW published an accusatory article about how AfD politicians are called or compared to Nazis.[74] Instead, a common narrative is that it is the left who are today's fascists. The many Nazi metaphors and allegories not only disparage actors branded with those labels, but evoke associations that aggravate the depiction of the current situation to the level of a state on its way to totalitarianism.

Mainstream media in this narrative are represented as both, instrumentalised by the governing elites, and wrongdoers themselves. They are not only presented as mirroring the supposedly restricted spectrum of allowed positions, but as actively spreading ideology and contributing to the rise of totalitarianism. Often, their financing is considered evidence for their role as helpers in an allegedly authoritarian system suppressing freedom of opinion and

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[74] Caroline Schmüser, "Sind AfD-Mitglieder nach Gerichtsbeschluss „alle Nazis"?," *Correctiv*, April 24, 2019.

spreading certain messages. Media's subvention by the state is equated with them being "state media," which are indebted to their sponsors and thus contribute by propagating their ideology and messages. Especially public broadcasting channels are hardly mentioned without an indication of their financing through public fees, which seems to be taken as a hindrance to their integrity rather than its guarantee. But not only the state, also private actors are highlighted as donors and puppeteers of media. Especially the financing of certain media projects of the popular news magazine *Spiegel* by the *Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation* is mentioned a lot. One of JW's main authors, E, for instance states that "since he [Gates] is giving money away to newspapers troubled by decreasing print runs, the editor in chief can hardly say no if the big philanthrope wants to write and publish something himself."[75] Any ties with the private foundation are presented as evidencing the financial and therefore ideological dependence and mutual support of media and the billionaire Gates as a symbol of private corporations.

Not only media are presented as puppets of media and financiers, but also the government is alleged to, "by order of Bill Gates, play games with us for as long as they want" as E claims in the same article.[76] Such ideas are closely related with and at least implicitly evoke conspiracy theories of elites striving for totalitarian control of the people. Generally, conspiracy theories are defined as "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors," which often are identified with governments, but can also accuse other actors who are perceived to be malevolent.[77] While conspiracy theories have adherents at the ideological extremes at all ends of the political spectrum, the far right has not only been found to be more likely to generally

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[77] Karen M. Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology* 40, S1 (2019), 4.

believe in conspiracy theories, but also to endorse such theories that accuse their political opponents.[78]

This tendency is mirrored in the narratives propagated on JW, in which the line between general vilification of the government and ideological adversaries and full-fledged conspiracy theories is often fuzzy. Surprisingly, references to other conspiracy theories about the pandemic having been created by China which have also been found to be spread through far-right networks,[79] however, did not appear in the analysed material. This also implies that racist and nationalist discourse are side-lined, the focus instead being on putting the blame on the own government by suggesting it is controlled by or part of global elites responsible for the pandemic. Some contributors explicitly refer to theories like "the new world order," the idea of a conspiracy of global elites to establish a global authoritarian government, or "the great reset," which in the context of the pandemic is the allegation that Covid-19 was either deliberately created, or only fabricated with the help of media, to create pretext and conditions for the initiation of the new world order. E summarises "the goals [of radical anti-Covid measures] in three words: The Great Reset. Which is not happening for epidemiological reasons, but due to economic reasons, or interests."[80]

The embrace of conspiracy theories by JW contributors is not always as straight forward, but also the more implicit versions nevertheless employ the same narratives and draw from the same anti-establishment sentiment and mistrust. An influential figure in the far-right scene, in another media outlet that serves as an important theoretical organ of the New Right, explains that from a strategic point of view, conspiracy theories as they are promoted among many Covid-deniers should be taken seriously. He holds that they intuitively support anti-

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[78] Robbie M. Sutton and Karen M. Douglas, "Conspiracy theories and the conspiracy mindset: Implications for political ideology," *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34 (2020), 6.
[79] Graham et al., "Like a virus"
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cosmopolitanism and ethnic nationalism as it is brought forward by the New Right, just in a more crude way, and thus are responsive to guidance and answers from the New Right.[81] In line with such strategic thoughts, the diffuse picture of elites that is painted on JW and gives corporate players like Gates the biggest weight and control over politics and media might help to mutually infuse classical far-right ideologies and ideas coming out of the corner of conspiracy theories. It illustrates the proximity of right-wing extremism and conspiracist predispositions, and suggests that JW and its contributors with their content are also attractive to conspiracy theorists among Covid-deniers.

The basic idea of an elite that wants to harm its own people and of media that play along with them did not appear on JW first with the pandemic but resembles customary far-right anti-migration narratives. A popular new-right conspiracy theory for example warns of "the great replacement," claiming that the European population gets deliberately replaced by other Ethnic groups and Muslims.[82] Thus, the far-right anti-elite discourse has rather just been adapted and applied to the pandemic. Frequently, the coverage of the pandemic and of anything related to refugees and migration are brought into connection. Authors for instance point out how in both cases, mainstream media allegedly employ specific frames to propagate messages in support of leftist policies. E introduces an article in which he alleges that the pandemic was created by the media through brainwashing and framing by analysing the different connotations of the words "migration" and "invasion."[83] This serves as his example of the allegedly biased framing of mainstream media, and he implies that this is also the foundation for the manipulation of people with regard to concerns about the pandemic. Migration and the pandemic are the customary topics on JW regarding which they criticise the mainstream. Relating their two favourite themes

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[82] Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, "The 'Great Replacement': The violent consequences of mainstreamed extremism" (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2019)

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to one another signifies an important way of framing one in relation to the other: They engage the negative meanings one topic has for them also for the other, and present both as symptoms of the same failure of government and established media.

2.3.   Spearheading the marginalised majority

Far-right media producers present themselves as part of a public of the marginalised, and as the forerunners providing the necessary discursive space and means for this public to grow into the majority they seem to feel entitled to represent. For example, NL, a youtuber in his early twenties whose videos are regularly posted on JW and who does not only have a lot of followers but also support from several established far-right media publishers, states: "They really fight us by all means. And by us, I mean all people who have not submitted themselves to this left mainstream, who really have their own opinion […]. Many people are affected by this nowadays, and for exactly those people I work on this channel, because I say, we also have a voice."[84] He presents the mainstream of society as opposed to his and like-minded people's own position, thus emphasising their self-depiction as marginalised. At the same time, it is also made clear that the mainstream media do not rightfully represent the majority of people, who are affiliated with JW's own political antipole only due to having submitted to the opinion propagated by the mainstream.

Throughout the articles and media outlets on JW, phrases like "left-green German political elite including the whole affiliated mainstream,"[85] or "left-green zeitgeist"[86] reveal this somewhat paradoxical understanding of the relationship between themselves, the mainstream, and the majority of people. "Every day, more people recognise the "fight against the right" as what it is: A fight against reality, a fight against the own people favouring all other terrestrials,

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a fight against the own country and for the New World Order."[87] In this statement, JW columnist and AfD politician NH expresses the perception that the seeming majority of the left, or what is defined as 'left' from a far-right perspective, is illusive and denies a reality in which far-right priorities are the natural ones. The apparent paradox of the narrative of marginalisation and the claim of truly representing people and presenting a challenge to the mainstream pervades articles and videos published on JW.

JW contributors not only often seem to regard their own public as representative for the right-minded people, but also tend to exaggerate their number to claim legitimacy for themselves. Constantly pointing out that they are marginalised by a powerful, established mainstream, and at the same time are and represent many, far-right media producers further evoke a sense of resistance and of their fight being worthwhile. They thus point at the same time at their problems and at their successes, as illustrated in an assertion from S, a former hooligan, bestselling author, and contributor to JW and other far-right media. In an interview with a youtuber often featured on JW, he states: "They try to keep down free media by all means, because they became too inconvenient, because we managed again and again to make big issues out of big topics."[88] On the one hand, alternative media producers draw legitimacy from the claim of representing a marginalised group. Together with the narrative of the deceptive, corrupt leftist mainstream, the marginal positionality puts them in the position of a counter-public of dissidents, not yielding to the same manipulations. On the other hand, the claim that more and more people support and agree with them can function as evidence: They are right, because the people agree with it. And because they are right, people agree with them. That they still are in an evidently marginal position – JW contributors' acceptance of this fact is implied in their common categorisation of the mainstream as leftist – in their worldview is

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explained by the supposed brainwashing of the people. In an article about the use of masks, E writes about mainstream media's alleged perversion of the reality about the measures: "It helps the autocratic government behind its façade of democracy, because […] it prevents the masses from identifying it as an autocracy."[89] It is not necessarily the mass or majority of people's support that grants legitimacy to the far right, but the support of the right-minded people who recognise its views.

That way, far-right alternative media present themselves as defenders of free opinions and correctives to biased and incomplete coverage by mainstream media. Especially the AfD-organised so-called "Conference of the Free Media," which took place in the parliament for selected media representatives for the second time in October 2020 and was covered a lot on JW, showed that the far-right alternative media network around JW tends to stress its own impact. JW contributor S writes about this conference: "The fact that this culture of open debate is only possible in safe spaces today shows the vital necessity of an alternative media culture."[90] The production of alternative media and the provision of alternative information is regarded as a form of resistance against a mainstream that supposedly silences and attacks everything to its right. This again illustrates how far-right media position themselves more towards the centre of society, not as its far-right margin. B, a Swiss far-right youtuber and founder of a former far-right party, for instance claims that "we are not right or left or right at the margins, but we are positioned at the centre of the population, and the population agrees with us […] and this is why we are being censored, because we are the voice of the people."[91] He and the far-right media in general claim to fight for the 'people' which are betrayed by the government and the majority of media, who do not or falsely represent them. Far-right media producers thereby

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position themselves as spokespersons of those who do not find their opinion represented in mainstream media, or disagree with it, or see their freedom at risk.

In this project of calling out and taking action against the status quo, far-right media producers seem to see themselves as pioneers, who perceive it as their call to awaken people and make them aware of their version of reality. At the "Conference of the Free Media," CZ, youtuber and former public broadcasting reporter, claims that "everyone who is here is a pioneer, and it is always hard to be a pioneer."[92] At the same time, regarding their media criticism, JW contributors often stress that everyone who is of the right mind should be able to see the same. One of the regularly featured youtubers, MG, who introduces himself in his channel's description with his past jobs as a reporter of established media, among them a public broadcaster, subheads his channel "voice of reason." Commenting on prognoses regarding the pandemic and economic development, he states that "everyone with eyes and ears must have seen what this is going to result in. You don't have to be a Nobel-Prize winning economist to make sense of this, but everyone in the classic media is surprised now."[93] Despite the supposition that something is common-sensical, this still places himself and others who shared his evaluation as the forerunners who are now witnessing the late awakening of others to the realities they themselves have long seen through.

JW contributors' self-portrayal as vanguards of the rescue of reason is often combined with calls for solidarity and cohesion, for far-right media producers and more generally those whose opinions they see marginalised, to stand together and act as one. Accordingly, supporting alternative media is often highlighted as a form of resistance. Especially in the bubble of media producers at the "Conference of Free Media," this was an omnipresent discourse. At the conference, CZ attracted much applause when she demanded in a speech embedded in a video

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on JW that they should all work together, and that they, as "many free media producers, with different political positions and focuses, have great power if we all hold together."[94] This illustrates the sense of belonging together, to one common scene, held together by the shared far-right opposition to mainstream media, which might together reach more people and present an important pillar to the New Right.

Also the consumers of their media content are included in this media resistance narrative. Youtubers like NL often solicit likes and support with the argument that by doing so, their channels can grow bigger "and we can really show the leftists who we are"[95] Although on JW itself there are hardly any comments, especially the YouTube channels attract considerable audience engagement. The comment sections generally echo the positions propagated in the videos in unison. Although it is not possible to tell if this is also due to the channels deleting unwelcome comments, it is plausible that the far-right public is in fact rather consentaneous. This also fits the strong group narrative present in many contributions of JW, which with their sharp rhetorical attacks at mainstream media consumers seem to target an audience agreeing with them and their opposition to the left and the mainstream. The far-right media producers on the one hand seem to see themselves as pioneers in speaking up against the establishment, and thus occupying a privileged position within their public and in the project of challenging the public sphere. Yet, those efforts and narratives are sought to be multiplied with the help of the anonymous voices of far-right media consumers.

Often, change in public opinion regarding the pandemic is optimistically proclaimed. NH remarks that, "[t]hanks to coronavirus, […] more and more people, due to this strange experience they now make first-hand, question their worldview and the news reports constitutive of it."[96] This points at how the pandemic is regarded as a new opportunity for

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people to develop an oppositional stance to the government and the mainstream, thus joining the group of people to whom far-right discourses as they are brought forward on media outlets like JW might appeal. Contributors often convey the idea that, triggered by the politics revolving around the topic of the pandemic, people's trust in established media and politicians is vanishing and change is near. Adding to that, mainstream media's critical coverage of developments regarding the pandemic and its counter-strategies are interpreted as signs of media's veering in their positions: "What slowly but clearly becomes apparent here is sensational, and has the potential to become a political and societal earthquake: More and more German mainstream media, until now the closest allies of the Corona-politics in attuning and disciplining the population, renegade and develop an unusually critical distance."[97] With such statements, JW contributors seem to suggest that the mainstream admits to its representation of the pandemic being wrong. The alleged converging of mainstream media towards JW's own positions thus seemingly confirms their correctness. Moreover, the depiction of the far-right counter public as experiencing a growth spurt might have a mobilising effect on its members.

The occasion for this sensationalist claim by regular JW author DM were articles and reports by various established newspapers and public broadcasting channels about the ways in which Covid measures are covered by the constitution, or risk to violate its principles. Such critical engagements with the policies implemented or planned make a regular part of mainstream media coverage. DM's and other contributors' presentation of such criticism as surprising and a radical change can only function hand in hand with JW's usual depiction of mainstream media as unequivocal in their positions and support for left politics or the government. The idea that media "desert into the critics' camp"[98] ignores the self-understanding of most mainstream media as reflecting and discussing a variety of perspectives in society. It

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mirrors JW contributors' understanding of media and the public sphere as split into clear camps that either unconditionally support or oppose a narrowly defined political line, which more and more people cross to join the far-right counter-public.

2.4. Censorship as a certificate of integrity

One of the most prominent claims throughout JW contributors' attacks on mainstream media is the accusation of censorship, which helps their self-presentation as defenders of free speech and truth and maintaining their integrity within the otherwise demoralised media landscape. While censorship is usually understood as the suppression of certain information or free speech by states or other controlling bodies, this term is applied by JW contributors also to criticise the choice of topics and the absence of, or opposition to their own positions in other media. Frequently, it is stated that topics are not covered by German mainstream media, or that they do not cover the important topics. With formulations like "refraining from mentioning,"[99] it is insinuated that the journalists do not simply have different assessments of relevance, but an intent of deceiving the audience or keeping them uninformed. In this context, topics are mentioned as purportedly withheld and explicated that often simply have little relevance or even nothing to do at all with the topic of the thus criticised articles. Thereby, JW contributors not only accuse the concerned media of concealment, but also employ the articles that in their eyes are inadequate to expound the topics or aspects they suggest being covered instead.

Yet, alternative media are also presented as victims of attempts of censorship in the more classical form. Especially the contributors active on YouTube emphasise how they or other figures of their political scene are confronted with their channels or specific contents being blocked.[100] In fact, deplatforming has been pointed out as an effective tool to counter digital

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right-wing extremism.[101] Over the past years, several far-right online media have been taken offline, and far-right influencers blocked from social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Instagram and thereby divested of important channels of reaching their audiences. Yet, a multitude of far-right media and individuals, from media that can be classified as extremist but still appear relatively moderate, like JW itself, to other blogs and platforms that openly embrace National Socialism can publish their content without problems. Thus, the frequent allegations of censorship dramatize the outlook of the media landscape, that is refuted even by the existence of JW and its contributors themselves.

It is often the companies providing and hosting the far-right actors' pages that take action against them in response to breaches of their community standards. Accordingly, from the side of JW and its contributors, this leads to a mixture of directly blaming companies like Google and Facebook for allegedly censoring specifically right-wing voices, but also more vaguely ascribing it to the government or the general political (left) climate. That blocking of content usually happens based on algorithms or other netiquette-ensuring tools creates a depersonalised sense of being censored, which is reflected in statements like B's, who claims that "social media delete more and more disfavoured accounts. Even the search engine Google is eagerly censoring."[102] Relating private companies and corporations to governmental or political interests again feed into the narrative of an elite in which financial and political interests join forces to suppress the people.

Similarly, some contributors do not distinguish between copyright and censorship. Another youtuber, libertarian conspiracy theorist OJ, shows footage from a TV channel and mentions that he has to comment on it for it to not be deleted from YouTube, explaining to "the

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[101] Maik Fielitz and Karolin Schwarz, "Hate not Found: Deplatforming the Far Right and its Consequences" (Insitut für Demokratie und Zivilgesellschaft, 2020)
[102]

dear censors" that this makes it a new and his own work.[103] He thereby interprets a general regulation, meant to prevent the use of material of which the publisher does not hold the authorship, as an attempt of censoring the critical engagement with it. Thus, the mechanisms of algorithms and companies' implementation of their community standards is perceived and labelled as censorship. This further adds to altering and blurring the meaning of censorship: in the far-right narrative about it, not mentioning of a topic, enforcing community standards, or scoring a bad ranking in a Google search become proof for the alleged suppression of information and free speech.

Related to the supposed omission or withholding of information that gets framed as censorship, mainstream media are often blamed for "slandering and writing to death,"[104] or silencing people. A popular allegation on JW is that mainstream media actively fight everyone who expresses different opinions, with many claims along the lines of "since he left the narrow, left-green window of opinion, he is combatted by the mainstream by all means."[105] With inserted phrases like "that's hopefully something I'm still allowed to say,"[106] contributors imply that people must be scared to speak their mind. Especially journalists who changed sides, from the mainstream to far-right alternative media, are presented or present themselves as silenced outcasts. MM explains why he is not working for established media anymore: "I got clear feedback: these topics are not welcome from you," stating that after his articles often did not get published by those media anymore, because "his core topics, family, nation, and faith, were not asked for," and that because of that, he moved to the "free media," which is how far-right media often like to refer to themselves.[107]

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Thereby, the alternative media scene is depicted as a refuge for people who do not accept to be censored, but say what the elites do not want to hear. Like MM, many important protagonists of the far-right media landscape used to have a standing and work for established media outlets, but turned their backs at mainstream journalism as they and their articles faced criticism when their positions shifted increasingly towards the far right.[108] They seem to also owe parts of their status within the far-right media scene to having worked for established media, which despite all the hatred against them still bears a certain authority. Moreover, their distancing from the media accused of propagandistic tendencies from the far-right alternative media perspective must speak for their integrity. Rather than counter-publics arising as a response to an exclusion from the general public sphere, those journalists' engagement with and promotion of counter-public discourses preceded their more or less voluntary or formal exclusion from the dominant public sphere.

Especially with regard to the pandemic, the mainstream media are blamed for attacking everyone who is not likeminded: "Everyone who arouses even the slightest suspicion of belonging to doubters or sceptics is venturing their reputation and existence."[109] This example is from a JW article about a news outlet's speculations about a famous German singer's sympathies for the Covid-denier movements after she had alluded to this in a post on social media. Similarly, several other cases of celebrities who openly acclaim the denial of Covid-19 as a serious threat, or ideas of the government using the pandemic to build a dictatorship are mentioned on JW. They would likely never have been with met with much sympathy or even attention by the same people who now defend them against critical coverage by other media on JW. Yet, the cases get picked up to serve as famous testimonials for the alleged aggressive suppression of critical voices. JW author DM for instance drastically likens the discord of

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Covid-denying TV celebrity Michael Wendler with his broadcaster to "discrediting operations by totalitarian regimes' secret service agencies."[110] Criticism or rejection of positions and people gets interpreted as their defamation and the concerted attempt of cancelling them. In so doing, JW contributors describe a forceful narrowing of the Overton window, i.e. the discourses deemed acceptable to the mainstream, jargon from policy research that DM even explicitly uses in his article. Thus, while the New Right is often attributed with attempts and considerable successes in stretching the limits of what can be said publicly without serious negative repercussions, far-right media contributors themselves bemoan and claim a development diametrically opposed to this.

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3. Claiming factual authority by invalidating mainstream media

3.1. Confounding fact and opinion

The far-right counter-public undertakes concentrated efforts to spread their own narratives, trying to invalidate not only the arguments of the general public, but their factual fundament. Therefore, it is useful to look at far-right media producers also more specifically as marketeers of truths, dominating the information supply within their counter-public and venturing beyond it. Harsin writes about three effects of truth markets on their consumers: Doubts about the possibility of objectively verifying truth, a strong conviction of the validity of their own "truth arbiters in their markets," and the counterclaiming against anything opposed to it.[111] Far-right media producers' claim to present the only alternative within a corrupt media landscape bolsters their success as agents in a truth market: They position themselves as the only reliable sources of information, correspondingly contesting and supposedly debunking other media. The justification of their claim to truth builds largely on integrity. By calling mainstream media's esteem for this value into question, they insinuate to hold the monopoly on it themselves. In this chapter, I explore the strategies employed by JW contributors to undermine trust in mainstream media's vindicability, thus amassing claims to veracity for themselves.

Far-right counter-public media like JW produce and propagate their own truth, which conflicts with what is generally accepted as factual in the public sphere. Harsin writes about the role of "emo-truth," an "aggressive masculine performance of trustworthiness" in the context of the Covid-crisis.[112] He argues that such angry and inconsiderate speech is perceived as "'honest', 'trustworthy' – and therefore deemed to be true."[113] Reminiscent of the tone of the

"toxic male 'truth'-tellers"[114] described by Harsin, many of JW's regular contributors express their disapproval sometimes quite fiercely and polemically. This, however, does not exclude a performance of their commitment to evidentiality and facticity. Rather than only arguing about values and policies, JW contributors often criticise media and journalistic practices in an ostensibly objective way, thus attacking trustworthiness, authority and factuality of established media. Thereby, they seemingly move their argumentation from the level of discussing opinions to the level of pitting facts and truths against another. The supposed facts are often rather misinformation or masked beliefs. Yet, I direct my analytical attention at JW's attempts of claiming integrity by depicting mainstream media as non-credible, rather than at uncovering the falsehoods they spread themselves or at the affective nature of their language, all of which adds to their (dis)information game.

In her essay on "Truth and Politics," Arendt wrote about the conflictual relation of the two that "[u]nwelcome opinion can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon, but unwelcome facts possess an infuriating stubbornness that nothing can move except plain lies."[115] She speaks of the despotic character of truth, expressing its irrevocability, "beyond agreement and consent."[116] Gnawing at the plausibility of the way established media convey facts, the narratives put forward on JW present an attempt in undermining the authoritative nature of the factual truths. This paves the way for their own narratives to be accepted, and for presenting them equally as truths beyond agreement and consent.

The superficial adherence to and valuing of evidence and fact-based arguments on JW is reflected in phrases like "[b]ut what's behind the claim that people in Germany benefit from immigration? – a lot of unproven claims are behind even such a short phrase."[117] Thereby, the

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[114] Ibid.
[115] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1967.
[116] Ibid.
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author does not appear to dispute the claim on a political or affective level, but tries to undermine its facticity. Especially with regard to the pandemic, references to evidence and science play a key role: "all this, still without any really reliable, serious scientific evidence of the effectiveness of masks – and even if this could be established, we'd still be left with the question of proportionality."[118] This quote from an article by DM about the alleged danger of masks illustrates the difference of two ways of debating the obligatory wearing of mask. On the one hand, the discussion of the proportionality of this measure. This is the level on which politics traditionally take place, debating the benefits and disadvantages of a policy and weighing off the interests of different groups against each other. On the other hand, however, with the reference to "scientific evidence," the argument addresses questions of truth. Ridding the discussion of a common empirical basis as its substance, it turns a political debate into a question of belief in one or the other version of truth. Without providing counter-evidence, the political opponents' points are denied evidentiality and credibility, thus maintaining the own position as a matter not of opinion but of facts.

JW regularly attracts the attention of fact-checking projects.[119] JW contributors' strong aversion to the practice of fact-checking thus suggests itself. They criticise that fact-checkers assume to know the truth and that with the idea of fact-checking, "newspapers suggest […] to the public that they know exactly what's right and wrong," as youtuber MG bemoans.[120] Such remarks usually do not respond to the content of the fact checks, but refer to them in a general way. Not only are fact-checks presented as if they moved in a grey zone of right and wrong as a matter of perspective, whereas they usually deal with news items where the question of verification can be quite easily clarified. Presenting fact-checking as a questionable media practice, JW contributors without even reacting to the content delegitimise the debunking of it.

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For instance, NH regards fact checking as a corrective if censorship does not succeed in suppressing oppositional voices and needs to rectify them in hindsight.[121] Without arguing about right or wrong, the possibility to distinguish between the two is simply denied. This denigrates any insistence on inopportune facts as going against freedom of opinion, fundamentally confusing fact with opinion.

Regarding the pandemic, JW and its contributors frequently not only present their own version of reality, but deny the existence of the pandemic altogether. Echoing a narrative that is dominant on JW and generally popular among Covid-deniers, E claims: "The 'Covid-19-pandemic' is a media plague, not a viral plague. It exists in the heads of media consumers, because it has been implanted there by the media, and not for real. It is the result of 'propaganda through framing.'"[122] This tale is repeated again and again, with some variations but always the same message: that the Covid-19 pandemic is not real, but constructed by media and elites. Most of the time, this is simply presented as an agreed-upon fact. At times, explanations and justifications of this claim are attempted. They usually consist of relativisations, baseless background information about elite conspiracies, or whataboutisms. E for instance explains that "there is no pandemic that would be more dangerous than long-known epidemics. This is why a new definition of what a pandemic is supposed to be was implemented by the WHO [World Health Organisation] only briefly before its 'actual outbreak.' It only really occurred, however, in the heads of panic-mongers."[123] Statements like this use rather unrelated facts as straw man arguments for the non-existence of the pandemic. It is left open for interpretation what other epidemics they are referring to. That other diseases are serious, too, is barely evidence for the non-existence of the Covid-19 pandemic, as it is implied here.

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The summoning of a fictional pandemic however is not presented as a unique case, but the artificial creation of reality identified as a general project, as illustrated in this statement: "Who abolishes democracy and reality through framing? The answer is very generalising, but brief: The left."[124] Throughout the articles on JW, mainstream media are ascribed a huge role in having created and constructed a pandemic where there allegedly was none. This is related to the engagement with a basic epistemological relativist view that underlies many JW contributors' claims. They often argue that media through framing create conceptual frameworks for people as they please, and ascribe mainstream media's supposed propagandistic power to this capacity. At the same time, JW contributors decidedly reject perspectivism as a view, insisting on the existence of unambiguous truths. The left, or more generally the mainstream, is in contrast accused of 'post-facticity,' of believing that reality is constructed, and that if enough people agree on something, it becomes real.

E comments on supposed attempts of establishing a "post-factual era," which he considers "an insane endeavour" of the leftist mainstream: "Things are the way they are. The way someone wants or should see them does not change anything about that."[125] This is somewhat paradoxical, as he and other contributors continuously express their discomfort with framing. Their conviction of it as instrumental for mainstream media's propaganda and brainwashing purposes implies that they in fact do acknowledge at least some effect of language on reality and perception. Probably also among the left, people rarely believe that changing the signifier will change the signified, but rather that the changed signifier might change people's attitudes towards the signified, and only through this have an impact on the world. This idea in fact seems to be mirrored widely on JW. After all, the metapolitical project of the New Right largely revolves around the idea of controlling discourses and talk as a way of impacting

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people's opinions and attaining cultural hegemony.[126] Yet, JW contributors like E insinuate that the practice of the left and mainstream media detaches discourses from reality by reducing the signified to a random signifier that misses any relation to it. Thus, JW contributors claim for themselves that their own language is apt to describe reality, whereas mainstream media's framing is meant to conceal it.

3.2. Contesting mainstream media's integrity through media criticism

JW features several authors and channels specialising on what is ostensibly just criticism of media practices. This 'criticism,' however, consists of repeating the narrative of the established media deceiving the people and assisting the totalitarian ambitions of elites, thus undermining trust in established media and their integrity. For instance, the recurring section under which many of E's articles are published is called and camouflages as "media criticism" ("Medienkritik"), but in fact tries to negotiate which discourses should be awarded attention. Similarly, MG regarding his channel's content promises "more videos with example which document how the mainstream wants to manipulate and condition us and to control our way of thinking."[127] Thus, pointing out specific technical points about frames and depictions in media are employed as concrete evidence of how the left elite is supposedly using the media to control the people.

Most of the time, mainstream media are criticised in a very general way on JW. The points of criticism mirror common topics of media analysis as they are also employed by non-far-right journalists when engaging with each other's work. JW contributors, for instance, criticise the use of dramatizing pictures, that authors fail to put numbers in relation, or that headlines distort the actual message and content of articles. Similarly, they often find fault with the way media supposedly uncritically take over research results or use purportedly random

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[126] E.g. Fuchs and Middelhoff, *Das Netzwerk der Neuen Rechten*, 23.
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studies, or criticise that the sources used for reference are unclear. The substantiation of these points of criticism, or the lack of it, can often only be determined with further research on the matter. Frequently, JW contributors commit the same mistake for which they blame mainstream media and do not provide evidence or an argument for why a point made in an article is supposed to be invalid. Regardless of its plausibility, the invalidation of other media outlets' content through questioning its facticity contributes to the general image painted of established media outlets as not providing truthful representations of reality. Yet, JW and its contributors suggest that they attack other media not for positions with which they disagree, but on a formal level, criticising the media practices rather than directly the content. This is a way of countering the arguments made by mainstream media, but not considering them as different opinions, but as simply wrong. It thereby also lets JW appear as the critical voices and guardians of facticity, who underline their own commitment to truthfulness and impartiality by criticising other media outlets for their lack of it.

JW contributors generally assume an overarching strategy behind what they identify as shortcomings in other media's reporting, and portray it as part of a bigger ideological project controlled by elites. Media practices are repeatedly labelled as "perfidious," journalists described as "proceeding smartly," or "hiding something from the readers." In so doing, JW evokes the impression that mainstream media employ their criticised practices in a mean-spirited and intentional manner, building up to the claim that "this is not only framing anymore, this is the malicious perversion of reality."[128] The repeated use of the words "propaganda," "brainwashing," "manipulation," "indoctrination" to describe mainstream media content or practices further suggests that mainstream media journalists are not only mischievous or unskilled individuals, but part of a bigger project. In line with that, specific single articles or videos that are thematised on JW and whose framing is analysed are often presented as just

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exemplary of general practices, thus using media criticism of individual items for a sweeping criticism that does not distinguish between individual journalists and media. Thereby, JW and its contributors imply the orchestrated unity of journalists and media outlets.

In their media criticism, JW contributors explain the ways in which mainstream news and journalists apparently try to convey their message and spread their propaganda by analysing their rhetorical and communicative strategies. For instance, they frequently interpret and decry the framing of certain issues in mainstream media coverage. That media engage in certain ways of framing became a commonplace of public discourse in Germany especially since a renowned linguist created a "framing manual" for the public broadcaster *ARD*, which became public and caused widespread discussions about the ways and intentions of media outlets in conveying information.[129] This incident is mentioned several times on JW. More generally, many authors point out and explain the term and practice of framing, relating it to deceptive brainwashing activities, as expressed in E's explanation of the purpose of framing to be in "disconnecting the German television viewer from the facts, thus to disconnect him from reality and information, in order to send him into the world of opinions."[130]

Framing generally simply refers to the selection and emphasising of certain aspects of an event to promote particular problems, interpretations and evaluations.[131] On JW, however, it is presented as if it was per se a dishonest practice, rather than a way of perceiving and communicating information about the world that is always present. The general accusation and criticism of media's framing practices is often accompanied with analyses of the use of certain terms or perspectives in articles with very concrete examples. For instance, the use of the word "fire" rather than "arson" in mainstream media's coverage of the burning refugee camp Moria

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[129] E.g. Jakob Biazza, "Kampf um den Deutungsrahmen: Framing-Manual der ARD," February 18, 2019.
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[131] Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993), 52.

on the Greek island Lesbos is criticised and the journalists are accused of their framing.[132] Referring to this event as 'arson' would be a very specific way of framing it, too. Whereas JW contributors in cases like this attack mainstream media for not being neutral or objective, thus, the criticism is in fact that they do not share the same bias. By drawing attention to mainstream media journalists' framing, they package their objections in language from communication or media analysis. This makes the criticism appear more like a neutral analysis of the mainstream media rather than just attacks on basis of different positions.

Engaging with other media's coverage of the pandemic, JW contributors frequently mention other diseases, other causes of death, mention that "birth rates are still higher than death rates," or state that more people have died and continue to die due to starvation than because of Covid-19.[133] What has been colloquially labelled "whataboutism," the tactic of drawing attention away from one issue by highlighting another, is a commonly used rhetoric across articles on JW. It is employed to relativise the danger of Covid-19, or to use other media's coverage of certain issues as a prompt to criticise different issues, and to reiterate other topics that are central to JW and their own agenda. In a very straight-forward manner, JW author E in his criticism of an article about Covid-denier protests rhetorically demands the editor to write about complaints of unconstitutionality and the lack of parliamentarianism instead.[134] Introducing quite different issues into the debate which in fact deal with the government and not with the protests, the actual criticism does not concern the way the article is written, but takes issue with its thematic focus and critical view on the protesters.

Another example for this strategy of using media criticism to defend positions and actors that are close to JW's is the coverage of a documentary about the German far-right. The documentary had attracted a lot of public attention and debate and raised uncomfortable

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questions for AfD and people associated with JW's spectrum.[135] Several JW contributors reacted to it. Recurring in all their engagements with the documentary is the contesting of the documentary's credibility instead of directly reacting to its content. For instance, the far right commonly invalidates a crucial scene in which a AfD politician is presented to express strongly inhumane positions by claiming that it contains "not a single secured quote."[136] In fact, the video had been shot covertly. Due to legal restrictions regarding the use of hidden camera footage, the audio recording had to be dubbed and labelled as 'verbatim from memory,' a common practice in investigative journalism.[137] With this critique of the criticism of AfD by the documentary, the party is indirectly defended on JW and represented in a more favourable light, while calling into question the reliability of the respective mainstream media outlet.

An additional way in which JW contributors undermine mainstream media's credibility is through criticism of the mainstream's use of expertise. A frequent reproach is that media instrumentalise experts, which can be researchers or generally people with a certain standing and authority. They either imply that experts are not quoted in a meaningful way, but only to make a point, or to make something sound more serious. Alternatively, JW contributors express doubts about the trustworthiness of the experts quoted by other media, as in this remark by DM: "Apparently, the brain-sprinklers from public broadcasting still find doctors who stoop to spread shameless propaganda and gross nonsense as ostensibly competent testimonials."[138] Thus, he claims that mainstream media use only select experts who are supportive of their own position. In general, the word "expert" is often presented in quotation marks, usually without further explanation as for why they question this expertise. This happens for both, recognised experts, especially in the context of the pandemic, or ironically, to delegitimise people's claims.

[135] Thilo Mischke, "Rechts. Deutsch. Radikal." September 28, 2020, accessed May 17, 2021, https://www.prosieben.at/tv/prosieben-spezial/episoden/prosieben-spezial-rechts-deutsch-radikal.
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[137] See e.g. Stefan Niggemeier, "Warum berufen sich Undercover-Reportagen auf ominöse „Gedächtnisprotokolle"?," *Übermedien*, September 30, 2020.
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Often, however, it is not the experts themselves that are criticised, neither their research on a factual ground, but rather just the way they are used by media.

The participants of Covid-denier protests have been found to show similar tendencies: They do not have a hostile attitude towards science, but use discourses around evidentiality and critical assessment when highlighting their own research or the points raised by experts of their choice.[139] Instead, their problem with ideas about the pandemic and the measures against it as they are presented by established media and government is an issue of trust. Researchers, experts and media are accused of yielding to political and economic interests.[140] Also JW's contributors, along with their general demeanour as the actually rational, neutral perspective, and their criticism of other media for the alleged lack of evidence, do not directly put into question the value of research and expertise. Especially with regard to the pandemic, they indeed also resort a lot to research results and expert voices in their argumentation, albeit in inconsistent and selective ways. Thus, the disagreement with experts' positions is presented as doubting the actual expertise of the person, without, however, usually questioning the concept of expertise or the value of research itself.

This mode of justifying their claims is built on the pretence of upholding journalistic standards and scientific reason. Analysing the production of counter-knowledge of participants at Covid-denier protests, Reichardt et al. find protesters often justifying their beliefs with intuition, or their own critical thinking.[141] That they trust their own assessment and gut feelings more than the overwhelming agreement of all experts might be explained by their strong mistrust of mainstream media, and the perception of a system being fundamentally designed to deceive. JW authors often equally present their arguments as simply common-sensical to any

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[139] Sven Reichardt, Johannes Pantenburg and Benedikt Sepp, *Corona-Proteste und das (Gegen-)Wissen sozialer Bewegungen* (Konstanz: KOPS Universität Konstanz, 2021), 4.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid., 5.

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reasonable person of the right mind. Yet, their rhetoric seemingly embraces evidence-led, (pseudo-) critical, rational argumentation. Thereby, they position themselves as the preservers of good journalistic standards, and the mainstream as the biased, emotionalising one. This, however, happens less by making themselves actually accountable through sources, references or critical reflexivity, than by simply proclaiming it in the same breath with discrediting the established media.

3.3. Eroding objectivity by challenging journalistic standards

In their efforts to erode trust in mainstream media, and thereby in the information conveyed, JW contributors not only criticise specific framing or articles, but the rectitude of media and journalists altogether. The criticism of rhetoric practices of mainstream media outlets is accompanied by the underlying claim that the value of objectivity is not upheld by journalists and media anymore. NB, former professor for media sciences with anti-egalitarian positions and radicalised member of the CDU-associated economic council, in a speech posted on JW talks about the "disturbing self-concept of younger journalists, who consider the separation of opinion and information outdated, killing the ideal of objectivity in journalism."[142] JW authors often blame journalists for infusing their coverage of a topic with opinion. In so doing, they seem to misunderstand what is generally considered the function of journalism, i.e. not only the mere presentation of information and events as neutrally as possible, but also placing and illuminating them in various contexts. Conventionally, the categorisation of a media outlet's content into different sections is supposed to clearly distinguish opinion-based pieces from other formats.

The separation of fact and opinion, and the obligations of press in that regard is in fact an issue of infinite debate. The German Press Code, that most established publishers and

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broadcasters avow themselves to, postulates that "[p]ublishers, editors and journalists […] fulfil their journalistic function in a fair way, to the best of their knowledge and belief, independent of personal interests and off-topic motivations."[143] The independence of personal interests, however, hardly equals the independence of personal perspective and opinion, but rather of private, economic interests. In a study of Norwegian far right alternative media, Figenschou and Ihlebæk point out that they criticise mainstream media for a lack of ethical standards, but without adhering to any themselves.[144] JW indeed claims in its imprints to "represent the full range of opinions," but is in fact highly partisan throughout its coverage.[145] Not only does it publish a daily news section specifically on AfD, and generally has close ties with the party. Contrary arguments and different perspectives are, if at all, only presented highly polemically, and usually explained by and reduced to suspicious motivations.

The very shortcoming of which NB accuses young journalists recurs on JW again and again: Most of the alleged media criticism in which JW contributors critique mainstream media content as opinionated is in fact referring to opinion pieces. These articles or contributions are clearly marked as such by the publishing or broadcasting media outlets, but such indications are generally ignored by JW contributors. Instead, the opinion pieces are taken as exemplary evidence for the bias of established media and their failure to provide factual information in an objective way. By criticising opinion pieces for their lack of neutrality, despite this characteristic being implied by the genre, they counter the view advanced in such opinion pieces, but less by claiming they have the right opinion themselves, than by simply acting as the keepers of good standards of objectivity. Through this apparently wilful misunderstanding of the existence of different journalistic formats, JW contributors position themselves on the good side, as opposed to the negligent, biased media practitioners of the mainstream.

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143 Deutscher Presserat, *Publizistische Grundsätze (Pressekodex)* (2019)
144 Figenschou and Ihlebæk, "Challenging Journalistic Authority,"
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The question "Who is [this person] to be allowed to comment on this on public broadcasting?"[146] illustrates another variant of attacking opinion pieces for the lack of neutrality. With this remark, NL reacted to a journalist commenting on daily news for a format which is explicitly named "opinion" ("Meinung"). It is one of very few examples on JW when an opinion piece is actually recognised as such. But it puts into question the entitlement of the journalist, implying that the personal opinion of a journalist is unrequested. This again challenges the role and professional expertise of journalists in explaining news through a specific lens, and contests their representativeness or interest for the people.

Furthermore, differentiation and acceptance of uncertainties and unclarities in mainstream media coverage are often interpreted negatively as inconsistencies by JW contributors. They for example point out that mainstream media's coverage of studies about the pandemic are full of "ifs and buts."[147] This is not interpreted as an attempt to paint a differentiated picture of the situation, but as the mainstream's inability to uphold its own position. When journalists point at normal limitations of studies, which could be seen as responsible science journalism, JW contributors commonly frame this as the journalists "admitting" limitations.[148] Thus, it is instead taken as an indication of mainstream media either giving up on their position, or on this position being too faulty do be defended in a persistent way.

The presentation of something as a confession or concession on part of mainstream media happens on the one hand in response to mainstream journalists' acknowledgements that the cited studies have their shortcomings. But JW contributors use the same allegation also to insinuate that mainstream media "admit" that the entire pandemic might not be quite like what it has been presented to be. With respect to the first type of cases, mainstream media indeed

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often write about research results with caution. The claims that mainstream media admit that they misrepresented the pandemic, however, are usually baseless. JW contributors in those cases refer to specific moments in mainstream media's ordinary coverage of the pandemic which point at an improvement, or an optimistic assessment of the situation. While both hopeful and problematising perspectives and factors have been part of the overall mainstream coverage of the pandemic from the start, JW contributors entirely deny the existence of such content. This allows them to interpret any such points as established media's concessions that their prior depiction of the situation was wrong. With statements like "mainstream doubts its own prognosis,"[149] or framing new assessments of the situation as "backtracking" or "veering" on part of the media, JW contributors ignore that the pandemic presents a new territory and that mainstream media's reporting simply reflects evolving situations or changed states of knowledge. The permanent revaluation of the situation by mainstream media is instead interpreted as them being untrue to their principles, as a conscious strategic change of track, and consequently as delegitimising them.

Nonetheless, aspects of mainstream media outlets' coverage of the pandemic that fit into or support their own narrative are readily picked up by JW contributors and presented as additional proof of the truth of their own view. Despite aggressively opposing the established and especially public broadcasting media, "even the mainstream says so" is a phrase repeatedly used by JW contributors, which seems to serve as validation. This indicates that the far-right media scene still acknowledges the authority of established media, their extremely negative representation of them notwithstanding. OJ for instance points out that "as you can see, they use the exact same data we have been using for months already,"[150] which seems to justify the data in questions and implies that those media otherwise have been using faulty data. Calling

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attention to established media's resorting to the same sources moreover provides the far-right media producers with another occasion to present themselves as pioneers in understanding and spreading the real facts about the pandemic.

At the same time, critical reporting by mainstream media is consistently explained away, as in this note by NH: "If there are occasional critical voices and articles in the mainstream, then those serve as perfidious fig leaves, along the lines of "Look, we do report critically!"[151] Not acknowledging any criticism of the government's Covid-policies on the part of mainstream media allows the far-right media producers to maintain their self-presentation as the only alternative, and to keep their narrative of the one-sided mainstream media propaganda apparatus intact. Another way in which critical engagement of mainstream media with the pandemic sometimes is acknowledged is by relating it to the claim that those media just give in to the increasing resistance of the public to the reality presented by them, as exemplified in this comment by MG: "If it cannot be avoided, if it cannot be ignored anymore, then the media cave in and admit what is happening, then they write about the reality, or about what can be foreseen."[152] This not only depicts the mainstream media as opportunistic weather vanes which strategically adapt what they present as facts, but also suggests that the far-right media outlets have always been the ones consistently committed to bringing the truth to the people.

Adding to the criticism of mainstream media as unobjective, journalists are on JW constantly blamed for supposedly sensationalist or emotionalising coverage. JW contributors unanimously downplay the pandemic and disparage mainstream media as "panic-mongers." At the same time, they create fear themselves, but about different issues. One of the most popular topics in that regard are the masks, which are loathed by Covid-deniers also beyond the far right, reflected in the common labelling of protesters as "anti-maskers." On JW, masks are often

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presented as "potentially life-threatening nonsense," like by DM in an article in which he insinuates that a public broadcasting channel was putting people's lives at risk by reporting about positive effects of wearing masks.[153] Thus, he and other contributors relativise one danger – that of the coronavirus and the pandemic – by exaggerating another – the alleged harm that wearing masks might cause. The evidence they present for such claims consists mostly of questionable examples. They for instance point out news items about people fainting while wearing a mask, but without proof of an actual correlation between mask and incident.[154] The pertinence of JW's own narrative instead rests on the integrity its contributors ascribe to themselves in their capacity of outsiders to the mainstream media allegedly corrupted by a leftist agenda.

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Discussion and Conclusion

Owing to its continuous critiquing, attacking and recycling of mainstream media content, the counter-public around JW is not cut-off from the general public sphere. Yet, the unilateral character of its engagement with established media, as well as its unwaveringly oppositional stance towards them result in a quite secluded cosmos of perspectives, narratives and beliefs. In line with their general rejection and distrust of mainstream media, JW and its contributors create a narrative about the pandemic and its general coverage that is incompatible with the knowledge and opinions about the pandemic and the measures widely shared in the general public, and therefore also in most media outlets. It largely consists in and promotes the idea of the mainstream media intentionally deceiving people to aid the governing elites. The alternative truth put forward by JW is built upon far-right media producers' self-stylising as the one resort of integrity, bolstered by the invalidation of any claims to truth, objectivity and facticity on part of the mainstream media.

Especially regarding the discussion of the pandemic, this happens on an ostensibly fact-based level that seemingly attributes great weight to evidentiality, expertise and other scientific justifications. At the same time criticising journalistic and rhetoric practices, the media criticism from the far-right thus tries to present mainstream media content as manipulative misinformation. Thereby, far-right media damage the credibility and challenge the authority of established media as trustworthy sources of information. Instead, they promote their own narratives of the pandemic. They draw a picture of a media system on its way to totalitarianism, suppressing all critical voices and unwanted information, and position themselves as victims of attempted repression of freedom of press and free speech. This is in turn used to lend validity and credibility to their own content.

While JW and similar far-right media outlets stylise themselves as fighters for the adherence to facts, objectivity, and journalistic standards, their media criticism fosters the exact opposite development. Perverting the differences between fact and opinion, challenging the function of journalism, and distorting the meaning of concepts like censorship or freedom of opinion, far-right alternative media are symptoms and fuel of the post-truth society. Their discourses erode trust in the possibility of truth and in the institutions like government, media and experts that have conventionally been regarded as authorities in the production of knowledge. Far-right media outlets refuse to accept any standards of right and wrong and conflate complex societal dynamics into a binary opposition between their public and an alliance of elites and a brainwashed mainstream. This bars even the possibility of common deliberation in the public sphere.

Post-truth sentiments and mistrust in established institutions as they are nurtured by alternative media like JW constitute a fertile ground for movements like that of the Covid-deniers, who trust in their own convictions more than in the overwhelming agreement of experts and the rest of society. Their extreme media scepticism is one of the most striking features of Covid-deniers, with more than 90 percent of protest participants having indicated in a survey that they do not trust the established mass media.[155] Instead, actors that have parted from the mainstream are more readily accepted as authentic and credible.[156] This renders JW and its contributors potentially interesting to people who are not usually part of the far-right public but sympathise with the narrative about the pandemic being merely a chimaera conjured up by the establishment. Covid-deniers rarely find confirmation for their positions in mainstream media, which in a self-reinforcing way corroborates the aggressive media scepticism that is promoted in their communication and at protests. In far-right media, however, they find the same

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[155] Nachtwey, Frei and Schäfer, *Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste*, 40.
[156] Reichardt, Pantenburg and Sepp, *Corona-Proteste und das (Gegen-)Wissen sozialer Bewegungen*, 4.

(mis)information and narratives about the pandemic, which runs counter to the facts and explanations that are accepted among most experts and disseminated by mainstream media. Moreover, far-right media like JW contribute to the circulation and reproduction of content originating in the scene of Covid-deniers themselves.

The traffic on JW suggests an audience overlap with for example the website of a regional group of Covid-deniers.[157] The overlap score is still rather marginal, and it is not clear whether it simply mirrors those members or the Covid-denier public who have always also been part of the far-right public. Nevertheless, this overlap supports the assumption that Covid-deniers' mistrust against mainstream media makes them more likely to encounter and sympathise with far-right alternative media. Outlets like JW and its contributors cater to Covid-deniers by promoting the same narratives and presenting content and information that supports their denial of the pandemic, but also fit their world view with regard to suspicion against mainstream media and government policies. Thus, their common views and narratives about the reality of the pandemic might allow the far-right counter-public to extend its reach to people not usually associated with the far-right.

Although both with regard to their discursive and political engagement with the pandemic constitute counter-publics, the Covid-deniers and the far right are not congruent. They differ in their interests, ideology, identities and agenda, which in the case of the former is more narrowly defined around the pandemic. But they feed into and draw from the same network of discourses and information with far-right media outlets like JW which are first and foremost characterised by their focus on anti-migration discourses. Therefore, the pandemic and the discourses around it might help the far right to increase its influence as a counter-public, mainstreaming its usual discourses in the garments of a new topic. By drawing from a common truth market, which the

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[157] "Querdenken 761," assessed with Alexa blended overlap score in October 2020.

far right also infuses with a broader array of their, often anti-migrant, discourses, their way of framing and some of the far-right content might likely leave its marks on Covid-deniers from outside the far-right scene. The drifting of the movement of Covid deniers towards the far-right should in this light be understood as at least a warning sign: of the potential alliance of Covid-19 protesters with the far-right, and of the expansion of the far-right counter-public and the attention to its discourses into a wider public. To my knowledge no studies about the media sources and use of Covid-deniers exists to date. Together with further investigations into the audience effects of the discursive strategies described in this thesis, such research could help clarify the state of the polarisation of the public sphere and of its degeneration into a battlefield over information and disinformation.

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