



Faculty: Faculty of Social Sciences	Department: Centre for European Studies	
Author: Bianca Welker	Degree programme: Master in European and Nordic Studies	
Title: Narrating the Covid-19 Crisis: How German populist far-right alternative online news media have framed the global pandemic during 2020.		
Level: Master's Thesis	Date: May 2021	Number of Pages: 81
Abstract <p>Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, alternative online news media were predominately thought to spread false information on the coronavirus and heavily engage in conspiracy theories. The populist and far-right news outlets especially were said to strategically exploit people's fears to further their own hate campaigns against migrants, political elites and the established media. This research aims to give a more detailed account of how five German populist far-right digital news outlets framed the ongoing crisis from January to May 2020 and managed to integrate the topic into their established narratives. For this qualitative content analysis, articles from the digital news sites of <i>Compact</i>, <i>Junge Freiheit</i>, <i>Eigentümlich Frei</i>, <i>Deutsche Stimme</i> and <i>Zuerst</i> were analysed regarding the topics, claims, actors and rhetoric devices that they used. The result of the study was that, rather than being swayed by strategic whims to exploit the crisis at all costs, the outlets relied on their established framing habits and were able to incorporate the crisis into all of their usual reporting. They were able to integrate the topic into overarching narratives, which not only confirmed worldviews held by their established reader base, but may also hold significant sway over new readers seeking reassurance in uncertain times. Finally, the thesis directed attention to the importance that language and presentation played in accomplishing this balancing act, establishing the need for further research on the language of the populist far right online.</p>		
Keywords: Covid-19; alternative news media; online right-wing media; crisis framing; narrative analysis; far-right populism; Germany; comparative media studies; qualitative content analysis; anti-lockdown demonstrations; disinformation.		
Where deposited		
Additional Information		



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI | FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES |
MASTER PROGRAM IN EUROPEAN AND NORDIC STUDIES

NARRATING THE COVID-19 CRISIS.

How German populist far-right alternative online news media have framed the global pandemic during 2020.

Bianca Welker
Master's Thesis
May 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	1
Chapter 1: Introduction	2
Chapter 2: Theoretical Background	5
2.1. Understanding PRAM news coverage through Frame Theory applications	5
2.2. Identifying the PRAM's Framing Environment during the Pandemic	11
Chapter 3: The Covid-19 pandemic in Germany and background on the populist far right	18
3.1. The Covid-19 pandemic in Germany and anti-lockdown demonstrations.....	18
3.2. The political and medial context of PRAMs and the far right in Germany.....	21
3.3. Presenting the five PRAMs to be analysed.....	24
Chapter 4: Data collection and analysis parameters	31
4.1. Analysis parameters	31
4.2. Data Collection and Analysis	36
Chapter 5: How the PRAM framed the Covid-19 Pandemic	39
5.1. Overview of the main results	40
5.2. Narrative themes.....	46
5.3. The importance of language in communicating shared mental frameworks	65
Chapter 6: Conclusion	70
Literature	74

Acknowledgements

While a thesis is ultimately a test of one's own perseverance and ambition, it becomes just that much easier to accomplish thanks to the professional and personal support and guidance of many wonderful people.

My supervisor *Lotta Lounasmeri* I would like to thank for extending a helping hand and being always available to give advice on specific questions throughout the process. During the Covid pandemic, she has gone above and beyond, offering virtual hangouts to all students to talk with her about their academic and personal struggles. I have not made use of the offer, but it was greatly reassuring to know that there was someone there, always ready to listen.

Daniel Sallamaa, also from the University of Helsinki, I would like to thank for the brilliant and inspiring conversations we had about Right-wing Extremism, my early thesis plans and the great coffee. Due to pandemic restrictions, not much is left of the topic we initially spoke about, but I dearly hope he will not consider his time wasted. His astute remarks and general advice will serve me well for years to come and I am grateful that he has shared his time with me so freely.

Leena Malkki I would like to thank for her support and interest in my personal well-being that she has expressed, and most of all her belief in my capability throughout my studies and early in the thesis process. Unbeknownst to her, I have kept her words very close to my heart, especially on days that I doubted myself.

On a personal note, I would like to thank my mother for single-handedly keeping the family off my back with their well-intentioned but stressful questions about job prospects and thesis deadlines. Sometimes, being given space to breathe is the best kind of support anyone could hope for. Caelum Davis I am thanking for being an overall good friend, providing just the right amount of gentle pressure to get my shit together, while being always supportive and to remind me that a thesis is not the pinnacle of my life's work. Julian Webb I am grateful to for helping with the editing process. I hope that he has not questioned his career choices in the face of all these misplaced quotation marks, italics and capitalisation errors.

Unusual times such as these require unusual acknowledgements. I would like to thank all the amazing people on the FSC Study Server on Discord and the virtual study community we have built together. To be able to study together with other people has become a privilege in these times, and I am deeply grateful for all their love and support. Finally, I am thanking all the excellent composers of movie and game soundtracks and the countless creators of background ambiances on YouTube. Being deprived of the real-life ambience of libraries, it was good to be able to metaphorically step into the Hogwarts library instead. Exploring the diversity of all these auditory worlds was a much needed counterbalance to the tedious and narrow-minded nature of the far-right content analysed on the following pages.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The global pandemic caused by the 2019 novel coronavirus disease (Covid-19) represents a fundamental crisis, which disrupted the usual state of affairs in almost all sectors of society. When the first reports of a new infectious disease originating in Wuhan reached Europe in December and January of 2020, it was hardly of any serious concern to average citizens in Europe. On March 11th the WHO announced that Covid-19 constituted a global pandemic and was “not just a public health crisis”, but rather a crisis affecting everyday aspects of people’s lives (WHO 2020). In conjunction with rising case numbers in Europe, the first governments announced nationwide lockdowns. Italy, suffering the first mass outbreak in Europe, began its regional lockdowns around February 21st, whereas in Germany, which is the subject of this thesis, the nationwide lockdown came about on March 22nd.

A crisis of such magnitude causes abrupt fissures in several areas of society and may serve to radically alter the perceptions of the state of the world, as was experienced in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the global financial crisis or the recent migration crisis. Covid-19 may have facilitated an even greater *personal* uncertainty among a far bigger group of people, because it was not concerned with more abstract concepts such as terrorism, markets and immigration, but rather the personal freedom of movement and health of the personal body. Future research will surely analyse the exact psychological impact of the pandemic on society, yet it has already been established in previous research that crises foster an environment of uncertainty, in which straightforward narratives and decisive framing efforts are more widespread and in greater demand from media outlets, political leaders, experts and other such actors. A recent concern in public discussions has been the danger of populist or far-right actors capitalising on the global pandemic. Vieten, for example, assumes that the extended time of self-isolation during lockdown has left more people vulnerable to far-right media online, making studies on their framing habits during the crisis important (Vieten 2020, 11).

This thesis will analyse how a selection of German populist and far-right alternative online news media have framed different aspects of the pandemic throughout the first half of 2020, including their first reports of Covid-19 up to their coverage of the anti-lockdown demonstrations in Germany. The importance of observing alternative news media framing efforts during the Covid-19 crisis was brought up first in Boberg et. al’s working paper from April 2020, wherein they conducted a content analysis of the Facebook pages of 32 different German alternative news media and the extent to which they contributed to misinformation online up until March 22nd

(Boberg/Quandt/Schatto-Eckrodt/Frischlich 2020). They found a *Pandemic Populism* at work in the most successful sites, which frequently relied on giving stories a right-wing spin, linking the crisis to their own long-established narrative patterns, such as anti-elitism or nationalism (ibid., 13). So far, no studies have specifically analysed the far-right digital news outlets framing of Corona and in the past, the respective *print* magazines of these sites have received more academic attention than their digital presences.

In case of the right-wing digital news infrastructure, Heft et. al. most recently showed that in many western democracies, far-right news outlets can defy conventional understandings about their usual dispositions by utilizing a populist style and linking their narratives to more right-wing conservative appearances (Heft/Mayerhöffer/Reinhardt/Knüpfer 2019, 24). It is important to stress here that such shifts in presentation and thematic emphasis need not be interpreted as the strategically driven, unauthentic Covid exploitation tactics, which news media regularly portrayed them to be. This thesis proposes that there was nothing sporadic about the Covid-19 coverage of the news outlets in question, partly because such manoeuvring always carries the potential of possibly alienating core audiences in the process. On the contrary, *Framing Theory* lets us expect a great amount of internal consistency in successful framing efforts, which would seamlessly integrate new topics such as Covid-related news into established explanatory frameworks and narratives.

Chapter 2 will present how central concepts of Framing Theory can assist our thinking when looking at the materials studied here. This review will focus on those facets of the vast theoretical body, that are most relevant for the analysis of alternative digital-news media, directing attention particularly to previous studies on framing in news media and the populist and far-right context. Attention will be directed to constraining and enabling elements that can be expected to influence the outlets framing of the pandemic, such as their interest in stigma management, usage of populist frames, crisis framing, the special opportunity structure of the digital space and lastly their position as mainstream-opposed Alternative Media. Previous research on alternative online news media and its populist far-right variety, as well as the first studies on the pandemic framing will give further direction in formulating expectations about how the crisis was framed.

The names of the five alternative news media outlets selected for this research are *Compact*, *Junge Freiheit (JF)*, *Eigentümlich Frei (EF)*, *Deutsche Stimme (DS)* and *Zuerst!*. All of them publish a regular print magazine that is advertised on their social media and news sites. This was an important selection criterion, because print magazines suggest a certain degree of organisation, editorial

intent and selection regarding the articles which are posted online. The magazines are all known to see themselves in opposition to mainstream media and political elites and it is expected to be found in this paper that a populist style will indeed feature strongly in their framing of the pandemic. While they are all showing an overlap in staff and themes that identify them as part of the same general network of German alternative digital news media, there are significant differences between them. For example, *Compact*, *DS* and *Zuerst* can be described as most vigorously anti-immigrant and generally far-right oriented, whereas *EF* is barely concerned with immigration and its proximity to new-right media requires some further justification. Finally, *Junge Freiheit* is unique in the set, because of its most remarkable attempts at keeping a conservative, non-controversial appearance of seemingly practicing objective news reporting, while simultaneously being unrestrained in their commentary pieces and staying very strongly tethered to the other magazines through personnel and background. Chapter 3 will present these magazines' backgrounds, their usual style and carve out the differences and commonalities.

Chapter 4 will bring the previous chapters together and formulate analysis parameters, while also making important notes on data collection and the coding process. For one, the chapter will consider possible framing motives driving the outlets, such as generating *clicks*, or increasing readership and securing donations to support the adjacent print magazines, most of which struggle financially. The chapter covers, how theoretical knowledge informed the coding of topics, claims and actors throughout the analysis process to eventually ascertain overarching narratives about the coronavirus. If much of the magazines' outputs did indeed follow consistent and established framework patterns suggested by previous research, then the analysis of the gathered data should reveal predictable differences between the magazines' choice of emphases and favoured narratives. Chapter 5 will present and then discuss the findings of the study in a comparative manner, examining how the magazines' reporting relates to one another, but also how reporting may have differed over the course of the analysis timeframe. After presenting the most general results, the chapter will then in turn analyse some overarching narratives which emerged, and illustrate, how the outlets linked these stories to their established framing habits. A final section of the chapter will consider the importance of language and style in building these narratives and suggests possibilities for future research on the topic.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Background

2.1. Understanding PRAM news coverage through Frame Theory applications

Framing is a term that could rightfully be accused of having become a buzzword in academia, as well as in the media and public life. One reason for this universal enthrallment might be the extensiveness of phenomena it aims to explain. Framing Theory is loosely concerned with the perception of a reality by actors, their reproduction of this meaning through communication and the on-going processes of reconciling different accounts of reality. In principle, any time anybody says anything to anyone, it might be interpreted as an act of framing. Whether Framing Theory can fully deliver on the tall order of things it seeks to understand is not for this thesis to judge. But, regardless, the mental analogies that Frame Analysis has developed over the years are not only highly intuitive to follow, but have enabled scholars of different disciplines to re-think the way they conceptualise problems in their respective fields, thereby often helping to advance them.

The first decisive development of a structured theory on Framing took place in the 1970s, when Gregory Bateson included some of his earlier work in his 1972 book *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind* (Bateson 1972). He is generally credited for first formulating a working definition of what a *frame* should be, and the sociologist Erving Goffman explicitly referred back to these foundations when opening his influential book *Frame Analysis: an essay on the organization of experience* (Goffman 1974, 10). The base assumption of the Framing concept is that reality is individually perceived through interpretive processes. Frames and frameworks take on the function of interpretive lenses for the individual. They represent tenets that are believed to be true about the world. When Goffman speaks about the *organization of experience*, he refers to these mental processes which filter and organize a situation in a way that is seemingly consistent within an individual's mind. As he regularly wrote, a framework tells the observer something about *what is really going on here*. Such frameworks can vary in extensiveness and importance among others. A so-called *primary framework* may be so fundamental that it explains a situation in its entirety, while others might only extend far enough to interpret certain aspects of a situation or only apply to specific types of situations (Goffman 1986, 25).

What makes the concept of Framing so intriguing is its ability to conceptualise the back-and-forth processes and interactions between different interpretations and different actors. The FrameWorks institute puts it most neatly in that "Framing is the choices we make in what we say and how we say it: What we emphasize, how and what we explain and what we leave unsaid. These choices

matter. They affect how people hear us, what they understand, and how they act” (FrameWorks Institute, 2020). Contained in this is the realisation that actors might *wilfully* modify their words, for example in the interest of self-presentation or even to convince and recruit individuals to adopt the same mental frameworks. Framing *as a tool* was already considered by Goffman for instance as *Fabrication*, and it has featured prominently in the area of Social Movement studies, and Media & Communication Studies.

According to Entman, Framing Theory’s biggest pitfall has been that there is no well-developed *general* theory of framing available and that, instead, many Social Sciences have conceptualized Framing according to their own specific needs. In his well-known 1993 article, he suggests that Communication Studies should aim to bring these different disciplines together and work towards a more commonly shared theoretical understanding (Entman 1993, 51f.). He then proceeds to synthesise the shared characteristics he reads out of the varied Framing literatures. Framing, regardless of its specific applications, always contains an element of *selection* and *salience*. *Selection* pertains to choosing a specific element of a reality to focus upon. This choice in itself gives the piece of information or topic some degree of significance and it serves to raise its salience. The actor will then proceed to make this information more salient through varied means such as defining and highlighting it as a problem, repeating it within a text, or presenting it in a particularly memorable style. The goal, most broadly, is to make the information clearly stand out to the audience and ideally make it appealing to them, so that they are more likely to select the presented framing in favour of their previously held or opposing frames (ibid.)

Entmans work is crucial for the present purpose because there is no specific theoretical framework available to study the far-right alternative online news media. Entman is invaluable in demonstrating how one can abstract more general principles from different field literatures and see how they might apply to less widely studied subjects. To study the populist far-right alternative media (*PRAM*, for brevity) and their framing of the pandemic, the theoretical concepts developed in social movement and mobilisation research, as well as the field of Communication and Mass Media Studies, will be best suited. In the study of social movements, the focus is on framing as a means of mobilising *palpable* support to promote collective action. As will still be shown, the news sites in question go beyond regular digital news reporting. Many are closely networked with one another and perceive themselves to be spearheading a broader movement which goes beyond regular journalistic work of online news media. While mobilising protesters to the streets may not be their primary concern (next to *clicks*, sold magazines and new readers), adopting a mobilization perspective is warranted.

Social movement studies elaborate which functions a frame must fulfil in order to lead to successful mobilisation and collective action. According to Snow and Benford, a successful framing effort should fulfil three core tasks: *Diagnostic framing*, which asserts and defines a problem and the culprits. *Prognostic Framing*, which identifies strategies that will lead to a solution of the perceived problem. And lastly *Motivational Framing*, which adds a clear call to action and states why the audience needs to take part in the process and join the movement (Snow/Benford 1988). Entman, taking into account variations among different disciplines, generalises a broader set of framing functions instead: *define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest remedies* (Entman 1993, 52). Contrasting these two sets of framing functions reveals that the emphasis that is put on different framing elements can differ. Entmans list is lacking the specifically motivational element of framing, that is of central importance in mobilisation studies. His selection also makes a point to emphasize that problem-definition and diagnosis might often be rather separate framing elements, that are subsumed into prognostic framing in the model of Snow and Benford.

Frame-alignment processes were another important theoretical development in the field, describing framing methods through which a social movement organisation may seek to mobilize their audience through methodical types of frame linkages. An SMO will try to adapt their own preferred interpretive frames to appeal to an “unmobilized sentiment pool of public opinion clusters”, which shares the same grievances, but might not yet have the means or conscious need to act upon them (Snow/Rochford/Worden/Benford 1986, 468). The different processes that align a frame with target audiences are *frame bridging, amplification, extension and frame transformation*. *Bridging*, the most common process, connects structurally unconnected frames; *Amplification* invigorates certain elements within a frame that are more appealing to the audience; *Extension* moves the boundaries of a frame to include grievances of the target audience and *Transformation* is a more fundamental reinvention of a frame (ibid.). Frame Bridging and possibly Amplification might be expected to play an important role in the news outlets analysed here.

The second important research perspective is the one on news media framing in general and of anti-mainstream alternative news media framing in particular. In their function as organisations that publish political print-magazines and online news coverage, they can be expected to share similar motivations and interest in outcomes as established news organisations. Further, the structural logic and framing habits within their articles should appear akin to other news sites, and only to a lesser degree be structured like the protest-mobilising texts which more regularly feature in social movement communication styles. News media make extensive use of different framing techniques when selecting, for instance, which news items are to be presented in the first place.

Readers not only learn about events through their reporting, but they are also subject to the *spin* and *interpretation* that a news source presents alongside the facts. Pan/Kosicki have presented a most practical approach to how framing analysis can be applied to news texts, which has been invaluable when designing the coding frame. They suggest that any news story may be approached with the assumption that there is one specific theme or claim at the centre of it, functioning as an organizing principle, around which all different framing devices and structures are arranged. A theme is not synonymous with a topic. Rather, a theme gives meaning to the story as a whole by means of different signifying elements which together form an intended overarching theme. A theme is *intended* and presented with the intent of being comprehended by the reader as such. Yet, due to a reader's subjective interpretive processes, *intended* and *comprehended* themes may differ (Pan/Kosicki 1993, 58f.).

Four types of framing devices are commonly found in news texts: *Synthactical structures*, *Script structures*, *Thematic Structures* and *Rhetorical Structures*. The most important syntax elements to name are the headline and the lead, because they activate certain associations in the reader's mind right from the start and suggest the chosen news angle to the story. The *Script structure* relates to the narrative order and sequence in which the presentation of the events is structured. The narrative script will answer most 'W-questions' (What, Who, Why...) and support the reader's subjective impression that all necessary knowledge on the matter is conveyed by the text and nothing was left unsaid (ibid., 59f.). A thorough analysis for such a script might be achieved through Roberto Franzosi's narrative analysis, which meticulously codes all the grammatical subjects, objects, both and their modifiers and their subject-object relations, usually with assistance of quantitative coding software (Franzosi 1998a and 1998b).

The concepts of *story* and *narrative* will prove particularly important in the far-right news outlets' presentation of the crisis management, so their meaning must be clarified. Franzosi describes a *Story* as a chronological journey from one situation to another, wherein the sequence of events is bound together by some logical coherence, marking the series as not randomly put together. Stories are the building blocks of a narrative and they lack the additional layer of personal perception or intention (Franzosi 1998, 520f.). A narrative, then, is the retelling of an event in such a way that it is selectively tailored to the way the narrator perceives and wants to present the events, possibly embellishing it with take-away meanings and morals. Franzosi remarks that *time* and *selection* play an important role in a narrative. The selective process of the order and manner in which the story is re-organized is "not innocent" but evaluative in nature. The narrator may choose to pay a lot of attention to one moment in time and gloss over other moments, because

time works differently in a narrative and two persons attending the same event can narrate it much differently to one another (ibid., 530). As will be further discussed, paying attention to *how* magazines in this study choose to narrate different events in the Covid-19 pandemic and how they link it to broader narratives will be most insightful.

To turn back to Pan/Kosicki's common framing devices found in news texts, the third one was the *Thematic structure*. It relates to the hierarchy and order in which a theme is presented, through a combination of predictably ordered sub-themes and conventional text logics. For example, many news stories follow a certain hypothesis-testing structure, which begins with a claim related to a theme or topics, which is then followed up by references to authoritative sources and proof of it. Finally, *Rhetorical structures* in news articles mean stylistic choices, such as a metaphor, a satirical remark or the prominent mention of sources and authorities, which signify the facticity of a news story (Pan/Kosicki 1993, 60f.). Since the primary goal of this thesis is to track the development of Crisis Framing of several outlets over a longer period of time, an in-depth recording of *all* individual instances of linguistic framing devices is neither suitable for the purpose of this qualitative study nor feasible for a single manual coder. However, the strategic approach to news articles and the attention to linguistic details that is taken by communication researchers was a valuable guide, when approaching the text material for this research. In a most practical way, the news media perspective helped to expand the coding frame in important ways, as will be laid out in Chapter 4.

It may sound almost trivial, but the most fundamental expectation of how the populist far-right alternative news media (PRAM) might frame the pandemic is that they will have done so in much the same way that they have been framing anything else previously. Framing Theory and its applications in social movements studies and narrative-driven news media analysis all point towards *consistency* of framing being the general rule. Changing one's framing strategy can be advantageous, but such changes are usually expected to happen gradually and imperceptibly, because sudden and too frequent changes can backfire. Rather, frames are embedded within their environments and feed from already present narratives within the group or surrounding culture. Considering the literature on movement mobilisation, it could of course be argued that, especially in a crisis, it is more common for actors to latch onto new frames suddenly. After all, social movements emerge, when the usual routines break down and a crisis comes about, bringing with it a higher demand for actors to present a suitable new interpretive framework (Snow/Vliegenthart/Ketelaars 2018, 392). In principle, it would therefore be possible that the news sites analysed here took the pandemic as an opportunity to radically change their presentation, in an attempt to attract a bigger audience with the explanations they provide. But the framing

literature more likely points toward a more conservative reaction to the events. In groups or movements with a fairly established following, such as the regular readership of far-right magazines, changing framing tactics too radically to take advantage of the health crisis comes with the significant risk of alienating the most devoted supporters, who are usually indispensable in financing the staff and printing costs, that most of the outlets struggle to afford.

Such dangers are generally referred to as *framing hazards* or *vulnerabilities*, and any frame-alignment technique comes with different risks (Snow/Rochford/Worden/Benford 1986, 477f.). If a group hopes to permanently connect with new audiences, framing hazards are to be avoided as much as possible, because they impede successful alignment and the *resonance* of the group's messages with the old and new audiences. *Resonance* is the result of an effective framing in which target audiences respond positively and the movement's framing resonates with their own frame of mind. While frame resonance is not fully understood empirically and is often argued for in a circular fashion (Snow/Vliegenthart/ Ketelaars 2018, 401), it is nonetheless self-evident, that a group would always hope to frame their issues in a credible and effective way.

The news media and narrative analysis discussed here also points towards the hypothesis that the PRAM will have framed the Covid-19 crisis in Germany in a way consistent with their regular narratives, rather than attempting too unexpected changes of direction. Similarly to a social movement organisation, news outlets are also recognized to have substantial *material* interests and motivations in that they also hope to finance their publication and contributors, as well as generate *clicks* and keep the core readership engaged by tailoring their content to their demands. News media research also suggests that news stories will still be expected to take special advantage of a crisis environment and put more focus on sensational headlines and a fast-paced update speed. In their role as self-professed correctives to the eschewed *mainstream-media*, their demeanour in Germany was found to mimic the established press in some respects (Holt/Haller 2017). It is to be expected that the PRAM would adopt a crisis mode in their reporting style, such as most other press outlets would lean to.

However, it is important to highlight that a different reporting style during the Corona crisis does not, by itself, disprove the thesis expectation to find continuity above all else. Continuity and predictability are expected only in so far as they relate to the underlying established narratives, preferred topics and attachment to certain frames. For example, given a general anti-elite disposition and distrust towards the *liar press* [Ger. Lügenpresse], it would indeed be surprising to find, that the PRAM have been supportive of the government's crisis management or been satisfied

with the German press coverage. Likewise, criticism of Germany's Covid-related border closures would be highly unexpected, considering their usual stance on national security, globalisation and immigration. Like most individuals and groups, these news outlets are expected to utilize their well-practiced narratives and apply them to their understanding and framing of the corona crisis. In order to figure out whether the digital news outlets acted according to these expectations, it needs to be specified, what can be expected of their framing in the first place. The next section of this chapter will review previous research on the nature of the alternative news media's digital environment and the state of a crisis. Their role *as*, and their connections *to* far-right actors in Germany is of vital importance. In particular, research on the manner in which successful far-right actors have been able to bridge and temper their extreme views with populism will help to clarify the expectations for the data analysis.

2.2. Identifying the PRAM's Framing Environment during the Pandemic

The previous section has shown that Framing can be very important in influencing, how one's message is received by others. This is particularly true if there is a good chance that the target audience might reject the proffered frames and only carefully aligned frames will overcome this resistance. Extreme, far-right and populist-right actors in Germany have ordinarily faced a comparatively strong stigmatisation of their ideologies and it was notoriously difficult for affiliated parties (such as the NPD) to gain political support or place right-wing topics on the agenda through other means. Caiani, della Porta and Wagemann argue that the old extreme right, in trying to find wider resonance, have learned to frame their views in such a way that they adapt to contemporary sensibilities and stigmatisation of openly expressed racism and anti-democratic positions. In their works, they have demonstrated that this is mainly achieved through frame bridging and other alignment techniques to include populist elements. This "Radical Right Populism" takes the perceived dichotomy between a pure people and a corrupt elite and infuses it with their extreme frames of nativism and authoritarianism (Caiani/dellaPorta/Wagemann 2012, 190; Caiani/Della porta 2011). This is also congruent with Mudde's work, which considers populism to be one of the core features of radical-right parties in Europe today, along with nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde 2007).

The nature of this new alliance with populist elements is often misunderstood in that it serves to soften the underlying ideologies, making the 'new' far right somewhat less extreme than its predecessors. This must not necessarily be the case, and this century has seen the re-emergence of

some more extreme forms of discourse, more reminiscent of the past (Caiani/dellaPorta/Wagemann 2012, 190). For many actors it is not so much a matter of softening one's beliefs in order to find wider acceptance as it is an attempt to alter their outward presentation of them. Berbrier has brought this strategic aspect to light clearly in his study on the new racist white supremacists' rhetoric. In trying to bridge micro and macro levels of frame analysis, he focussed on the human agency of individuals and the way they perceive their own framing. He found that, in the white supremacist movement, frame-alignment techniques are quite consciously applied and often expressed to be a change in tactics, but not of held ideologies: rather than advertising themselves as *anti-black*, interviewees argued that it was more effective to emphasise a *pro-white* stance (Berbrier 1998, 439).

With the global Covid-19 pandemic, concerns about the far right's potential to exploit the crisis have quickly come up, for example with *The Guardian* headlining that they "hijack coronavirus crisis to push agenda and boost support" (Doward 2020). In response to many of the often scarcely substantiated public claims, academic work on the subject quickly took up the task of trying to estimate the true impact of this "Pandemic Populism" (Boberg et. al 2020, Vieten 2020). Boberg and her colleagues were most interested in the impact that alternative news media had on spreading disinformation and conspiracies about the virus via their social media presences. Out of the much broader selection of all alternative news media of various political orientations they analysed, they highlighted that, in Germany, the last few years have been characterized by more and more far-right leaning outlets. The most thriving of these show an affinity to populist styles of communication (ibid., 3). The claim that these sources would contribute more strongly to the spread of false information about the virus is partly based on their generally oppositional relationship to established media and their self-understanding as a corrective force (Müller/Schulz 2019). In addition, the affinity to populism in some right-wing magazines might tempt them to emphasize their anti-establishment sentiments in the form of support for Covid-19 conspiracies. Boberg et. al did not find this to be the case. While false news items and conspiracies were present in the set, they did not feature strongly. Rather, the alternative news media framed Covid-19 by sticking to well-established concepts and narratives, that they ordinarily would turn to. Some of those linkage topics were a migration angle, system critique, nationalism or climate change (Boberg et al 2020, 13). With their study, they provide more reason to expect that the PRAM probably did not frame the crisis in the fickle way, bent on increasing their influence above all other concerns, as the public debate seemed to suspect.

The second tangential work on the topic was done by Vieten, who was interested in the implications of the pandemic for the further normalisation and mobilisation of the far right and populism, particularly in the digital sphere. As was mentioned in the introduction, the basis for her investigation was the concern that the lockdown and crisis situation will have made people more vulnerable to far-right attitudes and may have led some to unexpectedly get caught up in the far-right digital content bubble (Vieten 2020). Vieten identified a further increasing normalisation process of the far right during the course of the pandemic in Germany, for which she cites the protest movements *Querdenken 711* and *Widerstand 2020* which emerged in response to the government's crisis management and who might represent a blurring of boundaries in the way that they advanced "new alliances between the moderate, alternative left and far-right on the streets and in social networks" (Vieten 2020, 8f.). But here again, an element of continuity is uncovered, in that she interprets this development as a logical continuation of a long ongoing process of far-right normalisation. She argues that even before 2017, when the AfD entered into parliament for the first time, Germany had already been losing the struggle for far right containment in the public sphere and extreme views more regularly found representation in television debates, for example (ibid., 7). Her work draws attention to the essential identifiers which make up the framing environment for the German far right, which needs to be understood more fully before estimating the potential impact they can have during the crisis.

The first, most essential, feature of the framing environment is the condition of a *crisis* in itself, because it affects the way framing is both done and received. A crisis represents a state of temporary exemption, which stands in contrast to normality. As such it brings with it an increased demand for explanations of the crisis and further the potential for actors to exploit this need by offering straightforward black-and-white narratives that may even border on disinformation or might identify likely scapegoats to put blame on (Vieten 2020, 5f.). While the facts and realities of the pandemic are very much undeniable, what makes the crisis most interesting from a frame theory perspective is the fact that crises are only perceived *subjectively* by any one person and thereby socially and culturally constructed. This leads the authors to the conclusion that a crisis, whether real or imagined, needs to be *performed* through any presentational devices at an actor's disposal (Moffitt 2015/Stavrakakis et. al 2017).

For actors with an affinity to populist articulations, framing of perceived crises has notoriously been important. Populism upholds the idea of the unified *People* in opposition to a corrupt elite, which makes populists commonly critical of the system, announcing its crisis and advocating for immediate change. While Populism has often emerged in the wake of crises, this relationship is

more ambivalent in reality. Conceptualising a crisis in the performative way that Moffitt suggests can clear up some of that confusion: While Populism might not always *depend* on the existence of a manifest external crisis in order to flourish, one will usually find successful populist actors in the act of *perceiving* and *performing* a crisis. Moffitt suggests a 6-step model of how populists may perform a crisis. Similarly to the more general framing functions discussed previously, the populist actor must first link different failures together into a wider framework, transforming a single circumstance into something symptomatic of a wider problem (Moffitt 2015, 199). This process adds *salience* to an event and serves as the moment of *problem-definition*.

The most characteristic step in the whole process, which distinguishes a *populist* crisis performance from the regular crisis politics of other actors, is the linkage of *The people* in opposition to the forces seen as responsible for the crisis, which non-populist crisis politics does not rely on (ibid., 208). For a populist narration of crisis, there is an inherent *dependence* on the perceived state of crisis. To the populist, it can be very beneficial to present their opponents or the general elites to be *directly linked* and responsible for the crisis, making their attack on the Establishment seem more legitimate and objectively motivated (Moffitt 2015, 202). A common fear behind much of the media commentary on the populist far right during the unfolding Covid pandemic was that the exceptional crisis situation would predispose more people to be vulnerable to conspiratorial and racist narratives, because the straightforward, simple explanations return a feeling of certainty and safety, in a situation defined by a lack of control (Goßner/Rahner 2020). Previous research has demonstrated that there is a solid basis for such concerns. *Uncertainty-Identity Theory*, developed by Hogg, predicts that psychological uncertainty makes people more likely to respond positively to social groups offering a distinctive groupness in an attempt to reduce personal insecurity under threat (Hogg 2000). Consecutive work on his theory illustrated, how radical groups are more readily identified with during moments of uncertainty, because they have greater *Entitativity*. This term describes a group's property of having clear boundaries, internal homogeneity, common goals, clear leadership structures and similar characteristics (Hogg/Meehan/Farquharson 2010, 1062).

Based on this research foundation, Rieger/Frischlich/Bente (2017) conducted a study, focussing in particular on extreme right propaganda on the Internet and how a person's authoritarian values and psychological uncertainty interact to make them more or less receptive to propaganda that is specifically targeting the participant's nationality in-group (German nationality in this experiment). They have found that both uncertainty and authoritarianism make the far-right material more persuasive, but that the presence of *uncertainty* acts as a fuel in the mix, straightening out the otherwise more ambivalent relationship between authoritarian values and the evaluation of radical

content (Rieger/Frischlich/Bente 2017, 218). While findings such as these are not unique and unheard of in sociology and psychology, their significance is much increased in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The widespread uncertainty and the international lockdowns led to a radically changed situation of self-isolation for many, with the importance of the web 2.0. far increased and regular social interactions being reduced to a minimum.

Studies such as this one, which take a closer look at the populist far right's activities online, are important right now because the pandemic represents an unfortunate combination of circumstances rigged towards their benefit. From the individual's perspective, radicalism studies suggests that a person's face-to-face social network can usually act as a corrective mechanism, while the digital sphere facilitates radicalisation and can become a self-contained bubble, building and strengthening far-right attitudes (Heft et al. 2020, Rieger/Frischlich/Bente 2017, Vysotsky/McCarthy 2015, Krämer 2017). This is especially disconcerting because latent support for far-right attitudes is generally far more common in society than support for right-wing extremism itself. In Germany, there is a historically founded strong stigmatisation of extreme right ideologies and groups. While respondents in German surveys will strongly reject right-wing extremist ideologies and actors, they may simultaneously express support for racist attitudes held by those groups (Caiani/dellaPorta/Wagemann 2012, 45). For far-right actors it then becomes a question of how they can manage or avoid this stigmatisation and normalise their standpoints far enough so that potential new supporters might feel inclined to associate, which can be accomplished through different strategies of adjusting the structure of their arguments (Vysotsky/McCarthy 2017).

The Internet has presented itself as an ideal platform for far-right actors in at least two respects: For the already convinced supporters, the Internet makes it possible to avoid the judgements and reprehensions of society and partake in self-contained anonymous spaces, in which one can feel safe amongst people sharing the same views (Vysotsky/McCarthy 2017, 2). The PRAM analysed here are mostly well connected in the digital sphere, with various news outlets, magazines, blogs, social media, messaging channels, political parties, protest movements and individuals maintaining strong ties and sharing parts of their audiences. The possibilities of the digital environment allow the far right to create their own eco-system, where a person can consume worldview-conforming news, find witty memes and posts to share on their social media and be offered party suggestions for their political activity without ever being labelled a racist or having to confront other criticisms. Krämer suggests that such online networks go as far as enabling individuals to self-socialize themselves into what is essentially an emerging right-wing populist *lifestyle* and *identity* (Krämer 2017, 1302).

This then is the second big opportunity the Internet offers to far-right groups: To gain full control over their self-presentation and to attempt to connect with mainstream audiences on their own terms, without the constraint of being represented through established media actors (Adams/Roscigno 2005, 763). As Klein (2012) alarmingly illustrated, the Internet provides avenues of quite literally “Slipping Racism into the Mainstream”, through technical processes that serve to legitimize and add credibility to the content (*information laundering*) such as search engine algorithms and complex access points into and out of hate-based websites and through established and trusted sources. These mechanics become even more powerful if the far-right actors are aware and competent at utilising them and make active attempts at camouflaging their content to fit into such legitimising linkage networks. Therefore, their ability to strategically frame events to appeal to different target audiences and vary in tone and emphasis based on which platform the narrative is presented on becomes a major concern. A group might wish to remove views from their most public site, which would appear too radically extreme (Krämer 2017, 1304) and instead promote them within the more cloistered spaces of the community such as telegram chats or a magazines’ subscriber-exclusive discussion boards. While actors often find themselves in power struggles about whose framing of an event gains the most recognition when interacting within shared public spaces, the Internet offers actors the possibility to expand on their views at great length and weave them into overarching narratives. Krämer describes this as “establishing equivalence” by regularly applying the same frames to any given event or issue, and so suggesting, that the groups worldview is complex and capable of providing simple explanations of *any* issue at hand (Krämer 2012, 1300f.).

The final feature of the framing environment that will likely influence the pandemic reporting style of the PRAM is their status of being self-perceived *alternative* news media. While earlier theoretical conceptions of alternative news media were often normatively idealized towards only specific types of media (Holt/Figenschou/Frischlich 2019, 861), the growing emergence especially of far-right and extreme right alternative media has led scholars to propose more suitable definitions to fit this variety, while still emphasising their commonalities. The key defining feature of alternative news media is their mistrust and opposition to the perceived ‘mainstream’ media and the idea that they represent a corrective that challenges the journalistic authority and reports events more accurately (ibid.; Figenschou/Ihlebak 2019; Müller/Schulz 2019). In the case of right-wing examples, established media or the *Lügenpresse* (‘liar press’) is often seen as corrupt and wilfully misleading the public, often being in league with the political elites, together making up the polit-media establishment (Holt/Haller 2017).

Particularly for such news outlets on the right, whether populist or far-right, this general disposition comes with a certain amount of *anti-systemness*. As Holt (2018) has shown, this anti-systemness is to be understood in degrees; a spectrum between *ideological* and *relational* anti-systemness. Only *ideologically* anti-system media is strongly against the system as such, while the *relational* types can be understood better as a polarising force against the system, rather than being opposed to its underlying principles per se. According to Holt's 2x2 matrix, an alternative media source that is *ideologically* anti-system inclined but does not polarise in the *relational* dimension, is *irrelevant* alternative media, because their anti-system stance remains within its own echo-chamber. The PRAM analysed here are more or less vocal about ideological or relational anti-systemness (for different reasons), just as well as they differ in their position between populist right-wing and extreme right positions.

The preceding chapter has illustrated how Frame Theory can inform our way of understanding the pandemic news framing of the PRAM. After an introduction to the basic idea of the theory and its origins, Entman's efforts to generalise beyond disciplinary boundaries were highlighted. It was argued that Social Movement studies and Media and Communication studies had developed the most suitable applications for the present case study, and this was illustrated by discussing the concepts of framing functions, frame-alignment processes, news media framing techniques and the importance of *story* and *narrative* in news reporting. Based on these foundations and the most recent studies on the far-right framing of Covid-19, it was hypothesised, that the PRAM would rely on well-established frames and narratives that they have regularly used to explain any given event. To understand the building blocks of the frame environment expected to shape the pandemic framing, the second section took note of the importance of stigma management for the far right and the significant opportunity structure of a crisis environment. The role that populist framings play for successful alternative online news media was addressed, as well as the interrelation between populism and crises. The chapter finally summarised the ideal opportunity structure that the Internet provides for PRAMs and other actors, and lastly took note of the influence of the anti-mainstream stance of alternative media.

Chapter 3: The Covid-19 pandemic in Germany and background on the populist far right

3.1. The Covid-19 pandemic in Germany and anti-lockdown demonstrations

A crisis such as the one brought about by the discovery of a new type of coronavirus represents a challenge of extraordinary magnitude, due to the amount of uncertainty involved in making sensible decisions without sufficiently secure knowledge to base it on. When the World Health Organisation announced on December 31st that it was informed of a new “viral pneumonia” outbreak in Wuhan, nothing specific was known yet to inform the international community about the likelihood of a global pandemic, and it would take another eleven days, until the disease could be identified as a coronavirus and its genetic sequence was obtained for research. The possibility of human-to-human transmission and later the transmission frequency was still not investigated fully by January 22nd (WHO 2021). For most of European public, the developments in China were of little concern at first, and many people had not come across the news yet. But as time went by, public pressure for dependable information and resolute government actions or assurances became more urgent. The irony of a crisis is that it heightens personal insecurity and desire for clarity, while simultaneously serving to make political crisis management, scientific development and news reporting more challenging. As this analysis will show, the difficulty of the crisis environment is easily omitted by opposing actors in retrospect, who might just choose to criticize crisis management based on hindsight.

In Germany, the first case was reported in Bavaria on January 27th. Jens Spahn, Germany’s Federal Minister of Health stated that the arrival of the virus in Germany was to be expected, but that the response in Bavaria illustrated Germany’s preparedness and the overall danger for citizens remained small (BMI 2021). While the WHO announced a state of emergency three days later, the question of whether a global pandemic might be avoided still remained unclear for a while and cases in Germany occurred in a seemingly containable fashion. When events in Italy became more dire and not all infections in Germany could be traced, Spahn stated that the severity changed Germany’s own outlook and that it was to be expected that the spread could not be contained in Europe. He emphasized, however, that while the chain of infection could not be broken after all, Germany was well prepared for a pandemic (*ibid.*). The time leading up to the first lockdown on March 22nd was characterised by daily press conferences and media coverage of the legislative procedure on the specific measures to be implemented. The most prominently covered actors were Jens Spahn, Angela Merkel and the virologist Christian Drosten, who is Germany’s leading expert

on emergent viruses. As the leaders and communicators in the crisis, their pictures and statements were central to news reporting and central targets of attacks by critics such as PRAM's, as Boberg et al. (2020) found in their data set.

The first wave reached its peak in the beginning of April, with a total of over 100,000 cases and 6,557 new cases on April 2nd after which numbers steadily declined (RKI/Esri 2021). The first lockdown lasted for about a month, before restrictions on parts of public life, such as restaurants and non-essential shops, were relaxed. Simultaneously, new additions such as mandatory mask-wearing in public transport and stores was introduced on April 27th. Alongside these events, Germany saw a rising number of anti-lockdown demonstrations or *Hygienedemos* across the country, which surpassed anything seen in Europe at the time, in terms of turnout and consistency. The first such event took place on March 28th in Berlin with a mere 40 participants handing out copies of the German constitution and using the slogan "Defend the constitutional rights – say NO to dictatorship". The demonstration was disbanded due to the participants not observing the safety distance (BZ 4.4.2020), but was repeated regularly and with increasingly violent escalations, culminating in a total of 38,000 participants on 29th of August and approximately 100 people breaching the barricades to run up the stairs to the Parliament building (RBB24 29.08.2020).

One characteristic of the larger demonstrations was their seeming ability to mobilise across the political spectrum, uniting the '*Besorgte Bürger*' (Concerned Citizens), Conspiracy supporters, 'anti-vaxxers' and a fair number of very vocal far-right activists. The group *Querfront*¹ 711, originating in Stuttgart, was the most successful at such attempts and has developed into a network organizing events in cities all across Germany at least once a week up to the current date (April 2021). Whether the group can truly be considered as a *Querfront*, and in what proportions they attract followers, has not yet been sufficiently analysed. Initial work on the matter suggests that the group is heterogenous, but is united in feeling alienated from the political system, its political parties and the media (Nachtwey/Schäfer/Frei 2020, 52).

The official homepage describes the *Querfront* group as a centre for democratic resistance and abides by the slogan "Not without us". They consider themselves to be a "constitution giving"²

¹ *Querfront* (cross-front) is a term originating in the history of Weimar republic which saw a cooperation between conservative revolutionists and the Left. The term is generally understood as a toleration or cooperation between left and right, in order to achieve shared goals.

² Like many far-right actors and the *Reichsbürger* movement in particular, this is a reference to article 146 of the *Grundgesetz* (constitution). Falsely interpreted, it is then claimed that the *Grundgesetz* lacks democratic legitimisation and by law will lose its validity, as soon as the citizens decide on a 'proper' constitution.

movement, which rises up against the “fascist”, “delusional” and “lying” “Corona-Regime” that “continues wanting to make us people afraid of each other and thereby only serves to work on its own downfall”. The group often hints at certain peaceful “takeover” scenarios being planned, wherein many thousands want to peacefully take over government buildings to proclaim freedom. The last of the group’s ten core tenets promise that a re-election will happen during the next official parliamentary elections or “at the latest, six weeks after the Peaceful Revolution” (KDW 2021). It is hard to estimate, how many of the regular participants hold similar views, but the events have become a matter of concern in the way that far-right iconography such as flags, t-shirts and tattoos are not an unusual sight at the events. Other demonstrators have stated in interviews that walking alongside the far-right was of no concern to them, or that they were unaware of their presence (RBB24, 2020). Such blurring of lines between mainstream and far-right mobilisation could also be seen during the peak of the PEGIDA marches in 2014/15 and was illustrated in detail for the German anti-lockdown demonstrations as well by Vieten (2020).

The most well-known public figures and propagators of conspiracies were singer Xavier Naidoo and vegan chef Attila Hildmann, who have made most extraordinary far-right extremist claims, linked themselves to QAnon and questioned the existence of the pandemic, the invention of which supposedly served other nefarious aims of the world elites. Equally well known was previous radio host and blogger Ken Jebsen, who received most attention for his now banned (05/21) YouTube video ‘*Gates seizes Germany*’ (KenFm 2021) in which he claims that the Gates family are on their way to world domination, compulsory vaccinations were in preparation and that mandatory masks had the purpose of testing the population’s obedience for what was to come. The *Querfront 711* stands out in their ability to attract support by popular German figures, but also in its openness towards all types of Covid related conspiratorial or esoteric claims and the determination with which particularly populist far-right actors and the PRAM promote and seek to claim credit for the size of demonstrations.

In particular, the region of Saxony, the centre of much of far-right activity in Germany, has seen many additional events such as the weekly *Monday strolls* [Ger. Montagsspaziergang] organized in different cities, which were more directly aligned with local far-right groups. In particular, events in Chemnitz escalated more regularly and were often marked by a lack of permits. Closely linked to the Chemnitz walks were the far-right and PEGIDA affiliated group *ProChemnitz*, NPD related actors and other known far-right activists in Saxony (Lfv-Sachsen 28.5.2020). Across the country, these Monday strolls, as well as the Querfront events, maintained their momentum regardless of the end of the lockdown and lifting of many restrictions over the summer and were found to have

radicalised over time. For example, in early November, two demonstrations in Berlin (10k participants) and Leipzig (20-45k) overwhelmed police forces and showcased a much more unabashed far-right participation (MDR 10.11.2020). As the following chapters will illustrate, the far-right digital news media were engaged in trying to mobilise more of their readers and tended to present the entirety of anti-lockdown demonstrations as an expression of *the people* most broadly, who happened to be mostly synonymous to the imagined readership of the magazines.

The analytical scope of this thesis is limited to the end of May 2020, when the first peak of the demonstrations occurred, case numbers sank and the federal government enabled the regional governments to introduce further relaxations to restrictions. Since then, the demonstrations and general debate surrounding the role of the far right during the pandemic and the identity and motives of critics (often referred to as ‘*Cov-idiots*’) have continued. While two thirds of respondents were still supportive of the measures in an early November survey, detailed analysis of the data revealed a hardening conflict among the population in relation to age group and party affiliation. The group of 30- to 39-year olds, as well as AFD and the liberal FDP voters, were most opposed to the restrictions (SPIEGEL-Online/Civey Institute, 11.11.2020). Starting on October 28th, the government had issued a *Lockdown light* in response to rising numbers, which would eventually be expanded on 25th of November and lead to a full lockdown on December 16th due to the much stronger second wave. The demonstration movement, as well as the PRAM themselves, have since continued to report on the pandemic and its critics in the same manner as they had during the analysis period, aiming to maintain their momentum.

3.2. The political and medial context of PRAMs and the far right in Germany

Nowhere else in Europe have protests of such magnitude and persistence been reported, despite restrictions and the severity of the pandemic hitting harder in other countries. According to the Carnegie Global Protest tracker, only the UK demonstrations, which peaked in May 2020 with over 10,000 participants might be comparable (Carnegie 2021). Vieten (2020, 11) describes the events in Germany as a paradox, because the German government was seen as managing the crisis rather well and there was wide acceptance of the restrictions by most of the population. Whether it was a truly unexpected turn of events, or whether it might rather be explained by the pre-existing discontented network that has laid the groundwork for anti-government mentalities only a few years previously with the PEGIDA movement, will need to be researched more thoroughly in the future. Regardless, the demonstrations play a major role in the articles by four out of the five PRAMs

during the final phase of analysis in May 2020 (except *Eigentümlich Frei*). It will be important to pay attention to *how* the demonstrations have been framed by them, for example by looking at what they consider the purpose, demands and outcomes, and how they characterize the demonstrators as opposed to the non-participants.

To fully appreciate the PRAM's role in the dispersion of anti-elite, media-critic and stigma-avoidant content during the Covid-19 pandemic, they need to be situated within the broader context of their emergence. This concerns the political context of far-right and populist right-wing parties, the rise of alternative media and their linkages to one another. Following Reunification in 1990, Germany has seen a recently unprecedented rise in right-wing extremist activity and racist violence, half of which were linked to East German extremism. Several groups sought to establish themselves as political parties in this new environment, or to find their national footing, if they had existed formerly. Ultimately, the NPD (National Democratic Party) proved most successful and became the centre of far-right activity in East Germany, partially due to their local presence and engagement with the youth (Stöss 2015). Their most successful national election result dates back to 1969, but they have never managed to obtain seats in parliament due to Germany's 5% threshold. There was a sharp boost to their support above 1% nationally, starting with the 2005 election, but this trend was presumably broken by the rise of the AfD, and NPD dropped back to their previous normal of 0.4% in the 2017 national election. On a regional level, the NPD have concentrated their efforts on some federal states, in which they might hope to succeed, such as in Saxony, where they achieved their best result in 2004 with 9.2% (numbers from Cantow/Fehnrich/Zicht 2017). The *Deutsche Stimme* [Eng. The German Voice] has been the NPD's official magazine for the past 45 years and it is one of the magazines analysed here, mostly chosen for being a clear-cut case of an ultranationalist radical right outlet alongside *Zuerst!* [Eng. First!], which is affiliated with this same network.

The political scene has changed with the arrival of the *Alternative für Deutschland* [Eng. Alternative for Germany]. Founded in 2013, they were initially focussed on being an anti-EU party who claimed to be the *alternative* which Angela Merkel linguistically did not allow for, when famously describing a financial crisis package as *alternativlos* [Eng. without alternative]. They have since become a nationalist right-wing populist party and were quick to change tactics in the face of the European migration crisis, from which they benefitted with a 12.6% result in only their second Bundestag election (Decker 26.10.2020). In the 2019 regional election in Saxony, AfD achieved 27.5% and decimated the NPD's share in every state they competed in. With their more moderate, comparatively more civil presentation and heavy usage of populist framing, they have successfully

been able to mobilise voters from several other parties who are receptive towards far-right attitudes, but would not vote for the NPD. Vieten argues that the 2017 success of the party represents the final defeat in the attempts to contain far-right ideologies and that recent years in Germany have seen their normalisation in discourse and political representation, such as when an FDP candidate was elected state premier through joint votes of CDU and AFD (Vieten 2020, 8).

The party is currently in the process of dealing with the very common power struggle between a radical and more moderate wing, which also resulted in their lack of a clear united position and strategy in the pandemic. While more recent regional elections had been suggesting a further growth in support (all election data from Cantow/Fehnrich/Zicht 2017), it is currently hard to predict how the global pandemic, the party's internal conflict and the increase in support for the CDU/CSU, due to their crisis management, will eventually pan out in the upcoming 2021 election. As the previous chapter has laid out, the stigma which far-right actors face in Germany, necessitates elaborate framing techniques which can attract more moderately minded individuals, who hold some complementary views but would fear social judgement for supporting the group. The Internet has proven itself to be a favourable environment to achieve this, and many far-right political actors and online news media have shown themselves to be quite Internet-savvy. Barlen/Brandstetter (2015) have shown that the NPD has more social media followers in proportion to their number of actual party members and that, furthermore, the rate of interaction on their social media sites is much higher than that of other political parties. Their interaction rate of 46% at the time meant that almost every second follower presented with an NPD post on their timeline would choose to like, share or comment. The authors illustrate how they manage to moderate their content to avoid deletion, but also how they manage to draw in unsuspecting users by launching pages about certain emotional topics, such as petitions against child molestation, without revealing their own authorship at first glance (ibid., 313). AFD has shown similar talents in engaging followers online and interacting with online actors such as bloggers and other related sites, while SPD and CDU needed to rely on advertising funds to gain reach on their channels (Reuter 24.6.2019). The AFD has also been eager to include the politically partisan alternative news media and popular right-wing bloggers and personalities in their parliamentary work, for instance by issuing invitations to an AFD-run "Conference of the free media" held in the Parliament building (Eckert 21.5.2019).

The stigmatisation of the far right in Germany is also practiced by the established media. In an international comparison, German media can be characterised as more critical towards the far right and there is a comparatively high level of trust towards mainstream media. German online news media are barely polarising towards extremes overall, as in comparison to media systems in which

far-right views find their expression in some of the mainstream media (Heft et al. 2020, 27). Rather than aiming to represent issues in a balanced or objective manner, the PRAM respond to existing demands and focus on expressing views from the far-right spectrum, which are not brought up, or at most only harshly criticized, in popular German media. This inclination to embrace bias and selectiveness in news reporting is what leads many researchers to refer to them as *partisan* (Figenschou/Ihlebaek 2009, Müller/Schulz 2019) or *hyperpartisan alternative news media* (Heft et al. 2020). The following section will introduce the five PRAMs to be analysed here and justify their selection.

3.3. Presenting the five PRAMs to be analysed

Three main criteria were considered in the selection of the most suitable cases for this analysis. The first and most practical necessity was that the outlets should report on the Covid-19 pandemic extensively enough between January and the end of May 2020 to provide sufficient material for analysis. Outlets which did not publish any articles up until late March would not have enabled comparison between their early reactions to the emerging pandemic and later reactions that developed from there up until May. It became apparent that most casual news blogs did not pick up on the new topic as quickly as those with a more professional organisation.

The second criteria consequently became a comparable degree of organisation and regularity in news publishing. The chosen indicator for this was the existence of a regular *print* magazine alongside the digital news site. This suggested that at least some of the regular writers of the outlet would be employed by the magazines, who in turn could be expected to supervise news content on their site in accordance with some existing content guidelines. To look at print media's online presentations is also in accordance with current research needs in the field. As Heft et al. (2020, 24) points out, such print magazines have been analysed in the past, but their digital platforms such as their news sites, social media and YouTube channels have been neglected. To study how these magazines present their content on these free-of-charge platforms is vital, because new subscribers will most likely consume this content first, before committing themselves. As such, the digital news sites also represent one important entry-point for individuals not previously exposed to far-right materials online.

The third selection criteria relates to the outlets' content orientation and presentation choices. Early exploratory inspection of several PRAMs revealed that they differ on a spectrum. On one end are magazines practicing strong and open expression of far-right views with only minor concern

about how such content may be perceived. At the other end of the spectrum are magazines strongly emphasising populist anti-elite views, but who are more cautious about expressing far-right claims prominently and might instead attempt to normalise their appearance. Based on these criteria, a selection was made of cases, who are very similar in many respects, but still vary enough from one another, to make a comparison meaningful. *Deutsche Stimme* (*DS*) and *Zuerst* were primarily selected for their fierce far-right stance and little efforts to temper their presentation to appeal to more moderate readers. *Junge Freiheit* (*JF*) and *Compact* to a lesser extent represent outlets emphasising more populist themes and in case of *JF*, thoroughly try to present a well-rounded image of professional objective journalism. *Eigentümlich Frei* (*EF*) finally is situated on the far end of the spectrum in that strong far-right attitudes such as racist and anti-immigrant commentary is hard to find and rather subtle. Still, *EF* maintains links to the New Right network surrounding *JF* and strongly emphasizes many of the same shared frames across all cases, making it an intriguing case to include.

Deutsche Stimme

Deutsche Stimme [Eng. ‚German Voice‘] was founded in 1976 as the NPD’s party magazine and it is the oldest publication in the set, currently managed by Director and Chief Editor Peter Schreiber. Until the beginning of the global pandemic, *DS* was published in the format of a monthly newspaper, circulating 20,000 copies according to their own estimates in 2006 (Maegerle 2016), but current numbers are not available. During the spring of 2020, they were in the process restructuring and *DS* is now released in a monthly magazine format, rather than as a newspaper. The magazine considers itself to be a much needed source of patriotic and “non-conforming” independent news: “In a time when the established mass-media are practicing politics of disinformation, half-truths and one-sided propaganda against their own people/folk [orig. Ger. Volk], it is more important than ever, that a Voice rises up, which puts national interests to the foreground and is committed to the truth.” (*DS* 2020, About Us).

While *DS* continues to maintain their strong NPD-affiliated profile of extreme right, anti-immigrant, anti-globalisation, anti-American, anti-EU and anti-pluralist positions, the magazine is aware of possible opportunities in adapting their content and presentation. Schreiber considers the outlet’s online news offer and new print format to be a reaction to new media usage trends on the Internet. With their online offering, *DS* wants to meet the demand for daily news updates and commentary, for which customers are generally not willing to pay and which a monthly print magazine could not cover (*DS*, 29.02.2020). Along these lines one can also interpret the 2015 launch of *DS-TV*, a news reporting format which can be accessed through their YouTube channel and was marketed as *DS*’s

“new media offensive” (Maegerle 2016). Given the lack of transparency of the outlets’ economic situation, one can only venture a guess about the financial state of *DS*. The very visual advertisements all over the website and the editors’ regular calls for donations and subscriptions seems to suggest that *DS* cannot rely on a stable reader base to cover ongoing expenses.

Reflecting on the Querfront demonstrations in 2020, Schreiber interprets them as an alliance of globalisation critics and concedes that while the Left and the Right must stay generally opposed, “we should use this window of opportunity, now, that it is about our freedom, to also join conversations with those, who so far were not ready to listen” (*DS*, 23.12.2020). Possibly due to the ongoing restructuring process at the time, *DS* was slow to react to the emerging crisis. The first article about the topic was published as late as March 7th and was titled “Corona proofs: Globalisation is very [hazardous/combustible]” [orig. Ger. brandgefährlich] (*DS* 07.03.2020). In it, the dependence of the German pharmaceutical industry and that of other economic sectors on foreign products such as medications or intermediate products was criticized as dangerous. These contrasting arguments of globalisation being opposed to national interest and the sovereignty of the nation are very typical of all of *DS*’s positions, and the frame carries over into their views on immigration and EU politics.

Zuerst!

The *Zuerst!* [Eng. ‘First!’]³ monthly print magazine was first published in 2009 and is strongly rooted in the German far-right network. The publisher, Dietmar Mounier, acquired the longstanding fascist paper called *Nation & Europa* for his own extreme right and history-revisionist publishing company, transferring the old subscriber base to his new *Zuerst* magazine (Maegerle 2016). While *Zuerst* is not directly linked to a particular political party or organisation, its foundation was supported by *DS* and the two magazines’ advertisements and staff overlap. The Mounier publishing company also runs other far-right materials, conspiratorial publications and military magazines such as the *DMZ* (*German Military Journal*). *Zuerst* appears closely intertwined with *DMZ*. Their main page advertises internships “at *Zuerst* and/or *DMZ*” and chief editor Manuel Ochsenreiter, who has also been writing for *Junge Freiheit* and *Eigentümlich Frei* amongst others, has served as *DMZ*’s chief editor up until the launch of *Zuerst*. Every *Zuerst* article contains a few lines of advertisement about subscribing to the magazine and buying additional publications.

³ „First!“ in this context is explicitly a reference to notions of ‘Germany first’ and expresses the outlets ambitions to advertise national and patriotic interests above all else in their reporting.

In accordance with its background, a regular advertisement during the pandemic went: “Those wanting to be armed/prepared [orig. Ger. ‘gerüstet’] for the crisis, will find information and equipment here: https://netzladen.lesenschenken.de/krisen_bereit” with a link to an online shop selling related literature, different Mounier-owned magazines, conserved food in tins, security strongboxes, old German currency, survival guides and gear, German Reich flags and much more. The strongly far-right content and style of *Zuerst* is very similar to that of *DS* and the magazine describes themselves as the “magazine for German interests” in all of their advertisement lines. The two outlets are also very similar in their lower activity, follower count and importance of their social media sites. While both outlets keep their Facebook timelines updated, only *DS* also tries to regularly post content on their YouTube and Twitter accounts, while *Zuerst* has no YouTube site and has not used their Twitter in over four years. Their cautious usage of social media is in stark contrast to the activity levels among the other cases in the group. Given their similarities, the main reason to still include *both* magazines in the set is that they both posted comparatively *short* articles in a much lower frequency than the remaining magazines in the set. The typical *Zuerst* article averages at around 150 words, with a bold lead sentence followed by a short paragraph with further details and occasionally a derisive or cynical closing comment by the writer, about the event being yet another example of the corruptive state of the German elite or other such condition. Including both magazines as representatives of an almost identical orientation and reporting style was the only way to include sufficient amounts of their text materials in the set to allow for comparisons with the other more active outlets.

Compact

The *Compact* magazine, first launched in 2010, is one of the two more expansive outlets in the set, alongside *JF*. With 40,000 sold copies in 2016 it appears to be the best-selling print magazine in the set. *Compact* and *JF* come closest to what Storz (2015, 7) analyses as a *full-service offering* that allows an individual to experience a whole counter-public bubble, in which all daily news needs, internet-TV, magazines, books, events and information about demonstrations are offered only one click away. *Compact* was very active during the analysis period on all their platforms, posting news articles on the Covid-19 pandemic up to a dozen times daily and keeping their social media always updated. On Twitter, which is far from a popular platform among the German right-wing, *Compact* gained around 36% more followers between January and July 31st 2020 than they had gained in the same amount of time before the pandemic (own calculations). The outlet is considered to be right-wing populist in orientation with Querfront and conspiracy tendencies (Storz 2015, Maegerle 2016). *Compact* has been referred to as the AFD’s mouthpiece alongside *Junge Freiheit*. A simple search

query confirms that both magazines are much more cautious about mentioning NDP actors or other more stigmatized groups, and they instead focus more on giving room to AFD positions on ongoing events.

At the core of *Compact's* self-image is a perceived media censorship, against which they fight in their role as alternative news media. Their "About us" page promises readers may "read that which others may not write. For everyone with the courage for the truth, COMPACT is the sharp sword against the propaganda of the Empire" (*Compact* 2021, About us). Unlike *DS* and *Zuerst*, *Compact* puts a greater emphasis on populist framing and far-right content, while very common, is generally not as strongly worded as with the more radical outlets in the group. However, *Compact* compensates for this with their tendency to phrase their content in a very sensational and click-bait generating style. In April 2020, for instance, they titled their print magazine "They are coming! The new asylum flood in the Shadow of Corona". The issue promises to reveal plans of how the elite wants to bring about the *Corona-Dictatorship* and how Erdogan implements his plans for the great population exchange (*Compact* 2020/4). Their openness toward conspiracies came to full fruition in their very next issue centred around the "Vaccine-dictator" Bill Gates. *Compact* sets out to present proof for the claim that "he now wants to let 7 billion be vaccinated and aspires to reach pharmacological world domination, without any care about collateral damage" [literal Ger. 'without consideration of losses'] (*Compact* 2020/6).

2020 was marked by growing concerns about a radicalisation of *Compact*. The Ministry for the Protection of the Constitution listed the outlet as a suspected case of extremist activity in their yearly constitution report for the first time. On August 28th, Facebook and Instagram deleted the *Compact* accounts. One of the biggest concerns is the magazine's unreserved support for the far-right wing of AFD, which even *Zuerst* was hesitant to support outright. Further, the undifferentiated attacks against migrants, Muslims and Islam in its entirety, and the harmful conspiracy theories the outlet spreads during the crisis, were brought up in this debate. Jürgen Elsässer, the Chief Editor, who had been working for left-wing magazines earlier in his life, has also moved progressively further into extreme far-right circles over the years (Jeske/Litschko, 15.4.2020). *Compact's* classification as a *Querfront* magazine (Storz 2015) might need to be re-evaluated following the pandemic.

Junge Freiheit

Junge Freiheit [Eng. 'Young Freedom'] was first published in 1986 as a student magazine, which makes it one of the two older publications in the set. With approximately 30,000 sold copies in 2016

and high activity levels on their social media platforms and their digital news service, *JF* is the second full-service outlet with a large following. But the two magazines could not be more different in another respect: While *Compact* embraces a provocative reporting style and controversy, the opposite is true for *Junge Freiheit*, whose most noticeable feature is their endeavour to present themselves as a conservative and professional newspaper. Dieter Stein, the chief editor of *JF*, notably distanced himself from *Compact's* style, describing it as "propaganda" (Mahlberg, 31.3.2017). *JF* has instead worked actively to re-define the term conservatism to include parts of the far-right spectrum, presenting itself as a truly conservative force (Braun/Geisler/Gerster 2007, 68).

While *Compact* most notably features a very colourful and harsh home page design, *Junge Freiheit* presents itself with discreet fonts, a simple layout and neutral names for its topic sections. It takes a more careful analysis of *JF's* content to identify its clear far-right inclinations as perhaps the most central outlet of the New Right movement in Germany today. *JF* is described as the main force in this movement, functioning as a hinge-joint between radical-right circles and democratic, conservative forces (Braun/Geisler/Gerster 2007, 19). The authors of the cited study illustrate how this is not only achieved through their content and offering of a platform for New Right discourses, but can also be observed in the structural and staff environment of *JF*. While *JF* avoids openly radical positions, the personnel choices reveal an integrative setup that is open to linkages to more radical spheres (ibid., 28). During the magazine's development in the 1990s up until 2005, *JF* fought several legal battles against being listed as a suspect in the reports of the Ministry of the Protection of the Constitution in different states and ultimately succeed (Braun/Geisler/Gerster 2007, 18/ Maegerle 2016).

In their history of over 30 years, it is not unsurprising that their positions and strategic orientation have frequently changed in the face of changes in the political environment. Botsch (11.1.2017) describes how *JF* has shown itself to be strategically minded and ideologically flexible to accommodate their goals. The late 1990s saw a moderation process of their content, with the potential aim of accommodating commercialisation and expansion of the target audience. Following the turn of the century, however, *JF* radicalized their rhetoric yet again up until 2009, when the popularity of German coalitions at the time suggested there might be a greater number of disillusioned voters, accessible through a more tempered rhetoric. In the course of this development, *JF* also distanced itself from the more fundamentalist *Institute for state politics* [Ger. Institut für Staatspolitik, Ifs in short], a new-right think tank that was essentially founded through

central figures in *JF*'s orbit. *JF* was supportive of the emergence of AFD and its potential to mobilize a wider target audience, and consequently distanced itself from *Ifs* (ibid.).

Eigentümlich Frei

Eigentümlich Frei was founded by André Lichtschlag in 1998 and publishes issues 10 times in a year. *EF* is the most peculiar case in the set, because it covers many of the same themes as the other magazines do, but it does so within a different setting and in unique ways. The magazine's title loosely translates to "Peculiarly Free", yet the translation cannot capture the element of the German wordplay on *property* [Ger. Eigentum] and the connected notion of *freedom through property*. *EF*'s core values are libertarianism and rejection of any state intervention or paternalism in citizens' lives. Based on this premise, *EF* unites a variety of writers (by far the longest list of contributors in the whole set), many of whom are associated with the far-right or populist right-wing network in Germany today. For instance, *JF*'s chief editor Dieter Stein and other *JF* writers, *Ifs*'s Götz Kubitschek, *Zuerst*'s Manuel Ochsenreiter and *Compact*'s Jürgen Elsässer have all contributed articles. The openness towards far-right conspiracies and populism is seamlessly woven into *EF*'s basic foundation, as their 'About us' page illustrates: "We are on our way into a totalitarian socialism. A symptom of this is the politically desired mass-immigration from the Middle East and Africa into the welfare state – the 'great Replacement'. [...] *Eigentümlich Frei* stands on the side of the libertarian resistance" (*EF* 2021, *Why EF?*).

EF's self-presentation and general article style is oriented towards attracting readers with a higher level of education, which, according to their own data, is also reflected in their subscribers, over three quarters of whom completed the highest school degree or even have higher education degrees (Keßler 2018, 193). Self-reported numbers should be mistrusted, yet it is easy to notice that *EF* articles seem to target these groups in particular. *EF* articles are by far the longest and most complex articles among the group. While *DS* and *Zuerst* in particular usually keep their articles straightforward and short, *EF* articles are rarely just concerned with the factual details of events. Rather, the approximately 500–2000 word long articles take issues to an abstract level and make use of science, history, philosophy and linguistic wordplay to a much greater degree than the other outlets. The philosophical foundations cited by *EF* lend themselves to opposing social democratic principles, climate change campaigns, feminism and any type of political correctness or do-gooder idealism [Ger. Gutmenschentum]. This mindset allows for a comfortable union with right-wing populist and far-right mentalities. *EF* has been characterised as an example for a right-wing Querfront strategy, and this appears to be more actively sought after by publisher André Lichtschlag

since 2007, when *EF* conducted interviews with the NPD party leader and a writer employed with *DS* (Priester, 28.10.2010).

When the Covid-19 pandemic emerged in early 2020, *EF* found their footing and interpretive perspective quickly. Already on January 28th, the first article poses the question of “Why such measures against a disease with a ‘mild course’?” (*EF*, 28.01.2020) in response to statistical data from Wuhan. This early focus on the restrictiveness of state action in the fight against the virus appears to have been maintained and an anti-elite position is reflected in headlines and magazine titles covering the German crisis management. The preliminary browsing of *EF* did not reveal to what extent *EF* entertained conspiracies about coronavirus or joined in the exclusively right-wing anti-immigrant centred framing. The manner in which *EF*’s coverage of the Corona crisis will differ from the other cases will possibly shed light on its connections to the far right today. Their view of the anti-lockdown demonstrations will be particularly interesting, given the common view that they represented a Querfront alliance for freedom.

Chapter 4: Data collection and analysis parameters

The previous chapter has provided the reader with a generalised impression of the PRAM’s overall positions on the spectrum between openly far-right outlets (*DS*, *Zuerst*), more populist anti-elite centred (*Compact*) and the very cautious and presentation-conscious (*JF*, *EF*). It could further be gathered that some of the outlets had a greater affinity towards entertaining conspiracies (*EF*, *Compact*) or generally provocative and even aggressive headlines (*DS*, *Z*). Finally, an important take-away was that not only did all the outlets exhibit an anti-establishment and anti-mainstream disposition typical of alternative news media, but they also interacted within the same digital sphere, sharing several tight connections with one another and thereby justifying their grouping as PRAMs for the purpose of this study. It is expected that the framing of the health crisis should align closely with what emphasis may be expected based on this preliminary review. This chapter is centred around how the Covid-framing will be analysed practically. The first section will address different key aspects which a coding frame will need to account for, based on the theoretical work presented in Chapter 2. The following section will explain how the data was collected and coded.

4.1. Analysis parameters

It was discussed in the second chapter that an unexpected crisis represents a unique challenge and exerts contradictory forces upon any news media outlet. On the one hand, the environment

becomes more unpredictable and it is difficult to ascertain what represents reliable information to report on. On the other hand, the demand for such clear and explanatory news on the evolving crisis rises disproportionately, putting news outlets in a tight spot. An outlet which fails to provide clear answers and interpretations might risk losing readers, while those who offer security can hope to gain readers. Further, a framing actor such as an *alternative* news source might default to the usual anti-mainstream position, regardless of what stance they will oppose themselves to in the process. Yet, they might also find that by defaulting to what comes most naturally in normal times, they forfeit some of the support of readers, who might instead rely on established media during such an unprecedented situation. It is due to these framing uncertainties that the early stages of the coding process were designed in an entirely open fashion, particularly with regard to topics, claims and rhetoric device used. It was simply not prudent to assume that the PRAM framing would follow established patterns in all instances, hence this hypothesis would need to be tested.

When working with the material during the first round, the aim was to find out which general topics have been linked to Covid-19. Examples of such broad topics were the crisis management of the German government, Economy, Globalisation, Border Control, Immigration, Restrictions and Lockdown, Personal Rights and Freedoms, Corona Protests and more. As is the nature in such a process, less common topics such as “History Comparisons” or “Education and Schools” were recorded at first, and only dropped in later rounds, once their insignificance within the whole set became clear. Once the general topics were worked out, attention was then directed to which claims were commonly made within a topic area. For instance, paragraphs and articles about the crisis management might claim that the government did not act fast enough, that the reactions were too strict and harsh, or that Germany was not prepared to handle the crisis (e.g. due to inherent faults in the system). Articles related to Immigration might contain claims about Migrants not following the restrictions or Migrants receiving special treatment, amongst others.

During this process, many interesting passages were marked with technical codes, if they seemed in any way relevant examples of expectations drawn from the theoretical background presented in Chapter 2. For instance, Vieten (2020, 10) had stated that alternative media coverage of the Corona crisis generally mirrored the mainstream media in many ways, yet that they presented the information with a populist or anti-elite spin and interpretation. Another example is Holt/Haller (2017) formulating detailed observations about how alternative media interact with mainstream media. Empirically, alternative media interactions with established media cannot be reduced to simple media distrust and contesting references, because alternative media also interact with them in an *affirmative* manner, due to their lack of resources to conduct their own investigations (ibid.

53). It made sense then to also code references to the mainstream media and statements about the elite or other such segments of interest from a theory-driven standpoint. Previous research on related topics was particularly informative during later phases of the work with the material. While, during the first read-throughs, it was important to simply observe the variety of all the topics and claims being made, knowledge of theory informed the process through which the coding frame was later streamlined.

In order to answer the question of how the PRAM were framing the global health pandemic, it was not enough to merely record the linked topics and claims, but to take note of how they were arranged to form a narrative and story, as discussed in Chapter 2. Further, topics do not always occur separately in any given article. Rather, it was to be expected that topics and claims would overlap and be linked by the writer to weave a more complex narrative. For instance, a statement about the poor crisis management of the German government might be causally linked with reference to the European migration crisis as another instance of such bad management, or the comment might instead be expanded into an argument about the corrupt elite or the broken political system being to blame for the bad crisis management. These connections between different codes are perhaps the most valuable framing activity to be analysed, because they reveal something about how the writers construct reality and consider different elements to fit into their primary framework.

In this respect, the data was analysed with Entman's *selection* and *salience* in mind, as essential steps in any framing process. As has been discussed here, the process of selecting a news-worthy item, highlighting a piece of information or repeating a particular claim regularly in a text in itself constitutes a value-laden process. While this study cannot gauge, how successful the outlets are in raising an issue's salience within their readers minds, ultimately these connections can reveal much about the outlets aims and attitudes. To measure selection and salience in particular, two general steps were taken: First, a second data set was created, which only listed all of the headlines and preview snippets of articles on the pandemic situation. This way, data was gained about how often numerically a topic was reported on. For example, an over-representation of articles about "Corona and Immigration" would in itself be meaningful with regard to the outlet's framing choices. Secondly, salience can become particularly visible when looking at code co-occurrences. Paying close attention to which codes occur most often as a group, can reveal arguments that are consistently used and thereby embellished with salience.

The notion of *time* is of paramount importance for this analysis in two respects. The first more broadly relates the PRAM's changes in framing choices over the timespan of the five months of coverage looked at. Considering how unexpected the health crisis challenged news outlets, it is worthwhile to pay attention to how the PRAM might have adapted their perspective over time, once they gained their footing or analysed what the best stance to take on would be. If such unexpected changes of direction occur, it is interesting to consider whether they could correspond to external conditions, such as a change of public opinion, mainstream media stance and so on. Many changes, however, might simply be caused by what was considered the most urgent issue in public debate at different times. For example, it should be expected that, like other media, the PRAM will also have emphasized the impending restrictions and lockdown during March, while shifting focus to the anti-lockdown demonstrations in the summer. To consider changes over time, the coding material was organized into three groups based on offline developments: **Phase 1**, 1.1. – 22.3.2020, "Early onset and announcement of upcoming first lockdown". **Phase 2**, 23.3. – 25.4.2020, "first lockdown and full-blown crisis mode". **Phase 3**, 26.4. – 25.5.2020, "Mandatory masks in public and emergence of protests". It had been hoped that Phase 1 could be further divided into two phases, yet that proved not to be useful. Since some outlets in the set such as *DS*, reacted very slowly, they did not have any articles prior to public discussions of a lockdown in Germany in mid-March.

The second way in which *time* is relevant for the analysis is its construction *within* a news text itself. As was discussed in Chapter 2, Franzosi (1998, 530) points out that the sequence of events is constructed anew by the author of an article. That is to say, based on perception, intention and generally dominant mental frameworks the writer holds, a text may rearrange, leave out or expand on elements and assemble them into a new story. In the case of the PRAM's judgments about the early crisis management for instance, it might be expected that they put little emphasis on the uncertainty that decision-makers were facing in the early stages of the global pandemic and, instead, retrospectively re-structure the story to be one about German leaders idly sitting by, while drastic actions might have been taken as early as January.

Regarding the primary frameworks which influence the structure of how topics are presented, the importance of *actors* is central. Any worldview is naturally populated by different actors and their perceived relationships to one another and the actions that they usually take. The way an actor is presented to act within an article tells us much about the underlying frameworks. For instance, the participants at an anti-government protest might be associated with words like 'disrupting' or "vandalizing" by a state-funded news source, while an activist blog might describe the protestors

as “standing up for” or “peacefully calling for”. Franzosi has impressively applied such *story grammars* by automatically coding material in a subject-action-object fashion, allowing him to arrange actors around specific spheres of action (Franzosi 1998b, 88). Such a linguistic coding approach was simply not feasible to accomplish with a predominantly manual coding process such as the one at hand. However, in a limited fashion, the most common actors and their actions were coded to allow for more general observations about which actors feature most prominently in each of the PRAM’s outputs. The software also enabled examination of *word clouds* around actors, which were looked at to see whether some clear tendencies would jump out. In this fashion, it is possible to analyse in broad strokes, who the *Us* and *Them* are seen to be, what characterizes *The German people* or *The Elite*, who the culprits of the crisis are or who potential allies might be.

In expecting that the PRAMs will mostly maintain their conventional frameworks when writing about the crisis, an important assumption is being made, and that concerns their status as news outlets with organisational structures, financial interests and a core readership that is unsympathetic to radical changes to the PRAM’s core values. At the same time, however, it is not unreasonable to assume that some of the coverage would generally be aimed at winning new readers to increase sales of the print magazines. In the face of the global health crisis and the increased chances of individuals seeking additional or alternative information online (see Ch. 2), it is interesting to consider how a PRAM might respond, for instance by moderating their headlines to make them more appealing to share widely on social media. In this respect it can also be instructive to think about how articles refer to the readers of the outlet (the *in-group*, usually) in contrast to “other people from Germany, who do not read the magazine” and generally, which attributes are used to describe the in-group. For example, if the in-group of the magazine is generally characterized as “regular citizen with common sense” rather than “person of superior insight over the obedient mainstream masses”, this might hint at the outlet targeting a much wider target audience.

It is not ultimately possible to determine with certainty who the outlets were framing the corona crisis *for*, and to what extent editorial intent was involved. But, to answer the question of *how* the crisis was framed, analysing the content alone is not sufficient and the technical aspects of presentation and rhetoric style must be considered as well. As was noted in the previous chapter, the overall appearance and topic categories of a news outlet are often the first clues as to what impression a site wishes to send out. *JF*, more than any other site, was aiming for a conservative appearance, while e.g. *Compact* and *Zuerst* are not hesitant to highlight their offensive anti-mainstream stance visually. In this regard, the style of the headline and the lead sentence can be

another important clue. Headlines that are formulated in a sensational or even scandalous fashion achieve different effects than neutral ones, which suggest a more professional article behind the link. Within a text, many rhetorical and linguistic tools can be employed to reinforce the impact or salience of the content itself. While a thorough linguistic analysis was not intended, the coding frame included some common stylistic devices to give an idea of *how* arguments are practically expressed. Examples for such rhetorical codes are “usage of authoritative sources (e.g. studies, experts, other authorities)”, “simplification for reader (e.g. through allegory or easy example)”, “satire, humour or ridicule”, “rational fact-checking argument”, “usage of evaluating words to hint at writers opinion” and others.

4.2. Data Collection and Analysis

For this qualitative comparative content analysis, *Atlas.ti 9* has been used to code the data. The software is ideal for research which systematically aims to understand the deeper meaning of text, such as how framing of an issues was accomplished. The aim of this study was not to gain reliable data on how many times a certain type of argument was being made or a certain word was mentioned, but to find textual patterns and see how those arguments were presented within individual texts and comparatively among different outlets at different times. Atlas.ti’s ability to visually represent the number of occurrences of different codes was certainly useful in that it allows to make statements about the frequency of claims within outlets, in relation to other claims and outlets, or in relation to progression in time. Yet, the data set was not extensive enough to allow for any generalisations based on numerical information gained from the coding.

Compact and *JF*, in particular, posted so many articles within the timeframe that at most 10% of their total output was included for analysis. As such, an intimate understanding of each individual article was needed to contextualise information gained from coding analysis. The program’s ability to automatically code passages with certain phrases was utilized only in the beginning to approximately mark sections where actors or topics were mentioned. Still, all data was coded manually throughout, particularly to take note of more subtly expressed claims and rhetorical devices used. To avoid some magazines being far over-represented in the data sets, specific percentages were determined. These percentages were based on total word count rather than number of articles, because average article length varied widely between the outlets. *Compact*, *JF* and *EF*’s total output was rigorously reduced to around 23k–25k words each. *Zuerst* and *DS*, with their significantly shorter and less frequent articles, came in at about 14,000 words each.

Particularly for *DS*, this meant that next to *all* posted articles were included to reach that number. Further, the set was balanced in relation to the three time-phases (see 4.1.) of the pandemic in Germany, every time period taking up one third of the data.

Two sets of data were collected for coding, in order to facilitate two levels of analysis: The first set contained *all* of the article headlines and preview snippets within the timeframe that the search engines or topic pages presented. *Compact*, *JF* and *Zuerst* provided both headline and short snippets from the text lead, while *DS* and *EF* only presented the headlines. This data set was coded broadly according to main topics (e.g. “Corona-Protests”, “Economy”, “Asylum & Immigration”), actors mentioned (“Angela Merkel”, “The Police”, “The Radical Left”), claims made (“Migrants don’t follow restrictions”, “Corona reveals major system flaws”) or overall Judgements passed (“reported thing is bad”) for a total list of 91 codes, 40% of which were actors and countries. The aim of this first set was to get an overall view of the main topics and claims connected with Covid and their frequency throughout the time period. It was expected that the absolute number of repetitions of certain perspectives over others would be meaningful in its own right, signifying an emphasis in selection and salience, and so differentiating them further from established news media. Furthermore, this data set gave insight into what the PRAM’s readership would be presented with on the title pages, topic columns or on social media, if articles were shared there. This data set establishes whether outlets engaged in sensationalist click-bait reporting or were aiming to present an earnest and objective alternative to mainstream media by normalising their title choices. The second data set was more extensive and contained full-length articles in pre-determined quantities, as discussed above. While many of the codes from the first set were transferred, the second set was more valuable regarding detailed text analysis and hence used a more detailed coding frame. Only this set had detailed codes for rhetorical devices and, in addition to standard mentions of actors, was also equipped to analyse actors’ *actions* and common actor pairings (such as “Police – Protestors”, or “Germans – Migrants”). The total number of codes in Set 2 was 137, half of which were related to analysing the actor’s actions and pairings.

For the purpose of this analysis, only articles either covering the pandemic *exclusively* or *partially* were selected. All of the newspapers’ search engines were queried with the term “Corona”, which was the most commonly used word amongst other terms such as “pandemic” or “Covid-19” in German media at the time. The search engines operated differently, some searching only for title-hits, others showing word-hits within the text body. *DS* placed a time-limit on how far back one could search for specific terms. Consequently, non-topical articles also had to be gathered for *DS*, which then had to be manually sorted to only contain pandemic related entries. Despite this

additional step, *DS* still remains a critical case, in that the completeness of the Phase 1 set cannot be guaranteed. The magazine appears to remove article entries from their archives in irregular intervals. At the time of data collection in August 2020, the earliest pandemic article to be found was from March 7th, yet it is possible that approximately 1–3 articles had already been removed at the time. This estimate is based on the number of articles gathered from the other outlets at the time.

The articles covering the pandemic only partially generally mentioned the health crisis as an influential factor in relation to the article's main topic. For instance, this included articles that were primarily reporting on rising immigrant deportations but linked it to the increased border controls during the crisis. The decision criterion was that a *causal* link had to be made to qualify the article. This then excluded articles that practiced *name-dropping* of the crisis without a real framing effort, such as noting that something was taking place *alongside* the crisis, or referencing “the pandemic era” without any further references to how it connects to the article's topic. The data was collected in even and pre-determined time intervals covering the time frame of each phase. Occasionally, this pre-determined date was moved by one day in either direction, if more articles were published then, or the given date had no articles, for example because it was a Sunday on that day. If several articles were published on the selected day, the article was chosen through several stages: In the first step, articles with a significantly lower engagement rate were removed. The amount of comments on an article might, however, also indicate the *provocative* nature of the content and potentially lead to a data set with only the most extreme outlier articles, rather than articles thematically closer to the average output of the outlet. To some extent, this was acceptable, because unusual and provocative anti-mainstream claims and generating high click rates through headlines were clear characteristics and aims of all the sources. However, to rein in the engagement effect somewhat, attention was given to the *authors* of the remaining articles in the second step. Here, priority was given to official employees and regular writers for the magazine, over any guest submissions. The assumption was made that these writers would come closest to what the common position of the outlet might be. Articles with the highest engagement were consequently dropped if there was a similarly popular alternative, written by a more established contributor.

If a third selection step was necessary, the length and format were considered, favouring those articles closest to the average article of the outlet. The aim of these clearly defined selection criteria was to avoid as much topic- and content-related selection-bias as possible. With the bigger outlets, there were usually up to six articles on any given day, many of them following one main framing such as “*Corona and the new immigration crisis*”, “*Corona destroys the economy*” or

“Establishment/Merkel fails to deal with Corona”. Selecting articles for the data set based on content would have been very prone to personal bias and might have affected the results of the study significantly. Therefore, once engagement, authorship and overall format were considered, the final choice between the remaining options was made with the roll of a dice.

With all outlets except *JF*, there was no clearly visible difference between regular articles and opinion pieces. Descriptions of events went hand in hand with barely concealed judgement on how the information should be interpreted by the reader. This made *Junge Freiheit* an exceptional case for data collection. While the *JF*'s positions were still recognizable in the editorial selection of newsworthy stories and some subtle hints at interpretation of them, for the most part, *JF* differentiated between their opinion pieces and objective reporting. As such, many of their regular news articles could not have been coded adequately with a coding frame that was fine-tuned to the value-laden reporting style of all the other PRAMs. It was therefore decided that, as the sole exception, commentary pieces by *JF* would be treated preferentially in the selection process. This was further warranted because their opinion pieces also tended to have a much higher engagement rate and often would already be the best option when following the other selection criteria. Guaranteeing a certain amount of commentary pieces in the *JF* set made it more comparable to the other outlets and unnecessary conjecture and guesswork could be avoided on whether a section in an article was a subtle framing attempt or not.

The data was worked through several times and the coding frame adapted with insights from previous rounds. To allow for a more flexible and fresh perspective each time, the documents were coded in different orders subsequently. One round looked at one outlet from start to finish, while another looked at all Phase 1 documents, before moving onto the next phase. This way, trends and common themes could be recognized more easily by the researcher, with regard to individual outlets or specific points in time.

Chapter 5: How the PRAM framed the Covid-19 Pandemic

This chapter will answer the question of how the selected German populist and far-right alternative online news media have in fact been framing the Covid-19 pandemic from the beginning of 2020 until the end of May of the same year. The analysis will progress from the general down to the particular. Therefore, the following section will present only the most noticeable trends that can most easily be gleaned from the coding results. The aim here is to present the broad strokes of

which topics and claims appeared most strongly at different times and within different magazines. Further, a tentative summary of the most noticeable observations of each case will be given, to give the reader an overall insight. The preceding section will then dive into the nitty-gritty of how the framing was accomplished in detail. Topics will be arranged in terms of their relation to wider narratives that emerged. The nature of this frame construction will be retraced with the help of the text material. The last section of this chapter will dig deeper still and give some indications on how presentational and linguistic aspects helped to deliver the narratives. As a specific example of the use of language, that section will look at how value-laden references to different actors and their actions consistently served to perpetuate the general worldviews through implied judgement, without needing to rely on outspoken expression of such opinions.

5.1. Overview of the main results

To gain an overall impression of the most common topics that the Covid-19 pandemic has been linked to, the headline data set is the most amenable. This is because, for one, it contains an entry for *all* pandemic articles in the timeframe, which guarantees that no lingering selection bias could have affected the results. Furthermore, headlines and lead sentences were the most reliable indicators of which primary angle was taken in an article. As was discussed in Chapter 2, the first glance impression of an article can inform the reader of which mental frameworks will be engaged in the story primarily. In the headline set, there was the least overlap between topics, whereas the full-text data set most clearly showed how different claims and topics were woven into more complex stories. At the most fundamental level, the PRAM's topic emphasis mirrored the general events and widespread discourse in the established media at the same time or could otherwise be linked to what the usually dominant news angles of the outlet in question are known to be.

Phase 1 (1.1.–22.3.) is the most challenging one to draw dependable conclusions from, due to the scarcity of data from some outlets and their different reaction times. Most outlets only began reporting on the situation on a regular basis, once the German crisis management became the focus of public attention in March. During January and February, articles only appeared sporadically, the most regular contributors being *Compact* and *EF*, each with 7 articles posted during this time, followed by *Zuerst* and *JF* with only 3 articles each. As was discussed, *Deutsche Stimme* had no articles within the set before March 7th. The earliest to react were *EF* and *Zuerst* at the end January. *Eigentümlich Frei* (28.01.) asked “Why such measures against a disease with a ‘mild course’?” in response to the Chinese crisis management. In a February article (*EF*, 14.02.), it was further stated

that the Coronavirus in China was really just a matter of politics, challenging the Chinese Communist Party to demonstrate its authority, despite statistical data showing that such “extreme” measures were not necessary. Here, already, *EF* demonstrates its opposition to any type of state interference, which would dominate much of their angle on the crisis in Germany. *Zuerst*’s first reaction was quite opposed to *EF*, applauding the Chinese government and stating that “the German media are still counting on downplaying, but abroad they already cut to the chase” (26.01.).

In Phase 1 overall, the PRAM most frequently reported on general developments, the inability of German politics to handle the crisis adequately and the imminent lockdown and restrictions in March. While all outlets agreed on the government’s general ineptitude, which was finally unmasked, they had different ideas about adequate crisis management. It can be broadly generalised that *JF*, *DS* and *Zuerst* were most likely to say that the government did not act fast enough, and that borders were not closed early enough. When Germany decided to close its borders, *DS* shows itself to be optimistic, in that the Corona crisis shows “that a proper, sovereign Border Regime is not after all an outdated state of affairs” (16.03.). Commentary on border closures were often linked with the topic of Immigration and Refugees, which was another very popular story angle among all outlets except *EF*. Another equally common reaction was to write about Coronavirus as the harbinger of the next great economic recession. *Compact*, for instance, invited controversial economist Markus Krall for an interview, in which it is stated that the financial system will not survive the “Death-Virus” and that inflation, expropriation and perhaps even the “open dictatorship of the Establishment” may be expected (19.03.). A final rather complex theme emerged, which considered the pandemic to be an instance of unnecessary panic and hysteria. This theme in particular will require detailed analysis, because its conclusion is arrived at in different ways and it has a contradictory relationship with other claims related to the seriousness of the crisis and the slow reaction of the government. While most outlets shift in their balance between crisis and hysteria content at different points in the overall timeframe, it is very common for the two modes to coexist throughout most of the data. In Phase 1, it was *EF* followed by *Compact* who most strongly considered the mass-media and elites to be involved in a scaremongering campaign, because they would profit from citizen’s fears about a disease, which statistical data supposedly proved to be no more dangerous than a regular flu.

The second phase in the data set was chosen to be from 22nd of March until 25th of April, because it marks the beginning of the first lockdown and an acute state of crisis in Germany. The coding results show that the PRAM’s emphasis changed significantly after this date. Coverage of the government’s poor crisis management dropped sharply during the lockdown, and the notion that

measures should have been taken sooner was no longer a newsworthy claim that had to be argued for and was now simply assumed to be a given. This space is partly taken up by an increasing coverage of restrictions and immigration related topics, which make up the two most covered topics for *DS*, *JF* and *Zuerst*. While in Phase 1, the main immigration stories revolved around the threat of a new refugee crisis and border closures not applying to refugees, in Phase 2 additional news stories emerged about migrants not following the lockdown restrictions or taking special advantage of the situation, which can further explain the rise in citations. Most notably, the second phase saw the emergence of the topic of “Personal Rights and Freedoms”, which became the single most common headline topic for *Compact* and *EF* in an instant. The closer analysis of the full-text set reveals that it also featured heavily in the remaining outlets’ coverage, yet was not often referenced in their title sections. All outlets became concerned about the restrictions as a fundamental violation of personal rights and *Compact* knew to point out that “all these restrictive measures are supposed to wear down the people [orig. Ger. das Volk] across Europe, yes, even worldwide for the vaccinations” (04.04.), which many outlets suspected would become mandatory soon enough.

The themes of scepticism and conspiratorial claims become overall more pronounced in Phase 2 as well. In the first phase, it was not uncommon for outlets to make mention of popular conspiracies such as Bill Gates’ secret ambitions or to offer criticisms about case numbers and the true level of threat posed by Covid-19. But, during the lockdown, the overarching notion that the pandemic was used by various actors for other means becomes more integrated throughout the material. The results support Boberg et al.’s (2020) finding that alternative media did not focus heavily on distributing the popular conspiracy theories, although these are also far from absent. However, *general* mistrust about the motives of the elite, the established media and pharmaceutical companies, as well as scepticism about the authenticity of available statistics and information, permeates the material instead. It will be argued that this scepticism about all things Covid-19 may even resemble a state of mind which promotes a sense of *identity* among the community surrounding these sites. This proposition might also be supported by the fact that, with Phase 2, more cohesive narratives emerged, which string together a greater number of topics and claims to form a bigger picture, as can be seen from code co-occurrences.

Phase 3 was timed from the 26th of April until the 25th of May, because it marked the end of the first lockdown, new restrictions to regulate public life and, most importantly, the beginning of anti-lockdown demonstrations. It did not come as a surprise that the protests featured so heavily in the PRAM’s reporting and that they became the overall leading headline topic, with the most in-text

citations. *Compact* was by far the most enthusiastic supporter of the demonstrations, advertising several such events and even starting their own initiative, promising that if 20,000 reader signatures would be gathered, *Compact* would organise a demonstration of their own. They ask “How much longer does the Merkel-Regime want to lock us up? Are we free citizens or guinea pigs of big pharma? Do we want to allow it, that our fundamental rights and our jobs are sacrificed at the altar of virologists?” (06.05.). While the group of *JF*, *DS* and *Zuerst* do not share the same overwhelming intensity of protest coverage and other topics like Immigration or Economy have similar or even slightly higher frequencies, protests have a solid spot near the top with all of them.

The astonishing exception to this clear trend was *Eigentümlich Frei*, for which the demonstrations on the streets were clearly of no interest, with only a single article explicitly referring to the ongoing demonstrations in its headline, and only two instances of the word *protest* and *demonstration* appearing within the set of full-text articles gathered. During the third phase, *EF* instead focusses heavily on personal rights and freedoms with the mask mandate being a regular favourite. Coverage of crisis management and a regular coverage of *Corona Sceptics* and their unfair treatment in the mainstream media also feature more strongly for *EF* than it did for other outlets during this time. While *EF* shares in the general spirit of resistance, it is most peculiar that they avoid acknowledging the existence of the sizeable demonstrations happening in the offline world, given they had been categorised as an actual Querfront magazine in the past. No *EF* article or external source material was able to shed light on this peculiarity, making any guesswork nothing more than speculation, until future investigations on the matter can bring some certainty.

Another equally important development in Phase 3 was the upsurge of attacks against mainstream media and the notion that critical voices were targeted unfairly in order to silence the truth and dissuade hesitant citizens from speaking up as well. The established media had already been frequently criticized in previous phases for knowingly misleading the public by hiding the true facts and for being a tame servant of the political elite by not criticising their crisis management. With protest and general scepticism becoming the centre of attention in Phase 3, the media are now most often criticized for censoring and discrediting any opposition, whether it be alternative experts trying to share the truth or average peaceful citizens trying to have their voices heard on the streets, but being targeted with “the heavy club on which ‘conspiracy theory’ is emblazoned” (*JF*, 12.05.). Related to this, the police forces at the demonstrations became another regular actor within articles, usually being portrayed as being in confrontation with law-abiding demonstrators. During the preceding phase, *DS* wrote about how the Saxony police forces “demonstrated the full force of the Law, especially against elderly fellow citizens” during one of the earliest

demonstrations in Chemnitz (*DS*, 21.04.). Whether it was the police, the political elites, or the media, the PRAM were more determined in this phase to construct clear notions of “Us against them”, which created a sense of shared unity wherein the outlets took on the role of championing all those repressed voices.

So far, most results were presented chronologically based on the overall most common themes amongst the whole group, with individual examples and notes on individual cases. When trying to understand the characteristics of the individual framing efforts of magazines and their relationship with established narratives, it is worth to consider their individual development in turn. The remainder of this introductory section will briefly outline the most notable coding observations about the outlets, in order to give the reader a firmer grasp on what identified them within the set.

Due to having the smallest data set, normalising the *Deutsche Stimme* coding results was not particularly helpful in understanding its key positions in relation to the others and having the very similar *Zuerst* data alongside it was most needed to get a more complete picture of how these most far-right sources generally went about framing the crisis. While it was a very important angle for both of them, *DS* was by far the most focussed on topics of immigration, asylum and the behaviour of migrant citizens during the pandemic. Even in Phase 3, when most other magazines turned their attention away from immigration and towards the demonstrations, *DS* wrote *more* about immigration than they had in previous phases. A unique element of *DS* coverage of immigration is their usage of anecdotal evidence and their regular reports on migrant crime. As Krämer (2017, 1299) described, these often take the form of a long list of “singular cases” submitted by unexposed sources, which are framed to underline the agenda of media and politics to hide the true reality of migrant crime in the country. During the pandemic, *DS* continued this format, now citing cases of migrants not following the restrictions and endangering citizens.

While broadly sharing the same immigration outlook as *DS*, *Zuerst* has more often claimed that refugees wilfully exploit the crisis, for instance writing that “This is bold: ‘Refugees’ want to be taken care of better during the Corona crisis – and demand single-room accommodation in hotel rooms” (30.03.). Additionally, *Zuerst* was unique in its interest in military and security matters, a fact easily understood by its background and connection to a military magazine and advertisements for crisis-preparedness, as discussed in Chapter 3. At the end of March (28.03. and 04.04.), they were the only magazine to be concerned about impending food shortages, which readers of the magazine would naturally be prepared for, because *Zuerst* advertises their crisis preparedness materials in every article. What was finally noteworthy about *Zuerst* was that they appeared generally more

capable of moving on to new types of stories, whereas *DS* was less flexible in its continuing insistence on immigration as their main angle. Even though *Zuerst* had a comparatively low output and was similarly fixated on immigration, they more easily kept up with bigger magazines in recognizing new *hot topics* to pick up. This is most clearly visible with their early coverage of the demonstrations, already seen during Phase 2. The manner in which they told the story of the protests this early on also suggested that they more comfortably make use of the populist type of framing that characterizes the other PRAMs.

Compact turned out to be perhaps the most interesting case in the set for several reasons. For one, it provided the most noticeable and well executed fusion between clearly far-right content and an equally strong focus on populist narratives. While *JF* attempted to appeal to wider audiences through moderating their content immensely, *Compact* seems to succeed in presenting themselves as a rebellious and outspoken magazine, which is not afraid to take the offensive against the elites responsible for the people's grievances. This became particularly apparent in their increased usage of scandalising click-bait headlines and overall language, turning many news items into topics of outrage, such as when using the headline: "Merkel continues to lure immigrants to Germany. THIS is her nasty trick." (22.03.). Immigration topics are important in the *Compact* set, yet while they are presented in equally harsh tones as seen in *DS* and *Zuerst*, immigration over all represents only *one* of several important angles for them. Their similarities to *EF* were the second interesting feature. *Compact* and *EF* shared a stronger tendency towards giving space to conspiracies and they both presented the crisis as a case of unnecessary hysteria in the face of a harmless disease early on. Yet, *Compact's* way of including this content was striking in that conspiracy coverage was often camouflaged as critiques of the very same, and hysteria claims were kept out of many headlines, while making up enormous parts of the full-text content.

Junge Freiheit stood out in the set because it was the only magazine actively trying to maintain a conservative appearance with success, and the moderation process they have gone through shows in their coverage. Most noticeably, this shows in their very low usage of the hysteria narrative and any conspiratorial notions about Corona being used for other means or being fabricated. Even within their more strongly worded commentary pieces, *JF* steers mostly clear from suggesting that Covid-19 could be a "hype" which politics and media exploit, except a small spike during Phase 2. They also do not make any references to any of the conspiracies suggesting for instance that the virus's origin was artificial. Given its less confrontational style, the *JF* results also underline the significance of having a separate data set for headlines: *JF* was clearly conscious about the phrasing of their headlines, often neutrally describing the piece of news to be covered, without hinting at a

particular news angle. Their relationship with to other outlets was often revealed in indirect ways, such as the salience given to immigration topics simply by the number of articles posted about it, putting immigration headlines into first place in all of the three phases. Many more confrontational opinions on the government's crisis management for instance often found their way into articles through the citing of AFD politicians, experts or studies, which *JF* merely presented.

As was mentioned before, the single most remarkable and unexpected discovery in the *EF* set was their lack of direct references to the street demonstrations against the restrictions that grew during May. This was even more surprising because they engaged heavily in all of the co-occurring claims and topics, such as the repression of freedom and rights, critique of crisis management, the pandemic as exaggerated hype, or the support for unfairly targeted sceptics. It is possible that, despite writers from the far-right spectrum regularly contributing articles, *EF* had a content guideline in place, because the public debate at the time suggested that the German far right might be the driving force behind the movement. Considering that *EF* also did not emphasize the immigration themes strongly, it is conceivable that *EF* writers were urged to refer only to the grievances surrounding the demonstrations, without openly acknowledging or pledging allegiance to the movement itself. Alongside *Compact*, *EF* was the only outlet to most clearly favour the "Hype and Hysteria" narrative right from the beginning. Other magazines struggled to balance this narrative with their simultaneous critiques of the government for not reacting quickly and efficiently enough and contradictory claims between articles regarding how serious the pandemic actually was or was not.

5.2. Narrative themes

After having become familiar with the broad strokes of the PRAM's coverage of the emerging pandemic in Germany, it is time to take a closer look at how individual topics and claims were practically woven into familiar narratives. The following pages will analyse important themes that characterized the PRAM's broad mindset when framing the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany. It will be shown how these coincide with established framing patterns, which were to be expected from the outlets, making their effort predictable rather than volatile, as Chapter 2 had anticipated.

Performing a crisis: Criticising the elites' management of the fake pandemic

As was illustrated in Chapter 2, when thinking of a crisis in terms of framing, it is useful to realize that it needs to be actively perceived and performed by actors (Moffitt 2015 /Stavrakakis et. al 2017). In the context of the health pandemic this means that the crisis can exist in several conditions

simultaneously: For some actors it could represent an exceptionally serious threat against which strict measure should have been taken swiftly and decisively. Others primarily consider the pandemic to be a false alarm, which came about through an overrated new virus that pushed governments into blind action and panic mongering. The news outlets analysed here found themselves representing different positions alongside this spectrum at different times. They have also perceived the crisis from an *external* viewpoint, not being affiliated with any influential actors or decision-makers and not being considered part of the circle of established media. Their niche existence gave them more unrestrained opportunities to criticize proceedings freely and contradictorily and to make wilder speculations, demands or claims about how they would manage the crisis better.

In accordance with the PRAM's strong anti-elite and anti-mainstream media orientation, only one in seven headlines during the analysis time framed the issues being reported on as a positive development that was to be commended in some fashion. The most common positive news stories were about the rise of resistance against the restrictions, borders being closed, nation states regaining autonomy in the globalised world and political leaders abroad not following health guidelines and resisting the WHO recommendations. Looking at the coverage from January to May, the PRAM reveal most about how they perceive the crisis when writing about Germany's crisis management and on whether the crisis is genuine and severe or not. It is of course possible to criticise different parts of the crisis management while simultaneously highlighting different aspects of hysteria and hype surrounding the pandemic, and some outlets succeed more often at shaping such cohesive arguments. However, particularly during Phase 1, the text material's code correlations suggest that there was a fair amount of tension between these angles, which needs to be considered more closely.

Criticism of the government's crisis management fell into two broad categories, either saying Germany acted too late or that it overreacted with too strict measures. A great majority of PRAM overall said that measures in response to the crisis were "too late, too little" (*JF*, 18.03.). This news angle was particularly strong during the beginning of the crisis. Most magazines accused the German politicians of downplaying the danger of the coronavirus and practicing gross negligence with their inactivity. *EF* writes that while the virus has been raging in China for two months already, this "did not stop our authorities and politicians [...] to announce that here in Europe, the virus would behave differently as 'over there'" (10.03.). It was regularly stated that Germany was gaining some type of gratification from seeing other countries struggle, while being convinced that the German health systems were well prepared. The most common criticism was targeted at the open

borders, which Germany closed on March 16th. To lend support to their critiques, most outlets made use of expert citations and interviews opposing the mainstream views. Most interestingly, the criticism of crisis management by the PRAM during Phase 1 was unique with the highest number of *direct attacks* against specific politicians and other actors held responsible for concrete failures. In accordance with Boberg et al.'s result on alternative media Facebook pages (2020), the PRAM's most favoured targets have also been Angela Merkel, Jens Spahn (health minister), the government in general and the big health institutions *WHO* and the German *Robert Koch Institute*. These actors were usually mentioned in specific contexts and in response to statements they had made due to their central leadership roles, and the PRAM usually criticized not only their statements, but also their competence, in a derogatory fashion. This significantly more individualistic tendency to crisis management coverage is mostly explained through the nature of news stories that were relevant during the time. The later topical shifts to more abstract matters, such as personal freedoms and rights, more easily facilitated actor-less and abstract claims made on a systemic level. Nothing suggests, however, that the PRAM would have actively changed their language to become more abstract and populist over time. It is certainly true that articles in later phases appeared to be much more concerned with the notion of an endangered democracy and a thoroughly corrupt system led by an incompetent elite. Comparatively, however, the presence of these notions was stable enough throughout the whole analysis time to giving no clear indication that the PRAM would have strategically shaped their language as time passed.

The notion that the government did not react quickly enough to the emerging crisis correlates strongly with views perceiving a threatening worldwide crisis ahead, and also the view that the German system and political elite were insufficiently prepared to handle the crisis. This line of criticism does *not*, however, correlate with any claims about coronavirus being overestimated or fabricated, nor any claims suggesting the crisis was exploited to further the interests of different actors. When crisis management was criticised from a Covid-sceptic perspective within an article, it was instead always argued that the measures taken were *too strict*, rather than too hesitant. All sources have expressed claims rooted in both of these broad views on what the nature of the crisis was, but they have all emphasized them differently, and generally shifted from one to the other over time. For those magazines which emphasized the "slow reaction to a serious crisis" narrative more strongly during Phase 1 (particularly *JF*), this shift became more pronounced when their perspective on the crisis changed in later phases. The type of news story which ultimately allowed for a smoother transition was a critique of the government's responses, characterising them as so called *Aktionismus* [Eng. *action-ism*; doing things mindlessly for the sake of doing things]. For

instance, *Junge Freiheit* posted a “Chronology of Failure” on March 20th in which it is described that, for a long time, the German government had simply watched the crisis progress in other countries, without taking action themselves. Then, when Chancellor Merkel “in her regal benevolence” decreed it to be as such in her speech, the crisis suddenly came into existence in Germany, causing a complete turnaround: “The order of business changed from weeks of indifference, trivialisation and reassurances into complete panic mode” (*JF*, 20.03.).

While this *Aktionismus*-story did not yet link directly to the “Corona is overrated” narrative, framing the restrictions as a result of panicked hysteria made for a more seamless transition into writing that the restrictions were too strict and not appropriate in consecutive articles, even after having previously attacked the government for *not* reacting to the crisis appropriately. The manner in which the PRAM found their balance in this “Crisis vs. Hysteria” conflict points to the importance that storytelling plays in narrating a crisis. While *Compact* and *EF* quite strongly favoured the Covid-sceptic perspective on the nature of the crisis and the crisis management, other magazines needed to go through their own processes of re-negotiating their previous statements in order to tell new cohesive stories. Highlighting that restrictions unjustly limit people’s freedoms would have been much more difficult to argue from their previous standpoint that presented the crisis as very dire and genuine. Hence the text material shows how the representation of the past was subtly altered in later articles so that the more salient frame of the unnecessary pandemic hype could become more dominant and supplement the personal freedoms perspective.

“The problem is called globalisation” – fitting Covid-19 coverage into broader worldviews

As was discussed in Chapter 2, incorporating a newly emerged topic into a wider narrative in a way that is in tune with a group’s usual mental frameworks is of utmost importance. As Krämer (2012, 1300f.) had described, the routine of regularly applying the same frames to a wide set of circumstances can further the impression that the populist far-right worldview is able to explain many issues. For the PRAM, this helps them to underline their validity as a news sources equal to established media, in that readers can feel assured that they do not need to rely on any other sources if the PRAM in question can cover a great variety of topics with their own explanatory patterns. This section will consider how the outlets have presented the Covid-19 pandemic in a way that makes it fit neatly into some of their broader worldviews about the state of the globalised

word and their perceptions about German society as a left-dominated multicultural mess, which needs urgent fixing.

Some of the first reactions to the emerging crisis were of an economic nature, wondering about the economic consequences and whether a stock market crash was imminent. *Compact*, *Zuerst* and *JF* were particularly worried about how a possible worldwide recession would affect Germany. None of the magazines struggled to integrate the pandemic into their regular critiques of the international markets. According to *JF* (28.02.), the outbreak in China was first and foremost worrisome due to the countries' large share in international trade, which would quickly lead to a global market crash if the country did not contain the virus and re-open its factories. However, most magazines went further in presenting the economic struggles not simply as an unforeseen event, but saw Corona as a *catalyst*, which set in motion the collapse of broken systems and revealed systemic problems. The dependence of the German economy on international trade is consistently framed as a negative condition, the dangers of which the PRAM have been warning about ever since the financial crisis. *JF* describes the ECB's interest rate policy as fatal and finds Angela Merkel's involvement in EU Bonds and her government's economic management to be responsible for the weakened state of the German economy at the beginning of the crisis (*JF*, 21.3.).

Coverage of economics was strongly linked with arguments about globalisation and the status of nation states prior to and during the crisis. *DS* put the strongest emphasis on globalisation critique, writing in early March that the crisis has shown what "us national democrats" have long known, that "the globalisation excesses" of recent decades have made German production existentially dependent on upstream products from abroad, which was irresponsible with regard to pharmaceutical products and medical equipment during the crisis (07.03.). Chief editor Peter Schreiber looked into the future optimistically, writing in late April that "also the European Union [...] failed across the board. The nation state is back with power, borders are modern once more. The house of cards that is globalisation collapses" (*DS*, 25.04.). *DS* keeps up the globalisation narrative most consistently throughout the phases and regularly links it not only to economics, but also to their critique of open borders, liberalism and the general misguidedness of the "globalisation fetishists" (25.04.). All magazines shared in these notions and only significantly differed in the emphasis put on views of whether closing of national borders and a return to strong nation states was feasible in order to avoid future pandemics.

Compact, for instance, argued that the Covid-19 crisis will ultimately lead to the recurring realisation that too much globalisation increases fragility. As such, *Compact* sees it as parallel to the

refugee crisis in that “it is the hour of the Executive – not of the European one in Brussels, which lacks legitimacy and competence, but of the national governments” (21.3.). In this regard, all outlets also mention other countries specifically to illustrate their critiques of Germany, for instance with positive example from abroad, where stricter border policies were practiced sooner. *Compact* praised Israel for “consequently practicing its nation statehood” writing that it would certainly not be surprising to find that countries such as Israel would manage the crisis best (07.03.). Particularly during Phase 1, other countries were almost unanimously brought up as a *good example* for Germany, if they imposed strict regulations on travel and trade. This perception changed slowly, once criticism of the restrictions became a greater focus, and for instance Sweden was then brought up instead as a positive example. Some of the outlets were also concerned that other countries would exploit the crisis to gain economic advantages or that foreign investors would take over German companies that were weakened. *Compact*, for example, wondered “Are Turks and Egyptians playing with rigged cards?” arguing that many non-European countries cheat in reporting their exact case numbers in order to attract tourists (07.03.).

The partial exception to the praise of restrictive countries were *Compact* and *EF*, who had been faster to embrace the Corona-sceptic narrative. *Compact* was divided on this matter and only some writers in Phase 1 already brought up restrictive countries in a negative context. *EF*, however, already characterised Chinese restrictions in February as “draconic” (16.02.). While *EF* generally agreed with other outlets in that the nature of the globalised world made it harder to fight the pandemic and that the European economic policies were to blame for Germany’s weakened state, *EF* mostly opposed the notion that border closures and trade restriction could stop the virus ultimately, though they occasionally favoured such measures as well. But, unsurprisingly, *EF* instead was most critical of policies which restrict company’s trade (e.g. of medical equipment) as it is strongly against state interventionism in general. One *EF* writer suggests that the elites conveniently used the virus and market crash as an easy scapegoat to mask their “ongoing ‘crisis fiscal-policy’” which would have led to a collapse at any rate (10.03.).

Beyond their critique of the globalised state of the world and the nation state’s loss of autonomy, the PRAM also linked the pandemic to their views of the state of society in western countries, and particularly in Germany. *EF*, not having been very vocal about economic implications, was instead the outlet most interested in societal implications and how the current cultural environment in Germany supposedly complicated crisis management. When writing on March 20th that “the neglected-through-welfare ‘generation snowflake’ experiences for the first time, that there is real dangers apart from their imaginary ones” (*EF*, 20.03.), the sentiment captured the fundamental

belief about a left-dominated German society that all outlets share. The narrative goes that “the concerned public, who just now was still busy with soft topics like genderism, social-political benefaction and humanitarian do-gooder-ism, now switches to hard topics in the face of emergency” (*JF*, 21.03.). This perception of society is generally extended to and blamed on all the so called “Fair-weather democrats”, who “never practiced a proper job and shouldered responsibility” and therefore caused Germany to be surprised by the pandemic (*JF*, 14.03.). The most representative policy area that is often utilized to underline this misguidedness of the political elite, media and public is the climate change movement. The news sites linked the Covid-19 crisis with their climate change criticism, for instance by writing that the “Corona-Hysteria” was based on similar media mechanisms as the attempt to create a “Climate Hype” among Germans (*Compact*, 10.03.) or that in the wake of the Covid-19 Crisis, no one cared about the climate crisis anymore, which upset proponents of the “climate dictatorship” (*EF*, 16.03.).

The way in which each PRAM wrote about their perception of society at large was insightful, because it revealed who the writers considered to be some of the opposing actors and enemies within their worldview. While the text material was not extensive enough to make generalisations with certainty, there was a visible trend that the most far-right outlets in the set regularly constructed “The Greens”, “The Left”, “left extremists” and the left-wing activist group “Antifa” as very *specific* “Others” which were to be strongly opposed before and during the crisis. Outlets such as *JF*, *EF* and also *Compact* to a lesser extent, which aimed to appeal more to the average citizens and engaged more in populist framing, instead tended to target political elites *in general*.

An important bedrock of the populist far-right perspective on the pandemic was, of course, the strong focus on immigration, refugees and the multicultural society. By a great margin, *JF*, *DS* and *Zuerst* were the most anti-immigrant focussed magazines throughout the whole analysis timeframe and presented the most varied claims on the topic. The earliest linkages to the migration topic were border-practice critiques about “whoever shouts, coughs or sneezes the word ‘Asylum’, will still be waved through to the municipality” (*JF*, 21.03.). The PRAM seamlessly connect their positions on immigration to their overall views of German society, as was described above. The shared notion was that Germany has become a *Multi-Kulti* country, a term which nowadays often carries derogatory connotations with it and is mostly used in the context of criticizing Germany’s diverse society. As they did prior to the crisis, immigration topics continued to be often framed in contrast to a hard-working and decent majority of German citizens, whose culture the migrant population and newcomers refuse to adapt to, being all too willing to exploit the welfare funds provided by German taxpayers. *EF* predicted that the Covid-19 pandemic meant difficult times for the “army of

welcome-fanatics”, arguing that, with the economic difficulties citizens would face, it would become harder to justify rescuing refugees out of the waters, because “where is the solidarity with strangers supposed to come from, if more and more citizens have water up to their own necks?” (EF, 20.3.).

Phase 2 was the most immigration-centred phase, mostly due to new type of stories about asylum seekers not following the restrictions and receiving special treatment in addition to the by then established topic of borders remaining open for refugees. As has been brought up, immigration topics were important to *Compact* and *JF*, but it was not the only significant narrative in their corona coverage. *Compact* picked up different immigration claims at times when they were relevant and expressed them fiercely, but was more willing to drop them once their newsworthiness and scandal potential had been exhausted. *JF* was strongly anti-immigrant oriented in their commentary articles and most of their headlines throughout addressed the topic. But, overall, their recent moderation process showed in their restraint when it came to engaging as strongly as the remaining far-right outlets did. Immigration dominated the sets of *DS* and *Zuerst*, who stand out in their hostility and choice of language that they use, referring to these “unwanted guests” or “illegals”; they rarely distinguish between, for instance, newly arrived refugees and citizens with a migration background, all of whom are framed to stand outside of German society. To keep up a regular flow of immigration related coverage, *Zuerst* and *DS* relied heavily on their reports of migrant crime of any type, whether it be incidents at refugee shelters or any local crime with supposed migrant involvement. Just as Krämer (2017) had analysed in the case of *DS* previously, the focus on singular local cases was maintained during the pandemic and allowed to give immigration a continuing salience in the far-right corner of the set.

Two further features in the articles on immigration emerged that were of interest in regard to the theoretical expectations. The first were linkages to the *past*, highlighting, in different ways, that these incidents were not isolated but simply illustrated deep-rooted problems. When describing a “riot” of the “unbidden guests” in a reception facility against quarantine measures, *DS* ends their list of different offenses saying that “the exploitation of the fire alarms does not need to be mentioned separately, because that has been a permanent feature for years, not only in Halberstadt” (*DS*, 14.4.). Linkages such as these connected the *new* pandemic stories linguistically to the *old* established narratives, giving these stories added relevance and rootedness.

Secondly with regard to the PRAM’s penchant for defining various *Others* against whom they position themselves, the immigration topic illustrated again, how more populist outlets targeted

more abstract opponents, whereas the strongly far-right *Zuerst* and *DS* were additionally drawn to *specific* actors or instances. *DS* and *Zuerst* were the *only* magazines to mention organisations advocating for refugees' human rights such as *Pro Asyl*, which they referred to as "Immigration-Lobbyists" or " 'Refugee'–trafficker organisations" (*Zuerst*, 28.04.). Refugee organisations are constructed as more tangible representatives of the perceived misguided immigration policies and function as a foil to the outlet's own views and are consequently attacked harshly.

Pandemic Populism: adversarial framing against the elite and mainstream media

The adversarial framing of "Us against the Others" that was already a common feature in claims about immigration or the perceived left-dominated society works as a cohesive force, which ultimately helps the outlets to string together different topics into a much wider narrative which is firmly rooted in established frames and integrates the pandemic into existing views of the world. While support for the European populist parties has been in decline during the pandemic, Chapter 2 has shown how populist rhetoric itself can flourish in a crisis environment. For the populist right alternative online news media, opposing the political system, its elites and the mainstream media is at the core of their self-perceived identity and self-appointed role as news media working against all those who do not have the people's best interest at heart. The opposition to the establishment and the corrupt political actors was perhaps the most pervasive theme, because it was widely applicable to many different news stories, determining not so much the content as the very structure of how a topic was presented. While outlets differed in the emphasis they put on different pandemic topics, they were all united in their underlying dissatisfaction with the state of politics and media in Germany and differed only marginally in the strength of their populist framing beyond this shared anti-elitism.

The crisis management coverage presented in previous sections was one of the most conducive spaces for the PRAM to characterize the political elites and establish their opposition to them. The political elites in Germany were often characterized as inherently incapable of handling the harsh realities of a global health crisis, because they only knew how to practice "left-green fair-weather politics" (*EF*, 14.3.). Elites were described as part of a corrupt system that is interwoven with the media and only cares to promote its own prosperity, without a care about what its citizens would require of it. When the pandemic first emerged, all magazines were united in their view that Germany's politicians were altogether incompetent, regardless of whether they were in favour of stricter and faster restrictions or instead thought the virus was little more than a hype topic of the

media. While clear outlet positioning on the topic of crisis management was a longer process in some cases, opposition to the elites came most naturally to all of them, and it was expressed without hesitation and frequent use of ridicule, satire and other such linguistic tools. *EF* wrote for instance that “Germany is well prepared! The number of Polit-drivel-experts [orig. Ger. Polit-Schwätzperten] is huge. Nothing can go wrong now – right?” (02.03.). The term *Schwätzperten* is a neologism referring here to the stereotype of politicians who speak without knowing what they are talking about and considering themselves to be experts. During Phase 1, populist framings were first and foremost focussed on establishing the anti-elite attitude through such generalisations but also through direct attacks on specific politicians. References to the citizens and their relationship to the elite were still sparse at this time, usually characterising the people as frightened or confused.

With the beginning of the lockdown during Phase 2, the role of the people became more pronounced in that the range of what “the citizens” felt and thought about their leaders became wider and they also became a more active actor once the demonstrations took off in Phase 3, when some “find some courage again, as responsible citizens to make an appearance against injustice and despotism” (*Compact*, 07.05.). However, by and large the citizens play a lethargic role of obediently following any restrictions imposed on them, which *EF* describes as the “mental sluggishness [of] all these brainwashed couch potato lemmings’ who blindly follow the government and mainstream media” (23.03.). Often citizens are described as being in a state of daze or sleep, such as when *DS* hoped that “the European peoples are awake enough to see through this malicious game and thwart the plans of the outdated, established powers” (*DS*, 25.04.). From a social movement perspective, the framing of the people was not at all surprising. As Caiani/dellaPorta/Wagemann, for instance have analysed, the Extreme Right’s Framing of ‘Us’ will often differentiate between an “active heroic minority” and a broader group of the people, with a strong tendency of victimization in their self-presentation (2012, 121). Even when referring to the groups of demonstrators as *the people*, the PRAM gave a defensive emphasis to their being “respectable”, “peaceful” and to their status as “normal citizens”, in contrast to a state, police and general public, which was trying to suppress and discredit them.

The relationship between the state and the people during the crisis featured elements of misguided paternalism or even open oppression. When the restrictions took effect in Phase 2, all outlets eventually switched to being outraged about the restriction of freedom and it was presented as an unbelievable tyranny against the people, the price of which the citizens eventually had to pay through their taxes. According to *JF*, the restrictions after the government’s long inactivity now present “a kind of overcompensation that demonstrates the state’s almightiness daily, and even

regulates, for what purpose citizens may sit on park benches or use their secondary residence” (16.04.). Looking back on the lockdown later, *JF* will characterize the government’s actions further as “authoritarian condescension and paternalism”, which was lacking the “humility and respect before the people’s [orig. Ger. Volk] self-responsibility” (16.05.). This adversarial pattern is only broken when it comes to parties such as AFD and NPD (in case of *DS*) and experts or sceptics who would usually be seen as part of the elite’s circle of influence yet had opposed them during the pandemic. The way in which AFD was framed by the PRAM was particularly interesting because it mirrored the way the people were represented in a victimising fashion, but put AFD into the position of championing the people’s interests. During the beginnings of the pandemic, AFD was described as the victim of harassment through the elites and mass media, due to their insistence on demanding strict measures. Once the restrictions became the subject of criticism among the outlets, AFD was then presented as the voice of reason, which frequently called out the elites and was more capable of handling the crisis. Words such as “concrete”, “consistent” and “specific” appear often in the context of the AFD demanding better crisis management, such as when “unlike the old parties [orig. Ger. Altparteien; a term strongly linked to the populist right in Germany] they are naming a concrete date for this: the 14th of April” referring to when restrictions should be dropped (*Compact*, 09.04.).

Apart from their opposition to the corrupt establishment, the opposition to mainstream media was at the core of the PRAM’s reporting style as an expression of their self-perceived role as alternative media. As Figenschou/Ihlebaek (2019) had predicted, the far-right alternative media continued to put great emphasis on questioning journalistic authority and competence in favour of highlighting their own credibility during the crisis. When the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper criticized provocative behaviour of *Compact* reporters at the site of a demonstration, *Compact* editor-in-chief Elsässer wrote: “Because COMPACT does the job, which *Tagesspiegel* refuses to do [...] we are now the bad guys? What COMPACT does is called journalism, *Tagesspiegel*! That’s what you call the fourth estate, that’s what you call watchdog function of the press!” (*Compact*, 29.04.). This combination of portraying themselves as critical but suppressed voices and the self-understanding as being the last bastion of professional and unbiased journalism was characteristic to all outlets but *JF. Junge Freiheit*, while situating themselves as alternative media in their publishing principles (*JF* 2021), was the most guarded about the harshness of their critiques of the media during the crisis, presumably due to their ambitions to maintain their appearance of being an established professional media outlet of their own.

The established media are regularly described as an integral part of the establishment, as is captured in regularly used terms such as “polit-media establishment”, “state press” or “Merkel’s Court Commentators” (*Compact*, 07.05.). The media is commonly seen as another outgrowth of Germany’s current state of society, spreading left-green propaganda. The claim that the media were tame servants of the elite was one of the popular ones, particularly during March, when the lockdown was first announced. When the mainstream media applauded Chancellor Merkel for her decisive leadership, the PRAM often characterized them as fickle for hanging on Merkel’s “coat-tails, changing their opinion all of a sudden” (*JF* 20.03.). The term *liar press* [orig. Ger. Lügenpresse] has gained momentum in many populist movements, and the PRAM used it regularly to encapsulate their view that the media was not reporting on the facts of coronavirus and the governments’ handling of it. It is clear from the coded material that the claim about the media misleading the public had not arisen during the crisis itself, but was long established and such statements appear regularly, rather than being triggered by specific events during the pandemic.

While media related claims were constantly present throughout the set, the content of the claims and their intensity shifted considerably in Phase 3. Once the demonstrations dominated most of the pandemic coverage, the outlets focussed more on the claim that the mainstream media and general elite were unfairly targeting critical voices, such as through denouncing demonstrators or popular spokespeople of the movement. This was also true for *EF*, which did not cover the street protests, but still increasingly covered unfair targeting of sceptics during this time. The outlets were particularly outraged about media articles describing sceptics or demonstrators as conspiracists or extremists in relation to violent escalations and sightings of the German Reich’s flag and other far-right iconography at some demonstration sites. *Compact* thought that the mainstream media was misrepresenting “these peaceful and non-violent” demonstrations, making it seem as though they were “a mean rout of extremists and dangerous crackpots”. *Compact* felt that they needed to “let the affected persons be heard and also show those incidents, that others like to turn their cameras away from, or put away their notepad”, a notion shared among other outlets as well (*Compact*, 01.05.).

The Corona Dictatorship: Repression of Freedom and total system failure

The PRAM’s adversarial opposition to the political elites and the mainstream media discussed so far were taken to the systemic level very early on by most of the outlets. The most common way through which such notions were expressed during Phase 1 was statements that the elite was not

able to deal with the crisis adequately, not only because of their personal incompetence, but also due to major underlying flaws in the German system, which the elite had previously created. Different writers listed a great variety of such deficits as examples of this, often naming specific policy areas which they felt should not have been neglected prior to the crisis and which were now crippled and unable to function efficiently. Crisis preparedness was one area around which critiques were arranged, with *JF*, for instance, reporting that “Germany has not been prepared for any catastrophes for a long time” (*JF*, 07.03.). These statements were made in particular about security politics and Germany’s inability to protect its borders, as well as trade policies which stop exports of health equipment, and the general inefficiency of German bureaucracy to trace infection chains, for instance. Broadly speaking, most of the system flaws were implicitly understood to be caused by the political elites’ focus on *soft politics* rather than *hard politics*, which the PRAM considered a consequence of the political and societal environment. In this line of thought, the critique was then sometimes extended to question the political system more fundamentally: “The Regime of the politically correct world saviours, that has hollowed out an overripe democracy and has exploited more and more brazenly privileges of the party state, which had been created during the rebuilding process after the second world war, has failed. They have led powerful states into the economic abyss and destabilized strong societies. The corona pandemic reveals this mercilessly” (*EF*, 20.03.).

Compact, *EF* and *JF* to a lesser extent were the earliest magazines to assign a clearly structural dimension to the failed crisis management. Already on March 10th, *Compact* wrote that the consequences of Corona were not of a medical, but a political nature, increasing the “dictatorial tendencies on the inside”. They analysed that there was indeed a “masterplan in the background” when it came to the exploitation of the “corona panic” (10.03.). As was to be expected based on prior analysis of the magazines, *EF* and *Compact* were most open to the idea that the crisis was used for other means by different actors. While popular conspiracies about the origin of the virus or the involvement of Bill Gates were not absent in the set, the most pervasive types of suspicions revolved around political and economic interests behind the pandemic, motivating actors to invent or exploit it for their own gains. These early suspicions about the elite’s motives and the systemic failures came to full fruition during Phase 2, when outlets were united in their opposition to the lockdown restrictions. The restrictions were characterized as an unacceptable repression of people’s freedoms and as a situation in which the state revealed its true colours. *JF* saw “political despotism” at work, suggesting that the state showed itself very eager to “reprimand” and “bully” the “law-abiding ordinary citizens”, while at the same time being lax about enforcing restrictions in the “oriental problem zones in the cities” (*JF*, 22.04.).

Reporting on the restrictions and measures against Covid-19 was a very popular headline topic and articles discussed different measures throughout the time frame. With the beginning of the second phase, the topic became intertwined with the notion of the restrictions repressing personal freedoms. While restrictions of movement, mask mandates and the lockdown were previously the main topic of such sections, they were now more directly framed as an act of repression of freedoms as the main takeaway from an article section, particularly by *Compact* and *EF*. In other words, a decrease in *general* coverage of different restrictions and the lockdown after Phase 1 happened *simultaneously* with a rise in focus on the personal rights perspective on said restrictions. To this end, some PRAM took a liking to specific rights and measures to target. The *right to demonstrate* was brought up by writers writing about the demonstrations in order to give concrete examples of how the state repressed the citizen's rights. *DS* utilized the topic of masks and mask mandate most often among all others to not only present them as a violation of people's freedoms, but also to criticize the government's trade policies, by narrowing in on the export of masks. Masks, for *DS*, became a symbol representative of *many* of the elite's perceived failings, and this preoccupation shows in a lower overall coverage of other types of restrictions and measures.

The term *Corona Dictatorship* emerged early with *EF* and *Compact*, and its usage increased with the lockdown coverage amongst all outlets. *DS* thought that "the boundaries between the often-vilified authoritarian regimes – so called rogue states – and the 'liberal' western pseudo-democracies are blurred" (25.04.). Compared to the PRAM's overall coverage about the restrictions and their role in curtailing citizens' rights, the notion that democracy itself was endangered or dysfunctional as a consequence of the government's measures was not as prominently featured by comparison. This is *not* to say that such system-level vocabulary did not feature strongly in all of the PRAM's reporting style as time went on. However, apart from *Compact* and *EF*, the magazines did not very regularly dedicate longer sections of their articles to exclusively serving the function of *developing* and *explaining* such claims about the status of democracy in Germany or any broader structural level beyond anti-elite notions. Instead, the other magazines wrote about different topics and usually just *implied* a mistrust in the political system through their choice of language, rather than adopting a more direct approach, as did *Compact* and *EF*. There was not enough text material available to say with certainty what caused some magazines' seeming disinterest to expand on these thoughts. A likely explanation might be that the climate in which the other PRAM published was more closely associated with far-right circles in which a deep mistrust and dislike of the political system were strong before the pandemic. As such, the remaining outlets might not have been particularly concerned with a system-level framing, because they had already considered the German "Pseudo-

Democracy" (*DS*) to be a lost cause. The language of *DS*, *Zuerst* and *JF* support this notion, because system criticism was very much present in more subtle ways, but often seemed to appeal to the readers mental frameworks in a "we both know of course what this means" fashion.

Building a sceptic movement identity between The People and the enlightened few

The idea that the *panic* caused by the coronavirus was more dangerous than the virus itself emerged early with *EF* and *Compact*, who had quickly considered the pandemic to be a case of undue hysteria. It was argued that the economic and cultural consequences, or the overburdening of health systems by panicked people with a regular flu, were far more serious than the pandemic itself (*EF*, 11.03.). Once the repression of freedoms through the restrictions became more dominant in the set, they too were weighted against the severity of the crisis with regard to how appropriate they were. Chief editor Schreiber from *DS* wrote that "the first causality [of the virus] was our freedom – or at least, what recently remained of it. A whole nation in house arrest – happy and in accord with their leaders. It makes one want to be swallowed up by the earth in shame" (*DS*, 09.04.). Through all the varied ways in which the PRAM questioned the adequacy of the government's actions and the reliability of information on Covid-19 and their support of the street protest movement, they have cultivated a fundamental mind-set of scepticism about all things Covid-19, which might even foster a sense of community and shared identity.

When addressing their scepticism regarding different matters, all outlets tended to consider themselves to be a small group which saw reason. *EF* writes that: "Germany is split into two groups – the paralysed, obedient majority and into us, the small, perplexed but still seeking minority. You and I are part of a minority, [...] hassled, berated and insulted. To be part of a minority, to be in the line of fire of the state-media and to be hated for thinking for yourself, all of this has never been a sign to be wrong on the matter or in conscience – quite the opposite" (*EF*, 08.05.). *EF* most strongly appealed to the readers' scepticism on the basis of an *intellectual* mentality, which readers of *EF* seemingly shared, and which was in line with *EF*'s generally more complex articles and their aim to reach readers with a higher education level. Other magazines instead emphasized a more "common sense" oriented approach to their scepticism, often citing regular citizens being able to call out the government on their "hogwash", and that everyone would be able to recognize this easily, if only they would awake from their slumber. In this way, magazines found themselves making some contradictory statements, in that they sometimes framed the "Us" in a rather inclusive fashion,

while at other times aiming to speak for the majority of citizens, which they tried to accommodate within their perceived In-group.

When expressing their scepticism about information provided on the pandemic or the appropriateness of the government's measures, the PRAM utilized scientific studies, experts, frequent references to authoritative sources and general arguments that were framed as rationality-based. While it was important to all, *EF* and *Compact* made most use of arguments based on science and reason, for instance by specifically criticizing numbers and statistics by utilising alternative studies and sources. The other magazines also used those means, but simultaneously had a high proportion of arguments which appealed to the readers' "common sense" and, rather than spelling out evidence in full, instead left it at references to authoritative sources. *Zuerst*, for example, had a very high proportion of statements linking their claims to authoritative sources, but a comparatively low proportion of statements which engaged in detailed fact-checking or in building a rational argument through the discussion of evidence. This did not come as a surprise, given the exceptionally short average article length and the occasional habit of *Zuerst* and *Compact* to copy-paste parts of their science coverage either from each other or a third source.

Articles of many PRAM took the shape of the writer, for instance, seemingly fact-checking what the "pro-government" experts had said and then explaining, how the outlets' own expert sources could debunk their claims. In this capacity, the PRAM thought that the mainstream media was negligent about sharing well-researched information on the virus and about critically evaluating the government's actions as they should have. Often, this was extended to the claim that the media and the state spread misinformation *on purpose* and that it was the PRAM's responsibility, as an independent newspaper, to work against this. For example, *Compact* headlined that "COMPACT uncovers, which important studies they are concealing from us" (15.04.) and *Zuerst*, after commenting on a government paper which called out the dangers of disinformation online, concluded the article in saying "Therefore: Read ZUERST! to enjoy true quality journalism!" (04.05.). The outlets all made clear distinctions between pro-government experts and those who opposed the current consensus. These "experts against the mainstream" appeared in disproportionate amounts in the set and the outlets were supportive of them, often highlighting the struggle and ridicule these critical voices endured in order to have the truth be heard. In this sense, the magazines understood themselves to be allies of these voices, because they shared the same minority grievances as cited through *EF* earlier in this section. In view of the government's crisis management, some PRAMs suggested that the scientific consensus was indeed on their own side, and the elites were wilfully ignoring it to push through their measures.

In their ambition to provide reliable and professional analysis and information during the pandemic, the PRAM found themselves giving some room to conspiracies or other such ideas, which did not hold up to scrutiny. Already suspicious of the corrupt elite and their motives, they were more sympathetic towards any sources which seemed to confirm that the government's restrictions indeed served other purposes, even if these sources based their view on doubtful evidence. Some outlets clearly seemed to struggle to find a balance between wanting to step up as a trustworthy and professional magazine during the crisis and simultaneously perceiving themselves to be underdogs, reporting on those experts that no established newspaper picked up on. In one article it was explicitly argued that spreading conspiracies might also be unpatriotic. It was argued that "Certainly, there are political intentions" behind the restrictions, but that in the face of the danger of the pandemic, it was uncalled for to attack and oppose every single measure taken by the government on principle. Rather, one should "close the ranks" when "The People [Ger. Volk] and fatherland are in danger" (EF, 17.04.).

As a consequence of different incentives on the matter, the outlets differed in their handling of conspiratorial claims and coverage of the popular conspiracies. As has been mentioned previously, *Compact* chose a creative strategy of engaging in the more outlandish Bill Gates and bioweapon conspiracies through the guise of scepticism itself. On February 29th they headlined "Fact-Check: Is the Coronavirus a bioweapon of Bill Gates?". The article concludes that it was unlikely that such a theory could be true, however the reasoning given appears lacklustre. The article presents claims of the conspiracy in great detail, but the author does an insufficient job of delivering on the promised "fact-check". In later phases, *Compact* became much more open to conspiracies and Bill Gates became a favoured target. In comparison, however, all of the outlets were more focused on "conspiratorial claims" as far as dubious motives of the political elites and businesses were concerned, rather than engaging too heavily in full-fledged conspiracy theories. *JF*, always concerned with their credibility, did not partake in extreme theories at all, and only openly brought up political mistrust within their commentary pieces. *EF*, on the other hand, was the most open about political conspiracies and was eager about analysing case numbers and finding evidence they thought proved the harmlessness of Covid-19. Both *DS* and *Zuerst* shared the political suspicions and made conspiratorial statements, yet there was not sufficient text material available to make more general statements about their handling of the topics.

With all topics so far, it has become clear that the PRAM represent more than simply online news outlets, but that they are politically and ideologically partial to far-right attitudes and populist rhetoric. Their content caters to a specific group of readers with a shared set of sentiments. The

PRAM's organisational and personal interconnectedness was a further indication that this group of outlets is part of wider network of new-right activism in Germany. Utilising insights from the social movement's perspective on Framing was then further justified with the emergence of the anti-lockdown protests in late April. Prior to their protest coverage, most of the texts were focussed on the *diagnostic* dimension, that is the PRAM's view on what problems Germany faced during the pandemic and who was to blame for them. The *prognostic* dimension was the second most popular one but was held comparatively vague. Some writers had views about what politicians should have done specifically, such as closing borders or stopping exports, while others hinted at broader solutions, such as disposing of the elite. Compared to diagnosis and prognosis, explicit *motivational* framing was less prominent, even during Phase 3.

The outlets most openly motivated to mobilize their readers to join the street demonstrations were *Compact* and *DS*, being the only ones that explicitly appealed to their readers. *Compact* said that police violence against demonstrators called for a "German Spring" (17.05) and tried gathering signatures to initiate their own demonstrations, as was discussed previously. *DS* had the most aggressively phrased calls to action. On May 5th they wrote that it was "time to switch to the attack – the corona measures are the crux of state arrogance" and their motto was "ATTACK! Us for the people!" (05.05.). *DS* individualised their support of a broader resistance early on by calling readers directly to "be a part of it as well, Germany needs strong hearts, who take to the streets for freedom and justice!" (21.04.). In their general coverage of the pandemic, as well as in their support of the demonstrations, *DS* felt it was their duty to "position ourselves as a advocates of the People's interests and prosecute a government, which once again goes berserk and not only ruins the people financially, but also harasses them" (05.05.). To this end, the article elaborates on a detailed "action plan" which *DS* worked on to take a more active role in the demonstrations. Most interestingly, this article is one of the few instances of outlets specifically characterising themselves as part of the "Political Right". *DS* discusses, in said article, how the Right should position themselves during the crisis and become more involved because "all things considered, overall policy wise, not enough has come from the Right, if one truly claims to be the fundamental opposition" (05.05.). Such open identification with a political camp was unique among *DS* and *Zuerst* and, even then, rarely appeared. Most of the time, outlets focused on their alliance with the people and on their strong dislike of the political Left, without explicitly positioning themselves, as populist actors tend to do.

Most of the time, the outlets supported the street demonstrations through their regular positive coverage about them. The protest movement is characterised as a freedom movement, in which regular citizens take to the street to protest for their constitutional rights. The framing has clear

populist characteristics in that the more outspoken magazines on the matter (*Compact*, *DS*, *Zuerst*) often present it not just as a movement against the lockdown, but against the political elites and the state, *Compact* for instance headlining “Spring of the Democrats: Querfront-Protests are frightening the Establishment” (24.05.). Articles on the demonstrations were very preoccupied with information about the numbers of participants and the list of cities that participated or joined the movement. In this fashion, the large amount of protest coverage effectively created the impression of a constantly growing resistance movement with headlines like “This time it has already been 300: Again demonstrations against Corona measures in Berlin” (*Zuerst*, 14.04.). To this effect, the descriptions often noted that an event started with a low number of participants but that passers-bys would spontaneously decide to join in after learning about the cause. The participants were characterised as a diverse group, which mainly consisted of peaceful, respectable and normal citizens, who were concerned about their rights. While *JF* also covered the demonstrations very frequently, their tone was decidedly more neutral, also describing participants violations of health regulations and their attacks on police officers. Only in their commentaries, *JF* writers clearly state their support for the events and, just as with immigration topics, *JF*’s interest in the topic was revealed through the number of articles dedicated to it, rather than explicit judgements within the texts.

Police violence was a large part of the articles, and the police’s supposed brutal behaviour was contrasted with their behaviour especially against left Antifa protestors. Some writers felt that the police not only treated anti-lockdown protestors unfairly compared to left protestors, but suggested that the police were actively working with *Antifa*, for instance by threatening protestors to “leave them to Antifa if they don’t walk to their cars more quickly” (*DS*, 03.05.). Articles emphasizing the police’s role in the events also made use of vulnerable groups such as seniors or children, highlighting their participation in contrast to passages about police demeanour. *Compact* writes that “a little girl has come to the protest with her family”, who has painted her own sign that said “I want school and not wearing a mask”. The article follows up this imagery with the description of how the police closed in on anyone at the event (25.04.). In the far-right sphere surrounding *DS* and *Zuerst*, the video of a senior citizen being pushed to the ground by police forces in Chemnitz was shared widely, with *DS* claiming that the police regularly acted “with unbelievable force, especially against older fellow citizens”. The writer frames the events as a revealing moment for the nature of the state asking “what will happen next? While us citizens are forced to wear masks, the state lets its mask drop a little more every day” (*DS*, 21.04.).

The PRAM's coverage of the demonstrations and the restrictions in particular have shown that it was not always easy for them to combine their views and general sentiments on different matters into a broader narrative without creating some peculiar contradictions within their presentation and their self-conceived identity and relation to out-groups. One type of such discrepancies were double standards about the violation of restrictions. While migrants, refugees and protestors from the Left were exclusively framed in a negative light for violating restrictions and endangering public health with their riots, the anti-lockdown protestors were brave and rightfully concerned for their freedoms and their violation of health guidelines was not problematized. Another such difficulty arose in the area of crisis management, when their strong anti-elite sentiments pre-determined some contradictory reactions to government actions: While, at first, restrictions could not have been taken *fast enough* according to some writers, once the lockdown proceeded, it had to be framed negatively by the same anti-elite token. As discussed, magazines approached this conundrum differently, their anti-elite sentiment always remaining their central frame of reference.

A final and important conflict came about in the contrast between the PRAM's inclusive in-group identity and their aspiration to speak on behalf of the people in general. The outlets' self-image throughout the analysis time was that of a small and victimised group of sceptics that stood apart from the general populace, which was often described as complacent in their oppressed state and unquestioning of authority. At the same time, magazines regularly claim to speak the truth of the common people. With the emergence of the demonstration movement, this conflicting view of themselves in relation to the people became more complex still, when now only the common citizens *in the protest movement* were looked upon favourably. The study of the PRAM's framing of the pandemic illustrates that maintaining and performing a cohesive far-right identity does not in all details harmonize with a populist rhetoric. This becomes particularly difficult when narrating an all-encompassing topic such as Corona, which touches upon so many parts of society and subjects about which the far right normally hold exclusionary and isolationist views.

5.3. The importance of language in communicating shared mental frameworks

The citations presented from the source material in this study should have illustrated that one cannot separate an intended framing from the stylistic manner of its presentation, language choices and the linguistic descriptors and relations between actors making up a writer's worldview. In order to share a mental framework with others and to affect a reader's view on a topic, the use of language is a prerequisite. To gain a general understanding of how language and style aided the

crisis framing, Pan/Kosicki's (1993) list of common news framing devices and Franzosi's (1998a/1998b) attention to subject-action-object centred narrative analysis were considered during the coding process. News outlets like the PRAM have been increasing their reach and popularity online and gained in social media following during the pandemic. To study the language of how far-right populist online news media appeal to their readers, and whether their use of language and rhetoric has changed over time, should become a greater priority in researching them in the future. While it was not in this study's capacity to carry out a thorough analysis on the matter, this section will serve as an outlook and present some notable elements that should inform a closer look hereafter.

As is the case for many news outlets and publications competing for attention and readership, article headlines and the selection of the title image are of vital importance, because they can mean the difference between generating a *click* and being scrolled past by potential readers. The text material suggests that, for different magazines, this practically resulted in different habits. *JF* and *EF*, the magazines most concerned with a moderate and professional (*JF*) or intellectual and witty (*EF*) presentation, differed from the remaining outlets, whose presentation was more garnered towards sensational and provocative headlines. Sensational headers featured unflattering or threatening images of politicians such as chancellor Merkel and usually exaggerated events and their future consequences in some manner. The first implications of the economic impact of Covid-19 were instantly headlined as a total crash of the world economy (alongside tips to invest in gold). When a Bavarian politician stated that curfews may become necessary, *Compact* headlined that he was "threatening" to impose curfews and asked "Is the Corona Dictatorship coming?" (19.03.). Even *JF* considers this a possibility in a commentary piece by chief editor Dieter Stein, stating that "the 'shutdown' resembles a war" (16.04.). *EF*'s approach to generating interest in their articles is distinctly different, putting their emphasis on headlines that sound intriguing, intelligent or humorous. For instance, an article on the disproportionality of the restrictions was titled "Satirical recommendations about coronavirus. We will all die! The virus of proportionality-nonsense has spread worldwide" (06.03.).

The theme of satire and general ingenuity was an overall popular device used to creatively describe disliked policy developments and to attack disliked actors through the use of defamatory descriptors. Rarely, for instance, were Angela Merkel and her government named in a neutral fashion, but instead "the god-chancellor" (08.04.), "the great mother" (20.03.), "the lozenge" in reference to her infamous hand gesture, or "the German mistress of late reactions"(both 21.03.) were terms used by *JF* in this selection of terms. Descriptors most often presumed that she resided

over her “Merkel-Regime” (*Compact*, 11.05.) in royal or tyrant rulership. The actions associated with her painted the picture of a politician who frequently withdraws into inactivity, prattles without knowing what she is talking about, carelessly hands out tax-money to benefit anyone but her own people and is so fickle that she changes her opinions as soon as the wind blows in another direction. This pattern was the same for all actors that the PRAM regularly attacked. Negative sentiments and the stylistic enrichment of the actors and their actions through language often provided the text with more substance and memorability than the actual topic of the article itself. More in-depth studies should specifically analyse how the PRAM in recent years have expressed anti-elite sentiments through their language and whether their pandemic coverage could yield new insights.

Another area of great interest that would warrant more systematic study is the manner in which *evidence* is presented, what type of evidence is given and preferred and in what ways evidence and opinions held by opposing actors are disproven. To know how their arguments are constructed is an essential step in understanding the increasing appeal the PRAM have had on new readers since at least the European migration crisis. This study has found out that anti-immigrant or anti-left sections of text very often relied on *anecdotal evidence* and usage of *stereotypes* to give weight to their opinions. It appears that every topic in which concrete Others *could* be singled out to make wider claims tended to do so by using more generalising types of evidence. Examples of this were *DS* and *Zuerst*'s stereotypical descriptors of refugees and left activists, and also their common habit of singling out individual cases. Such single cases were often presented as migrant crime or violent escalations at anti-lockdown protests, when video footage of a single demonstrator's treatment was equated to the demeanour of police forces at large. More abstract actors, such as the establishment or the mainstream media, were not as commonly criticized through evidence from individual experiences, yet stereotypes were used increasingly and attempts were made to *personify* abstract systems through individuals, such as Angela Merkel representing the elite. Such tendencies are certainly not an unusual journalistic device among regular news media, but to analyse how far-right populists frame these types of anecdotal arguments in contrast to established media would be insightful.

When it came to the authenticity of information on coronavirus, the aptness of restrictions in relation to the perceived seriousness of the disease or general critiques about crisis management, the PRAM did not often rely on the writers' personal judgements, but on references to sources of authority. This is where they often brought up studies that seemingly disproved information which the government based its decisions on, or cited scientists, lawyers or other experts to support their

own arguments. Sometimes it was suggested that scientific consensus was indeed on the side of the PRAM, and the government was wilfully ignoring the truth. *EF*, for example, wrote: “But this is of course science and research, and science and research fade to the background, when Polit-driven-experts put their whole collected ignorance into words to endanger their own people” (02.03.). As was discussed previously, the magazines differed in how strongly they favoured rational arguments and fact-checking of their own, as opposed to simply presenting an authoritative source as an unquestioned fact. Particularly when no further details on studies were examined, some outlets instead relied on the tool of *simplification* for the reader, for instance by creating an analogy, intended to illustrate the truth of their argument, often linking it explicitly to the “common sense” of the reader.

Actors, their actions and their relations to other actors play an important role in any framing process, because actors represent the agents within their view of the world. This was particularly true for the PRAM, whose far-right populist orientation predisposed them to define much clearer In- and out-groups and to hold exclusionary views in many policy areas affected by the pandemic. Coding the common actors, their actions and the claims and topics that they were regularly linked to revealed more clearly which roles the outlets attributed to different actors within their narrative. The most central and well-researched divisions existed between the perceived In-group, the people and the elites. When not referred to simply as “the people” or “the citizens”, the general public in Germany were most often described as “ordinary citizens” [orig. Ger. Normalbürger] or “the Germans” by all outlets. The people took a passive and meek role in the text materials, largely suppressed by the elite. In the beginning of the pandemic, until the demonstrations, they were mostly “scared” (*Compact*, 10.03.), “panicking” (*DS*, 09.04.), “law-abiding” (*JF*, 22.04.) and a mere “state-dependent being” (*JF*, 05.04.) with a “fatal inclination to naivety” (*EF*, 16.03.). Despite their role as unquestioning subjects of the rulers, they were also hard-working and virtuous and hence not to blame for their actions, because they had been “betrayed and lied to” (*Compact*, 06.05.) and their panic was not caused by the virus itself, but by media and politics conspiring to “beat it into” them (*Compact*, 10.03.). In Phase 3, the people became a more active agent. Citizens were now “concerned” (*Compact*, 29.04.), “politically mature” [orig. Ger. mündig] (*Compact*, 07.05.) and when participating in the demonstrations, they were “completely respectable” (*DS*, 03.05), “non-violent” (*Compact*, 17.05.) or “go to the court” to take legal action against the restrictions (*Zuerst*, 15.05.).

As has been discussed at length previously, the PRAM characterised politicians and the elite as entirely incompetent, self-serving and in the grip of the left-green cultural tyranny. It was rare to

find a mention of any political actors without negative connotations or explicit negative commentary, apart from AFD or NPD politicians. The relationship between the people and the elite during the pandemic was perceived as more paternalistic than usual. The state does not have the people's best interest at heart and has instead "played with peoples fear" (*DS*, 05.05.), not caring that what money they expend "must in the end be paid for by the citizens and tax-payers" (*JF*, 26.03.). Actors who experienced equally negative representation were left and green politicians, left activists (or "left extremist", "left terrorists" and pro-immigration organisations and activists), the mainstream media, the police as well as migrants and refugees (particularly Muslims and supposed "IS terrorists"). All these groups had in common that even when they were *not* the main focus of a text segment, the PRAM consistently found ways to imply their dislike in passing, most often through the use of negative descriptors. For instance, *DS* and *Zuerst* usually referred to refugees as "Illegals" and made regular use of quotation marks to express their doubt that "refugees" or refugee "children" indeed had a genuine claim to aid. Left actors were described as communists, "bionade faction" (*JF*, 20.03.), "the politically correct twitter-bubble" (*JF*, 11.03.) and a variety of other unique terms. While the perceived allies and in-group were often victimized and framed as a suppressed group, the disliked actors were instead instrumentalised to serve as concrete scapegoats, to perpetuate stereotypes which might then easily be referenced in later arguments.

A shared feature between all these groups was that using negative or positive descriptors in passing appealed to a shared mental framework, which would allow the reader to interpret an implied meaning without the writer needing to lay out the details behind their sentiments. Frame Theory suggests that this would make these descriptors particularly important, because readers are free to interpret intended meaning subjectively. What the PRAM have expressed through their language will be perceived and interpreted differently by readers deeply immersed in the far-right digital sphere as compared to new and possibly moderately minded readers. The linguistic relationship between the imagined reader and "the people" is particularly interesting in this respect. As had been mentioned, this relationship was usually not addressed in the articles, or left vague at best. Examining how the PRAM perceive this relationship would require a study with a larger data set. Broadly, however, it seemed that the reader was linguistically placed outside of any reference to the people if the PRAM assigned *negative* characteristics to them. Then, the reader was part of the small and sceptic group, which saw the truth more clearly and set themselves apart from the uncritical masses. But when *positive* features of the people and their virtues were the centre of attention, both the reader and the author of the text seemed more often included in the unifying "Us". These types of In-Group and Out-Group biases are of course not a novelty, but to study them

more closely in the context of the PRAM is much needed. The German far right has adapted to the realities of the Web 2.0. and is no longer simply tucked away in a secretive corner of the internet, but instead utilises a more amenable and populist rhetoric to reach wider audiences, for instance through their social media. To analyse how this development reflects in their language, by using approaches such as Franzosi's narrative analysis, would advance our understanding of them and possibly inform counter-initiatives.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Research on far-right populist digital news media has been too infrequent and has often focused on only individual or a few magazines and their history at a time. Studies brought up here were often looking at *alternative news media* as a broader group, or looked at far-right activity online, without necessarily narrowing down the specific sub-group of far-right digital news outlets, who recently adopted a more populist persona and seem determined to further their reach and appeal. The need to study these present-day PRAM in a systematic way becomes all the more pressing in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Crisis environments breed insecurities among individuals and encourage media outlets and political actors to try and satisfy an increased need for reliable information and a clear narrative to help make sense of the world. Initial studies on the far right and the alternative news media during the pandemic have looked at their potential contribution to misinformation (Boberg et al 2020), further normalisation of the far right through blurred boundaries with the mainstream in anti-lockdown protests in Germany (Vieta 2020) or the sociological analysis of who was mobilised by the movement (Nachtwey/Schäfer/Frei 2020).

The present study set out to analyse the detailed framing efforts of five such far-right populist digital news media from January 2020 until the end of May 2020 in Germany. It was not only the first such qualitative comparative case study in recent years that narrowed in on the PRAM specifically – ever since they have increased their following on digital platforms and since the general openness towards far-right sentiments in Germany has surged with the PEGIDA protests and the success of AFD – but by taking to heart lessons from Goffman's Frame Theory and its further developments in social movement and communication studies, the thesis has effectively been able to illustrate that some of the common perceptions in the media about how the populist far-right have taken advantage of the crisis were not accurate or misrepresented a far more complex reality.

The first of these imprecise representations was the implied view that populist and far-right actors strategically exploited and instrumentalised the pandemic in order to spread their hate campaigns and to convince a wider segment of society of their narratives. As far as it goes, this is of course not untrue, given that *any* actor will naturally wish to make use of new situations to the best of their abilities. However, this type of representation runs the risk of inadvertently attributing too little importance to the permanence, complexity and consistency that predates the crisis framing and informs an actor's framing of a situation. For instance, the term of "Pandemic Populism", coined by Boberg et. al., could allow for one possible interpretation that there was an *exceptional* kind of Populism at play that was unique to the pandemic. Instead, a more language sensitive, although not catchy, term should have been "Populism during Corona". When it comes to the language of public discussions about the impact and reach of far-right ideologies into mainstream German culture, these are much more than trivial accentuations of emphasis. This thesis has shown how the PRAM were able to frame the crisis to great effect, not because of sudden strategic whims, but because their *established framing habits* and organisational set-up allowed them to utilize the crisis more so than other actors at the time could have.

To set up the premise of this perspective, the thesis began by recognizing that the selected print magazines aimed to build a parallel online culture through offering a variety of services like their digital news sites, video programs, online shops and social media platforms. This *full-service offering* (Storz 2015) can allow a reader to become fully immersed in populist far-right content bubbles, in which news is presented through specific narrative lenses and shared mental frameworks are build and repeatedly shared with new readers. The analysis of *Compact*, *Junge Freiheit*, *Eigentümlich Frei*, *Deutsche Stimme* and *Zuerst* revealed that there was presently still a large overlap between these magazine's employees and topical themes. This affinity towards one another's preferred narratives could be seen most clearly in the outlets' agreement over the state of a left-dominated society, their shared dislike of mainstream media and their strong populist framings and pronounced mistrust and animosity towards political elites, believing the system to be thoroughly corrupt and opposed to the people's interests.

The manner of expression of these sentiments during the crisis differed between the outlets, based on their previously established narratives and general set-up and interests as publishing companies. *Deutsche Stimme* and *Zuerst*, the most openly far-right and anti-immigrant outlets in the set, expressed their opposition to elites through an anti-globalisation and migration lense primarily. They criticized the government for not closing the national borders soon enough and argued that the pandemic illustrated that international trade and free movement incapacitated the nation

state's ability to react to the crisis quickly and efficiently. When the lockdown was in place, they most frequently instrumentalised migrants and left activists by claiming that they violated the restrictions largely unmolested by the police, while the state delighted in pursuing regular (German) citizens for minor offenses. *Compact* and *Eigentümlich Frei*, who differed in their view on many topics, were both more open towards conspiratorial interpretations of Covid, thinking that the virus was widely overrated and that the ruling elites and media fabricated a crisis to further their own goals. *Junge Freiheit* shared the sentiments towards the political elites and media and placed similar topical emphasis on immigration headlines as *DS* and *Zuerst* did, but reserved harsh anti-elite criticisms for their commentary pieces. The outlet has been undergoing a moderation process in recent years, seeking a more conservative appearance, which also came through in their crisis framing.

The second common misrepresentation about the populist far right's framing of the pandemic in their digital news outlets was the limited amount of topics and claims which were attributed to them. During the early crisis, German media represented them as bent on wilfully distributing misinformation and conspiracies about Bill Gates and Chinese lab accidents. Further, they were said to use the crisis to start hate campaigns against refugees and international travellers, whom they accused of bringing the virus to Germany through their movement or bad hygiene customs. As this in-depth analysis has shown, this representation of the PRAM's framing vastly underestimates the true extend and appeal that the PRAM offer. While many of the outlets did cover conspiracies and harsh anti-immigration stories, this was only *one part* of their total coverage for some of the outlets. The PRAM offered articles on any topic and analysed the pandemic from various angles, sometimes concerned with economics, school closures and other regular stories that would have appeared in a similar shape in established media outlets. The narratives the PRAM provided on Covid-19 were all combined into a mostly cohesive overarching narrative:

Society today is culturally governed by a left-green and brainwashed minority, who make up Germany's incompetent and corrupt political elites. The elites, who have conspired with the mainstream media, are trying to keep the people in the dark, while they fill up their own pockets. They are not serving the nation, but the endurance of their system. Blinded by their idealism, they invite in immigrants to take advantage of the German welfare state and the good-will of German citizens. During the crisis, their incompetence and selfishness was revealed once more, and they proceeded to make one bad decision after the other, ruining the German economy and societal outlook. But, in the process of showing their true face, many more citizens realised that they no longer wished to be governed by the Corona-

Regime and took to the streets, demanding their freedoms back and bringing hope to regular citizens and patriots alike.

The stories that different PRAM told about the pandemic were multi-faceted, yet they were based on these few core framings outlined above. To reduce these news outlets to the role of simple isolated scaremongers, bent on short-term profit off of people's fears, only serves to enable their own on-going habit of portraying themselves as victims. The true danger of their crisis framing lay in the ingenuity with which they applied their old established frames to a new crisis, appealing both to their established readership and offering tempting world-views through which new readers may comfortably understand the health crisis and ease their own uncertainties in this unprecedented situation. As was discussed in the final chapter, language and presentation were one important tool through which the PRAM invited new readers into their world. It is an understandable urge to try and distance oneself from these "Covid-Idiots" [orig. Ger. Covidioten] by relegating them to isolated little corners of society. But, as journalists, civil society and as researchers especially, we must try harder to understand and learn from the way in which populist far-right forces are able to speak to disillusioned citizens in a manner that not many other actors are able to do presently.

Literature

- **Adams, J., & Roscigno, V. J.** (2005). White supremacists, oppositional culture and the world wide web. *Social Forces*, 84(2), 759–778. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2006.0001>
- **An, S. K., & Gower, K. K.** (2009). How do the news media frame crises? A content analysis of crisis news coverage. *Public Relations Review*, 35(2), 107–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2009.01.010>
- **Botsch, G.** (11.1.2017). The *Junge Freiheit* – mouthpiece of a nationalist-radical opposition. Bpb, Federal Centre of Political Education. [*Die Junge Freiheit – Sprachrohr einer radikal-nationalistischen Opposition. Bpb, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*] <https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/230020/die-junge-freiheit-sprachrohr-einer-radikal-nationalistischen-opposition> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Barlen, J., Brandstetter, M.** (2015). Xenophobia 2.0 – Right-wing extremism and right-wing populism in the digital world. In: Decker, F., Henningsen, B., & Jakobsen, K. (2015). *Right-Wing Populism and Right-Wing Extremism in Europe: Challenge of the civil society by old ideologies and new media*, 2nd edition, 303–320. [Fremdenfeindlichkeit 2.0 – Rechtsextremismus und Rechtspopulismus in der digitalen Welt. In: Decker, F., Henningsen, B., & Jakobsen, K. (2015). *Rechtspopulismus und Rechtsextremismus in Europa: Die Herausforderung der Zivilgesellschaft durch alte Ideologien und neue Medien. 2.* 303-320.] <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845252940>
- **Bateson, G.** (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind: A revolutionary approach to man's understanding of himself*. New York: Ballantine.
- **Berbrier, M.** (1998). "Half the battle": Cultural resonance, framing processes, and ethnic affectations in contemporary white separatist rhetoric. *Social Problems*, 45(4), 431–450. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3097206>
- **BMG, Bundesministerium für Gesundheit** (2021). BMG; Federal Ministry of Health (2021): Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2: Chronicle of the Measures so far. [Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2: Chronik der bisherigen Maßnahmen.] <https://www.bundesgesundheitsministerium.de/coronavirus/chronik-coronavirus.html> [last access: 6.2.2021]
- **Braun, S., Vogt, U.** (2007). The weekly newspaper „*Junge Freiheit*“: Critical analyses of the program, contents, writers and customers. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. [*Die Wochenzeitung „Junge Freiheit“: Kritische Analysen zu Programmatik, Inhalten, Autoren und Kunden*]. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-90559-4_1

- **BZ, Berlin newspaper** (4.4.2020). Corona-distance not followed – two arrests at demonstration. [BZ, Berliner Zeitung: Corona-Abstand nicht eingehalten – zwei Festnahmen bei Demo.]
<https://www.bz-berlin.de/berlin/mitte/corona-abstand-nicht-eingehalten-zwei-festnahmen-bei-demo> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Boberg, S., Quandt, T., Schatto-Eckrodt, T., & Frischlich, L.** (2020). *Pandemic Populism: Facebook Pages of Alternative News Media and the Corona Crisis – A Computational Content Analysis*. Muenster Online Research (MOR) Working Paper 1/2020. 1–21. Retrieved from <http://arxiv.org/abs/2004.02566>
- **Compact** (2020)
 - (2020/4). COMPACT 4/2020: They are coming! The new Asylum-flood in the Shadow of Corona | Currently only available as download.
[COMPACT 4/2020: Sie kommen! Die neue Asylflut im Schatten von Corona | nur noch als Download verfügbar]
<https://www.compact-shop.de/shop/compact-magazin/compact-4-2020-sie-kommen-die-neue-asylflut/> [last access: 25.04.2021]
 - (2020/5). COMPACT 6/2020: The Vaccine-Dictator. How dangerous is Bill Gates? | Currently only available as download [Compact 6/2020: Der Impfdiktator. Wie gefährlich ist Bill Gates? | nur noch als Download verfügbar]
<https://www.compact-shop.de/shop/compact-magazin/compact-6-2020-der-impfdiktator-wie-gefaehrlich-ist-bill-gates/> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Compact** (2021). About us [Über Uns] <https://www.compact-online.de/wir-ueber-uns/> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Caiani, M., & della Porta, D.** (2011). The elitist populism of the extreme right: A frame analysis of extreme right-wing discourses in Italy and Germany. *Acta Politica*, 46(2), 180–202. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2010.28>
- **Caiani, M., della Porta, D., & Wagemann, C.** (2012). *Mobilizing on the Extreme Right: Germany, Italy, and the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199641260.001.0001>
- **Cantow, M., Fehndrich, M., Zicht, W.** (2017). Election Results. [Wahlergebnisse] Wahlrecht.de <https://www.wahlrecht.de/ergebnisse/index.htm> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Carnegie, Endowment for International Peace ThinkTank** (2021). Global Protest Tracker. Stand: last updated on 29.1.2021.
<https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Decker, F.** (26.10.2020). Stages of the AfD party history. *Bpb, Federal Centre of Political Education*. [Etappen der Parteigeschichte der AfD. *Bpb, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*]

<https://www.bpb.de/politik/grundfragen/parteien-in-deutschland/afd/273130/geschichte>
[last access: 25.04.2021]

- **Doward, J.** (25.04.2020). Far right hijack coronavirus crisis to push agenda and boost support. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/far-right-hijack-coronavirus-crisis-to-push-agenda-and-boost-support> [last access: 25.04.2021]

- **DS, Deutsche Stimme** (2020):
 - About us [Über uns]
<https://deutsche-stimme.de/ueber-uns/> [last access: 25.04.2021]
 - 29.02.2020. *DS* March 2020: Time to start a new chapter! [*DS* März 2020: Zeit, ein neues Kapitel aufzuschlagen!]
<https://deutsche-stimme.de/zeit-ein-neues-kapitel-aufzuschlagen/>
[last access: 25.04.2021]
 - 07.03.2020. Corona proofs: Globalisation is very hazardous/combustible [Corona beweist: Globalisierung ist brandgefährlich!]
<https://deutsche-stimme.de/corona-beweist-globalisierung-ist-brandgefaehrlich/>
[last access: 25.04.2021]
 - 23.12.2020. *DS* January 2021: From “Thinking Laterally” to Querfront?! [*DS* Januar 2021: Vom “Querdenken” zur Querfront?!]
<https://deutsche-stimme.de/ds-januar-2021-vom-querdenken-zur-querfront/>
[last access: 25.04.2021]

- **Eckert, T.** (21.5.2019). “First conference of the free media”: How the AfD invited right-wing bloggers and the Identitarians into the Bundestag. [“Erste Konferenz der freien Medien”: Wie die AfD rechte Blogger und Identitäre in den Bundestag einlud.] *Correctiv*.
<https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/hintergrund/2019/05/21/erste-konferenz-der-freien-medien-wie-die-afd-rechte-blogger-und-identitaere-in-den-bundestag-einlud/>
[last access: 25.04.2021]

- **EF, Eigentümlich Frei** (2021). Why ef? My declaration of independence. [Warum ef? Meine Unabhängigkeitserklärung]
<https://ef-magazin.de/webwarum-ef/> [last access: 25.04.2021]

- **EF, Eigentümlich Frei** (28.01.2020). First statistical data about the victims of the coronavirus. Predominantly old men. Why such measures against a disease with a ‘mild course’? [Erste statistische Daten zu Opfern des Coronavirus. Vornehmlich alte Männer. Warum solche Maßnahmen gegen eine Krankheit mit „mildem Verlauf“?].
<https://ef-magazin.de/2020/01/28/16384-erste-statistische-daten-zu-opfern-des-coronavirus-vornehmlich-alte-maenner>
[last access: 25.04.2021]

- **Entman, R. M.** (1993). Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>

- **Figenschou, T. U., & Ihlebæk, K. A.** (2019). Challenging Journalistic Authority: Media criticism in far-right alternative media. *Journalism Studies*, 20(9), 1221–1237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2018.1500868>
- **FrameWorks Institute** (2020): Framing 101. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/tools-and-resources/framing-101/> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Franzosi, R.** (1998a). Narrative Analysis—Or Why (and How) Sociologists Should Be Interested in Narrative. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24(1), 517–554. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.517>
- **Franzosi, R.** (1998b). Narrative as data: Linguistic and statistical tools for the quantitative study of historical events. *International Review of Social History*, 43(6), 81-104. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s002085900011510x>
- **Goffman, E.** (1986). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Boston: Northeastern University Press. New Edition, Paperback.
- **Goßner, C., Rahner, J.** (09.07.2020). Corona Racism: „Its about life and death“. [Corona-Rassismus: “Es geht um Leib und Leben“.] Interview with Judith Rahner, conducted by Goßner. EurActiv. <https://www.euractiv.de/section/antidiskriminierung/interview/corona-rassismus-es-geht-um-leib-und-leben/> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Heft, A., Mayerhöffer, E., Reinhardt, S., & Knüpfer, C.** (2020). Beyond Breitbart: Comparing Right-Wing Digital News Infrastructures in Six Western Democracies. *Policy & Internet*, 12(1), 20–45. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.219>
- **Hogg, M. A.** (2000). Subjective Uncertainty Reduction through Self-categorization: A Motivational Theory of Social Identity Processes. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 11(1), 233-255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14792772043000040>
- **Hogg, M. A., Meehan, C., & Farquharson, J.** (2010). The solace of radicalism: Self-uncertainty and group identification in the face of threat. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46(6), 1061-1066. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.05.005>
- **Holt, K., & Haller, A.** (2017). What Does ‘Lügenpresse’ Mean? Expressions of Media Distrust on PEGIDA’s Facebook Pages. *Politik*, 20(4), 42–57. <https://doi.org/10.7146/politik.v20i4.101534>
- **Holt, K.** (2018). Alternative media and the notion of anti-systemness: Towards an analytical framework. *Media and Communication*, 6(4), 49–57. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1467>
- **Holt, K., Ustad Figenschou, T., & Frischlich, L.** (2019). Key Dimensions of Alternative News Media. *Digital Journalism*, 7(7), 860-869. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1625715>

- **Jeske, A. & Litschko, K.** (15.4.2020). "Compact" magazine in crisis. Under Scrutiny. ["Compact" Magazin in der Krise. Unter prüfendem Blick. *Taz tageszeitung*]. *Taz daily newspaper*.
<https://taz.de/Compact-Magazin-in-der-Krise/!5676890/> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **JF, Junge Freiheit** (2021). Mission statement of JF [*Leitbild der JF*].
<https://jungefreiheit.de/informationen/ueber-den-verlag/> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Kenfm** (2021). Gates seizes Germany. [Gates kapert Deutschland]
<https://kenfm.de/gates-kapert-deutschland/> [last access: 25.04.2021]

[Author's note: This video has been the subject of regular deletions from different video platforms. While this copy is located on Ken Jebsen's official website, it is possible that it will no longer be accessible to future readers.]

- **Keßler, P.** (2018). The New Right; in the grey zone between the Extreme Right and Conservatism?: Protagonists, Program and positioning movements. [*Die Neue Rechte; in der Grauzone zwischen Rechtsextremismus und Konservatismus?: Protagonisten, Programmatik und Positionierungsbewegungen*]. Münster, LIT Verlag.
- **KDW, Democratic Resistance Unit** (2021): Democracy Movement. Not without us. [Demokratiebewegung. Nicht ohne uns.]
<https://www.nichtohneuns.de/> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Klandermans, B., & Staggborg, S.** (2002). Methods of social movement research. In *Social Movements, Protest, and Contention*, 16.
- **Klein, A.** (2012). Slipping Racism into the Mainstream: A Theory of Information Laundering. *Communication Theory*, 22(4), 427-448. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2012.01415.x>
- **Krämer, B.** (2017). Populist online practices: the function of the Internet in right-wing populism. *Information Communication and Society*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1328520>
- **LfV-Sachsen**, Saxony State office for the Protection of the Constitution (28.5.2020). Extremists are using Corona situation for their own interests. [Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz Sachsen (28.5.2020). Extremisten nutzen Coronalage für ihre Interessen]
<https://www.verfassungsschutz.sachsen.de/2251.htm> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Maegerle, A.** (23.12.2016). What does the far-right corner read? The folio-forest. Bpb, Federal Centre of Political Education. [Was liest der rechte Rand? Der Blätterwald. BpB, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung]
<https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/239620/der-rechte-rand-publikationen> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Mahlberg, Gaby** (31.3.2017). A visit in the "ideological mother-ship" of right-wing populism. Die Welt. [Ein Besuch im "ideologischen Mutterschiff" des Rechtspopulismus. Die Welt.]

<https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article163314751/Ein-Besuch-im-ideologischen-Mutterschiff-des-Rechtspopulismus.html> [last access: 25.04.2021]

- **MDR, Central German Broadcasting** (10.11.2020). Radicalisation of the Right at “Querdenken” demonstration. [Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk (10.11.2020). Rechte Radikalisierung bei „Querdenken“-Demo.] <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/politik/inland/radikalisierung-querdenken-rechte-100.html> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Moffitt, B.** (2015). How to perform crisis: A model for understanding the key role of crisis in contemporary populism. *Government and Opposition*, 50(2), 189–287. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2014.13>
- **Mudde, C.** (2007): *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- **Müller, P., & Schulz, A.** (2019). Alternative media for a populist audience? Exploring political and media use predictors of exposure to Breitbart, Sputnik, and Co. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(2), 277–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2019.1646778>
- **Nachtwey, O., Schäfer, R., & Frei, N.** (2020). Political Sociology of the Corona-Protests. [*Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste.*] <https://doi.org/10.31235/OSF.IO/ZYP3F>
- **Pan, Z., & Kosicki, G. M.** (1993). Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse. *Political Communication*, 10(1), 55-75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.1993.9962963>
- **Priester, K.** (28.10.2010). Fluid boundaries between right-wing Extremism and right-wing Populism in Europe? Bpb, Federal Centre of Political Education. [Fließende Grenzen zwischen Rechtsextremismus und Rechtspopulismus in Europa? BpB, Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung] <https://www.bpb.de/apuz/32423/fluessende-grenzen-zwischen-rechtsextremismus-und-rechtspopulismus-in-europa?p=all> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **RBB24, public broadcast of Berlin and Brandenburg** (29.08.2020): Almost 40.000 people at Corona Demonstration – barricades at Reichstag breached. [RBB24, Rundfunk Bayern und Brandenburg: Fast 40.000 Menschen bei Corona-Demos – Sperren am Reichstag durchbrochen. https://www.rbb24.de/politik/thema/2020/coronavirus/beitraege_neu/2020/08/demonstrationen-samstag-corona-querdenken-gegendemos.html] [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Reuter, M.** (24.6.2019). Study about Europe election: AfD dominates Facebook, die PARTEI Twitter. Netzpolitik.org. [Studie zur Europawahl: AfD dominiert Facebook, die PARTEI Twitter] <https://netzpolitik.org/2019/studie-zur-europawahl-afd-dominiert-facebook-die-partei-twitter/> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Rieger, D., Frischlich, L., & Bente, G.** (2017). Propaganda in an insecure, unstructured world: How psychological uncertainty and authoritarian attitudes shape the evaluation of right-wing extremist internet propaganda. *Journal for Deradicalization*, 0(10), 203–229. <https://doi.org/10.5282/ubm/epub.68786>

- **RKI, Robert Koch Institut; Esri Deutschland (2021): Robert Koch Institute: COVID-19 Dashboard**
<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/478220a4c454480e823b17327b2bf1d4>
[last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Snow, D., Benford, R. (1988).** Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization. In Klandermans, B., Kriesi, H. & Tarrow, S. G. (Eds.). *From structure to action: comparing social movement research across cultures*. Greenwich, Conn: JAI Press. *International social movement research*, 1, 197–217.
- **Snow, D. A., Rochford, E. B., Worden, S. K., & Benford, R. D. (1986).** Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation. *American Sociological Review*, 51(4), 464-481. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095581>
- **Snow, D. A., Vliegenthart, R., & Ketelaars, P. (2018).** The Framing Perspective on Social Movements. In Snow, D., Soule, S., Kriesi, H., McCammon, H. (Eds.). *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. Wiley-Blackwell. 392–410.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119168577.ch22>
- **SPIEGEL-Online/Civey Institute (11.11.2020).** SPIEGEL-Survey. High support of Corona-shutdown. [SPIEGEL-Online/Civey Institut (11.11.2020). SPIEGEL-Umfrage. Hohe Zustimmung zu Corona-Shutdown]
<https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/civey-umfrage-zustimmung-zu-corona-massnahmen-weiterhin-hoch-a-7457ad4a-e140-4be7-a950-bdf0f8a20edb>
[last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Stavrakakis, Y., Katsambekis, G., Kioupiolis, A., Nikisianis, N., & Siomos, T. (2018).** Populism, anti-populism and crisis. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 17, 4–27.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-017-0142-y>
- **Storz, W. (2015).** „Querfront“ – Career of a polit-media network. OBS working paper. Otto Brenner Foundation. [“Querfront” – Karriere eines politisch-publizistischen Netzwerks. OBS-Arbeitspapier. Otto Brenner Stiftung.]
https://www.otto-brennerstiftung.de/fileadmin/user_data/stiftung/02_Wissenschaftsportal/03_Publikationen/AP18_Querfront_Storz_2015_10_19.pdf [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Stöss, Richard (2015).** About the development of right-wing extremism in Germany. Bpb, Federal Centre of Political Education. [Über den Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland. Bpb, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung]
<https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/198940/zur-entwicklung-des-rechtsextremismus-in-deutschland> [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **Snow, D. A., Vliegenthart, R., & Ketelaars, P. (2018).** The Framing Perspective on Social Movements. In Snow, D., Soule, S., Kriesi, H., McCammon, H. (Eds.). *The Wiley Blackwell*

Companion to Social Movements. Wiley-Blackwell. 392–410.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119168577.ch22>

- **Vieten, U. M.** (2020). The “New Normal” and “Pandemic Populism”: The COVID-19 Crisis and Anti-Hygienic Mobilisation of the Far-Right. *Social Sciences*, 9(165). 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9090165>
- **Vysotsky, S., & McCarthy, A. L.** (2017). Normalizing cyberracism: a neutralization theory analysis. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 40(4).446-461.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0735648X.2015.1133314>
- **WHO, World Health Organisation** (2020): Coronavirus diseases 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report -51, 11th of March 2020.
https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200311-sitrep-51-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=1ba62e57_10 [last access: 25.04.2021]
- **WHO, World Health Organisation** (2021): Timeline: WHO’s COVID-19 response.
https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/interactive-timeline?gclid=Cj0KCQiAvP6ABhCjARIsAH37rbQ7pM3M31732n3ocWLzgYOPYC3H0wV5a_rfHx1bncjNxRBcW58MUnsaAtlmEALw_wcB# [last access: 25.04.2021]