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## How the media cordon sanitaire crumbles: lessons from Germany

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



This article belongs to Special Collection: 'Responding to the demand? Voters' grievances, far-right success, and mainstream party strategies'

## How the media cordon sanitaire crumbles: lessons from Germany

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### ABSTRACT

Far-right parties have been electorally successful in recent elections in many Western democracies. Previous research shows that mainstream actors, including mainstream parties and the media, contribute to the success of far-right parties by accommodating far-right ideas and fostering their wider societal acceptance. However, we lack a clear understanding of the factors that influence media responses to the far right. Combining research on political communication, media, and the far right, this article develops a framework to analyse the rationales behind journalists' responses, ranging from accommodation to the implementation of a *media cordon sanitaire*. The empirical study focuses on journalists' responses to the far right in Germany, where the political opportunities for the far right are expanding. Based on semi-structured interviews with editors-in-chief, political editors, and journalists reporting on the far right from different media outlets and regions, the article provides novel insights into the constraints and obstacles they face. The findings highlight that a combination of self-imposed and external pressure from the far right, alongside institutional constraints, prompted journalists to adopt responses that contributed to the mainstreaming of the far right. Overall, this article enhances our understanding of journalists' challenges and opportunities in responding to the far right in liberal democracies.

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## Introduction

Once considered marginal, far-right actors have become central political players in Western democracies.<sup>1</sup> Their nativist and exclusionary ideas now circulate in parliaments, on the streets, and in public debates (Mudde 2019). A growing body of research shows that the responses of mainstream parties and the media have played a crucial role in

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the entrenchment of the far right. First, mainstream parties have contributed to this process by accommodating and normalizing far-right actors by forming coalitions or policy alliances (e.g. Brause and Kinski 2022; Heinze 2022; Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023). At the same time, the mass media have amplified the visibility, resonance, and legitimacy of far-right actors and issues (e.g. Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023; Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2023; Völker and Saldivia Gonzatti 2024). While previous research has examined the effects of political responses ranging from accommodation to the implementation of a *cordon sanitaire*, the rationale and factors that influence media responses remain poorly understood (e.g. De Jonge 2019, 2021; Ellinas 2010).

I argue that public debates are decisive in the entrenchment of far-right actors because they shape public perception and the political agenda (Andrews and Caren 2010). As the media crucially influence how far-right actors are portrayed, this article investigates the rationales guiding their responses, leading to the following research questions: How do journalists respond to the far right? And what factors influence these responses? Combining research on the media, political communication, and the far right, I develop a theoretical framework to examine why the *media cordon sanitaire*<sup>2</sup> against the far right is weakening. The *media cordon sanitaire* refers to an approach that denies far-right actors direct platforms and avoids amplifying their ideas (De Jonge 2019). Similar to the political *cordon sanitaire*, it aims to prevent the inclusion of anti-democratic actors and ideas in democratic debate (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019).

Empirically, the study focuses on Germany for the study of far-right mainstreaming. As in many other European democracies, the question of how to engage with far-right parties has been widely discussed in public but the underlying motivations behind these responses have yet to be analysed systematically (Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2022). Thus, this paper draws on 21 semi-structured interviews with journalists from media outlets from different regions, ideological leanings, funding schemes and formats. The study provides insights into the perspective of journalists in the roles of editors-in-chief, political editors and journalists who play a key role in the decision-making and production of news content.

Overall, the findings show that journalists' response to the far right depend on three interlinked sets of factors: (1) supply-side factors (strategies of far-right actors, external pressure, internal conflicts), (2) demand-side factors (societal radicalization, critical events, polarizing issues) and (3) institutional constraints (funding model, resources, economic incentives). These factors often lead to overcompensation in the face of self-imposed and external pressure from the far right. Taken together, the article underscores the importance of examining mainstream actors in explaining the rise of the far right in contemporary liberal democracies and advances our understanding of how media practices contribute to its mainstreaming. Before turning to these findings in detail, the paper first outlines the theoretical framework, followed by the case selection and methodology, and concludes with the empirical results along with their implications and avenues for future research.

## Theoretical framework

Research shows that the media, much like mainstream parties, faces strategic dilemmas in responding to the far right, ranging from exclusion through a *cordon sanitaire* to various

forms of accommodation (e.g. Brause and Kinski 2022; Bräuninger et al. 2022; De Jonge 2019; Heinze 2018, 2022). Because mainstream parties and mass media hold high levels of legitimacy in liberal democracies, their behaviour significantly influence public support for far-right actors and ideas (Akkerman, De Lange and Rooduijn 2016; Moffitt 2022). Accommodation, i.e. the adoption of far-right core issue positions by mainstream parties, increases the support for far-right parties (e.g. Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023; Meguid 2005). The *cordon sanitaire*, on the other hand, denotes the refusal to cooperate and engage with far-right parties and aims to withhold them from political power (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019; Riera and Pastor 2022). Following De Jonge (2019), I conceptualize the *media cordon sanitaire* as the demarcation of far-right actors by denying them direct platforms and avoiding the amplification of their claims. Its purpose is to isolate far-right actors and prevent the normalization of their ideas. Following Axelsen (2023), I conceptualize the *media cordon sanitaire* as a social norm rather than a formal agreement, going beyond definitions limited to formal media outlet arrangements.

Empirical studies show that media responses to the far right vary substantially across contexts and over time. De Jonge's (2021) comparative research on the Benelux countries identifies three main media responses: demarcation, which seeks to isolate far-right actors; confrontation, which engages critically to delegitimise their claims; and accommodation, which provides platforms that may legitimise and amplify their rhetoric (De Jonge 2019, 2021; De Jonge and Gaufman 2022). The findings suggest that accommodative media environments have facilitated the mainstreaming of the far right, whereas strong demarcation has limited their access to the public sphere.

Similarly, Ellinas (2010) demonstrates that the far right struggled to gain traction in Germany during the 1980s and 1990s due to restricted media access, in contrast to Austria and Greece. More recent work, however, indicates that discursive opportunities in Germany have expanded, giving the far right greater visibility, particularly in debates on migration and Islam (Völker and Saldivia Gonzatti 2024).

Therefore, the media can shift boundaries around what is considered normal or legitimate in public debate (De Jonge and Gaufman 2022). Understanding how and why these shifts occur requires examining the conditions under which journalists amplify, oppose or ignore the far right. I develop a three-level framework to identify the key factors influencing journalists' responses to the far right, distinguishing between supply-side, demand-side, and institutional factors. The following sections elaborate on each of these levels.

### **Supply-side factors**

The supply side captures the political and discursive opportunities created by political and media actors that shape the visibility and resonance of far-right actors. In times of increasing political polarization fuelled by contentious issues such as immigration or the climate crisis, new alliances have emerged and gained power. In particular, far-right actors ranging from the populist radical right to the extreme right have benefited from these emerging political conflicts (De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Mudde 2019). They have successfully mobilized around questions of national identity and culture by positioning themselves as issue owners in debates on migration (Kriesi et al. 2012; Walgrave and Vliegthart 2012). The political success of far-right actors and ideas is linked to their

transformation in recent decades from the political fringes in the 1990s to a more mainstream presence today (Mudde 2019). This has made them more socially acceptable and appealing to a broader audience, increasing their resonance with mainstream politicians, the media and the general public (Miller-Idriss 2018).

Discursive opportunities are decisive for the rise of far-right actors because they need public debates to influence public perception and the political agenda (e.g. Andrews and Caren 2010; Bos, Van der Brug, and De Vreese 2010). Previous research shows that discourses of nationalism, racism, and antisemitism increasingly normalize and circulate in the mainstream public (Krzyżanowski 2020; Wodak 2015).<sup>3</sup> I refer to this process as *discursive mainstreaming*, which I define as the process through which far-right actors and ideas gain visibility, resonance and legitimacy in the public sphere. In the process of discursive mainstreaming, media actors can play a crucial role: they can shape visibility (by deciding who appears on talk shows or is granted interviews), influence resonance (by echoing or amplifying far-right agenda-setting), and enhance legitimacy (by endorsing or widely circulating far-right claims).

### ***Demand-side factors***

The demand side captures public attitudes and perceptions that constitute the audience environment within which journalism takes place. Public opinion scholars show the increasing acceptance and normalization of far-right attitudes in many Western democracies. Negative stereotypes toward immigrants, Muslims, and other minority groups remain widespread (e.g. Blinder, Ford, and Ivarsflaten 2013; Valentim 2024), while cultural grievances such as concerns about immigration are central drivers of support for far-right actors (Castelli Gattinara, Froio, and Pirro 2022). As these grievances become more visible and socially acceptable, far-right actors gain broader resonance among the general public (Miller-Idriss 2018; Mudde 2019).

Social norms play a crucial role in defining what is normal by shaping what people perceive as acceptable to think, say, or vote for in public (Valentim 2024). Valentim (2024) argues that far-right behaviour often arises not from changing attitudes but from changing perceptions of what is socially acceptable to express. The dynamics of normalization work in a similar way to ‘spiral of silence’ theory by Noelle-Neumann (1993), but in reverse: when people perceive far-right views as popular, they become louder, creating a spiral effect that makes the view even more dominant and visible, and discourages opposing views.

The normalization of far-right attitudes is often accelerated by critical events (e.g. Della Porta et al. 2020). For example, the so-called ‘refugee crisis’<sup>4</sup> or terrorist attacks have triggered contested debates in which the far right set the agenda on issues like Islam and migration (Eberl et al. 2018; Gessler and Hunger 2021; Hutter and Kriesi 2021). They created favourable conditions for far-right actors to attract media attention and amplify their claims.

### ***Institutional factors***

Institutional factors refer to the structural constraints and organizational logics of the media system that influence journalistic choices. The rise of interactive media technologies and the hybridization of formats have transformed these institutional conditions

by accelerating the pace of news production and challenging traditional notions of passive audiences (Birkner, Keute, and Davydova 2024). Although mass media outlets continue to shape political preferences (Sajuria and Collignon 2025), public trust in them has declined (Mazzoleni 2014). At the same time far-right actors exploit social media platforms to organize and disseminate their messages, which are often picked up and amplified by mass media (e.g. Heft et al. 2020; Heft et al. 2020; Klinger et al. 2023). Their sensationalist, conflict-driven narratives tend to attract engagement even from outlets that seek to challenge them (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2019).

News cycles and market pressures such as audience metrics, advertising value, competition for attention, and ownership concentration create incentives to prioritize content that generates visibility and engagement (Hamilton 2004; Shoemaker and Reese 1996). These dynamics can advantage far-right actors, whose provocative and polarizing communication fits commercial news values. This reflects broader trends toward the commercialization of the media landscape, driven by increasing profit motives and commercial imperatives (Mazzoleni 2008).

The organizational logics of national media systems affect journalists' responses to the far right. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology shows that systems differ in levels of journalistic autonomy, political parallelism, and state intervention. The democratic corporatist system (e.g. in Germany and the Nordic countries) is characterized by strong state support (e.g. public broadcasting, media freedom), high journalistic professionalism (e.g. professional guidelines, journalist's autonomy), and a relatively low degree of political parallelism (e.g. separation of news and commentary and limited political bias). These characteristics have historically served as barriers to the spread of extremist discourse (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Pfetsch 2001).

Taken together, these three levels provide a coherent framework for understanding how political behaviour, audience attitudes, and media institutions jointly influence journalists' responses to the far right. First, supply-side factors shape the discursive opportunities available to the far right through the behaviour of political and media actors, including the attempts of far-right parties to set the agenda on politicized issues such as immigration. Second, demand-side factors reflect the audience environment within which journalism takes place, as journalists interpret and react to public attitudes such as the normalization of far-right attitudes. Third, institutional factors capture the structural conditions of the media system such as funding models, resource constraints, market pressures, that influence how journalists work and what forms of coverage are incentivised.

Together, these dynamics suggest that media responses to the far right are not driven by a single force but by the convergence of political cues, audience signals, and institutional pressures. Building on this framework, the empirical analysis examines how journalists navigate these intertwined conditions in a context where political opportunities for the far right are expanding.

## Research design

### *Case selection*

The mainstreaming of the far right in contemporary Germany reflects trends observed in many other established democracies. For a long time, far-right parties were largely absent

from the German national parliament (see, for example, Art 2007; Ellinas 2010). Today, however, the far right has become a significant parliamentary force, as is the case in many other European countries (Weisskircher 2024). The AfD's electoral breakthrough in 2017 challenged the assumption that Germany was an outlier, with strong anti-far-right norms and a collective memory of the fascist past preventing the rise of a far-right party (Blinder, Ford, and Ivarsflaten 2013; Dilling and Krawatzek 2024; Manucci 2019). Far-right actors in Germany had limited discursive opportunities in the 1990s and 2000s, as mainstream parties and the media largely excluded their ideas from public debate (Art 2007; Ellinas 2010). However, these opportunities have since expanded, mirroring trends in other European countries (Völker and Saldivia Gonzatti 2024). The mainstreaming of the far right in Germany can be seen not only in parliament but also in the high levels of protest mobilization (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro 2024). This includes, for example, the Identitarian Movement and PEGIDA (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes), which mobilizes against what it frames as the 'Islamization of the Occident' and has been one of the most successful far-right mass protest movements in Germany in recent years, mobilizing diverse groups across the country (Volk 2020). As such, contemporary Germany provides a representative and insightful case for studying the dynamics of far-right mainstreaming.

Germany's media system belongs to the democratic corporatist model outlined above, which it shares with the Nordic countries, Austria, Switzerland, and the Netherlands (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Although social media has introduced pressures that prioritize sensationalism and engagement metrics over content quality, recent work suggests that Germany's democratic corporatist systems have remained comparatively resilient (Humprecht et al. 2022). At the same time, German media outlets must now respond to the rise of a strong far-right party, making Germany an instructive case for examining how a traditionally robust media system handles the rise of the far right.

## **Methodology**

The study is based on 21 semi-structured interviews with journalists that were conducted to understand the strategies and institutional constraints that journalists and media outlets face in responding to the far right.<sup>5</sup> The interviews were conducted in May and June 2024 in the context of various elections, such as the European Parliament elections in June and in the upcoming regional elections in three eastern German states in September 2024. In all of these elections, the AfD won a large number of votes.<sup>6</sup> As such, the interviews were conducted at a time when the far right was expanding its influence and the interviews aimed to better understand how journalists make sense of this development and their rationale for choosing how to respond to far-right actors and ideas. Interviews offer insights into perceptions, motivations, and processes 'behind the scenes' (De Jonge 2019; Lamont and Swidler 2014; Mosca and Paxton 2025). Hence, this method allows for understanding the blind spots of other data sources, such as media data or survey data.

I adopted a purposive sampling strategy to ensure variation across key theoretical and contextual dimensions and to identify interviewees with relevant insights into the media's response to the far right (Davenport 2010). As discussed earlier, existing research shows that media strategies are shaped by the broader media system, evolving political dynamics, and the political, commercial, and ethical interests of journalists, editors, and

media organizations. Therefore, the sampling criteria included differences in regional context (east/west, rural/urban), media type (TV, print, online, radio), funding model (public/private), editorial orientation (left- to right-leaning),<sup>7</sup> as well as diversity in professional roles (journalists, editors) and individual characteristics (age, gender).

Due to the potential for selection bias, particularly on politically sensitive issues, I aimed to mitigate this by ensuring diversity in institutional roles, regional contexts, and viewpoints. The aim was not statistical representativeness but theoretical generalisability through variation along key dimensions. Appendix A1 outlines in more detail how selection and social desirability biases were addressed through neutral interviewing practices and a sampling strategy that incorporated different outlet types and regions. The sample includes media outlets at local, regional, and national levels across all major parts of Germany, reflecting the political and organizational diversity relevant to the study. Moreover, the sample includes both commercially oriented private outlets with tabloid-like logics and quality oriented public media outlets with stricter editorial standards, allowing the study to capture a broad spectrum of institutional approaches to contentious actors and issues. This combination strengthens the analysis by making it possible to assess mainstreaming dynamics in different media settings.

I identified journalists covering the topic through online research and contacted them via email or LinkedIn if email addresses were unavailable. In total, 38 individuals were contacted, and 21 agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews (Appendix A1 provides further details on the sampling strategy and its limitations). [Table 1](#) shows the distribution of regions, ideologies, funding schemes, and formats of the interviewed media outlets.

The study includes three groups of media practitioners who play a central role in media coverage and public perception of the far right: (1) editors-in-chief, (2) political editors, and (3) journalists covering the far right. Editors-in-chief can be seen as decision-makers and play a key role in agenda-setting, determining the overall strategy and direction of the news production processes (Strömbäck and Karlsson 2011).<sup>8</sup> The editors-in-chief offered valuable insights from an elite perspective, but they were the most difficult to reach due to unavailable contact information, non-responses, or full schedules. The second group, political editors, are responsible for the politics section of the media outlet and influence the day-to-day operations and content of the media output. The third group, journalists, who report on far-right actors and are central to news production, influence who is portrayed and how they are portrayed in quite concrete ways. It is important to note that these positions and roles overlap and the different tasks cannot always be easily separated. [Table 2](#) shows that the interviews cover a broad range of journalists: There was an equal distribution of gender and age groups, and there were more journalists than editors. Overall, the distribution of interviews across media outlets and journalists' profiles reflects a balanced sample along the core theoretical dimensions that are

**Table 1.** Distribution of interviewed media outlets.

Region	N	Political Orientation	N	Funding	N	Format	N
Nationwide	9	Diverse	10	Private	13	Newspaper	12
East	7	Right-leaning	7	Public	8	TV, Radio	9
West	5	Left-leaning	4				
	21		21		21		21

**Table 2.** Distribution interviewed journalists.

Journalist	N	Gender	N	Age	N
Journalist covering far right	10	Male	10	>60 years	6
Political Editor	7	Female	11	40–60 years	9
Editor in Chief	4			<40 years	6
	21		21		21

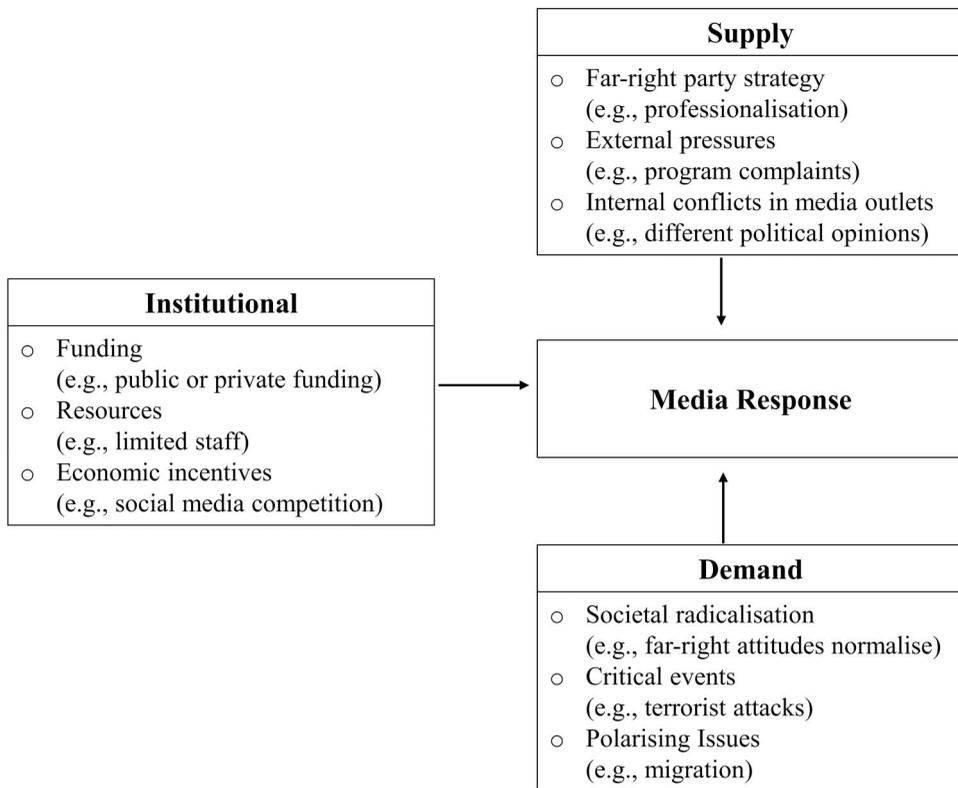
relevant to answering the research question. Thirteen of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, six online via video call, and two by telephone.

In line with the research questions, the interviews focused on how journalists perceive their responses to the far right and which factors influence their approach to covering far-right actors.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, the interview questions were broad and open-ended, and although the theoretical framework informed their design, not every dimension was translated into a fixed indicator, as this would have risked imposing predefined categories rather than allowing journalists to articulate their own understandings and experiences. The interviews cover four dimensions: (1) the media outlet's and the journalist's own approach to covering far-right actors and how this has developed over time; (2) the broader social and political context, including critical events and issues that influenced strategies; (3) the working context, such as editorial decision-making, editorial lines, and internal power dynamics; and (4) individual factors, including biography and personal security concerns (for details, see Appendix A.3).

Methodologically, I applied thematic analysis using an iterative approach that combined deductive and inductive techniques (see Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Coding was conducted with MAXQDA. The analysis was conducted in four steps. First, I derived broad analytical categories based on the research presented earlier on supply, demand and institutional factors influencing media responses to the far right. These included the following categories: strategies (e.g. accommodation, confrontation), supply-side (e.g. role of political parties), demand-side (e.g. perception of citizens' attitudes), institutional context (e.g. impact of digitization and funding), and individual factors (e.g. personal threats). In the second step, I inductively analysed each interview and derived codes and subcodes for the different categories to gain deeper insights into each interview as well as the differences between journalists and media outlets. Third, I trained a student assistant to review all coded interviews based on the fine-grained, semi-open coding scheme and to recode if necessary to ensure consistency by applying all sub-codes to all interviews.<sup>10</sup> Including a second coder improved analytical rigour by enhancing reliability, reducing individual bias, and fostering richer interpretation through collaborative discussion (for a detailed discussion of the coding, analysis, and quality assurance, see Appendix A.4). Finally, I cleaned and aggregated the codes and analysed them both qualitatively and quantitatively to compare the driving forces behind the approaches of different journalists, outlets and regions. In the next section, I present the findings, illustrated by direct quotes from the interviews.

## Results: how the media cordon sanitaire crumbles

How do journalists respond to the far right? Overall, the findings suggest that the dissolution of the *media cordon sanitaire* can be observed for the majority of media in Germany,



**Figure 1.** Factors influencing media responses to the far right.

regardless of their ideological background or funding schemes. The following sections present the findings of the interview study and explain the key factors shaping media responses to the far right, as summarized in [Figure 1](#) across three levels: supply-, demand- and institutional explanations.

First, the supply-side factors that prompt journalists to reassess their journalistic approach are the communication strategy of far-right actors, external political pressures, and internal conflicts in media outlets. Second, the journalists' perception of societal radicalization, critical events, and polarizing issues are the demand-side factors that create fertile ground for far-right visibility and make critical coverage more difficult and costlier. Third, institutional constraints such as the funding model, the availability of resources, and economic pressures limit the capacity of media outlets to consistently apply a demarcation approach and contribute to reactive responses to the far right.<sup>11</sup>

### **Supply-side factors**

First, on the supply side, the strategies of far-right parties, external pressures, and internal conflicts within media outlets influence media responses. In the following section, I outline how each of these factors influences journalistic approaches to covering the far right.

### *Far-right party strategy*

The electoral success of the far-right AfD at the national level marked a turning point in how far-right actors were treated as a broader group.<sup>12</sup> The political legitimization of far-right ideas played an important role in responding to the far right with a mixture of accommodation and confrontation. When the AfD was elected to the German parliament in 2017, thirteen journalists said that they had to cover them as a reaction to their electoral success. Twelve journalists referred to a learning process over time in which they initially underestimated the AfD and its extremist ideas and learned not to react to every provocation. The following quote describes the perceived learning process.

So I think in the beginning, we reacted to every provocation from the AfD [“über jedes Stöckchen springen“]. (...) But it was also a bit of a trap, because the strategy afterwards was to provoke somehow, then everyone is outraged and then the AfD can play the victim and say look, you're not allowed to say anything anymore and then somehow use it to promote itself again. That was a strategy that I would say many media outlets, including us, initially fell for and reported too much nonsense, which in some ways gave the AfD more space than it deserved and perhaps made it bigger. (...) We realised that at some point. But of course that was a negotiation process. And you can't imagine that at some point someone will say that's enough, but you start talking about individual occasions. (...) And over time, an attitude will emerge that can of course change again. (...) We recently had another discussion in our weekly meeting about whether we really need another text about the AfD in almost every issue, but not about the CDU and SPD. So there is still a certain imbalance. (Journalist from right-leaning national newspaper 2)

This quote shows that media responses to the far right were influenced by the perceived communication strategy of the far right. The journalist describes how the media's approach towards the AfD has changed over time: Initially, the media reacted to the AfD's communication strategy based on provocation and victimization and thereby increased its public visibility. Twelve journalists mentioned that they were surprised by the radicalization of the party. Over time, its radical nature and its growing political significance led to a strategy of confrontation and a negative perception of the party.

Despite these negative perceptions and the party's growing radicalism, the AfD's visibility and media resonance continued to grow. One reason for journalists' decision to increase the number of interviews and media presence of far-right actors was to expose the 'dark side' of extremist actors or to show that they had no real political solutions but were mainly populist.

In recent years, fifteen journalists have witnessed a normalization and professionalization of far-right actors in Germany, especially the AfD. While they first appeared as harmless actors and then as radical, irrational actors attacking mainstream journalists, over the past years they have increasingly adopted a mainstreaming strategy of appearing moderate and appealing to the wider public through the media. A journalist who has been covering the far right since the 1990s and who has experienced the transition from the third to the fourth wave of far-right politics described how she is now more afraid of new far-right actors such as the AfD than traditional neo-Nazi groups. In the latter case, she knows what to expect, while the former, though seemingly harmless, has much more influence and different ways of threatening her. The mainstream appearance of fourth-wave far-right actors makes it more difficult to recognize their anti-democratic nature and to implement effective approaches of demarcation. An editor at a public

broadcaster describes the challenge of interviewing far-right parties and thereby normalizing them.

Yes, and of course it's like that when you have someone from the AfD, we've already had that, and he comes with his wife and his child and maybe his dog. And then he sits down in the studio and makes a good mood feel-good speech. And our TV show helps him to present himself as the nice neighbour next door. That's also a particular challenge. So it's very difficult. I would say that the interaction is still a long way from normal. (Editor from public broadcaster west 1)

The quote illustrates how media presence has allowed far-right actors to present themselves as normal and increase public trust by presenting themselves as the 'nice neighbour next door'. Journalists describe how far-right actors have used the mass media outlets to appear moderate to the wider public. This perception aligns with research by De Jonge and Gaufran (2022) and Krzyżanowski (2020), which shows that the media can contribute to shifting discursive boundaries around what is considered 'normal' and legitimate in the public sphere. Taken together, this shows that journalists perceived a shift in the AfD's strategy over time from provocation and victimization toward greater professionalization and normalization, which in turn influenced their own approaches.

### *External pressures*

Journalists emphasized that external pressures, such as programme complaints, and legal disputes with far-right actors, were crucial in determining their coverage of the far right. For nine journalists, the fact that the court classified the AfD as partly extremist and against the democratic constitution was very important for labelling and reporting on it, as illustrated by the following quote.

We have struggled for years with how to label this party. On the recommendation of our legal department, we always say that 'the AfD Thuringia is categorised as right-wing extremist by the Thuringian Office for the Protection of the Constitution'. I would say that there is a kind of anticipatory fear of legal and political problems and complaints. (Editor from public broadcaster East 3)

As this journalist highlights, there is an 'anticipatory fear' of potential legal and political problems or complaints. Rather than responding to explicit demands, journalists acted pre-emptively to avoid potential negative consequences. This media response can be interpreted as a form of anticipatory obedience: behaviour driven by perceived expectations rather than direct pressure when 'individuals think ahead about what a more repressive government will want, and then offer themselves without being asked' (Snyder 2017, 8). Group dynamics reinforced this tendency, as individuals conformed not only to external pressures but also to internalized assumptions about what would be considered acceptable or appropriate.

In line with the findings of Pirro and Stanley (2022) on the strategies of illiberal parties, the interviews demonstrate that the AfD is skilled in playing the illiberal playbook. The party seeks to exert pressure on media outlets with the ultimate aim of controlling them. This approach has been observed in countries where far-right parties are in government, such as Hungary. The interviews show that, in German media outlets, there has been little institutional strategy about how to communicate about extremist actors and

how to report on their actions and ideas. Instead, media responses to the far right have evolved over time in everyday routines rather than as a strategic process.

### *Internal conflicts*

Questions about how to approach the far right also generated internal conflicts within media outlets, for example due to differing political views or organizational positions, as illustrated by the following quote.

Especially when we ask ourselves questions about how to deal with the AfD, I would say there is a tendency on one side not to speak with the AfD, in the sense of not conducting interviews. Others, however, take a different view. So how do we handle the AfD? Do we want to give them the same platform as other parties? Do we think it is a good idea to include them in a live panel or a TV debate during the election campaign? (...) These are major negotiation processes, but they do not occur every day. (Journalist center left national newspaper)

According to most journalists, conflict lines within newsrooms and between newsrooms were related to political orientation, professional ethos and position (hierarchical and across branches). The following quote from the editor of a public news channel describes how such conflicts arise between different groups within media outlets, such as between media owners, editors, and journalists.

As an editor, I have the feeling that I am caught between my superiors, who say you have to allow me to invite the AfD whenever it suits. And on the other hand, I have my more left-liberal journalists and freelancers (...). I mean, our media outlet, like every media outlet, is only a cross-section of the population. (Editor from public broadcaster west 1)

This quote shows how internal conflicts over dealing with the far right sometimes stemmed from differing hierarchical positions. Conflicts within media outlets often mirror broader societal developments, including the normalization of far-right views. The mainstreaming of the far right was not only an external threat to the media, but also occurred within the media as colleagues radicalized and increasingly adopted far-right views.

Even though twelve journalists referred to the 'Brandmauer' (translated 'Firewall'), a well-known term in Germany for *cordon sanitaire*, as part of their contemporary approach, the interviews reveal that the *media cordon sanitaire* increasingly became an 'empty signifier'. Far-right actors continued to be given a platform, losing its clear definition and becoming open to different interpretations. The editorial stance was often closely linked to wider public debates around the *cordon sanitaire* in Germany. At the time of the interviews, the country was experiencing its largest wave of protests in decades – a diverse coalition of political and civil society actors were mobilizing for a 'firewall' against the far right. These developments influenced journalists' critical attitudes toward the AfD as the following quote demonstrates.

It [the approach] is a common attitude of the newspaper, developed in everyday life, in routines, in permanent conferences and in constant dialogue with each other. On some issues it is characterised by a strong consensus. And I would say that's the case with the AfD. At least in the period after the radicalisation. In the early years there were perhaps two camps (in our newspaper). There was a camp that said, let's wait and see, the party also has something bourgeois ["bürgerliches"] and maybe relevant demands. But now the mindset is very clear as to where the political and editorial stance lies. With other topics, of course, it's not the

case that we're all swimming in the same direction, but there are still lively arguments in editorial conferences. But I would say that our firewall ("Brandmauer") is still there. (Journalist from right-leaning national newspaper 2)

This quote illustrates that the media's response to the AfD was far from uncontroversial and was often characterized by internal debates within media outlets about how to deal with the far right. Although the party's radicalization led more journalists to adopt a critical stance, its growing political significance continued to make it challenging for media organizations to agree on a common strategy.

### *Demand-side factors*

Second, on the demand side, critical events, polarizing issues, and journalists' perceptions of societal radicalization influence their responses to the far right. The following section examines these demand-side factors in detail.

### *Critical events and polarising issues*

Journalists often described critical events and polarizing issues as mutually reinforcing – for example, polarizing issues becoming salient through specific events. Because the two aspects were often intertwined in the interviews, they are discussed together in this section. The interviews reveal that journalists are more open to accommodating far-right actors when they perceive increasing support for far-right ideas. This change in response was closely linked to moments of crisis and polarizing issues – a pattern consistently observed across the interviews. The interviews reveal a discrepancy between the media's stated intention to maintain critical distance and their actual responses, a tension that became especially pronounced during moments of (perceived) crisis.

Critical events challenged the media's approach of maintaining a critical distance from the far right. The rapid and provocative responses of the far right have aligned with the need of journalists for swift reporting and attention-grabbing content. The most important critical events for media coverage of the far right can be grouped into four categories: (1) (perceived) crisis (e.g. financial crisis, energy crisis), (2) war, terrorism, and violence ( Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, Russian invasion of Ukraine), (3) protest events (PEGIDA, farmers' protest)<sup>13</sup> and (4) elections and referendums (e.g. Brexit, Trump's presidency) (for an overview see Table B3 in the Appendix). Below, I focus on two key moments that changed the media's response towards the far right: the 'refugee crisis' of 2015–2016 and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Across different media outlets, fifteen journalists highlighted that the 'refugee crisis' in 2015/2016, which was linked to cultural debates on core far-right issues such as migration and integration played a crucial role in the coverage of far-right actors. In the context of the 'refugee crisis' many felt that there were few critical and loud voices other than the AfD. Fourteen mentioned that demarcating far-right actors in the context of highly polarized debates on migration was challenging. The following quote illustrates this point:

Well, if the AfD has something factual to say about it, then we certainly take it on board. And above all, we will also take it on board when we see that the AfD criticises things in connection with migration that are not addressed by other parties. (Editor from media outlet producing left and right-leaning newspapers 2)

This quote illustrates that the far right's ownership of migration issues was pivotal in prompting journalists abandon the approach of a *media cordon sanitaire*. Such moments of crisis have altered the perceived social acceptability of anti-migration views, causing journalists to adjust their coverage to reflect societal developments.

Another moment of crisis that triggered a similar dynamic and increased the media presence of far-right actors was the COVID pandemic that began in 2020. The uncertainty and the time pressure to react to crises influenced the media's responses. However, this time it was not the AfD but anti-containment social movements and protest groups such as 'Querdenken' that mobilized on the streets and on social media. This created uncertainty and controversy among journalists, putting them under pressure to interview COVID deniers, conspiracy theorists, and far-right actors. The journalist in the following quote describes the shifting norms in media outlets in the context of the pandemic.

Corona was really the moment when I suddenly thought: internally, the floodgates were opening, and everything was starting to shift. (Journalist right-leaning newspaper 1)

Thirteen journalists perceived the pandemic as a turning point that undermined public trust in established institutions and left individuals feeling disconnected from traditional media. Interviewees described how journalists have come under greater pressure. Whereas in the past they were perceived much more as the fourth estate, today they have been delegitimised and accused of being part of the elite and the system ('Systemlinge') and the 'lying press' ('Lügenpresse'). These are pejorative political terms used by the far right to devalue the mass media and question their legitimacy as the following quote illustrates.

They say that you're sitting on their laps, that you're part of the system anyway ["Systemlinge"], that you're government journalists, and we have to live with this accusation. And we can only refute it by staying the course in the sense of critically observing the government, but also recognising when the government does things right or the opposition does things right. (Journalist from media outlet producing left and right-leaning newspapers 1)

In response to such accusations, fourteen journalists said they aim to ensure balanced coverage that reflects a range of perspectives – striving for neutrality while navigating the tension between informing the public and inadvertently providing a platform. For them, it was important to demonstrate that their outlets represented diverse viewpoints in order to directly counter public accusations of ideological uniformity. They often presented themselves as objective observers, committed to informing rather than instructing their audiences. To reinforce this stance, journalists emphasized their willingness to include not only progressive perspectives but also critical voices from the right. Some took proactive steps to pre-empt accusations of bias, for example by conducting interviews with far-right actors.

Efforts to maintain a critical distance from the far right often gave way to a greater emphasis on objectivity as journalists sought to maintain their credibility and legitimacy with the wider public. The concern among journalists about being 'balanced' and adhering to objectivity is in line with the 'objectivity paradigm', a pattern that is also highly influential in other countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, as previous studies have shown (Cushion and Lewis 2017; De Jonge and Gaufman 2022; Parks 2019).

### *Journalists' perceptions of societal radicalisation*

Another demand-side factor that played a crucial role in the media's response to the far right was the perceived radicalization of far-right actors and ideas, and their growing social acceptability. All 21 journalists stressed that their coverage of the far right reflected wider societal shifts. These included the growing normalization of far-right attitudes (17 interviewees), broader discursive shifts to the right (12 interviewees), and the political significance of the far right's electoral success (13 interviewees). The following quote demonstrates how the AfD's position as an elected party influenced journalists' willingness to speak with its representatives.

From a journalistic perspective, we naturally have to cover the AfD's issues. The AfD is a player in Bavarian politics, and accordingly, AfD politicians do appear in our reporting. If, in a debate in the Bavarian state parliament, an AfD politician says something noteworthy, we quote them – just as we would quote a CSU politician or the SPD opposition leader. That is self-evident, and we do not exclude them simply because they are from the AfD. (Journalist of center right newspaper West)

The quote demonstrates that being elected and representing voters makes AfD politicians a normal interview partner for journalists when they make 'noteworthy' statements. The interviews show that the far right has been often accommodated because journalists have perceived certain ideas as being supported by the majority of society and have felt a duty to report on them, even if they do not agree with them.

Neo-Nazis or right-wing extremists today no longer wear shaved heads and combat boots, but perms and briefcases. These right-wing extremist positions can now be found everywhere, and accordingly, the sense of inhibition in dealing with them has declined since it has become obvious that completely normal-seeming people share these views. There is also a habituation effect, because in [anonymised place], for example, such positions are simply very widespread. If you look at the latest polls, you can see how many people hold such views. These are, quite simply, also your neighbours. (Journalist of public broadcaster East 3)

This quote highlights that the dissolution of the *media cordon sanitaire* is often more a result of 'habituation' than a strategic media response. Journalists expressed the need to respond to sentiments and fears in society and show 'reality as it is'. Fourteen interviewees described having to respond to the public climate even though it was increasingly characterized by hatred and misinformation. This tendency to report on the far right or self-censor due to a perceived democratic duty is what Ermakoff (2008) describes in his book as the outcome of a 'process of collective alignment whereby individual actors assess collective preferences, make their choice on the basis of this assessment, and at some point reinforce each other's choice as they interact' (Ermakoff 2008, 241).

Similar to findings on the normalization of far-right attitudes by Valentim (2024), the interviews with journalists show that the accommodation of far-right actors and ideas often stem not from changes in personal attitudes, but from changing perceptions of what is socially acceptable to express. The perceived need to respond to public sentiment and maintain an objective stance sometimes had unintended consequences: by giving time and space to far-right actors in the name of balance, journalists risked legitimizing these views. This led to greater visibility for far-right actors in public debates (Völker and Saldivia Gonzatti 2024) even when the journalists involved were personally

opposed to them. Far-right actors successfully used this visibility to reinforce stereotypes and prejudices against marginalized groups as well as 'the elite', including mainstream journalists themselves. As the next section will show, institutional constraints further limited the journalists' ability to uphold a *media cordon sanitaire*.

### ***Institutional factors***

The third factor influencing journalists' responses to the far right was institutional constraints. The majority of journalists interviewed had no institutionalized policy, formal agreement or guidelines on how to deal with far-right actors. The majority of journalists relied on informal approaches (e.g. commitment to quality journalism and democratic principles) and discursive approaches (e.g. objectivity and balanced perspectives). While some media outlets had informal procedures, discussions, and ethical codes, there was no implemented strategy such as guidelines or recommendations on how to cover extremist actors and how journalists should deal with far-right actors and issues in particular. Fifteen journalists mentioned that the way they deal with the far right is in most cases an individual ad hoc decision or an editorial decision on a case-by-case basis (see Appendix B1 for an overview of media responses). Three key institutional factors stand out as having made a systematic difference to the way the media cover the far right: the funding model, resources and economic incentives, each of which is discussed in the next section (see Appendix B4 for further analyses of institutional constraints).

### ***Funding model***

The funding model refers to whether media outlets rely on public or private sources and the obligations associated with each. In Germany, public broadcasters are mainly funded by licence fees and some advertising, while private broadcasters depend mainly on advertising revenues. This difference is reflected in their mandates: public media are required to provide independent news, educational, and cultural content and to represent a diversity of opinions under strict regulation. Private media, on the other hand, have fewer obligations and can focus more on market demands and audience preferences.

In all interviews with journalists from public broadcasters, they referred to the fact that they have to cover all parties represented in the German parliament. The principle of graduated equality of opportunity ('Grundsatz der abgestuften Chancengleichheit') in Germany means that parties with equal electoral chances must be treated equally and parties with unequal electoral chances must be treated unequally. Journalists mentioned legal disputes with the AfD, which complained that it did not receive enough media coverage. At the same time, the AfD made it difficult for journalists to do their job by frequently ignoring or refusing interview requests and repeatedly making false statements, while at the same time presenting itself as marginalized and disadvantaged by the traditional media. Presenting themselves as 'victims of the establishment media' is a common strategy of the far right. Public funding and the obligations it entails therefore challenge their ability to pursue a demarcation approach. Six of the eight interviewed journalists from public broadcasters, however, referred to this rule without reflecting on the nuances in *how* to cover far-right actors and issues beyond quantity. The rule

refers to the visibility of parties in public media outlets, but not to the issues and frames that journalists cover.<sup>14</sup>

Public funding poses another challenge in dealing with the far right, namely the fact that the AfD strongly opposes public broadcasters in Germany, with the aim of replacing them or reducing their funding. The AfD has spent a lot of time challenging state institutions, including public broadcasters, and criticizing them for not treating them equally through programme complaints and legal action. This intimidation strategy by the far right is similar to the party responses in other European countries, such as Hungary and Italy, where far-right parties oppose the freedom of press for some media outlets (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019). In most democracies, far-right actors perceive the mainstream media as opponents who are part of the elite and 'corrupt system' and accuse them of being biased against them (Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2022). As a result, journalists have become extremely careful about how they refer to far-right actors, knowing that the likelihood of them being threatened or taken to court is quite high. This dilemma creates fear and uncertainty which is illustrated in the following quote.

At the moment you can tell that everyone is so on guard ["Habachtstellung"]. What will happen at a legal level? What will happen in these various proceedings and will the AfD perhaps even be banned in the end? Yes. Then. That doesn't mean the ideas are banned, but many people are simply worried that once the far right is in office somewhere, they will start to dismantle and reorganise the state and yes, that will happen faster than you might like. (Editor from public broadcaster west 1)

The intimidation strategy has led journalists to try not to become too political and to position themselves, take a stand, and criticize the AfD, as the following quote by a public broadcaster journalist shows.

Of course, we must not give the impression that we are now "fighting the AfD" because we are afraid that a party that is very critical of public service broadcasting might want to abolish us or abolish the system. So that's a very, very stupid position. Höcke has already said that if he becomes prime minister, he will cancel the state contract with public broadcasters. Yes, so we are still journalists. We're not allowed to become activists. (Journalist from public broadcaster East 2)

The quote highlights the pressure journalists face when targeted by the far right – particularly public broadcasters – where efforts to delegitimise them have often resulted in a more cautious, depoliticized coverage to avoid being perceived as 'activists'. Twelve of them saw talking to the far right as part of their responsibility and freedom of speech. Far-right actors were formally treated like any other political actors and as discussion partners in talk shows and interviews, on the premise that these actors do not express extremist views in these contexts.

### **Resources**

The second key institutional constraint on journalists in responding to the far right is resources. Journalists pointed out that low quality media coverage of the far right was often a result of media outlets not having the resources, in terms of staff, money, and time, to research and report critically on the far right. However, the interviews show that most media outlets have tried to find different informal approaches to respond to

the far right. For example, nineteen use different tools to contextualize far-right content. They use fact-checking,<sup>15</sup> provide additional information and diverse views on the topic, and invite communication consultants and experts on the topic to their media institutions. Knowledge sharing between colleagues is sometimes used and some of the journalists specializing in far-right issues act as experts and were approached by colleagues. However, such approaches have tended to be reactive and in response to political developments after far-right parties have gained more votes, rather than proactive in dealing with extremist forces in general.

Moreover, the majority of journalists, especially in public broadcasting, reported an increase in hate speech, online harassment, and physical threats in recent years – often linked to the growing influence of the AfD and marked by gender differences. As a result, journalists increasingly resorted to protective approaches, such as avoiding certain issues and reducing their public visibility. In sixteen cases, media organizations offered institutional support, including security training, legal aid, psychological counselling, and, if necessary, police or personal protection.

### *Economic incentives*

The third institutional constraint were economic incentives. The interviews show that the fact that far-right actors are perceived as newsworthy because of their scandals, stereotypes, and extreme statements has increased their visibility and resonance. Private media in particular highlighted polarizing issues and scandals as key reasons for reporting on far-right actors. Controversial issues and polarizing actors often attracted significant public attention, in line with a broader media logic of generating public interest. The following quote illustrates how scandals, regardless of their substance, often trigger journalistic engagement because of their perceived appeal.

A scandal is only a scandal because a lot of people are interested. And that's always a sign for a journalist, even if you don't think it's very interesting at first, but it shows you, OK, there's obviously something there. Is there something to it? Of course, you can also jump on the scandal and serve the interest in it, which is often an instinctive interest [of journalists]. (Journalist from right-leaning national newspaper 4)

Although public media were less influenced by market forces than their private counterparts, both had to attract and retain audiences. Journalists from different media outlets emphasized the role of audience feedback and reaction in shaping editorial decisions. News values such as sensationalism and negativity played an important role and fitted well with the communication style of far-right actors – making their messages highly marketable content for the media. As one journalist put it, 'extremist content sells' a sentiment reflected in the following quote.

The extreme positions always get applause, whether left or right. (...) And. Of course, this is the direct measurement of success, especially for online content, so I can immediately see what stories people have clicked on and for how long etc. Of course, I can see that the sensationalised stories work better. The "knife-wielding Muslim who abused millions of girls in Mühlheim", sorry for the stereotypes, naturally works much better than a story about the "neighbourhood mothers who try to do some kind of daily social work here". (Journalist from media outlet producing left and right-leaning newspapers 1)

Fourteen journalists critically reflected on the negative consequences of the commercialization and news values. One journalist refers to this process as ‘paradoxical marketing’ for the far right, whereby the media’s response of confrontation can increase the public visibility of far-right actors.

This paradoxical marketing. (...) In other words, we journalists also need to think about how much advertising we actually do with the best intention of denouncing something. But how much advertising do we actually do for the AfD? So? How, to what extent are we actually feeding the demon that we then get upset about, so that it gets bigger and bigger? (Journalist from media outlet producing left and right-leaning newspapers 1)

This shows that many journalists are aware of their own role in the development of the far right and that they can contribute to discursive mainstreaming by providing a platform for far-right actors, for example through ‘paradoxical marketing’ or by ‘feeding the demon’.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper examined how the *media cordon sanitaire* is eroding and the factors that influence media responses to the far right. Drawing on in-depth interviews with journalists in Germany, the findings highlight the challenges journalists face in identifying effective responses to the rise of the far right. They also indicate that media outlets have often adopted reactive rather than proactive approaches, which have inadvertently contributed to the visibility, resonance, and legitimacy of far-right actors. The study identifies three levels of influence that shape how the media responds to far-right actors.

First, on the supply side, the communication strategies of far-right actors, particularly the AfD’s professionalization and normalization, play a central role. These developments, along with external political pressures such as programme complaints and conflicts within media outlets, have encouraged more reactive and risk-averse media responses. Second, on the demand side, media perceptions of public opinion, especially during critical events such as the ‘refugee crisis’ and the Covid-19 pandemic, further enhanced the visibility and platforming of far-right parties and movements. Third, institutional constraints, notably public funding, resources and economic incentives to prioritize scandal and provocation, have hindered the development of coherent strategies. In the absence of formal editorial guidelines, journalists often relied on ad hoc decisions shaped by the ‘objectivity paradigm’, which limited critical engagement and contributed to the discursive mainstreaming of the far right.

Although I categorize them as demand-side, supply-side, and institutional factors, they are closely interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The findings show that media responses to the far right are not driven by a single force but by the convergence of political cues, audience signals, and institutional pressures. For example, the political strength and communication strategy of far-right actors (supply side) influenced journalists’ perception of the need to respond to a shifting right-wing climate (demand side) and increased the political and legal pressure on media outlets (institutional side). These findings show that a ‘spiral of anticipatory obedience’ plays an important role across these three levels, explaining why the media responds to the far right. When confronted with strong far-right parties and perceiving public support for their ideas, journalists react cautiously, engaging with far-right actors and their demands and thereby reinforcing the far right’s discursive influence. As far-right parties gain influence, confrontational

approaches appear increasingly risky, and providing a platform comes to be seen as the more pragmatic option. Yet by offering this platform, journalists inadvertently amplify far-right ideas and deepen their institutional entrenchment.

Overall, this study improves our understanding of journalists' rationales and the challenges of responding to the growing influence of far-right actors worldwide. Building on this research, future research could delve deeper into the differences between types of media outlets and journalistic roles. For example, researchers could more systematically examine how hierarchical positions (such as editors-in-chief versus staff journalists) or individual characteristics such as gender, age, and professional experience influence responses to the far right. This paper focused on responses in Germany's democratic corporatist media system but the theoretical framework can be used for cross-national comparisons. Comparative studies are needed to assess the extent to which demand-, supply- and institutional factors influence media responses in different political contexts and media systems – such as liberal or polarized pluralist systems. Another promising avenue for future research is cross-country comparison between Western and Eastern Europe, as well as with countries where far-right parties are in government.

Moreover, the findings highlight the need for further research on how mainstream political and media actors not only respond to, but also contribute to, democratic backsliding. While this paper shows that political pressures, perceived sentiments, and institutional constraints shape the responses of journalists, future research should examine the factors that influence the responses of other mainstream actors such as parties and civil society organizations.

The conclusion drawn from the empirical findings is that journalists face structural, organizational, and strategic constraints, but their choices matter: they can either reinforce or contain the discursive influence of the far right. For instance, in Belgium, the consistent implementation of a *media cordon sanitaire* deprived the far right of influence (De Jonge 2019). In Germany, unlike in other countries such as Hungary and Russia, the far right is not yet in government and does not have the power to control the media (Pirro and Stanley 2022). This, in turn, provides journalists with more opportunities to change their response. This study shows that most journalists seek to uphold democratic principles, but also highlights the need for greater self-reflection on their role in shaping public perception and for internal discussions on constraints and strategies for critically engaging with the far right.

## Notes

1. Far-right actors are defined as actors that share a nativist, exclusionary and authoritarian worldview and use either conventional or anti-democratic action repertoires to achieve their goals (Mudde 2000, 2019; Pirro 2023).
2. This notion is also referred to as *cordon sanitaire médiatique*.
3. The notion of the 'mainstream' is understood as dynamic and publicly negotiated (Moffitt 2022).
4. Quotation marks indicate distance from the politicized term 'refugee crisis', which was widely used in public debates but can be seen as assigning responsibility to those seeking protection and obscuring the root causes of displacement.
5. The study was approved by the *Anonymised* Ethics Committee (Ethics Review No. 2024/04/248).

6. This election campaign period was particularly interesting because political topics dominated media debates and captured journalists' attention. Against this backdrop, questions about how to report on the far right became especially salient.
7. The category 'diverse' refers to media outlets that represent left and right-leaning positions, often public broadcasters, but also media outlets that distribute their content among different newspapers.
8. Another important group that falls outside the scope of this study is media owners, who decide on budgets, policies and staffing.
9. This included their approach to far-right parties such as the AfD, as well as to other actors like social movements such as PEGIDA.
10. This included close supervision and regular review of the coding results.
11. For simplicity, the model focuses on the unidirectional influence of factors on media responses, which is the empirical focus of this interview study. A comprehensive theoretical model of mainstream responses and future research should include multidirectional relationships and interactions between the different factors.
12. It is important to note that the interviews asked journalists about their approaches to the far right in general, including a range of actors from parties to movements. However, for most journalists, the AfD served as the primary reference point when discussing media approaches to the far right.
13. PEGIDA (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes, translated as Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) is a protest movement that has mobilized against the 'Islamization of the West' since 2014. It is one of the largest far-right protest movements in Germany in recent decades (Volk 2020). The farmers' protest in Germany began in 2023 against the political decision to cancel tax subsidies for farmers.
14. Only during election campaigns does this rule require a minimum number of interviews with parties represented in parliament.
15. Fact-checking was mostly done after the interviews, which may be less effective than real-time correction, as not all audiences notice post-interview updates.

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## Generative artificial intelligence (AI)

I have used Chat GPT (Version 40) to check parts of the final manuscripts for language errors.

## Data availability statement & data deposition

The data that support the findings of this study are based on confidential interviews and contain sensitive personal information. In accordance with ethical obligations and interviewee consent agreements, these data are not publicly available. Due to the sensitive nature of qualitative interview data and commitments made to participants to protect their anonymity and confidentiality, the dataset has not been deposited in a public repository.

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