

Article

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

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## Abstract

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

## Keywords

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

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3. Covering Right-Wing Extremism

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

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

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

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

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

### 4. Case Study and Methods

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

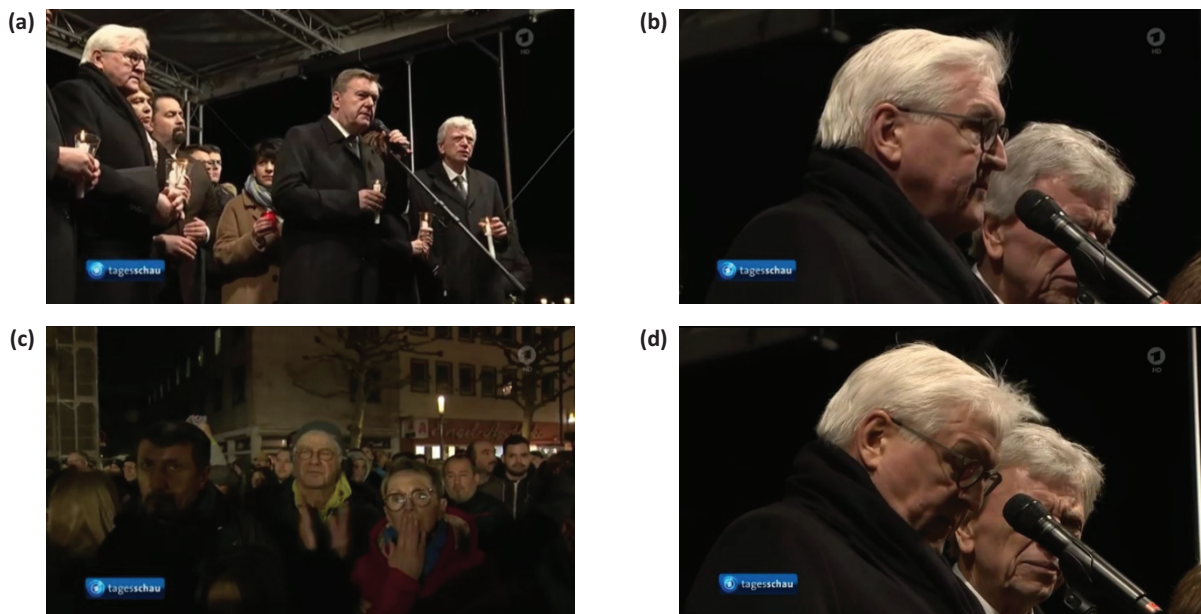
The affective register of national grief was also generated through various aesthetic means, for instance, in sequences that combined shots of politicians and regular people participating in the same vigils or performing similar practices to pay their respects publicly, such as laying flowers at improvised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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## 6. The Conversation Network Around #Hanau

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

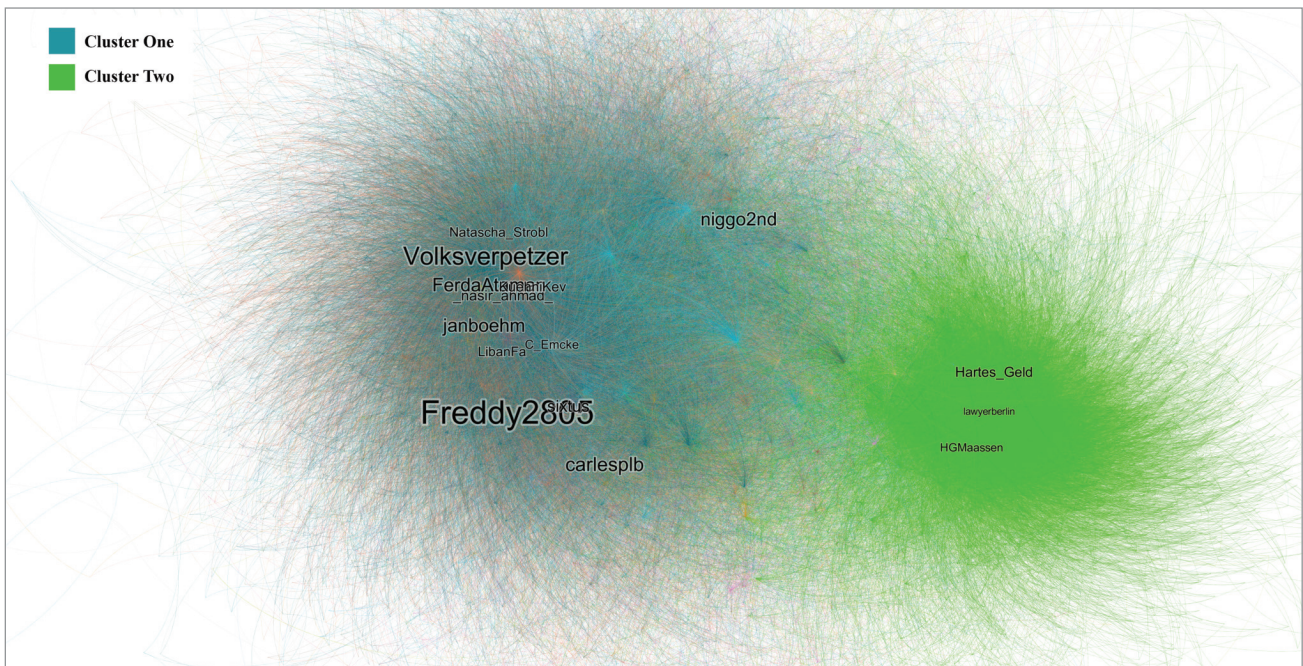
In our SNA, we first extracted retweets, mentions, and replies between Twitter users in our dataset. Mentions in retweets, as well as self-loops, were not included. The result was a total of 82,863 nodes and

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

## 8. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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



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

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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