Professionalism as a Response to Right-Wing Populism?
An Analysis of a Metajournalistic Discourse

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The rise of right-wing populism in various countries poses difficult challenges to journalism: While populists themselves often accuse journalists of being biased against them or even of lying, critics allege that the mainstream media cover populism too extensively and normalize it. We reconstruct an understudied perspective on this problem: how journalists publicly discuss how to deal with right-wing populism. A qualitative analysis of metajournalistic discourses in the German press was conducted to identify typical narratives concerning the relationship between right-wing populism and the media, criticism of the way right-wing populism had been covered, and recommendations or demands concerning the "right" approach. Overall, the analysis reveals a rather uniform narrative about right-wing populism in Germany, and similar conceptions of how to deal with it were found. Most journalists make a clear distinction between the right and wrong way to cope with right-wing populism and emphasize the need for professional norms such as objectivity. Finally, we critically discuss some aspects that may inform metajournalistic reflection on how to cover right-wing populism, but that were absent from the debate.

Keywords: right-wing populism, metajournalistic discourse, professionalism, journalistic norms, qualitative content analysis

In various countries, right-wing populism poses a major challenge to mainstream journalism: Populists often count the established media among the elite and accuse them of lying, manipulating the population, and betraying the will of "the people." On the other hand, the media have been criticized for their assumed contribution to the rise of right-wing populism. Critics have accused them of covering either populist actors or the issues commonly associated with them (such as immigration) too extensively, or of normalizing right-wing populists' behavior and discourses in a false equivalence with other political actors' actions and positions. How do the media react to these challenges? How do they justify themselves, and how do they cover those proponents of an antipluralist and illiberal ideology that threatens to undermine the very type of political order and public sphere that journalism is supposed to sustain, according to its own norms? This problem is

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particularly relevant because right-wing populists often frame their attacks on the media on the basis of those norms of journalistic professionalism: The press is said to be biased, to be untruthful, to withhold information, etc. Despite the tendency in some parts of journalism to avoid a critical treatment of the media themselves and to engage in abstract metadiscourses, some journalists have taken positions and published metajournalistic texts on the issue. Does this challenge lead them to critically discuss or even deconstruct these norms and routines to identify some blind spots and paradoxes of journalistic practices?

Previous research on the relationship between populism and the media has been either theoretical (e.g., Hameleers, 2018; Krämer, 2014, 2018a, b; Mazzoleni, 2003), based on content analyses (e.g., Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2010; Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017), or based on experiments or panel studies dealing with effects (e.g., Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Wirz et al., 2018). Various authors have also analyzed populist criticism of established media (e.g., Fawzi, 2020), the media's responses to specific attacks, such as the labels "fake news" or "Lügenpresse" ("lying press"; e.g., Denner & Peter, 2017; Koliska & Assmann, 2019; Lischka, 2019), and populists' attempts to discredit and sideline them by means of social and alternative media (e.g., Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Haller, 2020; Holt, 2020). However, how journalists reflect more broadly on their relationship with right-wing populism and populist criticism in public discourse has largely been neglected.

Researchers have started to investigate metajournalistic discourses with regard to populism in the United States (McDevitt & Ferrucci, 2018). However, to our knowledge, similar debates in other countries have not yet been studied. Germany is a relevant case in this context because its political and media systems differ significantly from those in the U.S. and because its history may affect how right-wing populists are treated by the media. After the Third Reich, the West German media system has been largely restructured (Beck, 2018), converging toward the model of objective reporting and with a strong system of public broadcasting, and the East German media system was later mostly transformed to match this Western model. However, to combat (Neo-)Nazi and other extremist propaganda or hate speech, the limits of free speech are narrower in comparison with other countries (e.g., Bleich, 2011).

Germany has seen the rise of the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) in recent years, culminating with its electoral success in 2017, when it entered the Federal Parliament as the largest opposition party. Whereas earlier right-wing populist and extremist parties were less successful and received less attention by the media, the AfD was covered more extensively since its foundation in 2013.

We conducted a qualitative analysis of the public debate in German journalism on how it should deal with right-wing populism. The aim of the study was to identify typical narratives concerning the relationship between right-wing populism and the media, criticism of the way right-wing populism had been covered, and recommendations or demands concerning the "right" approach (including the journalistic norms underlying these claims). As a basis for our analysis, we will theoretically discuss why right-wing populism poses a particular challenge to journalism and why and how journalism may (not) publicly debate its norms and routines. Having presented our method and results, we will conclude by critically discussing possible positions and arguments that have been missing from the discourse.

Theoretical Framework

Right-Wing Populism as a Challenge to Journalism

The notion of populism has been defined in different ways. Although a comprehensive review of the conceptual debates would go beyond the scope of this article, it should provide a working definition of right-wing populism as the variety that is of interest here. We follow the idea that different varieties of populism constitute ideologies that assume an antagonistic relationship between "the people" and a ruling elite (see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, and Müller, 2016, for an overview). However, style and performance are important aspects as well, because they correspond to this vision of society and make right-wing populism a political strategy instead of merely a static and abstract worldview (for such a perspective see, e.g., Moffitt, 2016).

Right-wing populism (Betz & Johnson, 2004; Kriesi, 2014; Pelinka, 2013) defines the people in ethnic terms and claims to defend it and its traditions against the threats posed by ethnic or racial and religious minorities and migrants, and by the elites. The people are assumed to possess a common interest and, in principle, a common will. This will can only legitimately be represented by the populists and should be implemented most directly.

This populist ideology poses a challenge to journalism on at least two levels. The first problem concerns the amount of attention right-wing populism should receive in journalistic coverage. Although norms of balanced reporting demand that the positions of relevant actors or camps on an issue receive a fair share of attention, journalistic routines cannot simply ensure a certain distribution of coverage on the aggregate. While journalists may aim to "hear both/all sides" on a given matter, they also select events and statements according to their news value. This can result in rather unequal distributions when it comes to the aggregate amount of coverage that different actors receive. Right-wing populists are newsworthy not only because they are relative newcomers to many political systems—although there may be a life cycle of attention with decreasing coverage in later phases (Herkman, 2017)—but also because they use various strategies to create events that are newsworthy, such as strategically ambiguous provocative statements (Wodak, 2015). Furthermore, right-wing populists receive more attention and voter support if the issues they are strongly associated with receive a lot of coverage (on such discursive opportunity structures, see Koopmans & Muis, 2009).

The second challenge is related to right-wing populist anti-elitism, criticism of mainstream journalism, and attempts to delegitimize it (Van Dalen, 2019). Right-wing populists not only turn against the political establishment, but also often count the (established) media among the elite and express criticism or hostility toward them, which may be called antimedia populism (Krämer, 2018b).

Right-wing populists often use norms of journalism against journalism in their criticism: They accuse the established media of reporting untruthfully or of withholding important facts, such as the ethnic or religious background of criminals, or of violating norms of objectivity and balance by being biased against the right-wing populists and treating them unfairly in comparison with other actors (Bhat & Chadha, 2020; Fawzi, 2020; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Krämer, 2018a; Van Dalen, 2019). On a more fundamental level,

right-wing populism threatens to undermine the basis of the kind of journalism many professionals aim to practice. Although right-wing populism appeals to the will of the people as the main legitimation of its political claim, it has illiberal, antipluralist, and authoritarian implications (e.g., Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Müller, 2016 Pappas, 2016; see also Moffitt, 2017, on populists' "illiberal liberalism"). The homogeneous, essentialist, and exclusive definition of the people and the claim to be the only political camp that can and will forcefully implement a predefined popular will runs counter to a liberal, discursive, or participatory understanding of the political process. Should journalists therefore defend their liberal norms against right-wing populism and avoid giving them too much attention, or, conversely, cover right-wing populists extensively and neutrally and provide detailed information on problems that have come to be associated with immigrants to take the wind out of the populists' sails (Krämer, 2018a)? This decision can be made by individual journalists or media outlets in their daily work, or journalists can publicly address such issues in metajournalistic texts to justify their position and convince others in the field.

Metajournalistic Discourses

Public contributions by journalists in journalistic outlets about how to deal with right-wing populism are a case of metajournalistic discourses (Carlson, 2016) or, more specifically, of what Malik (2004) calls "journalism journalism"—that is, the observation and thematization of journalism by journalistic means. Before addressing the possible positions in such a discourse on the treatment of right-wing populism, we will discuss whether we can expect such a discourse to take place at all.

Metajournalistic discourses within journalism operate between conflicting functions (Malik, 2004): They assure journalists and their public about the deep-seated convictions that inform journalistic practice (Carlson, 2016), and blanket criticism would shake the general confidence in journalism. However, if metacoverage were confined to self-affirmation or even self-promotion and praise, it would also raise skepticism and undermine trust in the independence of journalism. As a consequence of this dilemma and because journalism often tends to construct reality in terms of particular events and actors, not general problems and trends (at least at the more explicit level), metajournalism often focuses on occurrences that are presented as problematic individual cases involving specific organizations or persons instead of systemic problems (Malik, 2004).

A general debate about the media's relationship with right-wing populism might arise nevertheless, for one or more of the following reasons:

1. Right-wing populism and its general criticism of the press may be perceived as such a pressing or newsworthy problem that it seems appropriate to discuss possible responses publicly, and critical debates on journalistic performance can even appear as a valuable journalistic commodity (Cecil, 2002).

2. While journalists may be reluctant to express general criticism of their profession (Thomas & Finneman, 2014), they may perceive an increasing pressure to publicly justify themselves and apply the principles they usually follow to their own institutions and practice (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2016). Therefore, despite the reluctance toward metacommunication as such and abstract discourses, criticism coming from

outside the field may be addressed at the same level of generality. A general defense of journalism against such criticism may be perceived as less problematic than general criticism from inside the media.

3. The threats to journalism that are due to different types of external criticism (by right-wing populists and by those who accuse journalism of contributing to its rise) may be perceived as more serious than the consequences of self-criticism. If journalists feel that numerous colleagues have violated professional norms, exposing the profession to antimedia populism, or enabled the rise of right-wing populism, they may prefer harsh self-criticism to the consequences of these types of perceived misconduct.

We will attempt to determine empirically what the main functions and arguments of such a debate are. Before outlining the methodology of our study, we will discuss the role that journalistic norms may play in such a discourse.

The public nature of metajournalistic discourses and the resulting specific functions and challenges also give it relevance of its own. While journalists' attitudes toward populism have been investigated by means of interviews (Stanyer et al., 2019), the issues and arguments raised in public contributions are not necessarily the same, and the occasions for metajournalistic texts may lead to different kinds of reflections compared with the occasion of an interview setting. In this context, it is also of interest whether different journalistic outlets and formats fulfill different functions in the discourse. For example, the trade press, because of its specialized orientation and restricted audience, may grant more space to intraprofessional discourses and allow for more elaborate and critical debates than consumer media outlets (Dernbach, 2010).

Journalistic Norms and Responses to Criticism

Journalism usually responds to criticism by reaffirming its norms and routines as a valid way of representing reality: *paradigm repair* (Bennett, Gressett, & Haltom, 1985) and *image restoration* (Hindman, 2005). Typically, problematic occurrences are described as isolated cases that have been thoroughly investigated and that can be explained, whereupon the individual transgressors have been punished and symbolically excluded from the collective of honest and objective journalists, while the paradigm and the overall institutions and organizations remain unquestioned (e.g., Cecil, 2002; Hindman, 2005; Thomas & Finneman, 2014).

As far as journalistic coverage of right-wing populism is concerned, it seems harder to hold individual journalists or outlets responsible if such generalized criticism is being raised. Furthermore, different accusations are brought up by different sides: Right-wing populism turns journalism's own norms against it, and others contend that journalism contributes to right-wing populism or agree that its representatives have been treated unfairly by the press. Whose criticism should be addressed, and whose interpretation of norm and reality is to be followed (if at all)?

Thus, when commenting on the coverage of right-wing populism, there are five main options with regard to journalistic norms:

1. To demand that journalistic norms be followed more strictly when dealing with right-wing populism. Journalists would then urge their colleagues to be "more objective," "more balanced," and so on.

2. To defend journalism against right-wing populist and other criticism, arguing that journalistic norms are generally being followed, and the typical coverage of right-wing populism is the result of a correct application of these norms. As in the previous case, their observance fulfills the function of legitimizing journalism (Deuze, 2005; Schudson & Anderson, 2008)—particularly if they are also applied in the coverage of its critics.

3. To deconstruct the criticism, arguing that it is based on a misconception or deliberately misleading definition of journalistic norms. Or, more generally, journalists could contend that populists instrumentalize norms because of their exclusive, illiberal, and antipluralist ideology. What they ultimately demand, it may be argued, is not recognition among other perspectives, but submission to their exclusive claim to representation and their right to define who should be represented. Therefore, journalism, just as liberal democracy, would have to protect itself against illiberal forces that cannot simply invoke liberal principles.

4. To deconstruct the journalistic norms themselves, arguing that the underlying normative principles are unclear, that they have ambivalent implications when it comes to the coverage of right-wing populism, or that they do not allow for sufficiently clear conclusions regarding how right-wing populism should be covered. For example, are right-wing populists "one side" of a debate (e.g., on migration), or what are the relevant and legitimate positions? How relevant are right-wing populists even if their provocations tend to have a high news value? Such a debate may even raise the fundamental problem of how journalism constructs reality and how taken-for-granted assumptions, routines, and norms establish the ascribed facticity and objectivity of this contingent construction (Tuchman, 1978). Metajournalistic discourse might then lead to a more fundamental understanding of how issues should be selected and framed, and what constitutes relevant perspectives that should be represented in public discourse.

5. To adjust the standards with a view toward audience expectations. In a study addressing a similar research question to ours, McDevitt and Ferrucci (2018) analyzed how journalists discussed the media's coverage of Donald Trump's campaign. In retrospect, journalists admitted that they had underestimated the frustration of voters, but explained Trump's success by shortcomings on the part of the audience, such as media illiteracy. According to the authors' interpretation, the journalists did not really engage in paradigm repair, but took a position of "professional realism": The press needs to adapt to what it considers to be its anti-elitist audience. In the case of a crisis of representation, journalists consider it justifiable to make an exception from norms of objectivity.

We will determine whether journalists chose any of these options or if they reflected on their relationship with right-wing populism differently in their metajournalistic texts. More generally, we will analyze how journalists respond to the challenges posed by right-wing populism: how they conceive of this political phenomenon, how they respond to criticism and attacks by right-wing populists, how they reflect on the role of journalistic norms in dealing with right-wing populism, and what they consider the right and wrong way to cover it. We will also analyze critically what possible perspectives and arguments are missing from this metajournalistic discourse.

Method

A qualitative analysis of metajournalistic texts was conducted, which allows for a reconstruction of the narratives used by journalists when discussing right-wing populism and their arguments regarding journalistic norms. Our analysis thus identifies the main themes in the material based on a coding procedure that started with a number of theoretically informed, but open, categories that were subsequently differentiated and complemented (see the list at the end of this section, and, e.g., Grbich, 2013, pp. 61–62, 259–267). Furthermore, we also identified aspects that were theoretically plausible or normatively desirable, but missing from the discourse.

Metajournalistic texts were sampled from all German national newspapers and the main weekly news magazines, certain regional newspapers, and the trade press, as well as their websites. This was to ensure that the sample represented as broad a cross-section of different journalistic formats as possible. Our exploratory approach aims to represent metajournalistic discourses as broadly and diversely as possible so that potential differences between, for example, specialized trade press and general-interest newspapers can be identified.

Our study includes articles from August 2015 to June 2016, a time period before the 2017 election when German Chancellor Angela Merkel decided not to close the borders for refugees. In this critical period of the so-called refugee crisis, the AfD, with its anti-immigration rhetoric, rose significantly in national polls.

Articles were retrieved from several databases that, taken together, included most of the national newspapers and news magazines, and some of the more than 100 regional newspapers in Germany. In addition, the websites of the national newspapers and main weekly news magazines not represented in the databases were searched. This strategy was complemented by general Web searches to find further potentially relevant contributions in other outlets that we did not search individually or via databases. We used different search strings referring to populism and populist actors—for example, "(right-wing) populism," "AfD," names of important AfD politicians—combined with "journalism" and "media (coverage)," as well as their synonyms and various paraphrases, and iteratively refined our searches based on the terminology used in the material.

Overall, a total of 182 articles that were at least loosely connected to our topic were gathered. In accordance with the research interest of our study, only articles that contained substantial metajournalistic remarks on populism were retained. Along this criterion, 67 articles were analyzed. In a second step, following the principle of theoretical saturation, 29 articles were successively selected for further in-depth analysis (see Appendix for a list of these texts); they were analyzed and compared with the remaining material and new articles until further texts did not provide new aspects in comparison with the articles included in the larger corpus. We ensured that the articles we analyzed more closely expressed the relevant views on the relationship between right-wing populism and the media in the most prototypical way and that the other texts we inspected only added minor nuances.

The analysis started with a number of basic sensitizing and open categories that were derived from our research interest: the critical reflection of journalistic practice and norms in the context of the coverage

of right-wing populism and, as a consequence, demands and recommendations. The two authors conducted the coding, interpreted the material, and validated their findings in discussions to cover the central themes and perspectives in the sample. To this end, the category scheme was refined in an inductive procedure. The categories used are listed next.

1. The understanding of populism as a phenomenon. This category captures the context of the authors' discussion of journalistic practices and was subdivided into the authors' conception of populism as a general phenomenon, and their view of current populist politics. The former subcategory captures which definition journalists rely on and which characteristics of populism are named, but also whether they refer to historical aspects (including Germany's past or its presumably exceptional situation). The second subcategory captures the journalists' description of current events and circumstances, such as the rise of the AfD or of populism in general, or populist criticism of the media, and it also includes the possible justifications for why right-wing populism is covered and deserves metajournalistic discussion.

2. The reflection of the author's role. The second basic category refers to the author's perspective and self-reflection in the metajournalistic discourse and was subsequently divided into three subcategories: how authors define their own role and perspective (e.g., as an objective observer of problems in journalism or as advisers to their colleagues), their understanding of metajournalistic discourses, and background information on the author that is revealed to justify their attitude on the topic.

3. Descriptions of other journalists' and other actors' approach to right-wing populism. This category captures how authors describe and evaluate how other journalists and actors outside journalism (such as politicians) deal with populism. Although we were mainly interested in journalistic self-reflection, we also found that the authors commonly referred to other actors' public action toward right-wing populists. We therefore subdivided this category to distinguish between statements on particular journalists and media outlets, journalists in general, and other actors outside the media system, and then successively differentiated among different aspects of how populists are covered and treated according to the authors.

4. Normative demands and recommendations for action. In line with our research interest, we were interested in the journalistic norms that are invoked, whether journalists refer to one of the five options concerning professionalism mentioned earlier or whether they follow new, unexpected argumentative strategies. We found both suggestions regarding how journalists (and public figures) should act in relation to right-wing populism, and supposed solutions that served as negative scenarios and subdivided the category accordingly.

Results

In the theoretical section, we mentioned a number of possible reasons why a metajournalistic discourse on how to deal with right-wing populism could take place despite the reluctance toward such debates. An actual discourse might have emerged because right-wing populism had a sufficiently high news value that it was seen as a new and politically relevant phenomenon. Furthermore, criticism of the coverage of right-wing populists may have been sufficiently strong to warrant a response by a number of journalists. However, if this was the case, it would seem that criticism by right-wing populists or by others who had

accused journalism of being biased against populists was considered more relevant than the view that journalism has contributed to their rise or treated them too favorably. Or, journalists may have been more concerned by the rise of populism than by the criticism itself, but they may have feared that "wrong" ways of covering right-wing populists might contribute to their rise.

The occasions and reasons for the publication of the metajournalistic texts can be divided into three categories, which often blend into one another: (1) current (obviously newsworthy) occurrences with regard to the AfD (including media appearances and criticism), (2) the phenomenon of right-wing populism as such and its rise, and (3) the way the media and/or parties deal with the AfD. Specific dangers of right-wing populism were rarely mentioned as a reason for claims in the metajournalistic discourse. There were also hardly any references to Germany's national-socialist history. Instead, in the majority of cases, the contemporary case of the AfD or sometimes international populist actors such as Donald Trump are chosen as the only points of reference. We only found one statement that affirmatively draws historical parallels. Stefan Lutz, briefly cited in a small survey of six editors in chief of local newspapers in the trade journal *journalist* (22[1]), refers to National Socialism, but avoids a direct reference to Nazism and paraphrases it as the "approach which led directly into the catastrophe about 70 years ago."

Overall, we found quite similar conceptions of how to deal with right-wing populism during the period and in the media under analysis. The underlying narratives were similar across different types of media (consumer and trade press publications) and a broad range of political orientations of the outlets, from left-wing, left-liberal, liberal to conservative. There were also no systematic differences between different types of sections (such as politics or feuilleton) and genres (such as columns or editorials).

In the following, we represent the discourse as a fairly uniform narrative. Certainly, this account neglects certain nuances. However, we feel that a typology or another presentation that emphasizes the differences would be more artificial and make the discussion appear more controversial than it was. In the following, we will therefore reconstruct what we see as a common understanding of the problem (despite varying degrees of political distance toward right-wing populism itself) and its solutions, and mention the rare exceptions.

In addition to the main narratives, a major common feature of the articles is the frequent lack of (critical) self-reflection (which we intended to capture with our second category). Several authors seem to define themselves as observers and express neither self-reflection nor direct criticism, but strike a rather analytical tone. The vast majority of authors formulate either recommendations for action or criticism of others. In only a few articles do authors at least symbolically include themselves by indicating what "we as journalists" are supposed to do based on existing norms; however, they do not directly address their own concrete practice.

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[1] Numbers in parentheses refer to the publications in the sample listed in the appendix.

Perspectives on Populism and Its Rise

If the term *populism* is mentioned, it is mostly used without further definition and often pejoratively. With only a few exceptions, a rather diffuse everyday understanding of (right-wing) populism seems to prevail. Joffe (13), the editor of the left-liberal weekly journal *Die Zeit*, simply refers to populism as "a fuzzy thing." It is explicitly or implicitly related to simplification and demagogy. Populism is thus often described along features of an everyday understanding of populism rather than as an abstract, multidimensional construct. A typical example of the recurring everyday understanding is Berls' (24) description in an article in which he criticizes that the term is often used too carelessly: "According to [the dictionary] *Duden*, populists want to win the favor of the masses. Their means: closeness to the people and opportunism, but also demagoguery." However, some of the texts also refer to antiestablishment and anti-immigration politics, as well as xenophobia, as elements of populism. Not only the articles of professional journalists, but also two guest contributions from the politicians Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD; 26) and Peter Tauber (Christian Democratic Union, CDU; 1) define populism by such characteristics. For example, Tauber (1) describes populists' antiestablishment attitude as follows: "The 'others' for them are 'those up there': politicians, journalists, business leaders. An elitist 'cartel' against which the 'little man' is no longer allowed to speak out apparent truths."

Right-wing populism is mainly discussed with regard to a specific example, the party AfD. In large part, the elites are blamed for its rise, particularly the conservative party CDU, which is said to have shifted to the left, thereby leaving many conservative voters unrepresented. Voters of the AfD are seen either as part of the traditional clientele of the CDU or as those more right-wing voters who have always existed, but who have not been represented by a party. According to Kulke (11), commenting in the conservative newspaper *Die Welt*, published opinion stigmatizes

> the countless people who find themselves politically homeless after Merkel's turn to the left because things are moving too fast for them with gender, the energy transition, organic farming and all the breaches of the law worth tens of billions of euros during the Euro bailout.

However, Kulke argues, because the AfD was soon equally stigmatized, these "thoughtful" conservatives could no longer join it, leading to its radicalization.

Either way, right-wing populism is considered something rather normal that exists for a reason. Schüle (9) puts it as follows: "Yes, perhaps the AfD represents the 'right-wing fringe.' But this fringe is there, it is part of society as a whole, whether it pleases the non-right or not." (Schüle also argues that the grievances expressed by right-wing populists are understandable, and to condemning the AfD is paternalistic and ultimately self-defeating.) In a similar vein, Lobenstein (12), from the left-liberal *Die Zeit*, declares, "The AfD is not a temporary phenomenon that surfaces 'just like that.'" The rise of populism is mostly explained as a consequence of political strategies or the absence or failure thereof (and some errors committed in public discourse, see the next subsection), not cultural or structural factors.

The mentioned understanding of populism and its rise is also used as an argument for why the AfD ought to be covered. It cannot be ignored because it is supported by a sufficiently large part of the population and electorate and because the party has become quite influential. Furthermore, as a normal part of the political spectrum, the right-wing populists' positions have to be presented as a part of balanced coverage.

Other authors assume that the AfD is newsworthy because, being founded in 2013, it is rather new, and its rise has been spectacular. This also leads some authors to the conclusion that the amount of coverage will probably decline over time as its novelty value vanishes.

Although none of the authors agree with right-wing populist criticism of the media in its extreme form, most texts do not focus on refuting it, and it seems to be implicit in most of the texts that there is at least a grain of truth to it. As we will show in the next section, many of the authors point to what they see as biases and unprofessional behavior when their colleagues deal with right-wing populists.

The "Wrong" and "Right" Way to Deal With Right-Wing Populism

The metajournalistic texts make a clear distinction between the right and wrong way to deal with right-wing populism. This often already evident from the headlines, for example, in the liberal *Tagesspiegel*: "The major parties should not demonize the AfD," (27); the conservative newspaper *Die Welt*: "Contempt is the wrong way to deal with the AfD" (23); or the left-liberal *Die Zeit*: "Never demonize!" (18). Their authors claim that the AfD is often attacked and criticized in a way that confirms their self-proclaimed victim role. Furthermore, it is argued that journalists use double standards when covering the party and let representatives of other parties get away with comments that they would censure the AfD for. In this vein, Stefan Niggemeier (25), cofounder of the online magazine for media journalism and criticism *Übermedien*, writes, "In dealing with the AfD, the media apply double standards at times. This is evident, for example, in the nonchalance with which unacceptable attacks on AfD politicians are accepted."

A distinct line of argumentation postulates an affinity between populism and popularity and among simplification, scandals, and the economy of attention. The communicative style of populists is assumed to fit the functioning of journalism, given its tabloidization and commercialization, and the general mechanisms of attention in the profession.

The right way of dealing with the AfD is described as "professional," "neutral," and "democratic." Journalistic norms have to prove themselves, in particular when dealing with actors whose position one does not approve of, and these rules demand impartial coverage that reflects populists' "true" relevance. Journalists insist on this approach and refer to the rights and duties of journalists and normative functions of journalism. Thus, Niggemeier (25) states, "I believe that the AfD has the right to spread its views and that the population has a right to know these views." Many journalists insist on a critical scrutiny of populists' claim, but a professional, confident reaction to their provocations. For example, in the left-oriented *tageszeitung*, Sabine am Orde (19) formulates recommendations such as "discuss[ing] the content [of the AfD's claims]" or "stay[ing] calm on talk shows." While Kulke (11) of the conservative newspaper *Die Welt* emphasizes how unfairly the AfD is criticized, and am Orde, as a rare exception, directly addresses its racism, both seem to agree on a similar underlying assumption about how counterproductive certain

criticism is: One almost automatically becomes a defender of the AfD (Kulke), or at least certain attacks, such as Nazi comparisons, make it difficult to win back the democratic, conservative part of their supporters (am Orde).

It is assumed that the right approach either leads to a self-demolition or unmasking (or de-radicalization) of the AfD. In one of the few articles that is somewhat skeptical of the idea of confronting the AfD in talk shows, Gasteiger (10) summarizes this view of some of her colleagues:

> Anyone who makes crude demands like Beatrix von Storch [then member of the European Parliament for the AfD] and wants to send the Chancellor to Chile, unmasks himself enough—that is the tenor of those who want to give the AfD a chance to speak.

Others add that instead of demonizing it, and in addition to neutral coverage, the party should be further exposed by other strictly professional practices. The journalist is then required to increase the complexity of discourses, as opposed to the "simple solutions" of the populists, and to argue critically and thoroughly; as Straubhaar (23), a professor of economics and columnist at the conservative *Die Welt*, puts it, "Those who ostracize the AfD do not weaken but strengthen it. Totally unnecessarily. Because there are more than enough powerful arguments against a policy of populist simplification." Most important, it is demanded that journalists ask critical questions and be quick-witted in direct encounters with right-wing populists. Both strategies would then expose right-wing populists' disingenuousness and their groundless claims and worldview; for example, as Schreiber (21), host of a public service TV show covering journalism and the media, explains,

> But the more objectively we conduct a debate with those whose political proposals as such are rejected by the overwhelming majority of people, the more disenchanted the impression of the AfD and its victim role will be. Normality is the most effective antidote.

Ultimately, almost all the texts in our sample call for more journalistic professionalism and demand to follow the corresponding norms more strictly despite one's possible personal aversion to, or fundamental disagreement with, the AfD. These norms also allow for, or even require, critical questions and coolheaded counterarguments when dealing with right-wing populists, but observing these rules instead of opposing the populists in a moralizing manner or ostracizing them is seen as more effective. Some authors argue that it is not the task of journalists to combat the AfD, but to cover it neutrally or from a critical distance like they do all other parties. Others emphasize the same set of norms as a means to curb its influence without attacking it directly.

Discussion

Almost all the articles in our study urged journalists to comply with journalistic norms more strictly and to put professionalism before personal attitudes and general concerns. Critical self-reflection with regard to journalistic norms is virtually nonexistent. Thus, the norms or the populist criticism itself are not deconstructed. If right-wing populism is seen as a part of the ordinary spectrum of acceptable political positions or as something that one has to tolerate in a democracy, it must be represented in a neutral and

balanced manner according to the vast majority of authors in our sample—only under this condition, a conflict between professionalism and attitudes arises in which journalists can distinguish themselves by their superior professionalism and criticize their colleagues.

In our material, journalism, with its objective stance or critical questions and complex argumentation, is set apart from the simplicity and pseudo-solutions of populism that reveal themselves because of professional journalistic practices. Journalistic selection is then conceptualized as a simple dichotomy between coverage and ignoring right-wing populism despite its relevance and normalcy, and coverage is either objective (and/or critical in a rational manner) or demonizes right-wing populists in a counterproductive and illegitimate way.

In a recurring narrative, the metajournalistic discourse we analyzed mainly reproduces journalistic norms and mostly confines itself to calling on journalists to adhere to them more strictly. Rigorous toward the individual but in a rather ad hoc manner, based on the most salient domestic example of right-wing populism and recent incidents, media journalism reproduces the rules of routine practice (but also blind spots, as we will argue next). In the conflict between conventional professionalism and a fundamentally critical perspective toward right-wing populism, media journalism mostly takes the former side. The authors assume that if journalists were to follow the recommendations, this would demystify right-wing populism— or at least it is not their responsibility to defeat it. However, hostile journalism is held responsible for strengthening right-wing populism.

Our aim was not only to reconstruct the current discourse on how to deal with right-wing populism, but also to identify positions and arguments that have been missing from the debate, as well as the metajournalistic self-reflections of the journalists, which were very rare—at least in the outlets under investigation.

The discourse under investigation does not really acknowledge how journalism inevitably constructs political reality and can even constitute self-fulfilling prophecies, whereby political actors become important because they are considered important by the media. Coverage can, on the one hand, normalize right-wing populism as a part of the established political spectrum by referring to its strength or by equating it with political camps and ideologies such as conservatism. On the other hand, journalism can treat right-wing populism differently, as a relevant social and political phenomenon, but not as a necessary element in "balanced" coverage or even as one of two sides of an issue. The media may reproduce the perspective and framing of the right-wing populists or find other ways to construct problems. In particular, the perspective of those minorities or political opponents who are concerned about or even threatened by right-wing populism often receives less attention than the positions of the populists themselves, and we did not find any demands to routinely include the positions and firsthand experiences of those who are most affected by right-wing populist politics. The usefulness and practical applicability of coverage for active citizens and civil society and its empowering function may also be considered an important quality of journalism that the authors in the discourse under analysis do not acknowledge.

The metajournalistic discourse does not reflect on the complicity between the logic of journalism and right-wing populism, except for a rather apolitical criticism of commercialization and sensationalism.

However, there are more levels at which the functioning of journalism fits the worldview of populism, such as ethnocentrism, anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism, even if they are motivated by different worldviews. Some biases, as well as prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes, are not confined to an extreme of the political spectrum and the fringes of society, but are widespread in society, including among journalists.

The dichotomy between the professional and an unprofessionally critical or hostile way of dealing with right-wing populism excludes a professionalism that would reflect both the complicity between journalism and right-wing populism and their antagonism (antimedia populism and media antipopulism).

Authors in the metajournalistic discourse do not explicate their conception of a public journalistic discourse as such. They mainly reduce debate to quick-wittedness in direct confrontations with right-wing populists or "factual" and "reasonable" argumentation instead of reflecting on the types of competence and rationality that would be necessary when dealing with right-wing populism in general. However, right-wing populism risks being depoliticized and its structural preconditions being neglected if it is described as a mere simplistic worldview that will collapse under critical questions or even under its own weight.

However, on a critical and normative level, we would argue that metajournalistic discourses should also consider some more fundamental aims and principles: What are the underlying, more abstract norms that the specific journalistic rules and routines should help to realize, and what kind of discourse should journalistic practice constitute? For example, if such a discourse is to be open to all intelligible, sincere contributions backed by reasonable arguments, how does journalism treat those who seek to exclude others and instrumentalize such discourses by strategically ambivalent and provocative utterances, and who do not so much try to convince others as they try to demonstrate power? Media journalism should then not only sanction individual journalists, but also reflect how norms can lead to unintended consequences—and metajournalistic discourses should not be reduced to the question of whether journalistic practices help or harm right-wing populists. Instead, the rules and limits of discourses should be made explicit and justified when dealing with right-wing populists and with those who may follow their criticism of the media.

Conclusion

The criticism raised by right-wing populists and others or the doubts arising within journalism seem to be sufficiently relevant to justify a metajournalistic debate. Professionalism seems to be the legitimate and/or effective answer. Rather than deconstructing the norms or the criticism, journalists are admonished to follow them more strictly—a metajournalistic discourse that is, maybe a bit unexpectedly, directed inwardly, even in the general press, but may also contribute to legitimizing journalistic practices in the eyes of a larger public.

In our study, we only investigated contributions in major news outlets and the trade press. Authors in other publications and on other platforms could reflect on the relationship between right-wing populism and the media differently, and further studies should also turn to such platforms. For example, a post on the Twitter account of a German political talk show was widely criticized and ridiculed by other users (including journalists). It had been remarked that the show often reproduces right-wing populist frames in its topics and the host's questions. Critics pointed to the naive understanding implied in a responding tweet,

which stated that "as journalists," the producers of the show "have little use for concepts such as framing" and that their job is to represent "things that matter to people as they really are."

Furthermore, we have to consider whether Germany is indeed a special case. Without an empirical basis, we will not speculate in detail on the structure of debates elsewhere (which should be analyzed in future comparative studies); however, our findings should in principle apply to journalistic cultures that emphasize the journalistic norms discussed earlier and to media systems in which journalism is sufficiently independent from populist parties (in particular in government) to allow for an independent discussion on how to cover them.

Certainly, Nazi comparisons hang like the sword of Damocles over the head of right-wing populists, and we may expect the German media to be particularly cautious when it comes to coverage of the far right. However, the journalists whose texts we studied did not use this rhetorical device in their contributions or particularly call for countermeasures in the German tradition of militant democracy. On the contrary, the AfD and its coverage were normalized as an ordinary case of application of norms of balance and objectivity. Journalists may also avoid references to National Socialism just because right-wing populists complain that these comparisons are used excessively in public debates.

Authors in the debate frequently refer to transnational (but not universal) journalistic norms, and Germany is in many ways a rather typical example of a journalistic culture based on these norms (on commonalities and differences across various dimensions of journalistic culture, cf. Hanitzsch et al., 2011). We may thus, with due caution, consider our investigation a more general analysis on metajournalistic discourse about right-wing populism that contributes to the overall study of such discourses. They are a topic of research in their own right that should be further theorized and investigated.

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Appendix

Overview of the Sample

No.	Author	Headline	Outlet
1	Tauber, Peter	Unter Elefanten	ZEIT Online
2	Frankenberger, Klaus-Dieter	Warum es Rabauken wie Donald Trump auch in Europa gibt	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
3	Dernbach, Andrea; Meier, Albrecht	Mit Worten zündeln	Der Tagesspiegel
4	Huber, Joachim	AfD, eine rechtspopulistische Partei?	Der Tagesspiegel
5	Freudenreich, Josef-Otto	SWR—ganz elastisch	Kontext: Wochenzeitung
6	Houshami, Ali Reza; Pleic, Anita; Lachmann, Markus	AfD wird zum Märtyrer gemacht	Wormser Zeitung
7	Fietz, Martina	Warum Grüne, SPD und SWR mit dem AfD-Streit einen Kardinalfehler begangen haben	FOCUS Online
8	Staun, Harald	Eine Verteidigung des Populismus	Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung
9	Schüle, Christian	Armseliger Umgang mit politischem Gegner	Deutschlandradio
10	Gasteiger, Carolin	Die AfD ignorieren? Oder entlarven?	Süddeutsche Zeitung
11	Kulke, Ulli	Wo bleibt der souveräne Umgang mit der AfD?	Die Welt
12	Lobenstein, Caterina	Soll man mit der AfD reden?	ZEIT Online
13	Joffe, Josef	Trump überall	ZEIT Online

14	Lenger, Hans-Joachim	Der blinde Fleck des Populismus	Deutschlandradio
15	Tonassi, Timo	Wie umgehen mit rechtspopulistischer Rhetorik?	Mediendienst Integration
16	No author	Wie das Ausland über den Erfolg der Rechtspopulisten berichtet	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
17	Koschinski, Anna	Wie populistisch müssen wir schreiben?	Koschinski—kommunikation.medien.redaktion
18	Thurnher, Armin	Niemals dämonisieren!	ZEIT Online
19	Am Orde, Sabine	Schnappatmung hilft nicht	tageszeitung (taz)
20	Ürük, Bülend	"Focus"-Mann Ulrich Reitz zum AfD-Programmentwurf: "Was ist daran populistisch?"	Kress
21	Schreiber, Constantin	Der AfD mit Normalität begegnen	Meedia
22	Lungmus, Monika	Und wie jetzt mit der AfD umgehen?	journalist
23	Straubhaar, Thomas	Verachtung ist das falsche Mittel gegen die AfD	Die Welt
24	Berls, Ulrich	Wir Populisten	The European
25	Niggemeier, Stefan	Der Kampf gegen die AfD	Übermedien
26	Scholz, Olaf	Die Partei der schlechten Laune	heute.de
27	Birnbaum, Robert	Die Volksparteien sollten die AfD nicht dämonisieren	Der Tagesspiegel
28	Köckritz, Angela; Randow Gero	Wie soll man sie nennen?	ZEIT Online
29	Fahrenbach, Christian	Klickt extrem gut? Die Medien und die Populisten	Krautreporter