Young, free and biased: A comparison of mainstream and right-wing media coverage of the 2015–16 refugee crisis in German newspapers

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Abstract

Right-wing media have been growing in terms of readership and impact in recent years. However, comparative analyses that gauge linkages between mainstream and right-wing media in Europe are virtually missing. We pursued an algorithm-based topic-modelling analysis of 11,420 articles concerning the question of whether reporting of the leading German right-wing newspaper Junge Freiheit differed from that of mainstream media outlets in the context of the refugee crisis of 2015–16. The results strongly support this notion. They show a clear-cut dichotomy with mainstream media on one side and Junge Freiheit on the other. A time lag could be found, pointing to a reporting pattern that positioned Junge Freiheit relative to the journalistic and political mainstream. Thus, Junge Freiheit can be characterised as a ‘reactive’ alternative media outlet that is prone to populism: it stresses the national dimension of the crisis, embraces the positions of the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and largely neglects complex international, and particularly European, implications.

Keywords

Alternative media, comparative analysis, Junge Freiheit, LDA, populism, refugee crisis, right-wing media

Introduction

The refugee crisis of 2015–16 was a decisive and divisive moment in the recent history of Europe. More than two million migrants, mostly from Syria, entered the European Union’s Schengen Area, the vast majority of them ending up in Germany (Eurostat 2018; Frontex 2017). German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s decision not to close the German borders in August 2015, in the face of several hundred thousand people being stuck on what had become known as the Balkan route, caused a major controversy not just in Germany itself, but in other countries as well. The course of events strengthened nativist movements elsewhere: the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom, Donald Trump as a US presidential candidate and the French Front National all benefited from widespread fears of a German-style influx of refugees. In Germany itself, anti-immigrant
sentiments led to the rise of the hard-right party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, or AfD), scoring in the double-digits in the federal elections of September 2017.

In the course of bitter debates, German media became a target of criticism too. Hitherto respected quality newspapers, and TV and radio programs, were accused of painting an all too rosy picture, intentionally misleading the public. In national surveys conducted towards the end of 2015, more than half of all respondents subscribed to the point of view that the media offered an incorrect account of the developments surrounding the refugee crisis; another 22 per cent were undecided (Köcher, 2015). ‘Lügenpresse’ (‘lying press’) became a regular chant at anti-immigration rallies.

In a widely discussed study, Haller (2017) presents empirical evidence supporting the claim that mainstream journalism in Germany was prone to herd behaviour, in the sense that up to early 2016, media outlets took a predominantly refugee-friendly stance, which changed only after the sexual assaults against young women, allegedly by immigrants from North Africa, occurred in the city centre of Cologne on New Year’s Eve 2016.

Simultaneously, alternative media profited from anti-immigrant sentiments. The rise of this variety of publication and its interplay with the strengthening support for right-wing populist parties across Europe have been issues in communication studies since the 1990s (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016). Recent developments, however, raise questions that call for further empirical investigation. In particular, the role of alternative outlets in today’s media systems remains rather unclear. Do they just exacerbate political polarisation by applying their own brand of media bias or do they also fill a blank space left by mainstream journalism by contributing – for example, revealing new aspects, uncovering new facts or stressing disregarded arguments?

This article analyses the refugee crisis-related reporting in German print media in 2015 and 2016. By applying an algorithmic topic model known as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), we compare the coverage by four newspapers: three elite mainstream papers, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt and Handelsblatt, and the weekly Junge Freiheit, a leading right-wing publication. The use of topic models has two major advantages compared with traditional content analysis: first, as an unsupervised method, it allows for an explorative approach, keeping in check possible biases and prejudices of the researchers themselves; second, the algorithmic approach facilitates the inclusion of large numbers of articles – 11,420 in our case – thus producing continuous time-series rather than snapshots around certain key events. By following this approach, we are able to present a comprehensive account of the reporting patterns that accompanied the momentous events of 2015–16.

Theoretical framework and state of research

**Differentiation of the term ‘alternative media’: Reactive and autonomous media**

Alternative media operate outside the mainstream of recognised and established journalistic organisations, and we still lack a general definition of the term ‘alternative media’. As Haller and Holt (2018: 4) point out, it does not suffice to define them as ‘an alternative in terms of content but also concerning production process, professional ethos and distribution’.

It seems warranted to categorise the term further, allowing us to distinguish between publications like community media and, for example, right-wing publications, which are often subsumed under the same generic term, although their relationship with the general public is completely different. First, we define mainstream media as our reference point – media that are interdependent, yet mainly formulate their own independent response to common social topics, thus creating a joint sphere of discourse: the mainstream public. We can then classify the other media as follows. On the one hand, there are publications that also operate within this sphere of discourse, but respond to the mainstream media reactively, and therefore with a delay, contrasting
the published opinion with their ideologised view. We call these ‘reactive media’ because they ‘need to be understood in the light of their position as self-appointed correctives of traditional media’ (Haller & Holt, 2018: 2). On the other hand, there are publications that claim to cater to their own audience, covering topics or issues that do not receive adequate attention or pertain to marginalised sections of the population – we call these ‘autonomous media’.

One objective of this article is to position the alternative right-wing media we study (see next section for details about our research subject, Junge Freiheit) in this taxonomy. Research offers examples of both classifications: Storz (2015) describes alternative right-wing media in Germany as an autonomous media public, while an analysis of xenophobic media in Sweden (Holt, 2016b), by contrast, found a strong association with the mainstream media that suggests a reactive dependence rather than an autonomous public in fragmented spheres.

**Right-wing populist media**

Right-wing populist media emerged in Europe as early as the 1990s (Atton, 2006). Since the outbreak of the financial crisis (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016), and later the refugee crisis (Haller & Holt, 2018), however, their readership as well as their impact on the public discourse have been growing (Holt, 2016a; Storz, 2015). As Silverman and Thomas (2012: 283) emphasise, their populist ideology focuses on ‘public anxiety’ regarding both terrorism and immigration – all topics that are characteristic of a populist media focus (Krämer, 2014) feed on a ‘sense of existential insecurity’ (Furedi, 2009: 197). While populism, and hence the idea of populist media, constitute a ‘slippery signifier’ (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016: 48), literature offers a strong consensus on certain core characteristics: the above-mentioned feeling of insecurity and being under threat arises from a confrontation between an identification group (‘us’) and dangerous aliens and elites who are threatening the self-determination and sovereignty, well-being, and prosperity of the identification group (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008: 3). This reference point ‘us’ can be both nation-state and religion or ethnic group, which then defines the antipode of the alien ‘other’. Couldry (2002) speaks of ‘constructing or sustaining a community with closure’. The elites are generally the representative democracy, the economy or the media. This is where the inconsistency (or, positively worded, the flexibility) of the populist worldview becomes apparent: ‘It tends to be hostile to representative politics – while at the same time living in symbiosis with it’ (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016: 49). Mouffe (2005: 69) points out that the notion of ‘we’ in European right-wing populism currently defines itself via a

stronly xenophobic character, and the fact that in all cases immigrants are presented as a threat to the identity of the people, while multiculturalism is perceived as being imposed by the elites against the popular will. In most cases, this populism also contains a strong anti-EU element, European integration being identified with the authoritarian strategy of the elites.

Complexity is presented as a smokescreen created by the elites, and is contrasted with a simple world-view with clear archetypal notions of ‘enemy’. Problems are analysed mono-causally and thus presented as easy to solve (Canovan, 1999: 5). Populist explanations respond to complex issues (globalisation, climate change, evolution) with simplistic, negativistic narratives, typically taking ‘an underdog angle of the less privileged who are portrayed of being exploited by the elites’ (Müller, 2017: 68). Simplicity and negativity constitute the emotive power of the populist approach as it mobilises its followers with simple slogans. In this context, Atkinson and Berg (2012: 532) speak of ‘right-leaning alternative media’ and their high mobilisation potential compared with their left-wing counterparts.

Populist media – including tabloids (Mazzoleni, 2008) and party-affiliated online media (Atton, 2006) – as well as populist parties harness this communicative potential in symbiotic ways, benefiting both populist media and politicians (Alvares & Dahlgren, 55). Further, it can be argued
that populist communication strategies should be seen as a symptom of today’s increasingly ‘market-driven journalism’ (Bos and Brants, 2014: 707); Atton (2006: 574) even speaks of a ‘normalization of right-wing discourse in the public sphere’.

**Populist framing of the refugee crisis**

Framing is a strategy used by journalists to represent complex societal issues. According to Entman (1993), a frame comprises up to four elements: a problem definition, a cause diagnosis, a moral judgement and possible remedies. In terms of this taxonomy, the problem-defining property is of particular importance in the context of the coverage of the refugee crisis, stressing xenophobic notions (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017: 1756; Hier & Greenberg, 2002: 498; Lawlor & Tolley, 2017: 972–3). Other authors, including Esses, Medianu and Lawson (2013) and El Refaie (2001), identify a ‘safety’ or ‘threat frame’. They also identify a ‘crime frame’, a ‘war frame’ and an ‘illegality frame’. Within these frames, refugees are described as criminal and inherently dangerous elements that, above all, tend to destabilise their host societies. These negative frames are often associated with metaphors of aggression, such as the escalade of a ‘Fortress Europe’, or natural disasters, such as ‘tides of refugees’ (El Refaie 2001: 365, 359). Some metaphors found in this context even refer to asylum seekers as animals rather than human beings: ‘it becomes quite “natural” to talk of them as being hunted and caught in a net’ (El Refaie 2001: 358). Hier and Greenberg (2002: 500–1) isolate an ‘objectification frame’ that refers to migrants as ‘boat people’ or ‘human cargo’.

This type of frame can be characterised as populist for its clear-cut differentiation ‘between innocent in-groups and culprit out-groups’ (Hameleers, Bos & De Vreese 2017: 4). Refugees are framed as intruders who pose a threat to the host country’s economic and cultural achievements (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Van Gorp, 2005). Stressing differences between ‘us’ (the regular, native people) and ‘them’ (aliens, immigrants, foreigners, but also members of allegedly detached elites) is a key feature of populism. It should be noted that these findings were derived from the analysis of mainstream media. It can be assumed that even more polarising populist frames could be found in alt-right-wing publications.

The literature published to date on the recent refugee crisis confirms previous research. Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017: 1763) conclude that, ‘Austrian newspapers mainly employed established, stereotyped narratives of security threat, economisation, and – to a lesser extent – victimisation.’ As already mentioned, Haller (2017) arrives at a completely different conclusion about news coverage by German quality newspapers: for *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Welt*, he ascertained that in the first half of 2015 through to late autumn, ‘the standard of quality journalism – reporting objectively from a neutral point of view – was not upheld in approximately half of the reports’ (Haller, 2017: 134). Voices expressing fears and concerns about immigration found hardly any mention in news reporting: ‘When they did, it was in a patronizing or disdainful way (talking down to East Germans)’ (Haller, 2017: 135). According to this study, journalists failed to present and illustrate different positions; rather, until late autumn of 2015, generally conveyed the refugee-friendly viewpoints held by the German government (Haller, 2017: 135). Haller concludes that the failure to represent the viewpoints of the general public was due to the selection of the voices that were heard: in the above-mentioned newspapers, two-thirds of interviewees were representatives of political institutions. The fact that political actors were given a voice does not mean, however, that they represented the entire spectrum of views: even though the AfD was already represented in some state and district-level bodies at the time the study was conducted, followers of this party were only marginally covered in news reporting (0.1 per cent) (Haller, 2017: 133–4). He argues that, especially in the first half of 2015, the public were inundated with journalistic content on migration and refugees; the
established media had neglected their responsibility to present a broad and balanced selection of news (Haller, 2017: 132).

Haller describes the existence of certain spiral-of-silence effects in the coverage on refugees in Germany. He argues that the journalistic narrative of a ‘welcoming culture’ prevailed until the New Year’s Eve incidents of 2015 in Cologne, generating a dominant opinion that positioned ‘those who held different views as morally in the wrong’ (Haller, 2017: 144). Contrary to traditional spiral-of-silence theory, however, these days people who feel not represented by mass media do not need to remain silent, but can escape to the internet – which indeed they did, ending up in blogs, forums and other echo chambers (Haller, 2017: 145).

In such an environment, alternative media could, in theory, help to enhance the functioning of the public sphere. If uniformity and herd behaviour prevail, off-mainstream journalism outlets can easily add otherwise neglected issues, aspects, and arguments, thus putting competitive pressure on established media, as well as on their frames and beliefs, and consequently broadening the scope of debates by supplying auxiliary information.

Research questions

In the preceding section, we stressed the properties of two types of alternative media – reactive and autonomous – both in relation to mainstream media. While Junge Freiheit is clearly an alternative right-wing medium, it is less obvious whether it is reactive or autonomous. Given Junge Freiheit’s self-proclaimed mission (see below), we expected its coverage to meet the criteria of populist media, constructing sharp differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and applying overly simplistic explanations to complex issues. Furthermore, it could be anticipated that Junge Freiheit would mainly characterise the influx of refugees as a menace and a problem. Research has shown that negative frames have dominated mainstream media as well, although these findings are rather ambiguous with respect to the coverage of the most recent German refugee crisis.

In this vein, we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: Does Junge Freiheit, as an alternative medium, behave reactively – responding to mainstream media with a delay, contrasting the published opinion with an ideologised view – or autonomously, covering otherwise marginalised aspects or topics?

RQ2: Are populist strategies and frames primarily to be ascribed to Junge Freiheit, or can they also be found in the mainstream media, analysed to the extent where there is a normalisation of xenophobic discourses?

Selection of media

We analysed the coverage on the refugee crisis in Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt and Handelsblatt between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2016. All three media are well-established national quality newspapers, which have played prominent roles in Germany since the post-war period, with Süddeutsche Zeitung having a slightly left-of-centre leaning, Die Welt being a conservative paper and Handelsblatt pursuing a business-focused neoliberal stance. They are the second, fourth and fifth largest national German dailies respectively (IVW 2017a). The fourth paper in our selection, Junge Freiheit, is described in more detail.

Junge Freiheit

The first edition of Junge Freiheit appeared more than 30 years ago, in June 1986, as a student newspaper. It was founded by Dieter Stein, who still serves as editor-in-chief of the weekly newspaper today. Its initial circulation, 400 copies, rose to 4000 by the end of the 1980s, as it was distributed at universities free of charge. In 1990, its t10 main contributors founded the ‘Junge Freiheit Verlag GmbH’; since 1994, the paper has appeared weekly (Kellershohn, 2007a: 43–6).
According to its mission statement, Junge Freiheit follows four guiding values: nation, liberty, conservatism and Christianity (Junge Freiheit, 2017b). As the mission statement puts it, Germany remains ‘the decisive factor for order and the identity-building framework … even in a unified Europe’ (Junge Freiheit, 2017b). The paper considers itself a ‘weekly newspaper for politics, business, culture, media, and the environment’ (Junge Freiheit, 2017a: 5), covering all ‘socially relevant issues’ (Junge Freiheit, 2017a: 5). In its information brochure, the weekly claims that it contributes ‘significantly to the diversity of opinion in the German media landscape’ (Junge Freiheit, 2017a: 2), filling ‘a serious gap in the spectrum of public opinion’ (Junge Freiheit, 2017a: 2). Moreover, it considers itself ‘truly independent and free from third-party commercial interests and political influence’ (Junge Freiheit, 2017a: 2). Junge Freiheit says it reports on issues that other media do not tackle, ‘mainly for considerations of political correctness’ (Junge Freiheit, 2017a: 2).

Journalists from the research network Correctiv came to a different conclusion. In a series of articles about media of the so-called ‘New Right’, Correctiv studied several publications, including Junge Freiheit. The research network classifies the weekly as ‘clearly right-wing … with blurred boundaries between conservative right and far right’ (Kohrs 2016a).

Circulation figures show that Junge Freiheit is now the sixth largest weekly newspaper in Germany, selling more than 30,300 copies, about 20,000 of which are via subscription (IVW 2017a: 168). In recent years, the three quality media in our sample have suffered a decline in circulation (Die Welt and Süddeutsche Zeitung each lost about 3 per cent last year, Handelsblatt just under 0.5 per cent), while Junge Freiheit’s sales increased (Schröder, 2017; IVW, 2017b). The developments of 2015–16 seem to have impacted the weekly’s subscription figures positively. Since 2015, the number of copies sold rose by almost 25 per cent (IVW 2017b). Compared with the first quarter of 2008, circulation has almost doubled (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Evolution of Junge Freiheit circulation figures](source)

Source: IVW (2017b).

Correctiv draws the following conclusions: ‘Apparently, the paper hits all the right notes with AfD voters; addressing aspects they don’t see in the so-called “mainstream media”’ (Kohrs, 2016b). The research network mentions AfD voters explicitly because it ascertained that Junge Freiheit has an affinity with this party. Correctiv quotes Alexander Gauland, co-spokesman for the AfD, as follows: ‘If you want to understand the AfD, you need to read Junge Freiheit’ (Kohrs, 2016b). Correctiv further reports that, ‘in fact, the AfD party program reads like a digest of the weekly’s key topics: Close the borders; beware of criminal aliens; put a stop to mass immigration;
save the traditional family’ (Kohrs, 2016b). Its proximity to the AfD is also evident in the fact that several former contributors are spokespersons or members of parliament on behalf of the party today. The AfD often dominates Junge Freiheit’s front page (Kohrs, 2016b). Political scientists support Correctiv’s views: ‘Junge Freiheit is still considered the major publication of the New Right in Germany, a movement which, under the guise of conservatism, links right-wing extremism to the democratic spectrum’ (Braun & Vogt, 2007: 9–10).

Junge Freiheit was covered by reports of the domestic intelligence service (‘Verfassungsschutz’) of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia for over 10 years. The report states, ‘Its moderate tone often conceals anti-democratic and xenophobic ideas’ (cited according to Braun & Vogt, 2007: 10). The weekly is a publication, the report argues, that is ‘constantly riddled with articles that contradict the basic principles of a free democratic order’ (cited according to Kellershohn, 2007a: 51). It goes on to say that Junge Freiheit operates skilfully in the grey area of democratic conservatism, right-wing radicalism and right-wing extremism. In 2005, the German Constitutional Court ruled in favour of the weekly when it appealed against its mention in the federal Verfassungsschutz report. The court argued that freedom of the press outweighed concerns about the paper (Braun & Vogt, 2007: 9).

Content analyses of Junge Freiheit show that its reporting is dominated by identity and biopolitical topics (Kellershohn, 2007b: 141). The paper propagates the dangers of immigration, such as the downgrading of the German majority into an ethnic minority (Kellershohn, 2007b: 141). The analyses also show that the paper’s coverage warns about the dissolution of the traditional family. Pechel (2007) maintains that Junge Freiheit has a profoundly retrospective view of history. Editor-in-chief Dieter Stein said in an interview with Correctiv, ‘We want to convey a more positive view of German history’ (cited according to Kohrs, 2016b).

Methodology

Data pre-processing

Junge Freiheit data were scraped from the online archive of its print edition, Handelsblatt and Süddeutsche Zeitung data came from the publishers directly, and Die Welt data were obtained from data provider Nexis. The optimal search term was determined based on a relevance criterion according to Stryker’s best-practice approach (Stryker et al., 2006), with a recall of 0.92 and a precision of 0.74 (Krippendorff’s Alpha 0.798).1 In further pre-processing steps, numbers and punctuation as well as stop words – that is, filler words that do not carry meaning and do not enhance the interpretive content, which are quite common in German texts – were deleted (Snowball Stemmer Project, 2016). All uppercase letters were replaced with lowercase letters. For the subsequent topic clustering, we only used words that occurred more than five times in the corpus.

LDA

In a second step, we applied the topic-clustering algorithm LDA to the sub-corpora we had generated (Blei, Ng & Jordan, 2003). To do this, we used the R package tosca (Koppers et al., 2018). LDA is well suited to highlight thematic correlations in large bodies of text. It is therefore predestined for an analytical comparison of sub-corpora over time.

LDA yields word lists, called topics, which assign a probability value to each word in the respective corpus. Ordered by these probability values, they yield lists, which ideally activate thematically consistent cognitive schemata in human coders. For example, a human coder can easily correlate the words ‘asylum seeker’, ‘refugee’, ‘germany’, ‘number’, ‘persons’, ‘asylum seekers’ (JF-7 – for LDA topics of Junge Freiheit see Table 2, for topics of other outlets, see supplement) in a thematic context and label the list accordingly (here as ‘Numbers of Asylum Applications’, see Table 2).
LDA generates interpretable topics because it operationalises a fundamental property of human language using a statistical model: according to the distributional hypothesis (Harris, 1954), there is a correlation between the semantic similarity of linguistic units (words, phrases) and the similarity of their distribution across certain linguistic contexts, which are taken from empirical corpora. This characteristic of language is related to the cognitive-psychological model of cognitive patterns that enable human thinking and organising. The LDA topic clustering process operationalises this characteristic of language by putting words in a thematic context, depending on how often they appear together in a document (ignoring the syntax of the text; LDA is based on a bag-of-words approach, which assumes that word order is irrelevant). By measuring co-occurrence, LDA ties in with concepts from communication science that use cognitive-psychological models, such as the framing approach. According to Entman (1993: 52), frames manifest themselves 'by the presence or absence of certain key words'. Even though frames describe special patterns, which do not necessarily have to appear in the LDA topic patterns one-to-one, there is a conceptual overlap, which allows us to reference the framing approach in the context of our LDA analysis. Jacobi, van Atteveldt and Welbers (2016: 92) assert that 'if framing devices correspond to specific (latent) patterns of vocabulary use, LDA can capture these classes in specific topics, and as such LDA results can also include the frames used in a corpus of texts' (see also DiMaggio, Nag & Blei 2013: 571). Using LDA, frames are thus all the easier to recognise when the words associated with them are more specific. We therefore believe that the domain of refugee reporting and detecting populist frames is a particularly appropriate field in which to apply this method because, as we have seen, it is often characterised by a specific vocabulary.

The LDA parameters alpha and eta are defined as 1/K, the topic number K for Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt and Junge Freiheit each being 14, for Handelsblatt 10. Alpha and eta determine how heavily a few topics or words dominate documents (as probability distributions across topics) or topics (as probability distributions across the words in the corpus). In simple terms, you could say that these variables determine whether the probability mass is spread evenly or unevenly across words or topics. Common values for alpha and eta are 0.1, or values just above or just below (DiMaggio, Nag & Blei 2013: 579). The K parameter indicates into how many topics the LDA model should classify the words in the articles. There is no universal figure for this; rather, it depends on the topic and the articles analysed (Binkley et al., 2014: 26). The goal in defining K should be to describe the data with fewer dimensions than there actually are (to simplify the subject), yet with sufficient topics to minimise the loss of information. As a general rule, a K that is too small results in multiple themes being represented in one topic. A K that is too large, however, causes one theme to cover several topics and individual details to appear in various topics. In the first case the themes are not clearly discernible, and in the latter they are too diluted. Both scenarios yield solutions that are difficult to interpret (Binkley et al., 2014: 28). For the present analysis, the K parameters were determined using the intruder words validation method by Chang et al. (2009) (result tables in the supplement), which verifies how meaningfully LDA assigns words to a topic, checking whether this assignment yields a meaningful and coherent correlation that makes sense to a human coder (Chang et al. 2009: 2).

For the interpretation, we subsequently used the top words (most representative terms of a topic), top articles (most representative articles – that is, articles with the largest percentage of words from a certain topic) and the evolution of topics over time (assigned words on certain topics relative to the sub-corpus).

**Results**

Comparing the coverage of the three mainstream newspapers and Junge Freiheit, we start with the overall attention devoted to the refugee crisis. Figure 2 depicts the shares of articles per month concerning the migration movement relative to all articles that appeared in the four papers and
relates them to the numbers of refugees as counted by the official registration system EASY in 2015 and 2016 (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2017). As issue attention cycle theory (Downs, 1972; Waldherr, 2014) would predict, the coverage closely tracks the events during this period of time. When the number of refugees increased sharply in the summer of 2015, media attention more than quadrupled in all the papers, before petering out over the autumn of that year. A second peak can be detected in early 2016, when another key event took place: the sexual assaults of young women by groups of young immigrants in the city centre of Cologne on New Year’s Eve 2015. This incident started a second attention cycle that was kept alive over the course of 2016, even as the number of refugees entering Germany declined significantly.2

![Image](image_url)


**Figure 2: Normalised frequency of coverage and refugee numbers as a monthly share of all registered refugees in 2015/2016**

Comparisons of peak coverage yield an interesting first insight: *Junge Freiheit* lags behind the mainstream papers, especially *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Welt*, by about a month. While the other three reach, for instance, a maximum in September, *Junge Freiheit*’s peak occurs in October.3 This lag could be due to the different frequencies of publication – after all, *Junge Freiheit* is a weekly while the others are dailies. But our analysis suggests that reporting patterns play a more important role: as an alternative news medium, *Junge Freiheit* seeks to span a counter-public that is inherently focused on the mainstream sphere rather than on actual events. Essentially, *Junge Freiheit* tends to reflect what is happening in the political and media mainstream, commenting on its discourses and striving to re-frame them.

*Junge Freiheit*’s distinctly different reporting patterns can be traced statistically. Comparing probability distributions across word lists enables us to cluster topics at a higher level. The R Package tosca offers a function to ‘cluster topics’, which enables grouping with the help of the Hellinger distance. Here, the probability values of individual words in different topics are compared with each other so that topics similar to one another can be grouped. Figure 3 shows the resulting dendrogram, a tree-like graphical representation of statistical distance that displays branches of similar overall themes and twigs of related frames.
In Figure 3, topics that are closely related are depicted in proximity to one another, while topics from different strands of reporting are shown at greater distance. *Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt* and (to some degree) business-focused *Handelsblatt* share a vast array of reporting patterns.
Starting on the right-hand side of Figure 3 (in rectangle), the three mainstream newspapers include a European perspective on the refugee crisis (with similar topics labelled ‘Europe’, see Table 1); they report on dangerous boat-trips across the Mediterranean (labelled ‘refugee boats’), the chief cause of the refugee movement (the ‘middle-east conflict’), the fiscal burden of the influx to be borne by Germany (‘costs’); they highlight the potential effect on the overall economy and, more specifically, to labour supply (‘economy’); they tell tales about individual refugees (‘personal stories’) and muse about the ‘solidarity’ of volunteers and German society as a whole; the reporting includes debates about ‘asylum policies’, assaults against refugees and their accommodations (‘threats’) as well as cultural and artistic reflections on this disruptive social development (‘arts & culture’).

In contrast, Junge Freiheit chose not to cover many aspects of the refugee crisis – its causes or, somewhat surprisingly, the related costs. Where the LDA produces Junge Freiheit topics with some statistical proximity to mainstream topics, the slant is distinctly different. For instance, while the other papers ask whether refugee workers could alleviate labour supply shortages in Germany (topics labelled ‘economy’), Junge Freiheit stresses ill-fitting or missing qualifications. Where the others write about the difficult choices of ‘asylum policies’, Junge Freiheit highlights the success of the AfD. Instead of writing about ‘solidarity’, Junge Freiheit picks out religious differences between mainly Muslim immigrants and the mainly Christian resident population as a central theme (‘religion’). Instead of covering assaults against refugees, it stresses assaults by them (‘threats’). Quite significantly, the LDA yields a Junge Freiheit-specific topic (JF-4) that has no equivalent in the other corpora: a ‘media critique’ topic containing articles that deal with the coverage of mainstream media.

The predominantly national, if not nationalist, perspective of Junge Freiheit is underlined by the small degree of attention it pays to the European dimension. Figure 4 shows the shares of the four papers ‘Europe’ topics over time. Centrist Süddeutsche Zeitung and business-focused Handelsblatt cover attempts to deal with the crisis at the European level extensively, starting in August 2015; additionally, Handelsblatt relates the Brexit vote in the referendum of June 2016 to the massive influx of immigrants into the European Union, resulting in a significant peak in reporting that month. In contrast, Junge Freiheit’s share of the coverage of developments at the European level fluctuates between just 5 and 10 per cent.

Figure 4: Aggregated Europe topics over time as share of each sub-corpus (orange: Handelsblatt (HB), blue: Die Welt (DW), red: Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ), grey: Jung Freiheit (JF)
Table 2: LDA result as top words – that is, the most representative words of each JF topic (share of corpus in brackets)

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<th>Demonstrations against refugees</th>
<th>Media &amp; media critique</th>
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<th>Threats from refugees</th>
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In *Junge Freiheit*'s representation of the events, national politics in Germany play a major role, with a share of a quarter to a third of the corpus (Figure 5). As noted above, this *Junge Freiheit* topic (JF-8) deals mainly with the AfD’s rise in the polls and its successes in regional elections, while the other papers focus on the broader debates about asylum and immigration policies. There are two further *Junge Freiheit* topics that contain mainly criticism of Chancellor Merkel’s handling of the refugee crisis (JF-13, see Table 2) and demands for political change by different parties and associations (JF-12). No equivalent topics could be found in the three other papers.

![Figure 5: Aggregated national politics topics over time as share of each sub-corpus (orange: *Handelsblatt* (HB), blue: *Die Welt* (DW) red: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), grey: *Junge Freiheit* (JF)](image)

The LDA exercise shows that their reporting patterns are rather similar in terms of issues, frames and timing. Differences in political leaning may be reflected in opinion pieces – for example, with conservative *Die Welt* being rather critical of the government’s decision to open the borders, while *Süddeutsche Zeitung* generally embraces the notion of a new German ‘Willkommenskultur’ (‘welcoming culture’) – but the overall coverage of events and debates is strikingly similar.

In such an environment, does *Junge Freiheit* fill such a communicative gap? Put in terms of RQ1, can it be characterised as a ‘reactive’ or an ‘autonomous’ paper? Our analysis provides evidence that it fits the properties of the former. Given the reflexive nature of *Junge Freiheit*’s reporting in the context of the refugee crisis, it can hardly be considered an independent voice pursuing an independent agenda; instead, it takes on mainstream media’s reporting and adds a pronouncedly partisan bias in favour of the right-wing AfD. *Junge Freiheit* refrains from attempting to present a comprehensive account of all the issues at stake, but stresses national and partisan angles, neglecting more complex issues such as the European dimension, Middle Eastern politics (the chief cause of the crisis) and fiscal aspects of the influx of immigrants. While these gaps in reporting may partly be attributed to the weekly frequency of publication, they are still remarkable: *Junge Freiheit*’s reporting fits several characteristics of populist media as described in the literature. Simplification is usually attributed to reporting style and language; our results show that it also applies to the avoidance of certain complicated issues. *Junge Freiheit* constructs a grand ‘we’ that is set against Muslim aliens who pose a threat to the Christian majority. It pursues a negativistic, underdog angle that is directed at the elites, predominantly against the Merkel
government. It fosters a symbiotic relationship with a populist party, the AfD, and has been able to profit from this closeness economically, as its circulation has soared in line with the party’s support. While Junge Freiheit can clearly be counted as an alternative media, it can hardly be called autonomous.

Our analysis affirms the first part of RQ2 – that populist strategies and frames can predominately be found in the Junge Freiheit corpus – while we dismiss the second part: if xenophobe discourses had fed into mainstream media, we would expect to find some degree of deformation of reporting patterns over time, as the public’s mood grew more sceptical. Instead, the frequency analysis shows that the three mainstream peers held their course over the entire period, in the sense that the spectrum of issues was not diminished but instead stayed broadly in line with events and political debates. However, this result does need to be taken with a pinch of salt: it is possible that changes in language – for example, a shift towards a more aggressive anti-immigrant tone – are not detected by our methodology.

Conclusion
This article analysed the newspaper coverage of a critical period: the German refugee crisis of 2015 and 2016. It focused on the role of the right-wing weekly Junge Freiheit and compared its coverage with that of three major mainstream newspapers, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt and Handelsblatt. By applying an algorithm-based topic-modelling approach, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), we pursued a quantitative-qualitative analysis of 11,420 articles concerning the question of whether Junge Freiheit’s reporting on the refugee crisis differed from that of mainstream outlets.

Our results strongly support this notion. Our comparisons show a clear-cut dichotomy, with mainstream media on one side and Junge Freiheit on the other. Junge Freiheit’s reporting patterns set it apart from the other three papers. A time lag could be found, pointing to a reporting style that positions the paper relative to the journalistic and political mainstream, rather than as a unique source of timely information on current events. Junge Freiheit can thus be characterised as a ‘reactive’ alternative media. It is also prone to populism: it stresses the national dimension of the crisis, embraces the rise of the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and largely neglects international, and European, implications. Furthermore, it frames the refugee crisis as an influx of Muslim aliens who do not share basic cultural traits with the (Christian) native-born population; in contrast, the other papers stress ‘solidarity’ – that is, human proximity.

Economically, Junge Freiheit’s positioning seems to have paid off, as the sharp increase in circulation since 2014 demonstrates. Whether Junge Freiheit’s presence has enhanced the public discourse by adding new aspects and angles is, however, questionable. Our analysis suggests that Junge Freiheit lacks two properties of traditional journalistic media: multiperspectivity and impartiality. It focuses on certain aspects and largely ignores others; instead of maintaining equidistance from the political spectrum, it openly supports the AfD’s agenda and the party’s harsh criticism of Chancellor Merkel. It should not be expected to uncover new facts or put forward hitherto disregarded arguments.

With regard to the reporting styles of mainstream newspapers, we did not discover evidence for Haller’s (2017) criticism. There is neither a lasting dominance of a narrow-mindedly positive ‘welcoming frame’, and our analysis failed to detect a sharp shift towards a ‘threat frame’ after the incidents in Cologne on New Year’s Eve 2016. In contrast to older studies (El Refaie 2001; Esses, Medianu & Lawson, 2013, Hier & Greenberg, 2002: 498, Van Gorp, 2005), our results show that mainstream media reporting was rather balanced during the entire period. In particular, the mainstream papers refrained from systematically catering to xenophobic prejudices – a sensible approach, given the diverse structure of a society in which more than a fifth of former West Germany’s inhabitants now have some kind of migration background (SVR, 2018: 13).
Methodologically, we broke new ground with a media comparison using LDA. However, further development and validation of this comparative approach is needed, especially regarding the use of this algorithm in mixed-method approaches – that is, its connection to classical methods of communication science. It is possible that differences in sample sizes or data origins might have affected the comparability of the sub-corpora, but this is a question we have not been able to address in the context of this study. Further research should expand the analysis in terms of media outlets, issues, countries and methods. Since the alt-right press is a rapidly developing part of the media system, both in Germany and elsewhere, comprehensive surveying is called for. Other right-wing news media should be included into the analysis. For instance, it would be worthwhile to assess whether our broader findings concerning *Junge Freiheit* – narrow national focus, partisan bias – also apply to other media and to other issues, such as economic, defence or security policy. In the same vein, the framing of US president Donald Trump could be of particular interest; he is, after all, a politician who shares a predominantly nationalistic world view, but whose policies pose a threat to the German economy (through trade disputes) and security (by questioning America’s commitment to its European NATO allies). How do *Junge Freiheit* and its right-wing peers position themselves vis-à-vis such a figure? Cross-country analysis of different right-wing media may yield interesting insights into the similarities and differences between their reporting patterns.

We limited our analysis to a particular period; since then, the rise of the AfD and its representation in the federal parliament have rather transformed national politics in Germany. In the light of these developments, spillovers into the traditional media market may well be detected by future studies. Moreover, our research was confined to well-established print newspapers. The story for other media outlets could be quite different. Print newspapers are bound by their heritage and their clear positions in the media market. Being ‘experience goods’, they enjoy strong ties to their readership. The strength of their brands and the trust put in them should keep them from exploiting opportunities in populist territories. Maybe that is why, according to our results, we dismissed the notion that the surge in populism changed the positioning of mainstream media. For certain political magazines and for online outfits, however, these findings may not apply. As journalism markets become more and more competitive, cash-strapped media tend to be driven by the economics of attention rather than by traditional professional standards – that is, they become more receptive to populism (Müller, 2017: 70–3). While we do not detect such a general tendency towards populism in the newspapers we analysed, an increasingly ‘market-driven journalism’ may lead to a turn to populism elsewhere in the media system (Bos and Brants, 2014: 707). The ‘normalization of right-wing discourse’, that Atton (2006: 574) proclaims may well be found in other parts of the public sphere, which were beyond the scope of our analysis.

In terms of methods, traditional content analysis could deepen the understanding of the alt-right variety of reporting, and interviews with senior editors could further our insights into the structures and motives of these outlets. Reader and user surveys could enhance our understanding of the impact of alt-right news media on public sentiment.

**Note on translation**

All translations are those of the authors.
References


—— (2016b) Das Zentralorgan der AfD. Die Medien der Neuen Rechten, Teil 1: Die Wochenzeitung Junge Freiheit. Correctiv.org, 27 December. Available at:


Snowball Stemmer Project (2016a) A German stop word list. Available at: https://snowballstem.org/algorithms/german/stop.txt.


Notes

1 An article is coded as relevant if it explicitly and principally addresses the European refugee crisis, its causes and their economic, political, social and economic consequences for German municipalities, cities, federal states, persons, refugees, groups, companies, associations and institutions. The article is also relevant when addressing consequences for Europe and the European Union, if it covers the search for European or international causes and/or solutions to the refugee crisis. The article is not relevant if the main topic of the article is not the refugee crisis and it is mentioned only briefly or used for comparisons. Based on this relevance criterion, the search term ‘2 x “Flüchtling” (refugee) or 2 x “Asyl” (asylum)’ achieved a recall of 0.92 and a precision of 0.74. This search term generated sub-corpora with 5,156 (SZ), 3,429 (WELT), 1,721 (HB) and 1,114 (JF) articles.

2 The decline was a result of a deal brokered by German Chancellor Angela Merkel between the European Union and Turkey; the government in Ankara pledged to close its borders to refugees in return for financial aid from EU countries.

3 This delay was statistically proven in two ways: First, we conducted a peak analysis on the basis of the aggregated monthly data for the sub-corpora, which confirmed the aforementioned lag between the peaks. Second, we calculated the Granger causality between the individual time series – with highly significant results (adjusted according to Holm-Bonferroni) revealing Junge Freiheit lagging behind Süddeutsche Zeitung and Die Welt in each case. Both results can be found in the supplement, together with the R-code.

4 The seemingly heavy use of the European frame at Handelsblatt in the early months of the period under review is actually only partially comparable, since Handelsblatt published very few articles on the refugee crisis at this time. The line is therefore dotted.