



From Denouncing to Defunding: The Post-Truth Populist Challenge to Public-Service Media

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at post-truth politics from the vantage point of the populist challenge to public-service media. In the field of political theory, one important strand of the rapidly expanding literature on post-truth politics has focused on post-truth politics as a transformation in political culture, characterised by a declining status of the symbolic authority of the truth in political discourse (Newman, 2019, 2022). According to this reading, post-truth politics is distinguished by two central elements: on the one hand, a specific brand of populist politician that appears to “play fast and loose with the truth” and is, at best, strikingly indifferent to factual correctness (Newman, 2019, p. 94); while on the other hand, post-truth politics is also marked by postfactual attitudes on the part

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of the supporters of populist politicians (MacMullen, 2020), for whom concerns about the truth in terms of factual correctness appear to be subordinate to other, potentially more legitimate, concerns. The use of the concept of “alternative facts” at the outset of the Trump administration in early 2017 underlines this element and highlights the assertion that in post-truth politics, factual correctness *may* indeed be no more relevant than emotion, and that scientific facts are considered merely a matter of opinion. On this point, a number of authors have, however, raised important concerns to the effect that these twin phenomena of post-truth politics need to be understood primarily as a symptom of deeper underlying problems (Farkas & Schou, 2018; Fossum, 2022; Monsees, 2021).

Beyond this, the present chapter draws attention to one aspect of post-truth politics that tends to be overlooked and therefore deserves considerably more scholarly attention. This aspect is the fundamental hostility towards journalists and, indeed, the very institution of journalism (Cook, 2005; Reese, 2021; Vos, 2019). This hostility appears to be a constitutive element of what will be referred to here as *post-truth populism* and is reflected in the use of terms such as “fake news”, “system media”, or “liar press” (see Monsees, 2021; Sehl et al., 2020). In this chapter, the deployment of such terms is understood not simply as a method to silence critical journalists and/or avoid engaging with their questions, but moreover, as an attempt to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of professional journalism. Against this backdrop, this chapter presents a somewhat different take on the topic of post-truth politics: it is *forward-looking* in the sense that it explores what the post-truth populist hostility towards professional journalists, and the institution of journalism, might mean for the future of liberal democracy. Could it be that “fake news” allegations are part of a deliberate populist strategy to undermine the credibility of quality journalism? And if this is the case, could it also be that such efforts are merely a stepping stone on the path to a fully fledged post-truth era?

The chapter has a theoretical and an empirical ambition, but it also has certain agenda-setting aspirations. Regarding the latter, the chapter aims to raise awareness concerning, and prompt further empirical research into, the role of the populist hostility towards journalism and, in particular, towards public-service media in the context of the development of post-truth politics. At the theoretical level, the chapter develops the notion of *post-truth populism* as a specific type of populist politics in which

efforts to denounce professional journalism feature prominently. The core argument to be made is that post-truth populism is not merely characterised by a disdain for professional journalism, but also—and arguably more importantly—by an ambition to *defund* and potentially to eventually *dismantle* public-service media. The argument made in this chapter is that in order to achieve this end, post-truth populists employ a strategy consisting of two parts: first, they attempt to undermine the legitimacy of professional journalism (including public-service journalism) by creating a narrative of professional journalists’ liberal and elite/establishment bias. And second, post-truth populists also *exploit* such narratives in order to attack the financial basis of public-service media. To the extent that this strategy succeeds, the post-truth populist challenge to professional journalism needs to be viewed as an important step in the direction of a post-truth world in which the absence of independent and critical journalists would make it increasingly difficult to discern fact from fiction. This is connected to the role of journalism in democratic societies (see Norris, 2014; Ryfe, 2020; Strömbäck, 2005), which is discussed in more detail in the second section.

Empirically, this argument is illustrated by analysing populist attacks on public-service media during the COVID pandemic in Germany and against the backdrop of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany’s ongoing efforts to defund German public-service media. The COVID pandemic was chosen as an illustrative case because criticism of measures adopted to contain the spread of the coronavirus was quick to focus not only on the role of scientific expertise, but also on the way in which mainstream media (including public-service media) reported on the pandemic. This criticism was largely advanced by party-political actors such as, most importantly, the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany. As the empirical analysis will show, this criticism entailed claims that only certain views were tolerated in mainstream media, as well as there being verbal and physical assaults on journalists covering various demonstrations against COVID restrictions.

The remainder of the chapter is divided into three parts. The next section develops the theoretical argument on the link between populism, post-truth politics, efforts to denounce critical journalism, and demands for the defunding of public-service media. The following section provides empirical illustrations of the theoretical argument, while the chapter ends with a concluding discussion on the implications of the post-truth

populist challenge to public-service media for the future of liberal democracy, discussing the extent to which this challenge can be seen to pave the way to a fully fledged post-truth world.

POST-TRUTH POPULISM

A common denominator in the literature on post-truth politics has been a focus on the question of whether we currently live within an era of post-truth politics—and, if this is the case, then what makes this era different from previous eras in terms of the types of lies, deceit and spin that have arguably always characterised politics. Numerous authors have claimed that the processes observable today are indeed something novel, although some have pointed out that this is not necessarily or exclusively due to the mere scope or technical sophistication of disinformation spread via social or other digital media (see Waisbord, 2018a). At the same time, quite a few scholars are also critical of the discourse on post-truth politics and claim that despite such indications, there is nothing unusual about what we are experiencing. They go on to argue that by using the buzzword of post-truth politics (or focusing on the symptoms) we run the risk of overlooking either the root causes of the phenomenon or the potential detrimental effects of efforts to counter it (see Farkas & Schou, 2020; Monsees, 2021).

One aspect that has been conspicuously absent in this debate is the idea that processes such as the polarisation and fragmentation of the public sphere (Sunstein, 2017) may actually only be among the first signs of a process that may ultimately result in a fully fledged era of post-truth politics. With this argument in mind, this chapter therefore does not simply attempt to define and analyse expressions of post-truth politics in political practice, but aims instead to discuss what the populist hostility towards journalists and the institution of journalism can tell us about the future of media freedom and, by extension, the prospect of informed democratic debate in a vital and functioning public sphere. Although it is highly relevant to note that post-truth politics is marked by a political culture in which politicians can win elections despite their disregard for factual correctness, considerably more attention needs to be paid to issues of trust and distrust in mainstream media. In doing so, we are able to interpret better what populist efforts to denounce professional and, in particular, public-service media may mean in light of the development of post-truth politics. On the one hand, “fake news” allegations can be dismissed simply

as a method for avoiding critical questions (Monsees, 2021, p. 6), but they clearly also—whether deliberately or not—serve to undermine the credibility, and thus also the legitimacy, of the institution of journalism and thereby chisel away at one of the pillars of any democratic public sphere. In this section, this theoretical argument is developed in three steps: first, the chapter develops the concept of *post-truth populism* by highlighting the link between post-truth politics and populism. Second, the chapter highlights the role of post-truth populists’ efforts to undermine the legitimacy of professional journalists as part of a broader (and possibly *deliberate*) strategy to undermine the foundations of democratic debate, thus preparing the ground for a fully fledged *post-truth* world where fact can hardly be distinguished from fiction any longer. Third, the chapter highlights the link between denouncing and demanding the defunding of public-service media.

Post-Truth Politics and Populism

The literature on post-truth politics suggests a close link between post-truth politics and populism. Some observers speak of an “elective affinity” between populism and post-truth politics, where post-truth communication is a distinctive feature of contemporary politics that lays the ground for populist politics (Waisbord, 2018b). In this view, populism is not the product of post-truth politics per se, but that developments in information technology, and the resulting transformations of the public sphere, have brought about an information environment in which the sort of post-truth politics that is emblematic of populism thrives (Dahlgren, 2018; cf. Farkas & Schou, 2020, pp. 55ff.; *ibid.*, p. 18; McIntyre, 2018, Chapter 4). This points to an aspect that, for many scholars, constitutes the hallmark of post-truth politics—not the fact that certain politicians lie, nor the fact that post-truth politics is facilitated by such a degree of technical sophistication that it becomes more and more difficult to tell fact from fiction, nor that supporters of post-truth politicians are seemingly indifferent about their lies—but in the words of Silvio Waisbord, the defining feature of post-truth politics is rather the “absence of conditions in the public sphere for citizens to concur on objectives and *processual norms* to determine the truth as verifiable statements about reality”, resulting in a world in which truth-telling is no longer “a shared communicative practice grounded in reason and science” (Waisbord, 2018a, pp. 19f.; *emphasis added*). Other authors have emphasised the *affective*

dimension of post-truth politics, arguing that sharing fake news should be understood less as an act of rational information sharing than as an act of identity expression used to “express [...] a sense of belonging to a group of people being left behind by elites” (cf. MacMullen, 2020; Monsees, 2021, p. 4).

This understanding of post-truth politics rhymes well with the idea of post-truth politics as a transformation in political culture. As such, it is intimately connected to one of the central premises of populism, namely the idea of a clear distinction between a pure people and a corrupt elite (Mudde, 2017). This chapter therefore combines the two concepts and speaks of *post-truth populism* to refer to a style of politics that qualifies as populist in relation to established definitions of populism (see Mudde, 2017; Müller, 2016), but that is also characterised by what is, at best, an *indifference* to factual correctness or, at worst, a conviction that there is no common procedural standard for arriving at a shared truth: essentially the notion that “popular truth” is by definition different from—and irconcilable with—“elite lies” (Waisbord, 2018a, p. 25). This is an important point in that post-truth populists do not flat out reject the existence of the truth, but rather insist that elites, in particular the mainstream mass media, are withholding the truth by omitting or distorting certain facts and thus not telling the whole story.

A fitting illustration of this is the oft-cited claim, made in the context of the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States, that the White House was presenting “alternative facts” regarding the crowd size at the inauguration ceremony (see Monsees, 2021, pp. 6f.; Newman, 2019, p. 94; Vogelmann, 2018, pp. 19f.). In post-truth populism, facts that challenge “overriding narratives” are brushed aside (Waisbord, 2018a, p. 25), pointing to the rejection of basic standards for making factual observations, but moreover to the way in which post-truth populism questions the truthfulness of professional journalists and thus casts doubt on the trustworthiness of the institution of journalism. This creates a direct link between post-truth politics and one of the defining features of populism, namely the construction of a sharp distinction between *the real people* (whose voice is promoted by the populist politician) and an allegedly *corrupt liberal elite*. In post-truth populism, the media are seen as part of this corrupt liberal elite. For Silvio Waisbord, it is indeed this “binary vision of politics” (i.e. corrupt elites versus the real people) that constitutes the root of populism’s opposition to truth:

here, truth does not exist as a common collective goal (i.e. something to be developed through rational argumentation), but all truths are instead “partial and anchored in social interests” (Waisbord, 2018b, p. 25).

*From Undermining the Legitimacy of Professional Journalism
to Demanding the Defunding of Public-Service Media*

Given the emphasis that post-truth populists place on construing critical journalists as part of the corrupt liberal elite (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2020), it comes as no surprise that efforts to denounce journalists through the use of “fake news” allegations are an important part of the post-truth populist toolkit (Farkas & Schou, 2018, pp. 306f.; Monsees, 2021; Waisbord, 2018a, p. 1867). In the case of Donald Trump, it may be tempting to interpret such allegations simply as an easy way to dodge critical questions from outlets such as CNN or MSNBC. However, the argument to be made here is that such efforts also serve another, potentially much more detrimental, purpose in relation to the development of post-truth politics. For one, using “fake news” allegations in order to dodge critical questions is at least in part a way of silencing the journalist asking the question. But in addition, such allegations (or simply name-calling) also sow distrust in specific media outlets and in doing so undermine their credibility and, by extension, also their legitimacy. Such efforts therefore also speak to and reinforce the notion, already prevalent among supporters of post-truth populists, that such “fake news” outlets are indeed part of the corrupt liberal elite that is withholding the truth from the real and pure people. Few post-truth populists have expressed this as clearly as Donald Trump when he referred to such media as the “enemy of the people” (see Carlson et al., 2021; Kellner, 2018; Meeks, 2020), cementing the view that such media outlets should not be trusted, but that they also should neither be talked nor listened to. This is facilitated by the high-choice media environment that has emerged in recent decades and that allows politicians to be highly selective in choosing which media outlets to speak with, as much as it allows citizens to choose which media outlets to follow (Castro et al., 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2017). This is an important point in relation to the issues of polarisation and fragmentation, both of which are key features of post-truth politics (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2019; Sunstein, 2017).

Considering the centrality of this hostility to mainstream media in post-truth populism, it is somewhat surprising that only relatively little research

exists on the connection between post-truth populism and demands for the defunding of public-service media (Sehl et al., 2020). However, some notable exceptions exist that highlight that efforts to denounce journalism are *not simply* part of populism’s “bad manners strategy”. Instead, they do indeed constitute an integral part of the effort to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of journalists—and in particular public-service journalists—that is driven by the opportunity to “evade public scrutiny and democratic control” (Holtz-Bacha, 2021). In this sense, assaults on public-service media are viewed also as an assault on the freedom of the media that places increased pressure on the democratic system (*ibid.*).

From undermining the legitimacy of journalism by construing professional journalists as part of the corrupt liberal elite, it is only a relatively small step to demanding the *defunding* of public-service media. As some authors have argued, political actors can use funding and defunding as a weapon to threaten or constrain public-service media (see Rodriguez-Castro et al., 2021), which makes it the easiest and most effective way to “tighten the strings on public-service corporations and thus to challenge the whole system” (Holtz-Bacha, 2021, p. 227). In addition, it is a “convenient disguise for underlying interests that arise from populists’ overall discontent with the system” (*ibid.*). In the literature, the German right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has become a standard illustration of the broader phenomenon of populist attacks on public-service media. As is discussed in more detail below, the party has had an ambivalent relationship with the institution of journalism more or less throughout its existence. This is reflected in the inclusion of the demand to abolish the license fee in Germany in its party platform from 2016, as well as in its manifestos for the 2017 and 2021 federal elections (cf. Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Rodriguez-Castro et al., 2021; Sehl et al., 2020). Nevertheless, despite the central role that the AfD and its supporters have played in this process, such dynamics are by no means limited to Germany, which makes the theoretical argument presented in this chapter a topic of concern in other liberal democracies as well. The move from undermining the legitimacy of mainstream journalism to claiming the defunding of public-service media has also been discussed in countries such as Austria, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, to name but a few illustrative examples from the literature. In Austria, the right-wing populist *Freedom Party of Austria* (FPÖ) has made efforts to undermine trust in the public-service broadcaster ORF and used the highly charged concept

of “Zwangsgebühren” (i.e. *forced* as opposed to the more neutral *compulsory* fees) to demand the abolition of the license fee. In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has similarly expressed scepticism about the funding system of the BBC (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2020), whereas in Sweden, similar claims have been made by the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats (Sehl et al., 2020).

In Germany, the Alternative for Germany has campaigned for a fundamental reform of public-service broadcasting that would be tantamount to a radical *defunding*. This is well-documented in the 2016 party platform (Grundsatzprogramm) as well as in the 2017 and 2021 federal election manifestos, but specifically also in policy initiatives such as the “Grundfunk” initiative. Already in 2016, the party platform presented a view of German public-service media as part of existing “obstacles and hindrances” to “the idea of freedom of communication” (AfD, 2016, author’s translation), proposing to abolish the system of “forced financing” and to provide an opt-out clause to enable them to cancel their access partially or completely (ibid.). Similarly, the election manifestos from 2017 and 2021 framed German public-service media predominantly as a threat to freedom of thought and expression due to their alleged lack of distance to the state. The 2017 manifesto claimed that German public-service media are “dominated by politics to an extent that appears unworthy of a democracy” (AfD, 2017, author’s translation) and consequently demanded abolishing the license fee so that “every citizen can decide for himself whether he [sic] wants to receive and pay for public-service programs” (ibid.). In order to create more “democratic control” over the governing boards of public-service media companies in Germany (the *Rundfunkräte*), the manifesto also called for those to be directly elected by citizens rather than appointed, as is currently the case.

The 2021 manifesto went one step further and linked public-service broadcasting in its current form, as well as private mainstream media directly, to alleged “prohibitions on speech and thought” that have been brought about by “diffuse ideas of ‘political correctness’” that are “stifling public discussion” (AfD, 2021, pp. 164f., author’s translation). The populist distinction between a corrupt liberal elite and the pure people is also evident here, as illustrated by the claim that “the convergence of the old parties¹ into a *cartel of opinion* has solidified the left-wing dominance

¹ In the German original, the party uses the negatively charged term “Altparteien”, which is used to distinguish the AfD from all the mainstream parties in Germany and, in

in public-service broadcasting and in private mainstream media” (ibid.; author’s translation, emphasis added). In its *Grundfunk* initiative (a play on words that turns the German word “Rundfunk”, specifically broadcasting, into “basic casting”) in 2020, the party goes one step further and speaks of a “veritable legitimization crisis of public-service broadcasting”, whose programs allegedly reach “ever fewer people”, but whose intendants call for “ever higher forced broadcasting payments” (AfD Fraktion, n.d., author’s translation). Highlighting the link between efforts to undermine the legitimacy of public-service media and demands to defund them, the initiative consequently demands cutting the budget of *all* public-service broadcasting in Germany to a maximum of 10% of the 2019 budget, while also demanding that it should be completely free from advertising and thus unable to create any additional revenue.

These observations underline the argument that efforts to undermine the legitimacy of professional journalism go hand in hand with claims to defund public-service media. On the one hand, post-truth populists undertake efforts to construe critical media as part of the corrupt left/liberal elite that distorts the facts and withholds the full truth from the people. On the other hand, *the same actors* attempt to exploit this sense of undermined credibility and legitimacy as an argument to justify claims for defunding and—potentially—dismantling public-service media. When taken in combination, these processes have the potential to pave the way towards a fully fledged post-truth world where citizens’ access to reliable information is severely curtailed. This argument is intimately connected to liberal notions about the role of journalism in democracy. As a system of popular self-governance (and recognising differences between various democratic theories as to how this popular self-governance is to be exercised), democracy evidently necessitates informed citizens. In this context, it is the role of journalism to produce and provide the kind of information that allows democratic citizens to perform their role in democracy, regardless of whether this entails preference formation or a more active engagement in and use of participatory and/or deliberative instruments (cf. Ryfe, 2020, p. 295; Strömbäck, 2005). Moreover, and possibly even more relevant to discussions about post-truth politics and post-truth populists’ efforts to undermine public-service media, journalism also performs a watchdog role that is particularly strongly

keeping with the populist distinction between corrupt elites and pure people, to present itself as the only real alternative.

emphasised in liberal theory: watchdog journalism performs the important role of providing a mechanism for strengthening accountability in democratic governance (see Norris, 2014). With these aspects in mind, it is clear that efforts to undermine the legitimacy of journalism so as to justify demands for the defunding of public-service media could be a significant step into a post-truth world. The simple reason for this is that it would severely curtail the provision of information that allows citizens to perform their democratic role, but also because it would weaken accountability mechanisms.

In this sense, the epistemic crisis of democracy (Dahlgren, 2018) that is marked to a significant extent by a distrust in the institution of journalism may indeed only constitute a stepping stone on the road to a fully fledged post-truth world. There is certainly good reason to doubt that the ambition to defund public-service media serves the purpose of creating better conditions for informed public debate by increasing the distance between public-service media and the state. Instead, there is good reason to assume that the ambition driving such demands is the opposite, namely to undermine one of the fundamental pillars of any democratic public sphere. Even if post-truth populists frame efforts to “reform” the funding schemes of public-service broadcasting as a way to enhance media freedom, it seems evident that such efforts are rather a blow to media freedom.

FROM DENOUNCING TO DEFUNDING: POST-TRUTH POPULISM AND PUBLIC-SERVICE BROADCASTING DURING THE COVID PANDEMIC

Knowing about the centrality of this hostility towards professional and, in particular, *public-service* journalism in post-truth populism, the following section now presents a few empirical illustrations of the interplay of such aspects during the COVID pandemic in Germany. Overall, measures adopted to contain the spread of the coronavirus enjoyed broad support in Germany (as in many other countries) throughout the pandemic. Reluctance to accept such measures nonetheless grew, intensified, and to some extent also radicalised as the pandemic dragged on. The intensification and radicalisation of these protests also reflected the increasing polarisation observable in society with regard to social distancing rules, the mandatory use of masks, and, not least, the vaccination campaign. Protests against such measures, adopted at the federal and state level,

emerged relatively early on, but remained a fringe phenomenon in the first few months of the pandemic. However, the *Querdenken* movement that was founded in April 2020, whose protests initially only drew small crowds, quickly became the most important infrastructure in mobilising against such restrictions. By August 2020, two of the movement’s biggest protest marches in Berlin drew 20,000 and 38,000 people, respectively (Diehl, 2021; Vieten, 2020).

While such protests—and the *Querdenken* movement itself—have attracted considerable scholarly attention in relation to disinformation and conspiracy theories/narratives, they have not been discussed sufficiently from the vantage point of denouncing professional and/or public-service journalism. This empirical illustration therefore focuses on how populist actors have used the COVID pandemic to raise *and* at the same time to exploit distrust in professional journalism in order to advance their demands for defunding German public-service media. The COVID pandemic is a relevant case in point because it underlines the intimate link between post-truth populists’ reluctance to accept scientific expertise and their hostility towards professional journalists. In other words, the COVID pandemic provided post-truth populists with a welcome opportunity to denounce public-service journalism (by questioning its reporting) in order to provide a justification for its defunding.

Consequently, the analysis distinguishes between two aspects: on the one hand, it considers the discursive/narrative dimension of efforts to undermine the legitimacy of professional journalism by looking at the terms (e.g. “fake news”) that post-truth populists employ in denouncing public-service journalism, but also other professional journalists²; and on the other hand, the analysis considers how such efforts are connected to proposals for the radical refunding (or simply *defunding*) of public-service media. Emphasis is placed on party-political actors. While party-political actors are certainly only a relatively small part of the broader protest movement against the COVID measures, there are considerable overlaps between the organisers/participants of these protests and the voters of right-wing populist or right-wing extremist parties (cf. Nachtwey et al., 2020). This element is, however, more pronounced in the East German

² As the analysis will show, public-service and other mainstream professional journalists are often denounced in combination, even though the claim for defunding is obviously limited to the institution of public-service journalism.

COVID protests (Frei & Nachtwey, 2021). In Germany, the most important of these party-actors is clearly the Alternative for Germany (AfD), in particular with regard to its declared ambition to “reform” Germany’s public-service broadcasting system and to abolish the license fee. But the protests against German COVID measures have also resulted in the founding of a new party that emerged directly out of the *Querdenken* movement ahead of the federal elections in 2021, namely the *Basisdemokratische Partei Deutschland* (or *dieBasis*) (Frei et al., 2021; Frei & Nachtwey, 2021; Virchow & Häusler, 2021). Despite the party’s limited political weight (having achieved 1.6% of first votes and 1.4% of second votes in the federal elections in 2021), its emergence and relative electoral success is nonetheless indicative of the fact that the reluctance to accept scientific expertise (and methods), and a belief that the mainstream media are not telling the whole story, exists also in circles other than the far right of the political spectrum.³ This latter aspect makes the party relevant in relation to the aims of this chapter, especially as regards the discursive dimension of efforts to denounce professional journalism and to question/undermine scientific expertise.

The Discursive Dimension: Denouncing Public-Service Journalism

Defunding public-service broadcasting in Germany is one of the declared ambitions of the AfD. Their efforts to denounce mainstream journalism are therefore clearly not *prompted* by the COVID pandemic, but the pandemic has provided a welcome opportunity to emphasise the party’s critique of mainstream media as an alleged threat to freedom of thought and expression. The party has argued that mainstream media only present certain facts and only tolerate certain views and opinions. The terms that the AfD has used in the COVID context are therefore a continuation of the terms that it had already used previously, including the term “liar press” (Lügenpresse) that had (re-)emerged in the wake of the PEGIDA protests from 2014 onwards. However, the term played only a relatively minor role during the pandemic, possibly because a guideline issued by

³ As pointed out by Frei and Nachtwey (2021), there is a significant difference in this regard between COVID protests in East Germany and Baden-Württemberg, where the *Querdenken* movement emerged: while the East German protests have been dominated by the extreme right, the ones in Baden-Württemberg are characterised much more strongly by people from esoteric and anthroposophic backgrounds (Frei & Nachtwey, 2021, p. 5).

the party for the 2021 federal election campaign advised against using this term, and also the related term “Lückenpresse” (cf. AfD, 2021b, p. 34).⁴

The analysed material shows different, but partly overlapping, categories of efforts to denounce public-service journalism. Among others, these include references to public-service media’s lack of distance to (the institutions of) the state, their role as propaganda and/or brainwashing tools, and the inappropriateness of what is framed as “forced financing” through the instrument of the license fee. Regarding the alleged *lack of distance* to the state, MP Peter Boehringer speaks of German public-service media as “*system media* that are now officially becoming *state media*” and that the “liar press will from now on be state-subsidized” (Boehringer, 2020; emphasis added). In its campaign for defunding German public-service broadcasting, the party further insinuates that German public-service media are *not at all* independent, suggesting that “we need independent media, without any influence from the state or parties” (AfD-Fraktion NRW, 2020). The underlying argument, as made clear by Joachim Paul, one of the initiators of the *Grundfunk* initiative, is connected to the composition of the *Rundfunkräte*, specifically, the governing boards of German public-service broadcasting institutions. According to the narrative propagated by the AfD, “through their political control of the governing boards, CDU, SPD, FDP and the Greens have secured massive influence on the reporting of public-service [media]” (ibid.). This has allegedly also resulted in public-service media’s violation of their obligation for neutrality in their reporting (AfD Kompakt, 2021a). This reflects the populist distinction between corrupt elites and the pure people and underlines the sharp distinction that the AfD draws between itself (as the only real alternative) and what it considers to be mainstream “old parties” (i.e. “Altparteien”).

The alleged lack of distance to the institutions of the state is commonly connected to claims that public-service media in Germany are merely a propaganda tool—and even a *brainwashing* tool—in a state that cannot be considered fully democratic. Among representatives of the AfD, it is therefore quite common to use terms such as “state media”, “state press”, or “state broadcasting” (see AfD-Fraktion NRW, 2020; AfD Kompakt, 2021; AfD TV, 2020) to suggest that public-service media in Germany

⁴ In German, “Lücke” means gap, so that the term “Lückenpresse” is a play on the word “Lügenpresse” and refers to a press that omits certain facts and thus does not tell the whole story.

are state/government-*controlled*. Michael Klonovsky—a journalist and writer who has worked as a consultant for leading AfD politicians, such as Frauke Petry or Alexander Gauland—sarcastically points out that “state broadcasting has a responsibility. It cannot allow the opposition to have a say”, claiming that “we’re not in a real democracy. We are in a chancellor democracy. We’re in a democratorship!” (AfD TV, 2020). However, AfD politicians even go one step further and claim that public-service media are a tool for *brainwashing* citizens. In a Facebook post that is no longer available (after Jörg Meuthen’s departure from the AfD), Jörg Meuthen spoke of “GEZ-brainwashing”⁵ and “primetime manipulation of opinion”, demanding “journalism instead of activism” (Meuthen, n.d.). Marc Jongen, an AfD MP, argued that “the media are the channels through which the heads of citizens are informed *and programmed*” and speaks of German public-service media as having “turned into a moralist broadcasting company that transports state ideology into people’s heads, which has this mission and also understands itself in this way” (AfD TV, 2020; emphasis added).

The allegation of lack of distance to the state/government is also made explicit in the COVID context, where the coverage of German public-service media is denounced as “pushy court reporting” (“Hofberichterstattung”) that is allegedly “scathingly criticized by scientists” (AfD Kompakt, 2021b). Indeed, the AfD even claimed that German public-service media contribute to the polarisation of German society by creating sentiments against unvaccinated people. Tobias Rausch, the party’s media policy spokesperson in the parliament of the state of Saxony-Anhalt, pointed to how a commentary in the nightly news show *tagesthemen* demonstrated a lack of neutrality. He went on to claim that through their “agitatory indictment [of] unvaccinated people, the GEZ-force-financed broadcasting companies are contributing to further division of society”, reminding them of their “duty to report in an objective and balanced manner” and “calls in particular on public-service media to report in a neutral way” (AfD Kompakt, 2021e).

However, denouncing German public-service media during the COVID pandemic is by no means limited to the AfD. DieBasis makes similar claims and speaks of “‘quality media’ that have been brought

⁵ GEZ is the abbreviation for “Gebühreneinzugszentrale”, the former (but much better known) name of the institution responsible for collecting the license fee in Germany. In 2013, the name was changed to “ARD ZDF Deutschlandradio Beitragsservice”.

into line” (“gleichgeschaltet”), arguing that people will eventually realise that they “are being lied to and manipulated” and that there is no “epidemic condition, but only an agenda that promises no good for people” (Nadolny, 2020). The party also bemoans what it considers to be a lack of a “culture of discussion” in Germany, alluding to the idea that only certain opinions are tolerated, and speaks of “slandorous articles” that German media publish deliberately for the purpose of creating division among the party’s supporters (DieBasis, 2021a). Elsewhere, the party speaks of the “business model” and the “framing handbook” of German “force-financed public-service broadcasting”, suggesting that the latter suggests radical worldviews that do not actually correspond to the orientations of the party’s supporters (DieBasis, 2021b).

Demands for Defunding Public-Service Media

There is a close link between the dimensions of denouncing and demanding the defunding of public-service media. As a good illustration, the **AfD** demands the “slimming down” (i.e. defunding) of the “politically correct hippie spaceship of public-service broadcasting [which] has in many places lost touch with reality on planet Earth” so as to “reconnect it with reality” (AfD Kompakt, 2021b).

As a justification for the defunding of public-service media, great emphasis is placed on the compulsory character of the license fee in Germany, which is construed as a “force-financing” system (see AfD Kompakt, 2021c), which is a much stronger and more negative term than “license fee” or “compulsory fee”. In a Facebook post (which was deleted after he left the party), Jörg Meuthen called for an “end to the *force-financed* GEZ-System”, suggesting that this would result in “neutral reporting instead of indoctrination” (Meuthen, 2020; emphasis added). Consequently, the party demands the cancellation of the existing broadcasting contracts (“Rundfunkstaatsverträge”) in all German states so as to allow for a “fundamental reform”, at the end of which there would only be a “basic broadcaster” (Grundfunk) whose task would be “to provide citizens with neutral contents in the areas of information, culture and education” (AfD Kompakt, 2021d). The AfD’s *Grundfunk* initiative further aims for the introduction of a so-called “sunset clause” so that even this slimmed down public-service broadcasting system would expire after ten years and *not* be renewed automatically. This is based

on the argument that, according to the initiators, we do not know if we will *need* any kind of public-service broadcasting after this period at all (AfD-Fraktion NRW, 2020; AfD-Fraktion MV, n.d., p. 18).

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This chapter has highlighted the intimate link between two defining and interrelated features of post-truth populism's relationship with the institution of journalism, namely the effort to *denounce critical journalism* as part of the corrupt liberal elite against which the populist project rebels, and the effort to use this critique as a justification for claims to defund public-service media. The COVID pandemic has offered a particularly welcome opportunity for post-truth populists to advance both of these efforts. In an environment that was, at least initially, characterised by scientific uncertainty about the origins and the most effective ways to contain and fight the novel coronavirus, it was easy for post-truth populists to exploit and build upon already existing resentment against the allegedly biased elite project of mainstream professional journalism.

Such developments are a clear reason for concern. Sceptics of the academic debate on post-truth politics have a point in arguing that we need to be careful not to overlook the root causes of post-truth politics by focusing too much of our attention on its symptoms, whether in the form of the election of notorious liars like Donald Trump, a growing distrust of professional journalism, or even a rejection of scientific expertise. At the same time, there is a need to clearly spell out the potential consequences of the post-truth populist project. This chapter has placed criticism of professional journalism—and in particular *public-service* journalism—during the COVID pandemic in Germany into the broader context of populist efforts to undermine the legitimacy of the institution of journalism. As we have seen, although actors such as the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany are a central actor in this regard, they are by no means alone in construing the institution of journalism as part of the corrupt liberal elite, an elite which either deceives the people by not telling them the whole story or uses its powerful position to indoctrinate, brainwash, and re-educate people. By framing public-service media as an enemy of the people, post-truth populists create the image that the abolition of the license fee would indeed be tantamount to an act of liberation.

However, such developments need to be seen in a broader context. The post-truth populist attack on public-service media may not be the *first* step en route to a fully fledged post-truth world, but it certainly looks like a stepping stone in that direction. The AfD's *Grundfunk* initiative is consistent with the party's established ambition of defunding public-service media, as documented in the party platform and successive election manifestos. Its demand to cut the budget of all public-service media in Germany to 10% of the 2019 budget is clearly already quite radical. Nevertheless, in the theoretical context of the struggle against public-service media as an integral ingredient in post-truth politics, the relevance of the initiative's *sunset clause* cannot be overstated: unless state broadcasting contracts are renewed, they would simply expire after ten years. This is more than a gentle hint that if the AfD were to get its way, a complete dismantling of public-service media in Germany would be conceivable—with all that it entails for the further development of post-truth politics.

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