

**Beyond Lügenpresse – How Politicians Criticize and Delegitimize the Media in
Germany**

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Extended Abstract

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Beyond Lügenpresse: How Politicians Criticize and Delegitimize the Media in Germany

Media criticism is a crucial asset to democracies. Rational, evidence-based media criticism ensures that journalists attain their democratic functions and secures the correction of erroneous information without censorship (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Normatively speaking, media criticism should follow the rules of a shared culture of political communication and aim to preserve journalism as a whole (Van Dalen, 2021). In contrast to that, however, journalism in countries such as Germany has faced an increase in hostile attacks from politicians in recent years (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Instead of motivating critical thinking among audiences, accusations suggesting the intentional deception of the people through the media delegitimize their position as a fourth estate, fuel institutional distrust among citizens, and impact the work of journalists (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Egelhofer et al., 2022). Thus, even though media criticism from political elites can have a crucial democratic function when it offers a rational corrective message to the media, it becomes problematic when it is misused strategically to fuel distrust or to share opposing narratives. Although there exists a variety of research on the use of hostile delegitimizing labels from politicians such as *Lügenpresse* or *Fake News* (e.g., Brummette et al., 2018; Hameleers & Minihold, 2020), our understanding of media criticism beyond these labels is limited, especially when it comes from non-populist actors (Solis & Sagarzazu, 2020). We have yet to understand the boundaries between supportive and disruptive criticism in order to assess its democratic outcomes and how to mitigate the possible impact on citizens' media trust. Consequently, we asked:

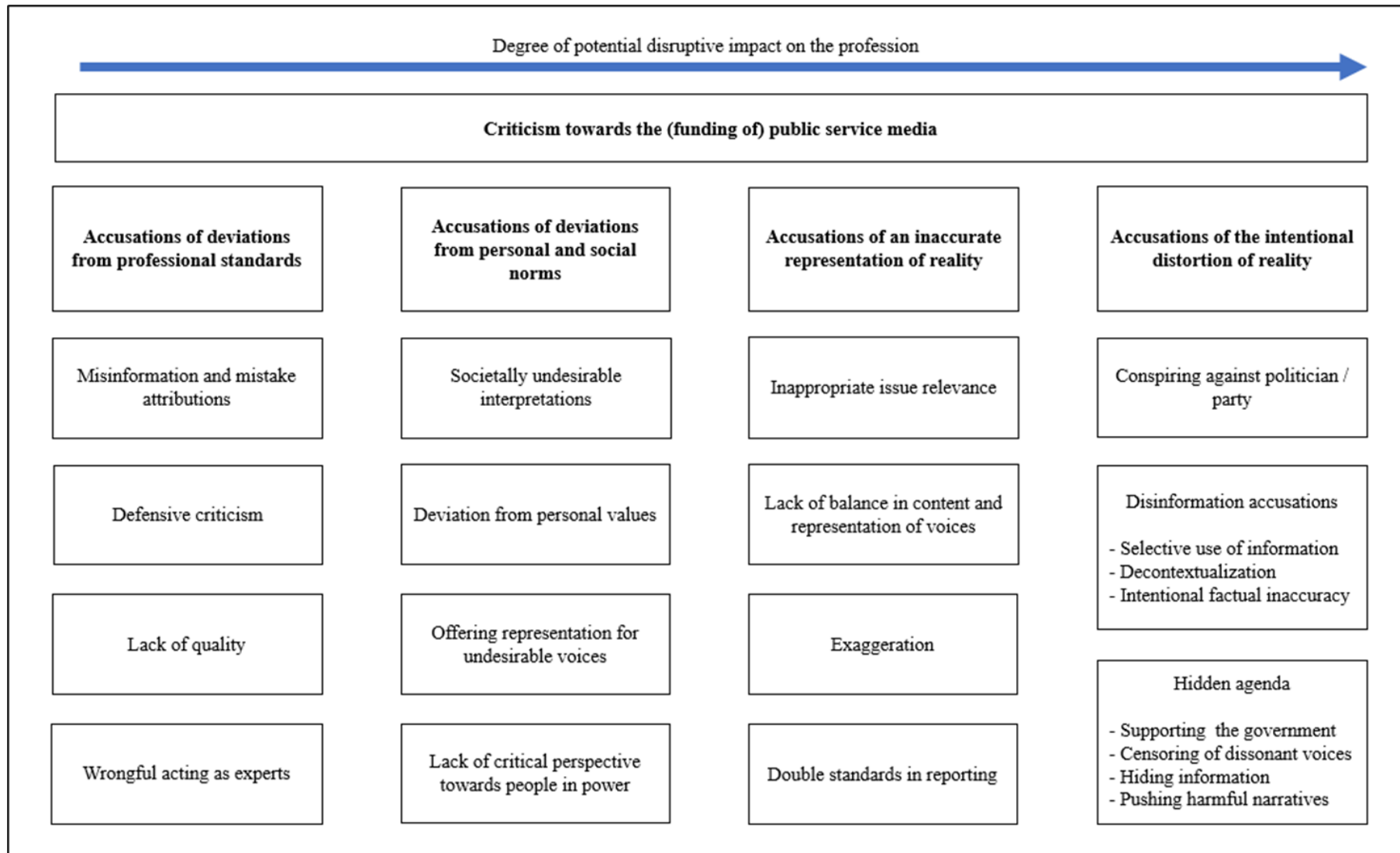
How is media criticism represented in politicians' social media discourse?

To address this, we inductively analyzed the social media discourse of ten German politicians from all major parties. Using a grounded theory approach, we analyzed all tweets

of the years 2015, 2017, and 2022 containing media criticism ($N = 545$), paying specific attention to the types and severity of the criticism, the construction of opposing truth narratives, and the explicitness of references to facticity over opinions. As presented in Figure 1, we identified five themes within media criticism discourse, ranging from mistake attributions to accusations of the intentional distortion of reality through the media. The main conclusion is that politicians (strategically) employ a wide range of media criticism and inaccuracy claims beyond factual matters, of which many pose challenges of ranging severity to the profession of journalism. Additionally, beyond the often studied ‘Fake News’ and ‘Lügenpresse’ labels, we find additional strategies targeting the legitimacy of journalists and media outlets, but also strong normative judgments surrounding representation and issue framing that move political conflicts to a media arena. With the results, we strive towards a better understanding of the discourse around the democratic role of the media, and thus provide a foundation to identify criticism with disruptive democratic outcomes.

Figure 1

Typology of Media Criticism in the Social Media Discourse of German Politicians



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