



DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM, MEDIA  
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# HOW ALTERNATIVE IS ALTERNATIVE NEWS MEDIA?

Alternative News Media's Framing of the COVID-19  
Vaccine Process

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# Abstract

Although research on alternative news media has been growing over the last decade, the focus is still predominantly on the far-right wing alternative media landscape. There is still little knowledge on the differences among different alternative news media and how they are embedded in the overall news media landscape.

This thesis sets out to get a better understanding on how alternative news media reported on the COVID-19 vaccination process in Germany and to what extent they might make use of mainstream news media's mechanisms when reporting on a crisis. Using a dataset of 670 news articles, the thesis aims to provide a comparative analysis among different alternative news media on their news coverage in relation to mainstream news media.

Relying on the framing approach by Robert Entman, the present study used a quantitative framing analysis based on the codebook by Semetko and Valkenburg's news media frames. Adjusting the codebook, it provided a total of seven frames with various subcategories that operationalize the specific frames, actors, context and tone of the news item. The data contains 670 news articles that reported on the vaccination process in Germany from three different alternative news media (*Compact*, *NDS*, *RT Deutsch*) and one mainstream news media (*Tagesschau*). The content analysis used cross tabulation analyses and chi-square tests to estimate the association between news outlet and frame usage.

The results suggest that there are differences regarding the frame use among different alternative news media. One thing in common however, is their high usage of fear and misinformation when it comes to the vaccine as well to possible restrictions that are related to the vaccination. Their high usage of different fear frames underlines the understanding of alternative news media as their own diverse conglomerate that might adapt dominant news frames from mainstream news media to some extent but with a broad range of different connotations and meanings. In that sense, alternative news media might, despite their political diverging perspectives offer generic news stories to some degree. Yet, they cannot be reduced to the assertion as being a homogenous counterpart of mainstream news media. Their different frame use indicates that their political orientation is indeed an important factor to some degree.

**Keywords:** alternative news media, mainstream news media, framing, COVID-19 vaccination, Germany

## Foreword

*“And what news media do you read? Where do you inform yourself on the COVID-19 vaccines if you dislike all this public state media and private mainstream news?”*

That was my question to two of my old friends from school back in summer 2021 in Hamburg when they told me that they refused the COVID-19 vaccines. It was the first time I was confronted with people putting general distrust in mainstream news media from my personal bubble. They told me they couldn't trust the media landscape and news articles. TV-talk shows were a machination organized by the German government. Asking them what news media they consume they answered with *Reitschuster* and *RT Deutschland* – two of the most prominent alternative news media in Germany.

Acknowledging this dissonance, I wanted to understand why a significant amount of people have turned to alternative news media and how their news coverage affects their decision to deny scientific consensus. Choosing alternative news media as a topic for my master thesis, was something I did not think of at all when I started that program in September 2020 at JMG. However, I am beyond happy that I finish my academic education with something that is so closely related to my personal life.

As it is common practice, I would like to take the opportunity to thank some of the people who helped me during these last two years, especially the last months. I would like to thank my supervisor Bengt Johansson for guiding me through this time and giving me support for any (stupid) question I encountered while writing. A big thank you to all my friends here in Gothenburg. I'm more than grateful that I have met you. Moving to a foreign country during a pandemic was a challenge from time to time. You guys have made it worth it so much! The times might draw us apart, the memories and friendships will remain for me. Gràcies a tu.

To all my Hamburg friends: Thank you for your emotional support throughout these last two years. The fact that I know that I can always count on you whenever and wherever I might be, gives me the confidence to go my own way and keep trying even if I might fail sometimes. 156 is more than a number, Thursdays became so much more than just a day.

Finally, to my caring, loving supportive family - Thank you, Papa, Mama, Simon and Lisa.  
Thank you for never losing faith in me. It would be an understatement to say that I could've  
done this without you.

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# I Introduction

*“Diffuse notions of ‘political correctness’ suppress public discussion by prohibiting speech and thought. Facts are distorted and controversial topics are tabooed. The convergence of the old parties into a political opinion cartel has reinforced left-wing dominance in public broadcasting and private mainstream media.” (AfD<sup>1</sup> 2022).*

With the rise of the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* in 2015 or the *Querdenken*<sup>2</sup> (*‘Thinking outside the box’*) movement in 2020, the German news media landscape has been subject to criticism for their accused subjectivity and alignment with the government. Therefore, the AfD recommended the public to turn towards so called alternative news media to get a more comprehensive picture on news (Hooffacker 2020: 250). The politicalized debate about mainstream news media and alternative news media has transcended to the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic with journalists being attacked on *Querdenken* demonstrations and mainstream news media being called ‘Lügenpresse’<sup>3</sup> (*‘lying press’*) for their coverage of the coronavirus and how the German government responded to the health crisis (Schneider 2021). This debate sheds new light to alternative news media in general and raises the question on how they are embedded in the news media landscape.

As Ogbodo et al. claim, health crises are characterized by an overflow of information which require a reporting on the crisis *“in a way that helps to douse the risk of the crisis rather than increase it”* (2020). Yet, with the ongoing pandemic itself the overflow of information that is apparent on different news media and the reporting on it, challenged news consumers. Describing the pandemic as an *“infodemic”* (Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus 2020), the Director-General of the World Health Organization addressed the prevalence of misleading news.

Informing on COVID-19 and its relating sub-topics such as the vaccination processes citizens not only use official sources or traditional online media outlets. When informing on the virus

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<sup>1</sup> Right wing party *Alternative für Deutschland*

<sup>2</sup> Movement that was founded in response to the COVID-19 restrictions in Stuttgart, 2020. The Movement is characterized *“by a great openness to all political attitudes, religious or ideological convictions; overriding orientation is the rejection of the facts asserted by the “elites” or the “mainstream” and all measures based on them.”* (Broer et al. 2021: 34).

<sup>3</sup> ‘lying press’ as a term that *“...was used by German National Socialist Party before and during the Third Reich to discredit the news media and to undermine public trust.”* (Assmann & Koliska 2021: 2729). Was picked up in 2014 again by far-right political movement *Pegida* and 2020 by *Querdenken* movement.



they also consume alternative online media outlets that dissociate themselves from traditional news media and thus partly spread conspiracy theories, misleading rumors, or disinformation (Boberg et al. 2020a: 2). As alternative news media claim to contribute to the society by covering news that are 'ignored' by the mainstream media the question is raised on how alternative media and traditional media framed the vaccination against COVID-19. This becomes particularly important considering the theoretical assumption that frames affect consumers on how to think about an issue and understand complex societal problems (Nelson et al. 1997; Lecheler & de Vreese 2018; Chong & Druckman 2007). This indicates a need to understand how news media frame crises as well as grasping the differences in framing among alternative news media and mainstream news media.

As consensus prevails on the notion of crises being like a magnifying glass for the popularity of alternative news media which have "*...a significant influence on the dissemination of those [alternative] perspectives and ideas*" (Hohlfeld et al. 2021; Boberg et al. 2020a). Yet, alternative media, especially from the politically right spectrum are still emerging in various countries such as Germany. The differences, and the possible implications of it have not been the focus in research.

Understanding how these alternative media outlets frame the COVID-19 vaccination process in comparison to mainstream news media through a comparative analysis may give an idea on why some people may mistrust and decline the offered vaccines. Following up on this the findings may contribute to a deeper understanding on the interrelation between the mistakenly diametrically opposed mainstream news media and alternative news media and problematize the connotation of seeing alternative news media as homogenous instead of a vast conglomerate with diverging frame use (see Schwarzenegger 2022). As there is a great focus on far-right alternative news media in Germany (see Boberg et al. 2020a; Boberg et al. 2020b; Schwarzenegger 2022) it is still not known whether there are differences among various alternative news media. For this reason, this thesis tests this notion by comparing three diverging alternative news media in terms of political orientation with mainstream news media.

This will not only give insight into how news media differ in their framing in the context of crisis and thus offer background on possible media effects but also provide interesting findings for public health institutions and practitioners for future crises and give a more nuanced picture of how societal issues are framed by alternative news media within and outside of crises.

## II Background

### 2.1 COVID-19 & the Vaccination Process in Germany

After detecting the first cases of COVID-19 in the end of January 2020 and facing increasing infections the months after, Germany has implemented several restrictions and strategies to reduce covid cases. One of these strategies is the vaccination strategy against COVID-19 which started on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December in line with the European Medicines Agency (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit 2020).

The national public health institute, called *Robert Koch Institute* (RKI), suggests mainly four different vaccines from biotechnological companies *BioNTTech/ Pfizer*, *Moderna* (mRNA vaccine) as well as *Janssen Cilag International/Johnson & Johnson* and *AstraZeneca* (vector vaccine). The vaccine provided by *BioNTech/ Pfizer* is the most used, followed by *AstraZeneca*'s vaccine<sup>4</sup>.

As the number of vaccines were limited across the globe in in the start of the vaccination campaign Germany distributed vaccines in four different priority groups which was in accordance with the European Medical Agency (EMA)<sup>5</sup>. Yet, throughout the pandemic, the central European country was confronted with different challenges regarding the vaccination campaign which was covered by the news media. Facing the fourth wave of COVID-19 in November 2021 with an infection record of over 70,000 cases per day, Germany struggles to speed up the vaccination process. Compared to other European countries it has one of the lowest vaccination rates. In December 2021 73 percent of the population have received at least a first dose. Especially the two vaccines that are based on the so-called Messenger RNA technology are subject to distrust in significant minorities as they had only been used in research before (Reuters 2021). Furthermore, in mid-March 2021 some European countries reported isolated cases of blood clots as a side effect of the vaccination with *AstraZeneca*. This led to a temporary suspension of the vaccine (*Vaxzevria*) in Germany, Italy and France on March 15<sup>th</sup>. However, three days later, the European Medicines Agency decided to hold on onto the *AstraZeneca* vaccine after weighing the opportunities and risks. This ruling is based on a scientific consensus that the benefits of the vaccine outstand the risks of serious side effects which was supported

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<sup>4</sup> See (Robert Koch Institute 2022a) for differences between COVID-19 mRNA vaccines and COVID-19 vector vaccines

<sup>5</sup> European Medial Agency is responsible for evaluation and monitoring of vaccines in the European Union

by the WHO<sup>6</sup>, EMA as well as the German Standing Committee on Vaccination (*Ständige Impfkommission*)<sup>7</sup>. This decision was followed by the German health ministry one day later, on March 19<sup>th</sup>. Yet, the question on whether to trust the offered vaccines remained in the public sphere.

The low vaccination rates against the SARS-CoV virus have caused an ongoing debate on whether the German government should implement compulsory COVID-19 vaccinations with chancellor Olaf Scholz supporting the idea (Deutsche Welle 2022b). Whereas the governing coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), the Green Party (B90 Die Grünen) and the neoliberal party (FDP) “*drafted a law stipulating that all personnel who work in care facilities such as hospitals, homes for the elderly and psychiatric clinics must be fully vaccinated by March 15*” (Schumacher 2022), the far right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) has criticized the mandate and refuses any universal vaccination. Furthermore, some neoliberal political actors are still opposed to the idea of this vaccine policy as they claim it is not in line with their core value of individual freedom. This criticism has evolved in ongoing demonstrations starting in March 2020 which have become a regular form of action against any COVID-19 restrictions in Germany. In the beginning of 2022, the police reported more than 70,000 citizens taking part in these protests across the country, demanding criminal prosecution for politicians and accusing German news media of being a “*compliant*” (Deutsche Welle 2022a) to the political leadership. Here it should be disclaimed that parts of the political leadership changed with the national elections in October 2021 from the big coalition (CDU/CSU with SPD to the so called traffic light coalition with SPD, FDP and B90 Die Grünen). This *Querdenken* movement has spread across the country and is joined by far-right actors and contains pandemic skeptics, anti-vaxxers and anti-lockdown protesters. However, the anti-vaxxer movement in the light of COVID-19 is not a phenomenon that is limited to the political right spectrum. According to Frei and Nachtwey the movement is characterized by a so called ‘conspiratoriness’ which is understood as a criticism that is in opposition to mainstream (Frei& Nachtwey 2022: 3). Furthermore, Frei and Nachtwey ascribe the movement “*Doing one’s own research, critical questioning and tracking down sources*” as “*central motives*” (Frei& Nachtwey 2022: 3) and register ideologies from various political orientations (Frei& Nachtwey 2022: 4). This mentioned criticism towards the German news media goes along with trust and credibility from

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<sup>6</sup> World Health Organization

<sup>7</sup> German Health Care Agency that is responsible for evaluating and monitoring of vaccines in Germany

the anti-vaxxer movement for alternative news media as they embrace to be different and diametric to the mainstream news media. (Frei& Nachtwey 2022: 12).

Given what has been said about the COVID-19 background in Germany, the object of study may be defined as the vaccination process in Germany which consist of three main elements: (1) the COVID-19 vaccines themselves, (2) the policies that are somehow related to the vaccines (e.g., distribution of the vaccine, priority groups, implementations, or restrictions for unvaccinated people) as well as (3) the public discourse relating in some way to the COVID-19 vaccines that are used in order to reach an immunization of German Citizens against SARS-CoV.

## 2.2 Alternative News Media in a Changing News Media Landscape

In the last decade the underpinned various developments of communication technologies that have not only altered the news media landscape but changed the dynamics and rules by which citizen communicate (through online media) has been conceded (Chadwick 2017: 5). This section provides a brief overview of these aspects which are crucial to understand the conditions under which alternative news media emerged as counterparts, shape so called ‘Gegenöffentlichkeiten’<sup>8</sup> and offer diametric perspectives for citizens to inform themselves on what is happening.

With the rise of digital media Chadwick observes a period of transition in which the lines between older media and newer media are blurred as they function in interrelation. According to Chadwick both, older and newer media represent different logics in terms of technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms that clash together in a new landscape which is characterized by him as a *hybrid media system* (Chadwick 2017: 4). This described co-existence of different media logics creates “*new opportunities for citizens to engage in political debate and express their opinions in new environments like blogs, Facebook, and Twitter,(...)*” (Chadwick 2017: 54) which are defined as “*alternative online news sites*” (Chadwick 2017: 55). However, alternative news media are not limited to social media sites

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<sup>8</sup> “*Counterpublics are a subset of publics that stand in conscientious opposition to a dominant ideology and strategically subvert that ideology’s construction in public discourse.*” (Fattal 2018: 1).

but include also outlets that present themselves as a “...*proclaimed and/or (self-) perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system.*” (Holt et al. 2019: 862).

According to Rauch, these alternative media cannot be observed without embedding them in the context to mainstream news media as they “*aspire to achieve the large scale, financial stability, professionalized operations and aesthetic norms of mainstream news media.*” (2016: 756). Furthermore, some scholars discern increasing competition among traditional media which is combined with increasing marketization and argue that traditional media is in crisis, as audiences are declining and turning their attention to alternative forms of media (Davis 2019: 186).

This transition has also affected the conditions under and the norms by which journalists work (hybrid journalism). Ideals of news media such as informing citizens, providing a forum for people to engage, criticizing wrongdoings, uncovering political scandals, and thus holding political actors accountable for their actions must be aligned with “*commercial logic of media industry*” (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999: 250). This has led to criticism for traditional news media and contributed to the rise of alternative news media who claim to fill this gap by providing perspectives that are ignored by mainstream news media (Au et al. 2021: 3). Alternative news media have become an important news source of the public when consuming news in and outside crises.

Therefore, news media play a very important role in providing information. Particularly, this also holds true to the context of a crisis. From a normative perspective, Shiang et al. argue that news media is not only supposed to function as an information submitter but “*act as the peoples' advocate by providing an avenue for public engagements and discussions.*” (2021: 90). From a crisis perspective this might be crucial for those who are affected as Monahan and Ettinger describe news media as “... *a galvanizing force in a community by providing an outlet for those experiencing loss and trauma,*...” (Monahan/Ettinger 2018: 479). Yet, news media has been criticized for not fulfilling these normative expectations (Monahan/Ettinger 2018: 479). On one hand news media can contribute to rescuing efforts by distributing and giving meaning to governmental information. On the other hand, news media is accused of spreading misinformation, myths and embrace sensationalism over serious investigative journalism (Monahan/ Ettinger 2018: 485). This can lead to “*false messages*” (Monahan/Ettinger 2018:

486) or irritating and misleading frames of issues. One given example is the so called ‘panic frame’ (Monahan/Ettinger 2018: 487) (in this thesis called ‘fear frame’) which can be adapted by other various news media outlets and thus emanate “*in a narrow perspective that is not factually representative of the situation, but rather perpetuates false myths*” (Monahan/Ettinger 2018: 487) which might result in outrage among news consumers.

In order to get a better understanding on the multifaced news audiences, the next section provides an overview on the news repertoires in Germany in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2.3 News Repertoires in Germany

It is important to note, that consumers of alternative news media do not solely rely on alternative news outlet but can be rather described as a “*hybrid audience*” that also uses mainstream media (Rauch 2015: 130; see also Andersen et al. 2021). This emphasizes the understanding of the lines between alternative news media and mainstream news media as becoming blurred. This in particular applies for the context of a crisis in which people “*experience a need for additional information, turning both daily and more seldom users into news omnivores*” (Ghersetti & Westlund 2014: 15). In light on the COVID-19 pandemic van Aelst et al. (2021: 1222) investigated news consumption among different European countries and suggest an increasing use of internet news sources and social media. According to them especially media “*that offer faster and more immediate coverage (online, social and television) experienced the increase while for example popular press experienced decrease.*” (van Aelst et al. 2021: 1223).

Traditionally, TV is the most used source for news consumption in Germany. Yet, in 2021 it decreased and is now as important as online news media (including social media). During the pandemic, most people (70 percent) put trust in the public state broadcasting (*Tagesschau*) and other traditional news brands (Hölig & Hasebrink 2021: 80). Yet, Hölig and Hasebrink also report a criticism towards mainstream media for not providing enough “*diversity of views and people within the media.*” (Hölig & Hasebrink 2021: 80). This in in line with research done by Andersen, Shehata and Andersson from a Swedish context that found trust in mainstream news media, traditional news use, news interest as well as political trust and social trust as important factors for alternative news media consumption (Andersen et al. 2021: 12). Especially people that place themselves more on the right of the political scale feel underrepresented and “*place least trust in the media*” (Hölig & Hasebrink 2021: 80). In relation to age, gender and education

however, consumers of alternative news media vary (Andersen et al. 2021: 12). For, these diverse audiences who have mainstream media skepticism in common, alternative news media have become an important source for information (Tsfati/ Cappella 2003: 504). Thus, in 2020 14 percent of German citizens put their trust in alternative news media sources such as *Compact*, 20 percent find alternative news media trustworthy at least to some degree (Jakobs et al. 2021: 157). Furthermore, according to Schulze it can be assumed that a significant number of citizens are not aware of their news consumption being alternative news media outlets (Schulze 2020: 14). Yet consuming alternative news media is defined as “*instrumental*” by Andersen et al. (2021) as consumers of these outlets tend to search information that are in line with their predispositions “*and gratify their needs*” (Andersen et al. 2021: 4).

These alternative news media are accused of producing disinformation and thus undermining democratic processes. This development has been recognized by political institutions such as the European Parliament which notes an emergence of alternative news ecosystems and stress that underlining business models of online platforms lead to increasing polarization (Colomina et al. 2021: 13). Since research on alternative media is very fragmented and entails different understandings on what alternative media actually are, this thesis relies on an approach that categorizes alternative media in a German communication research context (see Hooffacker 2020).

## 2.4 Alternative News Media in Germany

Not surprisingly, the German news media landscape is also permeated with various news outlets that assign themselves to the conglomerate of alternative news media. Starting in the 1970s with more politically left oriented news media (e.g. *taz* which transformed to mainstream news media by now) Germany is facing a rise of alternative news media from the right wing as well as media outlets that are characterized by misinformation and conspiracy theory (Hooffacker 2020: 250). Thus, it can be said that the news media landscape offers a broad spectrum of different providers with political ideologies that claim to offer a source of information “*...for those citizens who doubt the mainstream of public opinion makes and object the usual paroles*” (NachDenkSeiten 2022a).

Another characteristic of alternative news media that differentiates them from mainstream news media are smaller (but growing) audiences (Schulze 2020: 8). In the last eight years alternative news media have emerged as powerful platforms for the radical right in Germany. In connection

with societal crises such as financial crisis (2008) or the refugee crisis in 2015 right-wing alternative news media has gained importance (Schulze 2020: 8). This development is also connected to the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party that amplifies right-wing alternative media outlets on social media networks like Facebook (see Hohlfeld et al. 2021). However, the emergence of alternative news media is not limited to the right wing, recent studies that investigated alternative news media show that they can be found in the left-wing spectrum as well. Furthermore, alternative news media can be part of a public diplomacy strategy as it is the case for the Russian state-owned news media outlet *Russia Today* (DE) (see Hohlfeld et al. 2021; Hooffacker 2020).

Hooffacker developed different categories to help defining alternative news media in the context of the German media landscape. According to her, dominating alternative news media are common in their authoritarian perspective and misanthropy. Comparing alternative news media with mainstream media, Hooffacker differentiates both in terms of structures and actors. Whereas mainstream media produces more ideological content and is characterized by only a few producers, alternative news media is characterized by predominantly critical producers with content that is critical of those in power. Taking actors into account, alternative news media are characterized by critical producers and critical consumers (Hooffacker 2020: 250). According to Hooffacker the existence of alternative news media implies that mainstream news media might not fulfill their principal duty to inform the public in an objective way, (Hooffacker 2020: 250). This is in line with Holt et al. 2019 who define alternative news media as

*“...a proclaimed and/or (self-) perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system. This stated “alternativeness” can emerge on and should be studied on multiple different levels: Alternative news media can publish different voices (alternative content creators) trying to influence public opinion according to an agenda that is perceived by their promoters and/or audiences as underrepresented, ostracized or otherwise marginalized in mainstream news media, alternative accounts and interpretations of political and social events (alternative news content), rely on alternative publishing routines via alternative media organizations and/or through channels outside and unsupported by the major networks and newspapers in an alternative media system.”* (Holt et al. 2019: 862).



From this definition the self-perception of these alternative news outlets becomes the focal characteristic for alternative news media. In the same vein, Schulze (2020) ascribes alternative news media a “...(self-) perceived corrective.” (Schulze 2020: 9). As noted by Rauch (2016) Previous research has established adjectives for alternative media such as “*radical, citizens, autonomous, activist, independent, participatory and community media*” (Rauch 2016: 757). This self-perception of alternative news media correlates also to the aspect of contesting power. According to Rauch, alternative news media are driven by different motives that include the production of critical content and promoting social change (Rauch 2016: 762).

Yet, it needs to be noted that there is an ongoing debate in research on what constitutes alternative news media with some scholars using slightly definitions for (right-wing) alternative news media. Some refer to hyper partisan news media (see Schulze 2020) or to anti-elitist alternative media (Müller & Schulz 2019) and discuss whether right-wing news media can be defined as alternative news media as it was originally used as a terminology for left-wing alternative media (Schulze 2020: 7). Furthermore, as described in the chapter above, Rauch (2016: 757) argues that alternative and mainstream news media cannot be differentiated in binary categories but rather on the diverging ends of a broad news media spectrum with blurred forms. With the lines being sometimes blurred between mainstream news media and alternative news media, alternative news media outlet can be considered alternative at one point in time but transform to mainstream news media outlet. One given example for this phenomenon is the German newspaper *taz* (*Die Tageszeitung*) which started as a more left-wing alternative news media in 1978 and is now considered a mainstream news media outlet with a political leftist orientation.

This thesis analyzes three different alternative news outlets, *NachDenkSeiten*, *Compact* and *Russia Today Deutschland*. All of these are not only some of the most popular alternative news media but also have been object of communication research before. Taking Holt et al’s definition of alternative news media into account, the publication of different and allegedly underrepresented voices is also part of Compact’s own narrative. All three news sites understand themselves as a provider for alternative news that contributes to a counter-public. To get a more comprehensive understanding of this counter-public, all three news outlets offer diverging political orientations. A given example of this is *NachDenkSeiten* who define themselves as a “*critical website*” (Nachdenkseiten 2022a). A more detailed account on the different news outlets is provided in the next section.

### **2.4.1 NachDenkSeiten**

*NachDenkSeiten* is a news site that was founded in 2003 and publishes articles in German. Although it does not define itself as a news media with a left-wing perspective, their political orientation aligns with many leftist viewpoints. One given example is the pacifist viewpoint from the news site that generally oppose military interventions (NachDenkSeiten 2022a).

Owned by former Social Democrats-politician Albrecht Müller and Wolfgang Lieb (also SPD) who left in 2015, the news site was originally initiated to provide a counter perspective to the conservative and neoliberal *Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft* (INSM)<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, NachDenkSeiten employs popular leftist politicians as guest authors such as Oskar Lafontaine<sup>10</sup> and Sahra Wagenknecht<sup>11</sup>.

Since 2014 they face increasing criticism for providing pro-Russian conspiracy theories regarding the Ukraine as well as anti-U.S. American content. This criticism was supported by Lieb, who then left the platform in 2015 (NachdenkSeiten 2015). In 2021, the Amadeu Antonio foundation<sup>12</sup> defined NachDenkSeiten as a “truth-blog” that acts as a voice for leftist conspiracy ideologies (Amadeu Antonio Stiftung 2021: 53).

*NachDenkSeiten* describe themselves as a news site that “...intended to be a source of information for those citizens who have doubts about the mainstream of public opinion makers and object to the usual propaganda.” (NachDenkSeiten 2022a) as well as “... an outlet for those who no longer recognize enough critical opinion potential in the opinion-forming media.” (NachDenkSeiten 2022a).

### **2.4.2 Compact**

*Compact* is a right-wing alternative news media that was founded in 2010 by the far-right journalist Jürgen Elsässer. In 2021 *Compact* was categorized by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution<sup>13</sup> as a far-right wing news magazine (Götschenberg 2021). According to the Hans Bredow institute they have close ties with the nationalist movement *Identitäre Bewegung* (IB), *Pegida*<sup>14</sup> as well as the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). Mainly

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<sup>9</sup> Lobby organization that stands for deregulation and privatization in the job market as well as social and pricing policies

<sup>10</sup> Former minister of finance. He left the party in 2022

<sup>11</sup> Until 2019 she had the parliamentary co-chair of her party

<sup>12</sup> Foundation that strives to strengthen German society against anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, racism and right-wing extremism

<sup>13</sup> Intelligence service that collects and evaluates information on political movements that are aimed against the countries' democratic basis or security of the country

<sup>14</sup> Far-right Anti-Islam and Anti-Immigration movement that started in 2014 to protest against the ‘Islamicisation of the Occident’

focusing on their print version, that is published every month, compact does also offer online services that report on current issues at a domestic as well as at an international level. The magazine describes itself as “*the strongest voice of resistance*” (compact 2022) with a patriotic ideology. According to own numbers the circulation is about 80,000 magazines every month. Like *NachDenkSeiten*, compact defines itself as the flagship of alternative media which “*stands for honest journalism in times of lies*” (compact 2022).

### **2.4.3 Russia Today DE**

Russia Today DE is an international news outlet and TV network that is controlled by the Russian Federation. Funded by the Russian government in 2005, it today serves as an instrument for exerting soft power by promoting Russia’s interests and values outside of the Russian Federation. Thus, its independence as a news media has been questioned. Particularly with the start of the annexation of the Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing war since then, the news media has been accused to provide disinformation, Russian propaganda, and conspiracy theories in favor of the Russian government.

Although RT distances itself from any political ideology, it provides narratives on the German media landscape that are congruent to other alternative news media. It claims to have a different view of Germany to mainstream news media and is “*far from any political and business networks in Germany which is why our editors are not afraid to critically question existing narratives, clichés and stereotypes.*” (RT 2022). With this statement, RT dissociates itself from the general media landscape and implies that the so called “mainstream news media” does not fulfill democratic standards of being independent. This has led scholars to categorize RT as alternative news media (see Hooffacker 2020).

Focusing on its TV network, RT also offers news content in several languages such as English, Spanish, French and German. According to the NGO *Reporters sans frontières (RSF)* RT is represented in over 19 countries and thus understands itself as an alternative to news media such as *CNN International*<sup>15</sup> and *BBC World*<sup>16</sup>. Although there are no official numbers for *NachDenkSeiten* and *Compact*, it can be assumed that RT has a significantly higher budget (216 Mio. Euro) than the former two (Reporter ohne Grenzen 2013: 32). In March 2022, the German website RT DE has been banned by the European Union as a consequence of the Russian Invasion in the Ukraine.

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<sup>15</sup> International TV channel provided by CNN

<sup>16</sup> International pay TV network provided by BBC

#### **2.4.4 Tagesschau**

*Tagesschau* is the respective news website of the public-service television network ARD<sup>17</sup>. Starting in 1996 as a complementing website for the public broadcasting today *tageschau.de* is one of the most popular news websites in the German news media landscape.

*Tagesschau* takes up the issues that are presented throughout the day in public broadcasting and thus offers consumers daily news articles. This includes standard news articles, commentary, background information as well as Interviews. According to its own words *Tagesschau* aims to provide a comprehensive presentation of information on what is going on in the world. Thus, it has been categorized as mainstream news media in previous research. Although it is claimed that *Tagesschau* work ethic is independent and objective it has faced some criticism in the context of past crises. One given example of this criticism is the context of the financial crisis in 2007 in which the news outlet was criticized to report to close to what government officials had been said without critically investigating these governmental narratives and thus did not fulfill the journalistic standards (Arlt/ Storz 2010: 3). *Tagesschau* is one of the most popular online news outlets in Germany and therefore seems useful to function as a representative outlet for mainstream news media.

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<sup>17</sup> *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* ('Working group of public broadcasters of the Federal Republic of Germany')

## III Previous Research

### 3.1 Alternative News Media vs. Mainstream News Media

With the previously described changing news media landscape and the emergence of new online news platforms, alternative news media come more into focus, often in a comparative manner to more traditional news media taking different perspectives.

Investigating the lines between alternative news media and mainstream media, journalism research suggests that alternative news media use different sources compared to mainstream media “*with alternative media blurring the lines between producers and sources*” (Harcup 2003: 371). Furthermore, alternative news media tend to privilege the powerless and marginal groups (Harcup 2003: 371).

The emergence of alternative news media has also been part of research in a German context. In particular with the rise of the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and their close ties to right wing media, the focus has shifted towards alternative news media from different political ideologies. In this context, Frischlich et al. (2019) describe alternative news media as a “*counterpart*” of mainstream news media (2019: 151).

Although alternative media in general (see Holt et al. 2019; Boberg et al. 2020a;) and media use have been researched (see Ghersetti & Westlund 2014; Jakob 2021; Jakob 2021) comparative framing analyses on their specific produced content are still lacking. Research on alternative news media so far has been more conducted from audiences’ perspectives (see Rauch 2016; Klawier et al. 2021) as well as through other content analysis approaches that puts journalists into focus (see Harcup 2003; Harcup 2005) or focuses on different approaches such as narrative analyses or computational content analyses to investigate alternative news media’s content (Bachl 2018; Hughes 2021; Boberg et al. 2020a). Framing analyses however have been more focused on popular news media in general (see Klawier et al. 2022 for exception) without putting them specifically into relation to alternative news media but put them into context among different countries (see Semetko & Valkenberg 2000; Godefroidt et al. 2016; Dimitrova/ Strömbäck 2008; Strömbäck et al. 2013). Therefore, this literature review also includes studies (see Boberg et al. 2020a; Boberg et al. 2020b) that might have used different approaches than framing analysis, but still put the content of alternative news media at center of a comparative analysis.

In terms of frame building, research suggests contradicting findings. Although alternative news media understands itself as a counterpart to traditional media, it tends to use similar frames. Analysis of the news media coverage of a U.S. healthcare policy, Pain found that traditional news media and alternative news media were mainly dominated by the conflict frame. Overall, only one frame (material frame) showed a significant difference between the mainstream news media (*New York Times*) and the alternative news media (*The AlterNet*). According to Pain these results can be explained by the underlying assumption that alternative news media are indeed subject to the similar mechanism as mainstream news media as they have “*some crossover of ideas, content, and style,...*” (Pain 2021: 15). However, it should be noted that the sample size was limited to only two newspapers. In addition to that, this paper focuses on the framing of a healthcare policy. It needs to be asked, to what extent her observations also apply for different contexts such as a crisis.

Pain’s view is contradicted by Hopke (2012) who finds evidence that alternative news media tends to offer counter narratives and thus challenge the dominant media discourse. Similar to Paine, Hopke focused on printed newspaper from the central American country El Salvador. In the context of environmental movements, he used an inductive approach and thus developed five specific frames that were found in this discourse of environmental justice (Hopke 2012: 372). Comparing two mainstream news media and one alternative news media outlet he suggests that the latter mostly used a frame that emphasized responsibility for the government’s actions (Hopke 2012: 375). This observation seems reasonable, considering the previously described overall narrative of alternative news media describing itself as a counterpart to the mainstream and society. Therefore, it may be more likely that alternative news media tends to be more critical towards the political system and demanding accountability for the government’s actions.

This view is supported by Boyd-Barrett (2006) who argues that alternative news media reframes traditional news media and thus produces “*more alternative and radical readings of news*” (Boyd-Barrett 2006: 217). Yet, these studies took place in different contexts, so it can be questioned to what extent these observations also apply on the context of the vaccination process of COVID-19. Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that the countries, these studies were conducted in, have a very different media landscape and political system from Germany. In view of the fact that this limitation applies to all studies, it is essential to keep this

annotation in mind. It can be asked whether alternative news media framing might be influenced by the political system itself and its implications for freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Finally, as argued in the background section, alternative news media is not the same today as they were in the beginning of 2000s. Thus, it needs to be asked whether these findings would hold true in today's media landscape.

A more German oriented approach is done by Frischlich et al. (2020) who examine various German alternative news media websites regarding their style, content and form. Based on the framework of co-orientation. This approach is typically used in journalism research implying that *“two or more individuals orient themselves towards each other and the same object without a need for constant ‘translation’ of the other one’s actions”* (Frischlich et al. 2020: 154). Frischlich et al. conclude that German alternative news media indeed orient themselves in line with mainstream news media in terms of style and their use of mainstream news media as a source. Thus, they conclude, that there is some sort of co-orientation from alternative news media to mainstream news media. Yet, in terms of content, which includes aspects as topics, framing and master-narratives, they find no similarities. In their study they emphasize different aspects e.g.: the media type, structure of the website, formal characteristics, and the content (Frischlich et al. 2020: 156). Although they refer to frames when analyzing content-based co-orientation among different alternative news media, they analyze the focus of the specific website, more precisely the emotionality, the objectivity as well as the editorial leaning as well as the attitudes that are promoted on the specific website (populist, extremist, absolutist) rather than specific frames (Frischlich et al. 2020: 156).

Although this study takes a different approach in investigating alternative and mainstream news media in Germany, it offers interesting insights into the way alternative news media adopts certain aspects mainstream news media while repudiating others. Yet, it needs to be stated that this study is limited to the fact that they only include right-wing news media outlets when investigating the start page of the specific alternative news media outlet and do not focus on the news articles that are published. Furthermore, they use rather subjective and mostly dichotomous categorization when analyzing the content of alternative news media. One given example of this is the method they used which resulted in investigating the information focus and language style providing only two options and furthermore subjective (bland vs. emotional). This is also the case for other categories such as tone of writing or emotionality of the article (Frischlich et al. 2020: 156). Thus, it can be argued that a framing analysis could

give a more nuanced view in terms of content being produced and add an additional perspective on how alternative news media function in the German news media landscape.

Together outside the context of crises, these results suggest that alternative news media rely on mainstream news media when it comes to source usage. In terms of frames, mainstream news media and alternative news media act somehow similar, with alternative news media utilizing responsibility frames more with an amplifying radical tone.

### 3.2 Alternative News Media vs. Traditional News Media During Crises

To get a more nuanced view about the comparative framing between alternative news media and mainstream news media it is necessary to look into research in the context of crises.

Crises entail time periods in which “*a social system, a community, an organization, a policy sector, a country, or an entire region – experiences an urgent threat to its basic structures or fundamental – values, which harbors ‘many unknowns’ and appears to require a far-reaching response.*” (Boin et al. 2017: 5). Furthermore, a crisis always raises “*a symbolic contest over the social meaning of an issue...*” (Boin et al. 2017: 79) in which various actors, including news media are involved. With this understanding, an analogy can be drawn between supposedly diverging crisis such as the refugee crisis, the COVID-19 crisis or the plane crash of the Malaysian Airline flight MH370.

According to Baya (2020) who focused on reporting on refugees in Romania, mainstream news media tends to adopt “*uncritically the frames proposed by official sources or by international media...*” (Baya 2020: 168). In contrast to this observation alternative news media emphasizes eyewitness accounts. Framing this crisis differently Baya concludes that mainstream news media and alternative news media are complementing each other and thus offer the public a comprehensive perspective on the issue (Baya 2020: 168). Taking these findings into account, it can be asked, whether just one media of these two would offer only a limited perspective.

Picking up on the so-called refugee crisis Klawier, Prrochazka and Schweiger (2022) compared frame repertoires of Mainstream and right-wing alternative news media. They identified two different types of alternative media. Whereas the first type uses a strong interpretative style of reporting and alternative frames relating to the refugee debate and thus differentiate itself from mainstream news media the second (e.g. RT DE) is characterized by a more descriptive style



of reporting and frame usage that is more in line with conservative mainstream news media. Thus, they conclude that alternative news media such as Russa Today Deutschland employs a “*rather assimilated and descriptive style*” (Klawier et al. 2022: 15).

Another approach is taken by Shiang, Chibundu and Wilson (2020). Investigating the airplane crash of the Malaysian Airline flight MH370 and its following crisis for all parties they compared traditional Malaysian news media with alternative Malaysian news media. Using a quantitative content analysis, they suggest that mainstream media focuses on human interest frame whereas alternative news media takes a more critical perspective and emphasizes on responsibility frames (Shiang et al. 2020). Different than Baya, Shiang et al. departure from a crisis communication perspective. They start their analysis with the underlying assumption that there is a demand for transparent crisis information (Shiang et al. 2020: 92) and referring to Öhman, Nygren and Olofsson (2016) who claim that news media “*partially constitute the normative power that maintains society’s hegemonic structures*” (Öhman et al. 2016: 516).

Like this thesis, Shiang et al. base their frame analysis on five predefined news frames by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). By comparing one traditional Malaysian news media and one alternative Malaysian news media they find that the former provides more frames that supported the government’s actions and portrayed their content with a focus on the Human-Interest Frame (Shiang et al. 2020: 96). In contrast to previous research, both news media relied in the Malaysian government for official sources. Furthermore, it is apparent that the alternative news media focused more on the conflict frame (14 %) compared to the traditional news media (3%) (Shiang et al. 2020: 96). Testing the relationship between the five different types by doing a chi-square test they find difference that is significant (Shiang et al. 2020: 97). Focusing on Human-Interest frames the traditional news media is failing to provide a factual analysis of the crisis. Although the mainstream news media used the responsibility frame to some degree (35%), Shiang et al. claim that these articles are “*skewed*” (Shiang et al. 2020: 99) and thus provide a narrative in which the government framed as the main actor that is trying to overcome this crisis. Shiang et al. define this as “*framing ‘the attribute of responsibility frame’*” (Shiang et al. 2020: 99). In this case the traditional news media “*deliberately selected the kind of responsibility frame it wants the readers to focus on (selective responsibility frame).*” (Shiang et al. 2020: 100). In contrast to the mainstream news media, the alternative news media takes over the role as a watchdog and reports more critical of the crisis. The analysis by Shiang et al. shows that the alternative news media used critical slants to 83 % whereas the mainstream news

media used critical slants only to 29 percent. In this way, the theoretical role between mainstream news media and alternative news media become twisted with the latter advocating for seeking the truth.

These findings offer interesting insights into how different mainstream news media and alternative news media frame certain crises such as the Malaysian airline flight MH370. However, it should be noted that Shiang et al. findings need to be evaluated in context of the repressive Malaysian media landscape. It seems reasonable to argue that the alternative news media has a bigger need to act as an opposition of the traditional news media when reporting a crisis. However, as Shiang et al. state, this may always be strongly affected by the opportunity's news media is given in order to report on government's actions. It needs to be asked to what extent both news media were affected by their access to reliable information and a suppression of the press. Together, these studies indicate that alternative news media tend to focus on the question of responsibility and may be more critical towards the political leadership. However, these results also highlight the need for further research with a crisis context that offers insights from western media landscapes.

### 3.3 News Media Framing During COVID-19

A more comprehensive approach was taken by Ogbodo et al. (2020). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic they investigated the framing of different news media outlets across the world. Although they only included mainstream news media from every continent in their content analysis, it still offers interesting findings regarding the question how news media frames the ongoing health care crisis.

Similar to Shiang et al., Ogbodo et al. based their framing analysis on Semetko and Valkenburgs predefined five news frames and completed them with four other frames (Politicisation, Ethnicisation, Far/Scaremongering, Hope) that were specified for the context of the pandemic. According to Ogbodo et al. the human-interest frame as well as scaremongering frames seem to dominate the mainstream news media across the globe (2020: 259). This observation is in line with other studies in the context of other crises as mentioned before. Interestingly, Ogbodo et al. found similar framing patterns in different media systems across the globe.

These findings are partly contradicted by Adiprasetio and Larasati (2020) who examine the framing by an Indonesian online news website (detik.com). Similar to other studies conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, they base their framing analysis on the predefined by Semetko and Valkenberg and adapt them to a crisis perspective. According to them, the dominant frame that was used was the attribution of responsibility, which was followed by the human-interest frame. This is also the case when the government is the main source of the news item. This emphasis on responsibility is in line with previous studies on frames in crisis by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and An and Gower (2009). In addition to asking for the dominant sources they also find an overall positive tone towards the government which changes to a negative tone however, if the government is not the main source of the news item (Adiprasetio/ Larasati 2020: 160). Yet, as they only investigate one news outlet, a generalization on a broader news media landscape can be questioned.

Putting different news media outlets in relation to their political ideology, Chock and Kim (2020) found that far-right wing news media users perceive COVID-19 as less threatening compared to left wing news media users (Chock/ Kim 2020: 1184). Analyzing different news media outlet in the U.S. they suggest, that far right-wing news outlets tend to neglect the COVID-19 pandemic in general and provided messages that denied any need for preventative measurements (Chock/ Kim 2020: 1184). However, these results are based on a quantitative online survey that focused on news consumption rather than on the actual news content. Nonetheless, it gives an idea that news outlets with a different political orientation frame COVID-19 as a crisis and thus the need for a vaccination different.

### 3.4 German Alternative News Media Framing (During COVID-19)

As the crisis of COVID-19 is still ongoing research on framing different news media outlets is still emerging. In the context of Germany Boberg et al. (2020a) investigated alternative news media and their reporting on the pandemic. Comparing different outlets to traditional news media Boberg et al. (2020a) suggest that alternative news media give “*events [pandemic] their own ideological spin*” and define their reporting as “*pandemic populism*” (Boberg et al. 2020a: 1). Although they did use a different methodological approach and focused on conspiracy theories and disinformation, it gives interesting insights into the reporting patterns of alternative news media in Germany during COVID-19.

In particular their research question asking for the central topics of their coverage of the COVID-19 crisis becomes important for this thesis. Analyzing 32 different alternative news media's Facebook pages and 78 traditional news media's Facebook pages they found that alternative news media use similar patterns as traditional news media in terms of referring to official sources (Boberg et al. 2020b: 6). This is in line with the previously mentioned argument by Pain (2021) that alternative news media became an inherent part of media landscape and are thus subject of the same mechanisms. Furthermore, their results indicate that alternative news media report on the same topics as traditional news media but can be characterized as a "*photo negative of what and how large the mainstream media reports on; the outlines are the same, but they are mirrored with reversed colors*" (Boberg et al. 2020a: 17). Boberg et al. find similar frames and "*pre-existing narratives*" (Boberg et al. 2020a: 13) that were found in previous studies in relation to issues like the migration and refugee or the climate change debate. One given example of this is the "*corona panic*" which according to Boberg is related to the narrative of "*climate panic*" (Boberg et al. 2020a: 13).

In addition, alternative news media's reporting focuses on national topics and criticism of the system in line with judging the politicians' handling of the crisis in a polemic way (Boberg et al. 2020a: 13). One given example of this is the chaotic crisis management frame which was occurring in *RT Deutsch* (Boberg et al. 2020a: 8). Having this observation in mind, it seems reasonable to assume that alternative news media will emphasize responsibility frame in a way that they blame the political leadership for not handling the vaccination policy in a right way. Although they include Russian alternative news media and left-wing alternative news media in their analysis Boberg et al. (2020a) did not mention any differences among different alternative news media. This finding seems surprising to the fact that news media with diverse political orientation frame issues the same way.

Analyzing how the pandemic was framed by alternative news media Boberg et al. (2020a) use a co-occurrence analysis that links actors in the context they occur and how they are framed. Thus, they put the main actors of the pandemic into focus and do not emphasize how specific sub issues were framed among different news media outlets. They conclude that actors such as Angela Merkel (former Chancellor of Germany) Jens Spahn (former Health minister) and the CDU as the ruling party at that point were linked to several terms that are defined as "*facetious*" (Boberg et al. 2020a: 13) and critical. Consequently, they conclude not only their overall presence in the news coverage but also the anti-system framing of alternative news media

towards the German government. This approach however does not shed any light on how the alternative news media framed specific topics such as the vaccination process in general. Thus, it seems necessary to add a more nuanced view on what frames they used to report on the pandemic.

Although Boberg et al. (2020a) did not focus on the vaccination process and only investigated alternative and traditional news media's coverage in relation to their Facebook content, it seems reasonable to argue that this thesis' analysis might find similar results in the context of the vaccination process. However, it should be noted that the data was conducted during an early stage of the crisis in the beginning of 2020. Following, they focused on different keywords such as "epidemic", "quarantine", or hashtags such as "#flattenthecurve", "#stayhome" or "#washyourhands" (Boberg et al. 2020a: 4).

### 3.5 Framing Research on Vaccines

Complementing the research on alternative news media, it is necessary to take a look into framing research on vaccines. Thus, this thesis offers a more comprehensive overview not only on alternative news media outlets in relation to mainstream news media but gives an idea on how the framing of the chosen crisis (COVID-19 vaccination) has been studied before in news media.

A comparative approach regarding different framing of vaccine is taken by Sandell, Sebar and Harris (2013). Using a qualitative approach, they compare the framing of the H1N1 pandemic for Swedish and Australian news media in 2009. In a second step, they put the different framing messages by the news media in relation to the vaccination rate of the specific country (Sandell et al. 2013: 860). As it is done in this thesis, they put the aspect of vaccination at center of discussion. Starting from divergent vaccination rates the countries' news media used different frames reporting about that issue. Whereas both newspapers communicated the risk of H1N1 similar Sandell et al. found differences in terms of the responsibility frame, self-efficacy frame and uncertainty frame.

The Australian news media used the responsibility frame in order to blame political institutions and organizations for not handling the crisis as they should. In contrast to this observation Swedish news media tended to emphasize responsibility for community to protect the Swedish society. This indicates that different news media frame the same issue in a different way which

according to Sandell et al. has implications for the success of public health measurements such as an increasing vaccination rate. However, Sandell et al. do not explain why these diverging emphasizes on responsibility occur.

Yet, the study by Sandell et al. (2013) is limited to the fact, that they do not investigate different news media outlets such as alternative news media or social media. This delimited approach can may be explained to some degree by the fact that alternative news media and social news media were not that important back in 2009. Although there are newer studies conducting different narratives and rhetoric's of anti-vaccine news media in the context of COVID-19 (see Hughes et al. 2021), it seems reasonable to argue that there is still a lack of comparative research regarding alternative news media in a crisis context and thus should be put into focus.

This literature review has emphasized the different research approaches on alternative news media in relation to mainstream news media and in the context of a crisis. In summary, it has been shown from this review that studies find contradicting results when it comes to a comparative analysis between alternative news media and mainstream news media in a general news context. Whereas some scholars argue that alternative news media tend to use the same frames (see Pain 2021) or at least some tend to use similar frames (see Klawier et al. 2022) as mainstream media others suggest that alternative news media emphasizes its narrative of a counterpart by using frames of responsibility and thus hold governments accountable for their actions (see Hopke 2012, Boyd-Barrett 2006). Although they use different frames, Frischlich et al. (2020) indicate that alternative news media indeed rely on mainstream news media by using them as a source (see also Boberg et al. 2020a; 2020b; Pain 2021; Kenix 2009). In a crisis context, the findings suggested in the presented studies are similar. Shiang et al. (2020) find that alternative news media are more critical by using responsibility frames whereas mainstream news media focus on human-interest frames (see also Ogbodo et al. 2020; Adiprasatio & Larasati 2020).

A similar finding is provided by Boberg et al. (2020a) who suggest that alternative news media might use similar frames but with opposite connotations regardless of whether they are Russian alternative news media or orient themselves more on the right wing. On one hand, these findings indicate that alternative news media is far more critical in their COVID-19 reporting compared to mainstream news media. On the other hand, Boberg et al's findings do not give any definite answers to the question whether and if so, how the framing of a COVID-19 sub-topic differs

among different alternative news media with diverging political orientation. This observation is apparent throughout previous studies that have been mentioned above. However, approaching alternative news media solely as one unit, limits the complexity of alternative news media gives the idea of the different alternative news media outlets being more or less as a homogenous group. By focusing on the differentiation of the specific news outlets this thesis contributes to a more nuanced picture of alternative news media and not only gives answer to the question whether there are differences among alternative news media but also indicates whether there are alternative news media that make use of a similar framing as mainstream news media.

## IV Theoretical Framework

### 4.1 Framing Theory

This master thesis' theoretical background is based on the concept of framing and its underlining assumption that media emphasize certain issues or events and assign them a certain meaning. According to Druckman and Chong (2007) "*an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations*" (2007: 104).

Having its roots in sociology, psychology, political science and journalism, there is an interdisciplinary debate on framing's sovereignty of interpretation which gave rise to a description of framing as a "*fractured paradigm*" (Entman 1993). Robert Entman (1993) understands framing as a selection of "*some aspects of a perceived reality*" (Entman 1993: 52) that influences people's understanding, define problems, diagnose causes, make judgements, give treatment recommendation, and therefore unfold the power of communicating text. These can be found in speeches, utterances, novels or in this case, in news reports in terms of certain keywords, stereotypes, images and facts (Entman 1993: 51). This constructionist approach understands framing in the context of news production and "*frames on the side of the receiver...*" (van Gorp 2007: 61). Following, this understanding emphasizes culture as the origin of how humans build their knowledge and understanding of the world.

For this thesis it is necessary to define what is meant by a news frame. This term has come to be used to refer to "*...a central organizing idea of story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue*" (Gamson & Modigliani 1987: 143) which will be the base of this thesis' theoretical fundament. Here, a frame is understood as a perspective that is articulated by an actor. This differentiates a frame from a narrative which can be seen more as "*expressed products of those perspectives*" (Aukes et al. 2020: 1). These different perspectives offer the audience of the frame a specific segment of the world through which the consumer is able to understand an issue. Thus, the frame should not be seen as something static but rather as a process that unfolds when journalists try to make meaning of an issue. In this connection, frames can be expressed not only through language but also through tones and pictures. Although this thesis makes a difference between a narrative and a frame, it should be



noted at this point that both are closely related to each other and often used interchangeably in research (see Aukes et al. 2020).

According to Entman the concept of framing has a high meaning for political communication because it understands news as an opportunity for political actors to exert power (Entman 1993: 55). This observation is in line with Lecheler and De Vreese who argue that the way journalists select and produce news influences the citizens' understanding and perception of issues (Lecheler & De Vreese 2018: 1). News is understood as polysemous and thus open for interpretation (Rauch 2021: 28).

However, with the changing news media landscape the relevance of framing as a concept and its effects has been questioned by some scholars (Cacciatore et al. 2016: 8). Cacciatore et al. argue that in times of online news media effects of framing could be limited to “*preference-based reinforcement*” effects (2016: 18). This assumes that news media outlets tend to present information to audiences that are fragmented in terms of ideology and thus people orient themselves towards information that is in line with their beliefs.

Yet, Cacciatore et al. also question this assumption and ask whether “tailored” information in an online news media environment can also open up for strong media effects (Cacciatore et al. 2016: 19). While the question about the strength of framing effects remains unclear, the occurrence of frames is immanent. However, most frames are largely not acknowledged (Gitlin 1980) it becomes more important to disclose these and analyze their effects on public opinion. Therefore, the next section will emphasize different types of frames that appear in news media.

## 4.2 Framing in News Media

As previously mentioned, frames are an inherent part of communication text. Thus, especially in communication research the concept of framing has emerged as a broadly used theory and its underlying question on why “*(often small) changes in the presentation of an issue or an event produce (sometimes larger) changes of opinion*” (Chong & Druckman 2007: 104).

News framing research is dominated by two different paths. First, news frames can be understood as logically similar news items that are presented (framed) differently (equivalency

framing). Secondly news items can also be presented in different perspectives that might highlight a specific angle of an issue (emphasis framing) (Lecheler & de Vreese 2018: 3).

This thesis will base its approach of framing on Lecheler and de Vreese who argue for the importance to understand framing as a process in which first frames are build (frame building) then interplay with consumers (frame setting) and shape their interpretations (Lecheler & de Vreese 2018: 11). Although frame setting is a crucial part of the framing process and much research has investigated framing effects on citizens, this thesis focuses on the forgoing process of frame building. The idea of frame building assumes a “*competition, selection, and modification of frames from elites or strategic communicators by the media*” Lecheler & de Vreese 2018: 12). According to Lecheler and de Vreese this process is shaped by internal factors as well as external factors such as political actors. Internal factors that influence the frame building process are editorial policies of the news media outlet or journalists’ news values (de Vreese 2005). This is in line with Donsbach (2004) who suggest that the political orientation of a medium or a journalist influences the news content that is produced (Donsbach 2004: 131). Scheufele (1999: 115) adds aspects like organizational pressures as factors that give input in the frame building process.

However, studies that investigated frame-building on an individual level and analyzed journalists’ roles in deciding what frames to use it can be asked how applicable these findings are for journalists in alternative news media as there is free access to journalism. This issue should also be raised when taking Scheufele’s argument into account that journalists are more likely to adapt the framing that is used by the political leadership when the issue is new on the media agenda (1999: 116). But by what means can these findings have a relevance for journalists working in news media environments where the lines between activism and journalism get blurred?

Over the years research on news framing has identified common frames that are generally applied by news media for various topics. A given example is the highly cited study by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) who identified five dominant frames that occur in news media across Europe (attribution of responsibility, human-interest, conflict, morality, economic consequences) (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000).

According to Lecheler and De Vreese not only different types of frames play a role in how consumers perceive certain issues. They argue that through the selection of sources journalists can shape citizen's perspective as they "*provide a platform for certain stakeholder views...*" (Lecheler & de Vreese 2018: 27). This reiterates the importance of source selection and its possible implication on how a news article is framed.

Especially during crises, the concept of news framing becomes important in order to understand how news media functions as Staniland and Smith state: "*At moments of uncertainty and risk occasioned by the emergence of a new disease (Strong 1990), the frame concept pinpoints the 'little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters'.*" (2013: 311).

## V Aim, Research Question & Hypotheses

Aim of this thesis is to provide a comparative analysis among different alternative news media and their framing in relation to mainstream news media. Understanding how alternative news media framed the vaccine process in Germany, it is desired that this thesis will contribute to a deeper understanding of how alternative news media function in the context of a crisis and generate interesting findings for practitioners for future crises but also offer a more broad picture of alternative news media in general and their framing of societal problems outside crises. The findings should not only give an insight into how alternative news are embedded in the media landscape but may indicate how traditional media theories such as the framing concept are applicable for alternative news sources. Lastly, it might give a possible answer to the question on why Germany is struggling with their vaccination rate. Therefore, the following research question is proposed:

*RQ: How did alternative news media in Germany frame the COVID-19 vaccination process in Germany?*

This rather descriptive research question functions as an overarching frame for the thesis. Taking the findings from previous research into account this thesis proposes five more specific hypotheses which have the goal to reach a better understanding to what extent alternative news media operates with similar mechanisms in relation to mainstream news media. As stated in the introduction, up to date research on alternative news media tends to put them under the same umbrella without asking whether there are nuances among alternative news media. If they are similar in their frame usage, although they offer diverging political perspectives, it can be said that alternative news media do provide a rather homogenous counter-public. If they offer large differences this would indicate that we might need to reconsider our understanding of alternative news media. Testing the notion of alternative news media being homogenous that put themselves always in contrast to mainstream news media, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H (1): Contrasting *Tagesschau*, all alternative news media will rely on different frames for the vaccination process in Germany in order to put them self as the counterpart of mainstream news media

H (2): The alternative news media will use predominately the responsibility frame compared to mainstream news media and emphasize the government's responsibility for handling the vaccination process

H (3): Alternative news media will use the fear frame to a high degree by promoting misinformation on the danger of the vaccines and by comparing the implementation of restrictions with the former Nazi-regime.

H (4): In contrast to alternative news media, *Tagesschau* will focus on the human-interest frame with actors that are pro the vaccines

H (5): Alternative news media will rely on mainstream news media in using them as a source, whereas mainstream news media will refer to other mainstream news media or official governmental or healthcare institutions as sources

## VI Methodology

This section will provide an insight into how the framing analysis among different German news media will be conducted. As the vaccination process is a sub issue in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and predominantly a health care topic that has been politicalized, it seems reasonable to rely on general news frames that have been defined in general news media as well as on frames that are more common during health care crises.

Aiming to understand how the alternative news media frames the COVID-19 vaccine process with the approach of a quantitative framing analysis allows not only a general overview on how the alternative news media frames the crisis in comparison to more mainstream news media but provides a nuanced prospect on frames that are used among different alternative news media outlets. Furthermore, it will give insights into the dominating frames and actors that occur in these news media while using a large amount of data. Thus, we'll gain a comprehensive and systematic understanding on how alternative news media themselves perceive and evaluate the crisis.

As previously mentioned, this thesis will base its framing analysis on the approach by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) who define five frames that occur in news media across Europe. In addition, and based on Dan an Raupp's systematic literature review (2018) on health care framing, two more frames (fear/scaremongering & health severity/risk magnitude) will be added. In order to get a more nuanced view on how the different news media may use similar frames but with diverging connotations some frames are operationalized with additional underlining questions that ask for sources, actors or tones of language. By relying on frames that have been used in research, the findings can be embedded within the broad field of news media framing as well in the research body in context of COVID-19 and thus be replicable for further research.

### 6.1 Sampling

As presented in chapter 2.4 three alternative news media outlets (*Compact*, *NDS*, *RT Deutsch*) and one mainstream news media outlet (*Tagesschau*) were chosen for the comparative analysis. All three alternative news media are some of the most prominent alternative news media in Germany and have been researched before (see Boberg etl a. 2020a; Hooffacker 2020; Klawier et al. 2022). Furthermore, all three of them offer diverging political perspectives with *Compact*

being a far-right wing news media outlet, *NDS* being considered as politically left and *RT Deutsch* representing alternative news media from other states such as Russia. Nonetheless, the German media landscape consists of a vast of different mainstream news media alternative news media and those who may be assigned to both news media types. Particularly on the far-right spectrum there are other news media that could have been chosen for the analysis. Given examples are *KenFM* which has been taken down by today, *Freie Welt*, *Reitschuster* or *Junge Freiheit* and *Tichys Einblick* which define themselves as more liberal conservative and are closer to mainstream news media but still considered as alternative news media (see Bachl 2018). Although some of these alternative news media have a greater reach than *Compact* some of them require memberships or contain a paywall for a vast majority of their articles. Regarding alternative news media from other states and alternative news media from a more left political spectrum *RT Deutsch* and *NachDenkSeiten* are part of a smaller group of alternative media and also prominent in research for reporting on the COVID-19 crisis (See Boberg et al. 2020a).

As described in the method section the sampling is scheduled in two time periods. The first sampling period is from the 15<sup>th</sup> of March to 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2021, the second sampling period is from the 1<sup>st</sup> of November to 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2021 (Germany). A total of eight weeks is coded. As previously stated, the vaccination campaign in Germany has faced various challenges throughout the ongoing crises. Both chosen time periods are examples of these sub crises that evolved. During the first time period beginning from mid-March 2021 the EMA reported several individual cases of side-effects when getting vaccinated with *AstraZeneca*. As explained in the Background section earlier, this led to a debate in the German news media landscape on whether the vaccines are trustworthy and if the EMA or the Stiko<sup>18</sup> should put some vaccines (*AstraZeneca*) on hold for specific groups. Thus, the chosen time period of four weeks includes the first rumors of reported side-effects (starting from the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2021), the debate and the temporary stop of the vaccine (15<sup>th</sup> March 2021), as well as the following closing when medical scientists found the cause for the side-effects the resolution of the EMA to proceed with the vaccination process (starting from the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 2021). The debate on side effects of the vaccines has also caused people to ask about so-called long-term effects of vaccines. This phenomenon however was declared as invalid by institutional health care authorities (Robert Koch Institute 2022b). Rumors of COVID-19 vaccines having long-term

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<sup>18</sup> Ständige Impfkommission

effects was officially falsified which was shared by the German government (Bundesregierung 2021).

The second time period highlights another historical sub-crisis which affects the vaccination debate up until today. Despite the fact that, the causes for the reported individual cases of side-effects were found and scientific consensus was established about the pros for the vaccines outweighs the cons, in November 2021 the Robert Koch Institute reported a low vaccination rate in Germany. According to them this would make it harder to flatten the curve. The low vaccination rate evolved in a debate on whether the new formed government of *SPD*<sup>19</sup>, *FDP*<sup>20</sup> and *B90/Die Grünen*<sup>21</sup> should implement a mandatory vaccine<sup>22</sup>. This discussion has brought up cleavages along the German public such as individual freedom vs. solidarity, science communication, trustworthy vaccines as well as reliability of science. Considering the fact, that both time periods are marked by different historical aspects, it can be assumed that the extent to which certain frames are used might differ over time. One given example is the case for the fear frame of side-effects. Whereas for the first time period, there was no established consensus in scientific research on the possibility of side-effects when getting vaccinated, the data situation offered a more comprehensive picture on the danger of COVID-19 vaccines. Therefore, it seems reasonable to argue that news media would decrease their usage over time. Despite the fact that there was broad evidence against the high occurrence of side-effects and them being less dangerous than getting infected with COVID-19, it can be argued that news media using this frame in the second time period promote misinformation.

## 6.2 Data

This thesis will investigate full news articles (including the headline) as the news item. Thus, it is ensured, that the whole message is object of the analysis. Previous studies that investigated news frames have used full news articles as the unit of analysis. In order to identify the text as a full news article, a minimum of one sentence is the sufficient condition, regardless of whether an article contains only a few words, it is coded as a news item.

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<sup>19</sup> Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland

<sup>20</sup> Freie Demokratische Partei

<sup>21</sup> Bündnis 90 die Grünen

<sup>22</sup> Up to this date (18th April 2022) the German parliament has rejected a mandatory vaccination (Gehrke 2022)



Having the scope of this thesis in mind, it seems beneficial to delimit the analysis on the text of the news article. This methodological approach is supported by the fact that *NachDenkseiten* as well as *Compact* do not include images for all their articles. Therefore, the content analysis will exclude pictures as part of the news articles. So, the focus of attention is solely on the text. Nonetheless, it needs to be noted that pictures contain frames as well.

The data was downloaded from the 25<sup>th</sup> of February to the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2022. Entering the respective websites of the four different news outlets, all news articles in relation to the COVID-19 vaccines were downloaded. To include all news articles that report on the COVID-19 vaccine campaign, the following predefined keywords were used: ‘*Impfung*’<sup>23</sup>, ‘*Impfen*’<sup>24</sup>, ‘*Vakzin*’<sup>25</sup> in connection with the specified time periods.

In the following step all articles that contained news on other vaccines than the COVID-19 vaccines were excluded from the sample. A total of 685 news items were downloaded. Thereafter, the data was coded from the 28<sup>th</sup> of February to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2022, using Excel. The completed dataset was transferred into SPSS. In the process of coding, it became apparent that 25 articles could not be used as they referred to different vaccines (not related to COVID-19) or did not refer to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 670 news items were coded with 74 news items from *Compact*, 140 news items from *NachDenkseiten*, 200 news items from *RT Deutsch* and 256 news articles from *Tagesschau*. Whereas 268 news items were coded from the first time period (15<sup>th</sup> March 2021 to 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021) 402 news items were found in the second time period (1<sup>st</sup> November 2021 to 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021).

Table 1- Descriptive Statistics News Articles Differentiated by News Media & Time Period

	<i>Compact</i>	<i>NachDenkseiten</i>	<i>RT Deutsch</i>	<i>Tagesschau</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> time period	20	34	89	125
2 <sup>nd</sup> time period	54	106	111	131
total	74	140	200	256

<sup>23</sup> ‘vaccination’ (engl.)

<sup>24</sup> ‘vaccinating’ (engl.)

<sup>25</sup> ‘vaccine’ (engl.)

### 6.2.1 Data Limitations

With regards to the sample the data is limited to the fact, that a total of five news items which were found on *Compact*'s website couldn't be downloaded due to missing access. However, this was solely the case for *Compact*. Furthermore, during the ongoing invasion of the Ukraine that started on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, the website of *Russia Today* was prohibited by the EU<sup>26</sup> on 03<sup>rd</sup> of March. Thus, up until today the web address of *Russia Today Deutschland* is not available anymore. However, this did not hinder the process of conducting data. As previously mentioned, pictures are excluded from the content analysis. One hand, one could argue that this limits the news items' information. On the other hand, it is necessary to delimit the perspective and delimit the codebook and the operationalization to a feasible number of different variables.

Another limitation of the data is the fact that only four news outlets are investigated. Clearly, the German news media landscape offers a broad range of various news media. Therefore, some might argue that choosing only four outlets, the German news media landscape is reduced and thus findings cannot be generalized. Selecting news outlet from diverging political perspectives, this thesis aims to cover the broad spectrum of German news media landscape.

Adding *Tagesschau* as the only reference category for mainstream news media one may ask whether the public-service news outlet is representative for mainstream news media in general. Although *Tagesschau* is very popular in Germany, it can be assumed that public-service news media might be subject to different mechanism in the news production than private news media such as *BILD*. Despite this, it is important to note that although *Tagesschau* might be a public broadcast, it is independent of the state. Furthermore, if mainstream news media is understood in terms of popularity (high rate of news consumers) there are strong similarities between news outlets such as *BILD* and *Tagesschau*. Focusing on daily news coverage *Tagesschau* is overrepresented in the data sample compared to the other three news outlets.

## 6.3 Codebook

For the collection of data, a codebook was designed based on the previously explained framing approach of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). The codebook is divided into four different sections. The first section includes formal categories such as a story identification number, the

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<sup>26</sup> European Union

date on which the news item was coded as well as the publication date. which helps to identify every news item that was coded.

The second section includes the frame analysis. In total seven overarching frames are part which are operationalized with in total 33 questions. As mentioned earlier the dichotomous questions are adapted from Semetko and Valkenburg. In order to identify if a certain frame occurs in the news item a minimum of two questions needs to be answered with yes. These dichotomous variables (*yes or no*) are complemented with additional nominal scaled questions that ask for actors and underlying connotations. Here, this codebook differs from the codebook that was developed by Semetko and Valkenburg in which a minimum of three yes-answered questions are needed to identify a frame as present in the news item.

The third section asks for the tonality of the news item. As previously mentioned, the operationalization is adapted from Strömbäck et al. (2012). As Strömbäck et al. use predefined buzzwords that implicate a negative or positive tone of the news item, it is needed to translate these into German. Identifying these certain buzzwords in the news item the variable is operationalized with a four-point ordinal scale ranging from 0 (neutral tonality) to 3 (predominantly positive tonality). If the news item contains significant negative and positive buzzwords the overall tonality is coded as 2 (balanced/ambivalent).

To find the main focus of the news item, the fourth section asks for main-frames and sub-frames. Since it is possible that one news item contains different frames, this codebook aims to capture one main frame as well as up to two sub-frames.

Following that, the codebook aims to capture the sources that have been used in the specific news items. This is operationalized with a nominal scaled variable (*0 = no sources used, 1= mainstream news media sources, 2= other alternative news media sources, 3= official governmental sources, 4= official health care institutions, 5= other, 6= no clarification which sources have been used*). With that variable, this thesis aims to capture to what extend alternative news media rely in mainstream news media by using them as an object of reference.

Throughout the pretest phase, another two sections were added. The fifth section contains a variable with respect to the reporting of specific vaccines. This variable was operationalized with a numeric variable distinguishing the vaccines into vaccines from Russia (1) (examples of

these are Sputnik V and CoviVac), vaccines that are approved by the EU (2), meaning particularly mRNA vaccines (BionTech/Pfizer and Moderna) as well as AstraZeneca, and other vaccines (3). In addition to that another variable was added to capture the overall context of the news article (1= German context, 2= EU context, 3= U.S context, 4= Russian context, 5= worldwide, 6= other). With adding these two variables the codebook does not only give information on what frame has been used but gives an idea on how positive the news media reports on specific vaccines in a specific context<sup>27</sup>. The next section provides an overview on the specific definition of the used frames as well as an exposition how these frames are operationalized.

### **6.3.1 Frames**

Relying on previous studies that have been done in different fields of research (crisis communication, framing research & health care research) the analysis will use 7 predefined frames with additional subcategories. Additionally, the tone as well as the use of source and the overall context will be investigated.

#### **6.3.1.1 Conflict Frame**

As described in the previous section, this framing analysis will base its operationalization by relying on Semetko and Valkenburg and their predominant frames that occur in news (2000). According to them the conflict frame “*emphasize conflict between individuals, groups or institutions as a means of capturing interest*” (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000: 95). This frame presents the issue in terms of a confrontation of two or more contrasting arguments on the issue. It emphasizes the disagreement and confrontation between two sides which can be taken by different actors. Possible indicators for this are comparisons between different political actors on how to proceed with the vaccination process, as well as conflicts between health care experts that criticize political actors on how they implement the vaccine policy in Germany. Investigating the question between whom there is a conflict, it is important to note, that the different types of conflict are understood as reciprocal. A total of five different questions is used to operationalize the conflict frame in a news item. One example of this is the following question: “*Does the story reflect disagreement between parties/ individuals/groups/ countries?*”. Whereas the first four questions are dichotomous and only give information on

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<sup>27</sup> for a better overview see Appendix C

whether a conflict is occurring or not, the fifth question is a nominal scale question asking between whom there is a conflict.

#### **6.3.1.2. Human Interest Frame**

The Human-Interest frame “*brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem.*” (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000: 95). With reference to a health crisis, it embraces the “*impact on the lives of those affected*” (Dan & Raupp 2018: 210). With regard to the vaccine indicators for this frame could be the presentation of certain sub-groups that were treated differently due to specific health conditions in the vaccine process in forms of portraits or interviews. Given examples of these subgroups are pregnant women, children, or elderly people. Furthermore, the personalization of a political actor does also indicate the occurrence of the Human-Interest frame. This frame is operationalized through four dichotomous questions which asks for personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage or empathy. In addition to Semetko and Valkenburg this codebook is complemented by a variable that asks for the impact that is emphasized in the human-interest frame which contains a positive impact (e.g., reporting the positive impact from the vaccine process), the negative impact (e.g., reporting the struggles from the vaccine process or the negative impact of the vaccine) as well as the vaccine process in an ambivalent light. In addition to the impact, the sixth questions finally ask for the actor that is at center of the frame. This includes someone who had side effects from the vaccination, someone who is pro the vaccine, someone who is not vaccinated or is against the vaccine, political actor from the government, political actor from the opposition, an institutional authority as well as someone who is vaccinated and got COVID-19 (vaccine breakthrough).

#### **6.3.1.3 Economic Consequences Frame**

Same as the previous two frames the economic consequences frame is an adaption of Semetko and Valkenburg’s framing analysis approach. According to them “*This frame reports an event, problem, or issue in terms of the consequences it will have economically on an individual, group, institution, region, or country*” (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000: 96). Given examples for this frame could be the storyline of a possible mandatory vaccination and its financial implication for people who would lose their job if they do not want to get vaccinated, as well as self-employed citizen who are facing revenue declines due to the so called 3G rule or 2G rule. Furthermore, this frame can also refer to biotechnology companies that produce the vaccines (e.g., BioNTech). This frame is operationalized with three dichotomous question that

ask whether there is a mention of financial losses or gains, a mention of costs or economic consequences in general in the news item. In order to define this frame as present in the news item a minimum of 2 questions needs to be answered with *yes* (1). Additionally, a fourth question contains information about the actor in focus by asking for whom there will be consequences which ranges from government (1), political establishment (2), the public in general (3), self-employed individuals (4), vaccine producer (5), international organizations (6), healthcare institutions (7), mainstream news media (8), alternative news media (9) as well as the opposition (10). Here it should be noted that political establishment (2), government (1) and opposition (10) might overlap with each other. However, political establishment was only used as a possible answer if the news item specifically refers to political actors as the ‘political establishment’.

#### **6.3.1.4 Morality Frame**

The morality frame puts “*the event, problem, or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions*” (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000: 95). Possible Indicators for this frame are normative or moral suggestions on how to behave. Given examples of this application of morality are messages to get vaccinated for the greater good, it may promote solidarity or individualism (e.g., individual responsibility, individual freedom) as a value of today’s society as well as the message that if people die, it is god’s will. This frame is operationalized with a total of five dichotomous questions that ask whether the news item makes references to God, morality or offers social prescriptions about how to behave. Furthermore, the codebook contains questions on which key moral (individualism vs. solidarity) is promoted in the news item. Both moral principles have been part throughout the ongoing pandemic and seemed to be understood as antagonistic by large part of the public sphere. Therefore, it seemed crucial to check to what extent this moral conflict is represented in the alternative news media landscape. Whereas individualism in this context might promote a liberal crisis management as well as the individual freedom to make someone’s own decisions and thus contradict political restrictions (e.g., curfew, contact limitations or mandatory vaccinations), solidarity in this context promotes the vaccine as the chance respectively duty to protect the vulnerable groups in the society and thus contribute to a common good.

#### **6.3.1.5 Attribution of Responsibility Frame**

According to Semetko and Valkenburg, this „*frame presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an*

*individual or group.*“ (2000: 96). With regard to the vaccination process this can refer to the German government’s, the European Union’s or the vaccine producer’s obligation to provide enough vaccines or take action in forms of policy implementations. Possible indicators for the usage of this frame might be buzzwords like villains and heroes in this crisis. This frame is operationalized through six questions. Whereas four dichotomous questions ask for ability to solve, solutions and requirement of action, two additional questions are more actor oriented and ask who is responsible for the crisis and who is responsible for solving it which ranges from government (1), society as a whole (2), individuals who are against the vaccine (3), political actors as individuals such as Jens Spahn<sup>28</sup>, Angela Merkel<sup>29</sup> or Karl Lauterbach<sup>30</sup> (4), Scientists such as Christian Drosten<sup>31</sup> (5), mainstream news media (6), alternative news media (7), corporates that produce the vaccine (8), healthcare institutions such as the Stiko, EMA as well as hospitals, people who support the vaccine (10) and the opposition (11).

#### **6.3.1.6 Fear Frame**

As previously mentioned, the codebook is complemented by two additional frames that are specifically used in a crisis context – one is the fear frame. This frame has been used in the context of the covid pandemic by Ogbodo et al. (2020) when analyzing the news framing of the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe. Therefore, this thesis will adapt its definition from Ogbodo et al. (2020).

Referring to Ogbodo et al. fear frames are “*Stories that are exaggerated to cause fear or panic among the public*” (Ogbodo et al. 2020: 259). Other “*Unsubstantiated claims blow the risk out of proportions.*” (Dan & Raupp 2018: 211). With reference to the vaccination crisis this could result in reporting on side effects of vaccines, and an emphasis on the uncertainty of possible long-term effects of the vaccines. Additional possible indicators could be the use of buzzwords (*shock, fear, dread, horrific, panic*). Yet, some might argue that using buzzwords like fear or horrific in the context of the crisis is not an exaggerating promotion of fear but rather a factual reporting on the critical situation. Therefore, the frame focus on news items that produce fear among the public by bringing up arguments that contradict scientific consensus. The fear frame is operationalized with five dichotomous questions that might capture various fears in the

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<sup>28</sup> Minister of Health until 8th December 2021

<sup>29</sup> German chancellor until 8th December 2021

<sup>30</sup> Expert for Healthcare & Minister of Health from 8th December 2021

<sup>31</sup> German virologist, consultant German Government in COVID-19 crisis management & became popular with being the Co-host in the podcast “Das Coronavirus-Update von NDR Info”

context of the COVID-19 crisis. The first two questions asks whether the news item brings up arguments about the side effects when getting vaccinated as being more dangerous than getting the COVID-19 infection. Examples of these are also news items that use buzzwords like ‘deadly vaccine’. The third questions focus on possible long-term effects of different COVID-19 vaccines. As there is scientific consensus that speaking of long-term effects in relation to the COVID-19 vaccine is problematic (Schraer 2022), this framing can be categorized as a fear frame that causes panic among the public. The fourth question focuses on possible health conditions for people as a consequence if the public will not get vaccinated.

All the first four questions aim to capture fear frames that are interrelated with the health consequences of the COVID-19 infection or the vaccination. During the pretesting phase however, a significant number of news item presented another fear frame that is connected to the vaccination process in a more indirect way. Thus, the fifth question aims to capture news items that bring up arguments for the threat of oppression by comparing the restrictions to the former Nazi regime and using buzzwords like ‘state-terror’, ‘vaccination-terror’, or ‘covid-dictatorship’. These news items focus on the implementations of possible restrictions that are related to the vaccination process (e.g., so called COVID-19 passports, 2G- rule<sup>32</sup>, 3G-rule<sup>33</sup>, mandatory vaccination)

#### **6.3.1.7 Health Severity/ Risk Magnitude Frame**

The last frame that is included in the codebook is the health severity or risk magnitude frame which has been researched in light of health care crisis. This thesis will base its definition of the health severity frame on Dan and Raupp who understand it as “*The impact of a health risk on human life as a whole.*” (Dan & Raupp 2018: 210). Given examples on for the use of a risk magnitude in a news item are numerical information on the risk, risk comparisons as well as mortality statistics (Dan & Raupp 2018: 213).

This frame is operationalized with two dichotomous questions. The first question asks whether the news item mentions the level or size of a risk effect (injury, illness, mortality, or other risk-related consequences) when getting infected with COVID-19 and thus promotes the vaccine as

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<sup>32</sup> COVID-19 restriction the German government implemented the 2-G rule that instructed facilities (e.g. restaurants, cinemas etc.) to require a proof of vaccination or recovery (‘Geimpft’ and ‘Genesen’)

<sup>33</sup> COVID-19 restriction the German government implemented the 3-G rule that instructed facilities (e.g. restaurants, cinemas etc.) to require a proof of vaccination, recovery or being tested (‘Geimpft’, ‘Genesen oder ‘Getestet’)



the way out of the crisis. Additional examples are also phrasings such as ‘the vaccine is our strongest weapon’ as well as ‘The vaccine is our way out of the crisis’.

By asking whether the story does mention the level or size of a risk effect (injury, illness, mortality, or other risk-related consequences) when getting the vaccine and thus promotes the vaccine as a reason for the crisis, the second question offers the contrasting perspective on the risk magnitude. Depending on the answers the frame offers a neutral risk assessment (if both questions are answered with yes), a risk assessment with a focus on COVID-19 risks as well as a risk assessment with a focus on the vaccination risks.

## 6.4 Pretest

Although this codebook relies predominantly on predefined frames that have been used in research before, it is crucial to conduct a pretest to evaluate whether they capture the frames that are apparent in the sample. Therefore, a size of 70 news items was coded from all four different news media outlets. In this process the codebook was edited and adapted with regard to the main actors that appeared in the articles. One given example is the predefined conflict frame which was adapted to the existing sample of COVID-19 vaccine news articles. In the process of pretesting, it occurred that the variable four which was operationalized with the question whether the news item refers to winners and losers, did not occur at all in the pretest sample. Therefore, it was rejected for the actual coding process. Adaption was also needed for the fifth question that asked for the conflict parties. Thus, throughout the process item 3 (*public vs. political actor*) changed into *expert vs. politics*.

In addition to that, it was checked, whether significant frames might appear in the news articles that were not part of the codebook. This was the case for the fear/scaremongering frame which was originally designed to capture only in relation to the offered vaccines and possible side effects or long-term effects. However, throughout the pretesting it became occurrent that some alternative news media seem to use this frame not only regarding the vaccine but also the restrictions that are related to the vaccine campaign. Especially, the far-right wing alternative news media tend to use this frame to a significant extent by defining the restrictions of the 2G

or 3G rules as “Corona- dictatorship<sup>34</sup>”, “vaccination-terror<sup>35</sup>”, “state terrorism<sup>36</sup>” or “Corona-regime<sup>37</sup>”. In order to capture this narrative, an additional question was added (*Does the news item use buzzwords that implies oppressing the citizens or refers to the dictatorship under Adolf Hitler?*).

Not surprisingly, the health severity frame could be found in many news items. Even though it might be only present as a sub-frame, it is still an overarching frame that appears throughout all the news articles. Considering the fact, that we investigated news media in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic this observation seems not surprising.

A challenge that occurred throughout the pretest was the irony and sarcasm that is an inherent part of alternative news media’s news reporting. Particularly the alternative news media from the right spectrum used irony in their news articles. Thus, it is needed to interpret the content to get to the core of the actual media message. In terms of tonality this requires that words with originally a positive connotation are understood in a negative context.

## 6.5 Reliability & Validity

As previously mentioned, the content analysis is adapted from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). By referring to their codebook, the methodological approach is concurrent with previous frame analysis research, thus concurrent validity is ensured.

As a quantitative content analysis is always subjective to some degree and analyzed by coders who might be influenced by their cognitive bias, it is needed to ensure the objectivity of the conducted data analysis. In order to ensure reliability an intracoder reliability test was conducted. Six weeks after the collecting process had ended, five percent of the data sample was randomly collected and coded again. The sample size is 760 news items. The average outcome for intracoder reliability was Cohen’s kappa = 0.85. No variable had a lower value than 0.64 which can be interpreted as substantial agreement.

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<sup>34</sup> „Corona Diktatur“ (ger.)

<sup>35</sup> „Impfterror“ (ger.)

<sup>36</sup> „Staatsterrorismus“ (ger.)

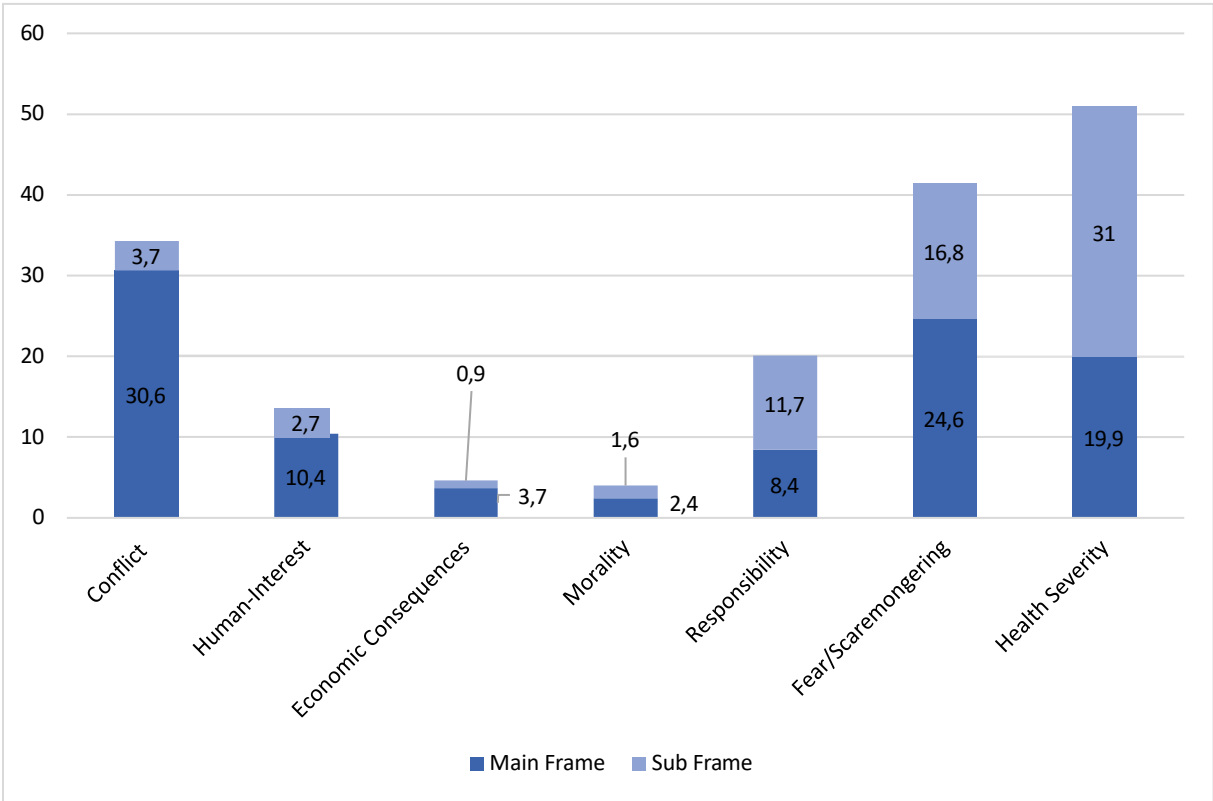
<sup>37</sup> „Coronaregime“ (ger.)

Looking at population validity, it is important to keep in mind that in total four news outlet were selected. As previously mentioned, these four news outlets represent only a small part of the German news media landscape. However, by selecting news outlets from different political perspectives, it can be argued that the sample is representative of alternative news media in Germany. With regard to mainstream news media, it can be asked how representative the sample is of the population.

# VII Results

To compare the different frames that were used among the selected news outlets, the statistical procedure will mainly rely on cross tabulation analyses as well as a Chi-Square tests. Having the overarching research question in mind on how the news media framed the COVID-19 vaccination process and campaign, the specific news outlets are defined as the independent variable (x). The specific frame that is represented in the news item is considered as the dependent variable (y). Referring to the research question on how the alternative news media did frame the vaccination process in Germany, the following figure (1) presents an overview on the most used frames with the X-axis presenting the percentage of the extent to which the frames are used and the Y-axis presenting the different types of frames.

Figure 1 – Dominant News Frames in Alternative and Mainstream News Media in Germany about the COVID-19 vaccines (percent)



Alternative News Media: *Compact, RT Deutsch, NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
 Time period: 15.03.2021-15.04.2021, 01.11.2021-30.11.2021  
 Summarized percentages: Conflict = 34.3 %; Human-Interest= 13.1 %; Economic Consequences= 4.6 %; Morality= 4 %; Responsibility 20.4 %; Fear/Scaremongering= 41.4 %; Health Severity= 50.9 %  
 N= 670; author’s own calculations

As figure 1 shows, the selected news media predominantly used the conflict frame (30.6 percent) as well as the fear/ scaremongering frame (24.6 percent) as the main frame in the news item, followed by the Health Severity frame which was used as a main frame in 19.9 percent of

the articles. Whereas the Conflict frame was more present as the main frame in the news item, the Health Severity frame seems to function as an overarching frame that occurs mostly as a sub frame (31 percent). In total, more than half of the news items contain the health severity. Considering the fact that the overall setting is the COVID-19 pandemic and its vaccination process in Germany it seems not surprising that this frame is present in 50.9 percent of all news items. Contrasting this, the bar chart indicates that the economic consequences frame as well as the morality frame did not play a big role in the news reporting about the vaccination process in Germany. This might be explained by the fact that in contrast to the health severity frame or the conflict frame, the former two are more specific in their definition.

Thus, the economic consequences frame only occurs in 4.6 percent of all news items and the morality frame is used only in 4 percent of all news items. Although the results of this bar chart show that the selected news media were dominated by the conflict frame, the fear/scaremongering frame as well by the health severity frame it gives no insights into possible differences between alternative news media and mainstream news media. The next section, therefore, moves on to analyze the two different media types.

## 7.1 Mainstream News Media vs. Alternative News Media (H1)

To get a first glance on whether mainstream news media and alternative news media framed the vaccination process in Germany in a similar way, the alternative news media are grouped together in a new variable (v57) with 1= alternative news media (*Compact*, *NachDenkSeiten*, *RT Deutsch*) and 2= mainstream news media (*Tagesschau*). In a second step, v48 is used as the dependent variable which gives information on the main frame that is present in the news item.

Taking the first hypothesis into account, that all of the alternative news media will rely on different frames for the vaccination process in Germany in order to put them self as the counterpart of mainstream news media, a cross tabulation is used with a table dimension of 7x2. The table below illustrates the frames in the rows differentiated by alternative news media and mainstream news media in the columns for the total time period of eight weeks.

Table 2 - Dominant Frames Used by Media Type (cross tabulation with row percentages)

Frame	Alternative News Media No. (%)	Mainstream News Media No. (%)	Total No. (%)
Conflict	150 (36.2)	55 (21.5)	205 (30.6)
Human-Interest	41 (9.9)	29 (11.3)	70 (10.4)
Economic Consequences	16 (3.9)	9 (3.5)	25 (3.7)
Morality	8 (1.9)	8 (3.1)	16 (2.4)
Responsibility	32 (7.7)	24 (9.4)	56 (8.4)
Fear/Scaremongering	133 (32.1)	32 (12.5)	165 (24.6)
Health Severity	34 (8.2)	99 (38.7)	133 (19.9)
<b>Total</b>	<b>414 (100)</b>	<b>245 (100)</b>	<b>670 (100)</b>

Alternative News Media: *Compact, RT Deutsch, NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
 Time period: 15.03.2021-15.04.2021, 01.11.2021-30.11.2021  
 N= 670; author's own calculations

As presented in table 2 the selected mainstream news media differ slightly in their frame usage. Whereas both put not much emphasis on the morality frame (1.9 percent and 3.1 percent), the human-interest frame (9.9 percent and 11.3 percent), responsibility frame (7.7 percent and 9.4 percent) and economic consequences frame (3.9 percent and 3.5 percent), they differ in their frame usage when it comes to the fear/scaremongering frame, conflict frame, as well as the health severity frame. The news reporting of *Tagesschau* is clearly dominated by the Health Severity frame that occurs in 38.7 percent of all news items as the main frame, followed by the conflict frame that is present in 21.5 percent of all mainstream news media articles. Contrasting this, the alternative news media mostly used the conflict frame (36.2 percent) as well as the fear/scaremongering frame with 32.1 percent.

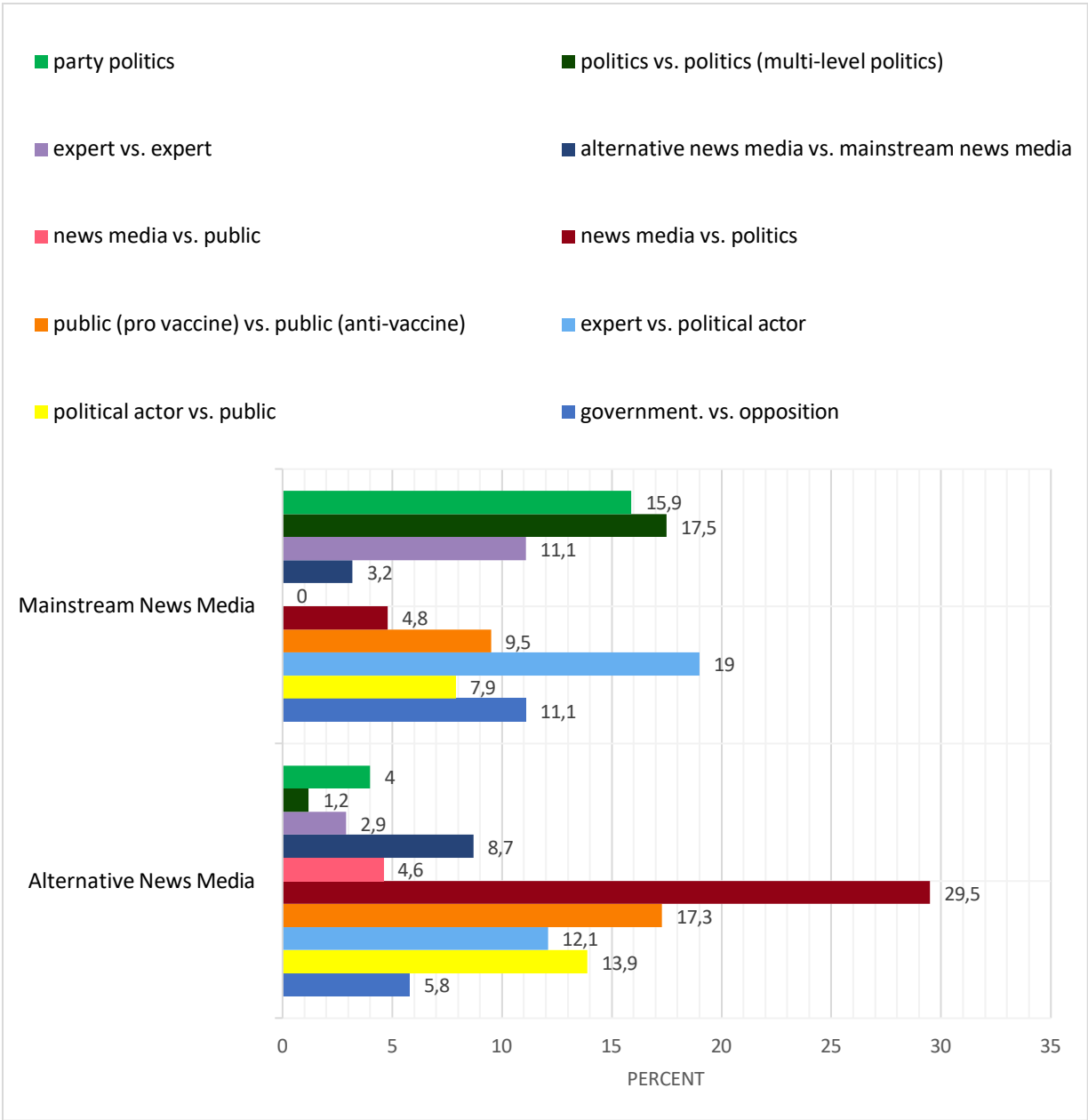
Summarizing these results, it can be stated that both media types indeed use the frames to a different extent when it comes to the coverage of the vaccination process. Yet, for both media types it seems like the conflict frame seems to dominate the coverage. Taking the frames into account that are not used to a high extent, we find similar findings for both media types. Merely the fear scaremongering frame and health severity frame create a major difference among alternative news media and mainstream news media. Therefore, hypothesis (1) that all of the alternative news media will rely on different frames for the vaccination process in Germany in order to put them self as the counterpart of mainstream news media holds not true and needs to

be rejected. Testing whether the two variables are related to each other the Chi-Square test is applied. The value for the Pearson Chi-Square is 111.73 with p-value is  $p = < 0.001$  which is smaller than the significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ . Thus,  $H_0$  that the frame usage is independent of the media type can be rejected. Checking for Cramer's V the value is  $= 0.41$ . Therefore, it can be concluded that the association between frame usage and media type is relatively strong. Which frames are used, seems to depend on the specific news outlet. Yet, these results do not offer any information on whether there are differences among the specific alternative news media and the two time periods. Therefore, the next section the news media as well as the two time periods are differentiated.

### **7.1.2 The Dominating Conflict Frame**

As stated above, the conflict frame dominated the coverage for alternative news media as well as mainstream news media. Therefore, it seems fruitful to unpack the conflict frame itself and asks what kind of conflicts are dominating the coverage. As the codebook provided 10 different types of conflicts the following figure presents an overview on the dominant conflicts.

Figure 2- Dominant Conflicts presented by News Type (percentages within Media Type)



Alternative News Media: Compact, NDS, RT Deutsch; Mainstream News Media: Tagesschau  
 Time period: 1st time period= 15.03.2021-15.04.2021; 2nd time period= 01.11.2021-30.11.2021  
 N= 670; author's own calculations

The conflicts that occur in the two time periods differ among mainstream news media and alternative news media. While *Tagesschau* predominately reported on conflicts between experts and political actors (19 percent), conflicts that occur at different political levels (17.5 percent). Given examples of this are especially conflicts between the states, districts, and the federal level, as Germany is a federal parliamentary republic in which different policy areas are overarching negotiated at different levels. The third most presented conflict was between parties with 15.9 percent. This indicates that *Tagesschau* delimited its perspective on the political actors when reporting on conflicts that occurred in relation to the vaccination process. Yet, the



different time periods need to be kept in mind and the fact that Germany had a national election in between the two time periods. This means that the item (government vs. opposition) might be unclear which parties it actually refers to. Thus, for this specific item the data should be interpreted with caution.

The alternative news media contradicts this delimited perspective on political actors by focusing more on the public when reporting on conflicts. Some might argue that the vaccination process as part of the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis and thus this result might be surprising. However, alternative news media most reported conflict itself is the disagreement between media and politics. This indicates that alternative news media understand media itself as an active actor throughout the crisis. Yet, there cannot be drawn any conclusion on what type of media they refer to since the codebook makes no differentiation between media types for that item. Interestingly, alternative news media also report relatively much about a conflict between alternative news media and mainstream news media (8.5 percent). This is in line with the theoretical understanding of alternative news media seeing themselves as the antagonist of mainstream news media.

The second most reported conflict is the one among the public between groups that support the vaccines and people who are against the vaccines with 17.3 percent. This conflict is also part of the mainstream news media's coverage yet to a lower degree. Summarizing these results, it can be concluded that mainstream news media focused solely on political actors when covering conflicts in the pandemic. This observation does not hold true for alternative news media. It seems like they emphasize more on different conflicts outside political processes and thus might contribute to new political cleavages that arose during the pandemic such as the act of dividing the public in people who are pro the vaccines or people who are against the vaccines. It can be asked whether this high use of conflict frames for various actors contributes to an adamant and simplified classification in the so-called 'friend-enemy' scheme.

## 7.2 Differences Among Alternative News Media

As mentioned earlier, previous studies tend to reduce the variety of alternative news media to one construct. In order to understand alternative news media as a conglomerate of diverse news media, this section differentiates the selected news media and asks whether there are differences in the frame usage among these. *Tagesschau* as a news media will be treated as a reference category for mainstream news media.

Taking the cross tabulation below into account differences among the three alternative news media can be observed. Whereas *Compact* predominantly relies on the fear/scaremongering frame (39.2 percent), *NDS*<sup>38</sup> presents the conflict frame to the largest extent in their COVID-19 vaccine reporting. In particular for *NDS* the results suggest that the frame use is unequally distributed. With a percentage of 48.6 (conflict frame) and 35 percent (fear/scaremongering frame) only two frames clearly dominate the news reporting of the politically left oriented alternative news media. More equally distributed is the frame usage for *RT Deutsch*. Although the Russian alternative news media's coverage is dominated by the fear/scaremongering frame (34.5 percent) and conflict frame (32 percent) as well, they use the health severity frame (15 percent) and the human-interest frame (12 percent) relatively to a high extent. Especially with regard to the health severity frame *RT Deutsch* differs from the other two alternative news media. In that sense it has most similarities with *Tagesschau* which might be explained by the fact, that both news media are more similar in their resources for news production and employ more journalists that differ in their frame use as well as by the fact that RT Deutsch might use the health severity frame in the context of Russia's vaccine.

Table 3- Dominant Frames Used Differentiated by News Media (cross tabulation with row percentages)

Frame	Alternative News Media			Mainstream News Media	
	<i>Compact</i> No. (%)	<i>NDS</i> No. (%)	<i>RT Deutsch</i> No. (%)	<i>Tagesschau</i> No. (%)	Total No. (%)
<i>Conflict</i>	18 (24.3)	68 (48.6)	64 (32)	55 (21.5)	205 (30.6)
<i>Human-interest</i>	13 (17.6)	4 (2.9)	24 (12)	29 (11.3)	70 (10.4)
<i>Economic</i>	4 (5.4)	8 (5.7)	4 (2)	9 (3.5)	25 (3.7)
<i>Consequences</i>					
<i>Morality</i>	2 (2.7)	4 (2.9)	2 (1)	8 (3.1)	16 (2.4)
<i>Responsibility</i>	7 (9.5)	18 (12.9)	7 (3.5)	24 (9.4)	56 (8.4)
<i>Fear/Scaremongering</i>	29 (39.2)	35 (25)	69 (34.5)	32 (12.5)	165 (34.6)
<i>Health Severity</i>	1 (1.4)	3 (2.1)	30 (15)	99 (38.7)	133 (19.9)
<b>Total</b>	<b>74 (100)</b>	<b>140 (100)</b>	<b>200 (100)</b>	<b>256 (100)</b>	<b>670 (100)</b>

Alternative News Media: *Compact*, *RT Deutsch*, *NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
 Time period: 15.03.2021-15.04.2021, 01.11.2021-30.11.2021  
 N= 670; author's own calculations

<sup>38</sup> *NachDenkSeiten*

A  $\chi^2$ -test for association was conducted between news outlet and frame use. It should be noted that four expected cells' frequencies (14.3 percent) were smaller than five. Thus, the values for Pearson Chi-Square (162.77) and Cramer's V (0.29) with a p-value of  $p = < 0.001$  (which is smaller than the significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ ) might be incorrect and cannot be interpreted. This problem can be explained by the unequal distributed dataset with some news media using some frames only to a low degree.

As an alternative to the asymptotic distribution the Monte Carlo method is applied which is used to estimate the exact significance level. By repeatedly sampling using different reference tables of numbers in the range of the minimum and maximum of the observed values an exact significance level can be calculated. For the table three the simulation is calculated with 100000 sampled tables in total. Chi-Square has a value of 162.77. Now 0 cells have expected frequencies less than five with a 99 percent confidence interval and a p value of  $p = < 0.001$  which is smaller than the significance level of  $\alpha = 0.01$ . This result is in line with the previous conducted  $\chi^2$ -test for association (For the following cross tabulations the Monte Carlo simulations and Chi-Square tests see comments of the tables). If the mainstream news media is taken out of the calculation, the result is still significant with a Chi-Square value of 62.44 and p-value of  $< 0.001$ . Having this result in mind it can be concluded that there is an association between news outlet and frame use.

This table was then differentiated by the two time periods. Whereas, *NDS* and *Tagesschau* frame usage did not change significantly over time, *Compact* and *RT Deutsch* show different results in relation to the conflict frame (increasing usage for both), the Human-interest frame (decreasing usage for both) and the Fear frame (decreasing usage for *Compact* and increasing usage for *RT Deutsch*)<sup>39</sup>. Yet, it needs to be noted that even though compact usage of the fear frame decreased it was still high for the second time period with 29.6 percent. This aspect will be further discussed in chapter 7.4.

### 7.3 Attribution of Responsibility (H2)

As mentioned in the previous research chapter, studies on alternative news media suggest that in contrast to mainstream news media alternative news media uses the responsibility frame to a large extent. Taking the second hypothesis into account (H (2): The alternative news media

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<sup>39</sup> See Appendix A and Appendix B for table (Main Frame Itemized by Time Period for Each News Media)

will use predominately the responsibility frame compared to mainstream news media) the table above offers contradicting results. Only *NachDenkSeiten* (12.9 percent) produced more responsibility frames compared to *Tagesschau* (9.4 percent). The difference to Compact (9.5 percent) seems not significant, RT Deutsch uses the responsibility frame even less (3.5 percent). Taking this into consideration the second hypothesis holds not true and shall be rejected.

However, taking a more nuanced glance at the responsibility frame by asking for the actors that have been accused to be responsible for the crisis by the news media the content analysis presents the following results. Whereas *Tagesschau* puts most responsibility on people who do not want the vaccine (46.3 percent), followed by the corporates that produce the vaccines (22 percent) and the German government (17.1 percent), the alternative news media blame the government in most articles that contain the responsibility frame. In particular *NachDenkSeiten* presents the German government as responsible in more than half of their news items in which the responsibility frame is included.

If both time periods are taken into consideration, it can be seen that all news media blamed the governments for being responsible for the crisis to a lower extent in the first time period. The usage of this responsibility increases for the second time period. Exception is made for *NDS*, whose usage does not change significantly over time. This finding is underlined by the previously mentioned argument by Scheufele, that journalists tend to adapt the news framing by the political leadership when the issue is relatively new on the news media agenda<sup>40</sup>. As previously indicated, it needs to be asked how this argument applies to journalists from alternative news media when it is becoming fuzzy whether the authors of those news articles can be still considered as journalists rather than activists.

The German government however is not the only actor that is blamed for the crisis. Interestingly all alternative news media blame mainstream news media itself as responsible for the crisis to some degree in their articles. Particularly this is the case for *NachDenkSeiten*, who blame mainstream news media in nearly 19 percent (18.9 percent) of their articles that contain the responsibility frame. If these results are put into comparison to the mainstream news media these results show that alternative news media focus on the German government, health care institutions, companies who produce the vaccine and mainstream news media as responsible

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<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 4.2

for the crisis. Mainstream news media focuses more on the group of people who decline the vaccine and vaccine producers. In terms of blaming other news media, *Tagesschau* puts the responsibility on alternative news media only in one news item in total. This result is in line with the theoretical understanding of alternative news media putting themselves as a counterpart of mainstream news media and accusing mainstream news media of not fulfilling their journalistic job.

Looking at the variable which asks whether the story suggests a solution to the problem, the results indicate that the mainstream news media works more solution oriented. *Tagesschau* offers a solution to the crisis in 73.7 percent of articles that produce the responsibility frame, *Compact* offers a solution only in 6.5 percent of their articles that contain the responsibility frame, *RT Deutsch* offers a solution only in 5.3 percent, *NachDenkseiten* does not offer one solution in order to solve the crisis. These results indicate that alternative news media do not rely predominantly on the responsibility frame when reporting on the COVID-19 vaccine. Although they make the German government responsible when using the frame, they do not offer much solution for how to solve the crisis. Since this frame is used by all media to some extent, the hypothesis (H2) does not hold true and needs to be rejected on the average level.

### 7.4 Fear & Scaremongering (H3)

As stated in the background chapter, alternative news media are accused to spread misinformation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the fear frame is very common during health crisis by making “*unsubstantiated claims that blow the risk out of proportions.*” (Dan & Raupp 2018: 211).

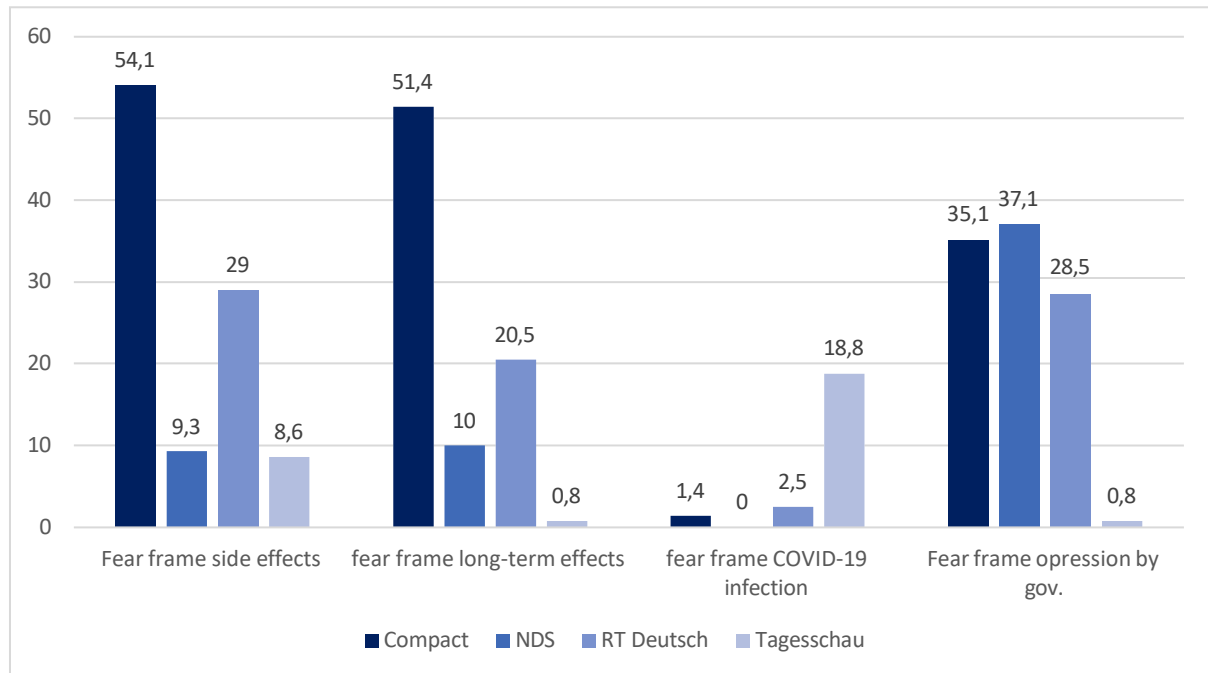
Thus, the third hypothesis was designed as followed: Alternative news media will use the fear frame by promoting misinformation on the danger of the vaccines or comparing policy restrictions to the former Nazi regime. This hypothesis was operationalized in the codebook aiming to capture different fear frames. Whereas the first two questions capture the fear frame that refers to the side effects of the vaccines as being more dangerous than the vaccine itself (a claim that is unsubstantiated), the third question refers to the second fear frame and to the so-called long-term effects of the vaccine as a real danger. The third fear frame refers to the fear of people not getting vaccinated and its implications for the vulnerable groups of society. Whereas the aspect of unsubstantiated claims might be applied for the first two and the last fear frame, it can be asked whether the third fear frame refers to these claims or is rather reporting

on real risks. However, for the analysis itself, the justification of producing fear frames is not in focus. The fourth and last fear frame refers to the threat of oppression by comparing possible COVID-19 restrictions to the former Nazi regime.

From table three it can be seen that the fear and scaremongering frame plays an important role in the news coverage of the selected news media. However, the results indicate that the fear frame was more used by the alternative news media compared to *Tagesschau* who covered only 12.5 percent of their reporting with a fear frame. The news media that used the fear frame the most is the far right-wing alternative news outlet *Compact* with a percentage of 39.2. However, for all alternative news media the usage of fear frames in general is relatively high.

To get a more nuanced view on which fear frames especially have been used by the alternative news media and mainstream news media, the following figure (3) presents an overview on the most used fear frames with the X-axis presenting the percentage of the extent to which the frames are used in relation to the overall frame use and the Y-axis presenting the different types of fear frames. At this point it should be noted that this analysis makes no difference between the usage of a fear frame as the main frame or as a sub-frame. More specifically for *Compact* this implies that the far-right news media used the fear frame of side effects in 54.1 percent of their articles as a main frame or as a sub frame.

Figure 3- Dominant Fear Frames present as Main Frames and Sub Frames in Alternative and Mainstream News Media in Germany about the COVID-19 vaccines (percent)



Alternative News Media: *Compact, RT Deutsch, NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
 Time period: 15.03.2021-15.04.2021, 01.11.2021-30.11.2021  
 N= 670; author's own calculations

#### 7.4.1 Fear of Side Effects

With respect to the fear of the COVID-vaccine being more dangerous than getting infected with SARS-CoV, it can be seen that this fear frame is especially utilized by Compact with a percentage of 54.1 which is followed by RT Deutsch with a percentage of 29. Yet, with a percentage of 8.6 the usage of this fear frame is surprisingly high for *Tagesschau*. This might be explained by the fact that this bar graph includes both time periods. As reported earlier, it can be assumed that there is a difference in the frame usage between the first when there occurred individual cases of side effects with momentary stopping of specific vaccines in the EU and the second time period when there was scientific consensus about the vaccine's efficacy. Having this in mind, it can be assumed that for the second time period the news media should contain less news items with presenting the fear frame. The following table presents the usage of the 1<sup>st</sup> fear frame differentiated by the two time periods.

Table 4- Fear Frame (side effects) Usage Differentiated by Time Period and News Media (cross tabulation with row percentages)

Frame	Time period	Alternative News Media			Mainstream News Media		Total
		Compact No. (%)	NDS No. (%)	RT Deutsch No. (%)	Tagesschau No. (%)		
Fear frame: side effects	1st	15 (75)	7 (20.6)	41 (46.1)	19 (15.2)	82 (30.6)	
	2nd	25 (46.3)	6 (5.7)	17 (15.3)	3 (2.3)	51 (12.7)	
	Total	40 (54.1)	13 (9.3)	58 (29)	22 (8.6)	133 (19.9)	

Alternative News Media: *Compact*, *RT Deutsch*, *NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
 Time period: 1st time period= 15.03.2021-15.04.2021; 2nd time period= 01.11.2021-30.11.2021  
 N= 670; author's own calculations

1<sup>st</sup> time period: Pearson Chi-Square = 44.16; p-value is  $p < 0.001 < \alpha = 0.05$ ;  
 Cramer's V = 0.41.

2<sup>nd</sup> time period: Pearson Chi-Square= 73.28; p-value of  $p < 0.001 < \alpha = 0.05$   
 Cramer's V= 0.43

As assumed above table four presents diverging results in relation to the two time periods. Whereas the relatively high usage of fear frame for the mainstream news media overall was remarkable table 4 offers a more nuanced view over time. In the first time period, when the individual cases of side effects were reported by several EU-countries, the usage of the first fear frame was high with 15.2 percent. In the second time period the use of the first fear frame decreased to a low degree of 2.3 percent. This observation also holds true for the alternative news media with a decrease for *NDS* from 20.6 percent to 5.7 percent and for *RT Deutsch* from 46.1 to 15.3 percent.

As highlighted in chapter 6.1, during the second time period in November 2021 it was already proven that the risks of getting SARS-CoV outweigh the risks of getting side effects from the vaccines. Nonetheless, the far-right wing news media *Compact* still used the first fear frame in the second time period in 46.3 percent of their articles as a main frame or sub frame and thus neglect scientific consensus and promote misinformation. Similar findings are provided regarding *RT Deutsch* who use the fear frame of side effects at least in 15.3 percent of their articles. Only *NDS* seems not to fit in that picture and uses the fear of side effects only to a low degree in the second time period. Testing whether the two variables are related to each other the Chi-Square test is applied for both time periods separately (see comment table 4). The outcome shows a significant and relatively strong association between usage of the first fear



frame and the specific news media outlet for both time periods. The results in this chapter indicate that the hypothesis 3 holds true only for Compact and RT Deutsch but does offer contradicting results for *NDS*. The next chapter, therefore, moves on to analyze whether the hypothesis 3 holds true for the other fear frames.

### 7.4.2 Fear of Long-term Effects

With regards to the second fear frame (long-term effects of vaccines) similar results over time are expected. When the individual cases during March 2021 were reported in the European Union a debate evolved about possible long-term effects of COVID-19 vaccines. Similar as for the side effects however, for the second time period scientific consensus on the not existing long-term effects were already established (see chapter 6.1). The following table 5 presents the usage of the second fear frame differentiated by the two time periods and news media.

Table 5- Fear frame (long-term effects) Usage Differentiated by Time Period and News Media (cross tabulation)

Frame	Time period	Alternative News Media			Mainstream News Media	
		Compact No. (%)	NDS No. (%)	RT Deutsch No. (%)	Tagesschau No. (%)	Total No. (%)
Fear frame: long-term effects	1st	15 (75)	7 (20.6)	25 (28.1)	1 (.8)	48 (17.9)
	2nd	23 (42.6)	7 (12.4)	16 (14.4)	1 (.8)	47 (11.7)
	Total	38 (54.1)	14 (10)	41 (28.4)	2 (.8)	95 (14.2)

Alternative News Media: *Compact, RT Deutsch, NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
 Time period: 1st time period= 15.03.2021-15.04.2021; 2nd time period= 01.11.2021-30.11.2021  
 N= 670; author's own calculations

1<sup>st</sup> time period: Pearson Chi-Square = 75.66; p-value = < 0.001 =< = significance level of alpha = 0.05

Cramer's V = 0.53. one cell (12.5 percent) has an expected count less than 5.

2<sup>nd</sup> time period: Pearson Chi-Square = 68.55; p-value = < 0.001 =< = significance level of alpha = 0.05

Cramer's V = 0.41

Monte Carlo simulation 1<sup>st</sup> time period: Chi Square= 106.66 (news media); 110.39 (2<sup>nd</sup> fear frame); p-value= < 0.001 =< = significance level alpha 0.01, 99 percent confidence interval; 0 cells with expected frequencies less than 5

Monte Carlo simulation 2<sup>nd</sup> time period: Chi Square= 32.17 (news media); 235.98 (main frame); p-value= < 0.001 =< = significance level alpha 0.01; 99 % - confidence interval; 0 cells have expected frequencies less than 5

Overall, the general distribution of the second fear frame is consistent over time. Considering the fact that the sample for the first period is smaller it can be argued that the second fear frame played a more important role from March 15<sup>th</sup> 2021 to April 15<sup>th</sup> 2021 than in November 2021 (17.9 percent to 11.7 percent). Similar to the frame of side effects, the usage did decrease over

time. Yet again, the far-right wing news media *Compact* presented the fear of long-term effects when getting vaccinated with the COVID-19 vaccines 42.6 percent of their articles as a main frame or sub-frame. This corresponds to a usage that is more than twice as much as the usage by *NachDenkSeiten* (12.4 percent) and *RT Deutsch* (14.4 percent). Again, the different alternative news media display large variance in their framing. Testing whether the use of the second fear frame (long term effects is related to the specific news media outlet, a Chi-Square test as well as a Monte Carlo simulation is conducted for the first time period (see comment table 5).

### **7.4.3 Fear of COVID-19 Consequences**

As previously stated, the third fear frame refers to the possible health conditions for vulnerable subgroups or people who are infected with COVID-19 as a consequence if the public will not get vaccinated. This fear frame thus brings up fear of the COVID-19 disease itself which works similar as the previous fear frames in terms of operationalization. Yet, it can be argued that the fear of COVID-19 has its foundation more in scientific consensus and might be more justified than the other fear frames. It is assumed that alternative news media will rely on fear frames in order to spread misinformation that contradicts scientific consensus. It can be assumed that alternative news media will not use this specific fear frame as much as the previous two. Table 6 contains the usage of the third fear frame differentiated by the two time periods and news media.

Table 6- Fear Frame (COVID-19 effects/low vaccination rate) Usage Differentiated by Time Period & News Media (cross tabulation with row percentages)

Frame	Time period	Alternative News Media			Mainstream News Media	
		Compact No. (%)	NDS No. (%)	RT Deutsch No. (%)	Tagesschau No. (%)	Total No. (%)
Fear frame: COVID-19	1st	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1.1)	26 (20.8)	27 (10.1)
	2nd	1 (1.9)	0 (0)	4 (3.6)	22 (16.8)	27 (6.7)
	Total	1 (1.4)	0 (0)	5 (2.5)	48 (18.8)	54 (8.1)

Alternative News Media: *Compact, RT Deutsch, NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
 Time period: 1st time period= 15.03.2021-15.04.2021; 2nd time period= 01.11.2021-30.11.2021  
 N= 670; author's own calculations

1<sup>st</sup> time period: Pearson Chi-Square = 29.79; p-value is  $p < 0.001$  =<significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ ; Cramer's V = 0.33; two cells (25 percent) have expected frequencies less than 5

2<sup>nd</sup> time period: Pearson Chi-Square = 34.99 ;p-value of  $p < 0.001$ ; Cramer's V = 0.29 One cell (12.5 percent) has expected count less than 5.

Monte Carlo simulation 1<sup>st</sup> time period: Chi Square= 106.66 (news media); 170. 88 (3<sup>rd</sup> fear frame); p-value= < 0.001 =< significance level  $\alpha$  0.01, 99 percent confidence interval; 0 cells with expected frequencies less than 5  
 Monte Carlo simulation

2<sup>nd</sup> time period: Chi Square= 32.17 (news media); 301.25 (3<sup>rd</sup> fear frame); p-value= < 0.001 =< significance level  $\alpha$  0.01; 99 %- confidence interval; 0 cells have expected frequencies less than 5

Contrasting the assumption that the second time period might contain more fear frames (third fear frame), there is no overall significance difference over time. Regarding this fear frame all alternative news media display similarity of no or very low usage (*RT Deutsch*). This is in contrast to the mainstream news media frame usage. *Tagesschau* presents the fear frame of COVID-19 in relation to a low vaccination rate in 20.8 percent (first time period) and 16.8 percent (second time period) of their articles.

#### 7.4.4 Fear of Threat of Oppression

The fourth and last fear frame refers to the fear of implemented restrictions that are related to the vaccination process (for examples see chapter 6.3.1.6) and comparing these with the former Nazi-regime. In contrast to previous fear frames this frame is not related to health security but captures the fear of oppression which is an inherent part of debates in the COVID-19 pandemic. As described in the sample section, November 2021 was marked by the low vaccination rate and its implications for the future which included a political debate on whether the German government should implement a mandatory vaccine mandate. Thus, it is crucial to investigate

whether this dominant debate is reflected in an increase of this fear frame over time. The following table 7 presents the usage of the fourth fear frame differentiated by the two time periods and news media.

Table 7-Fear frame (implementation of restrictions) Usage Differentiated by Time Period & News Media (cross tabulation with row percentages)

Frame	Time period	Alternative News Media			Mainstream News Media	
		Compact No. (%)	NDS No. (%)	RT Deutsch No. (%)	Tagesschau No. (%)	Total No. (%)
Fear frame: COVID-19	1st	8 (40)	8 (23.5)	7 (7.9)	1 (.8)	24 (9)
	2nd	18 (33.3)	44 (41.5)	50 (45)	1 (0.8)	113 (28.1)
	Total	26 (35.1)	52 (37.1)	57 (28.5)	2 (0.8)	137 (20.4)

Alternative News Media: *Compact*, *RT Deutsch*, *NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
 Time period: 1st time period= 15.03.2021-15.04.2021; 2nd time period= 01.11.2021-30.11.2021  
 N= 670; author's own calculations

1<sup>st</sup> time period: Pearson Chi-Square = 42.83; p-value is  $p < 0.001$  <=significance level of alpha = 0.05;

Cramer's V = 0.40; two cells (25 percent) have expected frequencies less than 5

2<sup>nd</sup> time period: Pearson Chi-Square = 74.38; p-value of  $p < 0.001$ ; Cramer's V = 0.43 all cells have expected frequencies with more than 5.

Monte Carlo simulation 1<sup>st</sup> time period: Chi Square= 106.66 (news media); 180.6 (4<sup>th</sup> fear frame); p-value= < 0.001

<= significance level alpha 0.01, 99 percent confidence interval; 0 cells with expected frequencies less than 5

Based on 100.000 sampled tables

As expected, the results show a strong increase of frame usage over time. While the fear of oppression was presented in only 24 news items in total during the first time period, the second time period contained 113 news items in total. Taking the specific news media into consideration particularly *RT Deutsch* registered a strong increase from 7.9 percent to 45 percent. It can be asked if comparing Germany's political system with a dictatorship or alluding to the former Nazi-regime is related to a general criticism towards Germany by *RT Deutsch* which might have increased in the months before the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 which resulted in a breakdown of relations between Russia and Germany.

It should be noted that *RT Deutsch* is not the only alternative news media that increased the frame of oppression. The left-wing alternative news media *NachDenkSeiten* emphasizes this frame in during November 2021 in 41.5 of their articles. Even though this observation does not hold true for the far-right wing news outlet *Compact*, it can be stated that it still amplifies the frame to a high degree throughout both time periods with a usage of 40 percent for the first time

period from Mid-March to Mid-April 2021 and 33 percent for the second time period in November 2021. Thus, it can be concluded that the fear frame of oppression and dictatorship is a frame that is strongly represented among the different alternative news media. This is in line with the theoretical conception of alternative news media as provider for a counter public that identify being critical of the system as a central characteristic of themselves.

Summarizing the results for the different fear frames, it can be said, that the three alternative news media offer different findings when it comes of the usage as a main frame or sub frame. Whereas *Compact* and *RT Deutsch* seem to utilize the fear of vaccine side effects, *NDS* relies more on the myth of long-term effects when getting vaccinated. Thus, with respect to these two fears frames the alternative news media offer mixed results. Considering the fear of oppression all alternative news media seem to use this frame to a high extent (see table 7). Together, these results indicate that the hypothesis holds true and can be accepted.

#### **7.4.5 A Closer Look into *RT Deutsch***

Although, there might not be any specific hypothesis dedicated solely to *RT Deutsch*, the framing analysis offered interesting findings for the Russian alternative news media. Additionally, throughout the coding procedure with its ban by the EU *RT Deutsch* got more prominent in the public discourse and thus deserves a digression in this thesis.

Taking a closer look at *RT Deutsch* it becomes striking to analyze how the alternative news media embraces its role as an alternative news media outlet while being compliant with narratives that are given out by the Russian state.

Selecting the second time period in November 2021 the Russian alternative news media provides interesting but not surprising findings. With regards to the fourth fear frame of oppression it is important to state that most of this fear frame is used in a German or European context (64 percent for German context, 14 percent for EU context). News items that amplified the fear of oppression in a Russian context were only produced in 4 percent of all articles that used that specific frame. Similar results can be found when the first two fear frames are taken into account for both time periods. When reporting on the vaccine's side effects, a German or European context is used in 88 percent. For long-term effects of the vaccine the German or European context is used in 78 percent of all news articles that used the second fear frame. However, this is a general observation for *RT Deutsch*. Overall, 50 percent of all news items

are placed in a German context, 23 percent of all news items are placed in a European context, only 5.5 percent of all news item have a Russian context. Considering the fact that only German news items were analyzed these findings might not be surprising, although the use of a German context is slightly higher when using these fear frames (exception third fear frame).

This is in line if the specific vaccines are taken into consideration. In the codebook vaccines that occur in the news items are differentiated in Russian vaccines (e.g., *Sputnik V* and *EpiVacCorona*) and vaccines that were approved in the European Union (*BionTech/Pfizer*, *Moderna*, *Johnson & Johnson*). In relation to the usage of fear frames it can be said that *RT Deutsch* uses the fear of side effects and long-term effects only in relation to vaccines outside Russia (see table 8).

Table 8- RT Deutsch Usage of 2nd Fear Frame (side effects) in Relation to Vaccines

Frame	vaccines				Total No. (%)
	No specific vaccines mentioned	<i>Sputnik V</i>	EU approved vaccines	other	
<i>Fear frame: side effect</i>	8 (7.4)	0 (0)	49 (73.1)	0 (0)	57 (28.6)
<i>No fear frame</i>	100 (92.6)	24 (100)	18 (26.9)	100 (70)	142 (71.4)
<i>Total</i>	108 (100)	24 (100)	67 (100)	0 (0)	199

Alternative News Media: *RT Deutsch*  
 Time period: 1st time period= 15.03.2021-15.04.2021; 2nd time period= 01.11.2021-30.11.2021  
 N= 670; author’s own calculations

Pearson Chi-Square = 98.35; p-value is  $p < 0.001 < =$ significance level of alpha = 0.05;  
 Cramer’s V = 0.73; 0 have expected frequencies less than 5

Summarizing the results for 7.4 the following can be stated: although they might display similar percentages in their general use of a fear frame, the results of chapter 7.4 provide insights in their large difference when it comes to the specific fear frames. This underlines the understanding of alternative news media as a vast conglomerate that needs a profound analysis among the specific news outlets. This finding applies in particular to the fear frame of side effects and the fear frame so called long-term effects. Having the claim by Klawier et al. (2022) in mind that *RT Deutschland* works in conformity to mainstream news media and uses a more descriptive style of reporting, the results that are represented above contradict that claim to some degree. Although, there are frames in which the usage between *RT Deutschland* and

*Tagesschau* might be similar, *RT Deutschland*'s usage of fear frames in relation to EU approved vaccines indicates that *RT* utilize similar mechanisms and narratives as *Compact* and *NachDenkseiten* when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing solely on *RT Deutsch* some findings might be a bit surprising. It would be interesting to compare news articles *RT Deutsch* publishes in different languages with the existing dataset to see whether these observations hold true in different contexts or whether *RT Deutsch* uses completely different frames and is more in line with political leadership in a Russian context.

## 7.5 Mainstream News Media & the Human-interest Frame (H4)

Chapter 7.5 looks into the human-interest frame and how it has been used among the different news media. As shown in table 2 mainstream news media did not use this frame the most. In only 11.3 percent of all news items *Tagesschau* applied the human-interest frame which is less than for *Compact* (12 percent) and *RT Deutsch* (17.1 percent). However, this might be explained by the fact that *Tagesschau* focuses more on daily news and thus comprehensive and expensive background stories that shed light to individual stories become less feasible. Although, this frame was less important throughout the two time periods, it seems useful to see which actors have been in focus when the frame was applied. Therefore, the cross tabulation below presents the impact (*positive, negative, or ambivalent*) that is emphasized in the frame.

Table 9 - Impact of Human-Interest Frame Differentiated by News Media (cross tabulation with row percentages)

<i>Impact Human-Interest frame</i>	Alternative News Media			Mainstream News Media	
	<i>Compact</i> No. (%)	<i>NDS</i> No. (%)	<i>RT Deutsch</i> No. (%)	<i>Tagesschau</i> No. (%)	<i>Total</i> No. (%)
<i>Positive</i>	1 (5.6)	0 (0)	9 (28.1)	21 (61.8)	31 (34.4)
<i>Negative</i>	17 (94.4)	6 (100)	23 (71.9)	11 (32.4)	57 (63.3.)
<i>Ambivalent</i>	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (5.9)	2 (2.2)
<i>Total</i>	18 (100)	6 (100)	32 (100)	34 (100)	90 (100)

Alternative News Media: *Compact*, *RT Deutsch*, *NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
*N*= 670; author's own calculations

Pearson Chi-Square = 27; p-value is  $p < 0.001$  =>significance level of alpha = 0.05;

Cramer's V = 0.39; 6 cells (50 percent) have expected frequencies less than 5

Monte Carlo simulation Chi Square= 109.77 (news media); 1363.52 (impact Human-Interest frame); p-value= < 0.001

<= significance level alpha 0.01; 99 percent confidence interval; 0 cells with expected frequencies less than 5

Based on 100.000 sampled tables

As can be seen from table 9, the impact which is emphasized when news media use the human-interest frame is unequally distributed among *Compact*, *NDS*, *RT Deutsch* and *Tagesschau*. Whereas *Compact* solely focuses on the negative impact of the vaccine process when producing news items with that frame, *RT Deutsch* and *Tagesschau* present a more balanced frame usage: However, in contrast to *Tagesschau* which refer predominantly to the positive impact in a human-interest frame (61.8 percent), *RT Deutsch* emphasizes the negative impact of the vaccine process to a high degree (71.9 percent). However, the differentiation between three aspects don't give much detail about how and especially who is presented in the human-interest frame. Therefore, the next section presents the actors that are in focus in the human-interest frame.

As reported earlier *NDS* did use the human-interest frame only to a low degree, thus it makes sense to focus on the news outlets that actually presented the frame to some extent. Furthermore, it can be noticed that some actor categories did not occur at all in the dataset (*political actor from the opposition*) or only to a very low degree (*someone with a vaccine breakthrough*). This might be explained by the broad range of categories as well as by the fact that the issue of vaccine breakthroughs occurred mostly a bit after the second time period. Thus, the next table focuses on the dominant actors that were presented.



Table 10- Dominant Actors Presented in the Human-Interest Frame Differentiated by News Media (cross tabulation with row percentages)

Actors	Alternative News Media			Mainstream News Media	
	<i>Compact</i> No. (%)	<i>NDS</i> No. (%)	<i>RT Deutsch</i> No. (%)	<i>Tagesschau</i> No. (%)	<i>Total</i> No. (%)
<i>Someone with side-effects</i>	4 (22.2)	0 (0)	2 (6.5)	1 (3.2)	7 (8.2)
<i>Someone who is pro-vaccine</i>	1 (5.6)	0 (0)	9 (29)	18 (58.1)	28 (32.9)
<i>Someone who is anti-vaccine</i>	9 (50)	2 (40)	13 (41.9)	2 (6.5)	26 (30.6)
<i>Political actor (government)</i>	3 (16.7)	1 (20)	3 (9.7)	5 (16.1)	12 (14.1)
<i>Institutional authority</i>	1 (5.6)	2 (40)	4 (12.9)	5 (16.1)	12 (14.1)
<i>Total</i>	18 (100)	5 (100)	31 (100)	31 (100)	85 (100)

Alternative News Media: *Compact*, *RT Deutsch*, *NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
*N= 670; author's own calculations*

Pearson Chi-Square = 31.31; p-value is  $p < 0.001$  => significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ ;

Cramer's V = 0.35; 14 cells (70 percent) have expected frequencies less than 5

Monte Carlo simulation Chi Square= 109.77 (news media); 3354 (main actor Human-Interest frame); p-value=  $< 0.001$

$\leq$  significance level  $\alpha 0.01$ ; 99 percent confidence interval; 0 cells with expected frequencies less than 5

Based on 100.000 sampled tables

Table 10 underlines the overall low usage of the human-interest frame which is also reflected in the low numbers of main actors that are part of the frame. Thus, these results must be interpreted with caution.

Although the frame does not play a big role overall the table indicates some interesting findings, that are in line with previous research on mainstream news media. Whereas the alternative news media, *Compact* and *RT Deutsch* mostly present people who are against the vaccination when using the human-interest frame (50 percent and 41.9 percent), *Tagesschau* predominantly reported on people who are pro the vaccines. In addition to that in 32.2 percent of all news item that contain the human-interest frame they put a political actor from the government or an institutional authority in focus. One could argue that this finding aligns with research claiming, that during crises mainstream news media tend to have close ties with the government and adapt their framing. However, it is not clear whether the news item itself agrees or disagrees with the

presented main actor when using a human-interest frame. The fact that *Tagesschau* did not focus on the human-interest frame in general is an unexpected result. Thus hypothesis 4 (In contrast to alternative news media, *Tagesschau* will focus on the human-interest frame with actors that are pro the vaccine) does only hold true to the fact that mainstream news media focuses on people who are pro the vaccine and cannot be fully accepted. Although the overall usage of the human-interest frame in general is low, it can be concluded that alternative news media focused on actors that are against the vaccine whereas the mainstream news media clearly based their reporting on people who are pro the vaccine. Yet, taking the overall low usage into consideration it cannot be drawn any conclusions on the questions how the actors were presented by specific news media.

## 7.6 Alternative News Media's Reliance on Mainstream News Media

The fifth hypothesis picked up on the finding in research in alternative news media that they rely on mainstream news media in using them as a source, whereas mainstream news media will refer to other mainstream news media or official governmental or healthcare institutions as sources.

Therefore, the codebook contains three variables (v51, v52, v53) which ask for the source the news item is referring to. Defining a multiple response set the three categorical variables are grouped into a multiple category set which is used for the following crosstabulation. Analyzing the following table 12 it is important to note that the news outlets could use up until three different sources.

Table 11- Source Usage Differentiated by News Media (cross tabulation with row percentages)

Sources	Alternative News Media			Mainstream News Media	Total No.
	Compact No. (%)	NDS No. (%)	RT Deutsch No. (%)	Tagesschau No. (%)	
Mainstream News Media	44 (59.5)	63 (45)	125 (62.5)	155 (60.5)	387
Alternative News Media	18 (24.3)	77 (55)	28 (14)	4 (1.6)	127
Official governmental Source	9 (12.2)	2 (1.4)	29 (14.5)	74 (28.9)	114
Official Health Care Institution	4 (5.4)	0 (0)	19 (9.5)	57 (26.2)	90
No Clarification Which Sources Have Been Used	9 (12.2)	9 (6.4)	10 (5)	4 (1.6)	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>74 (100)</b>	<b>140 (100)</b>	<b>200 (100)</b>	<b>256 (100)</b>	<b>670 (100)</b>

Alternative News Media: *Compact*, *RT Deutsch*, *NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
*N= 670; author's own calculations*

Pearson Chi-Square = 31.31; p-value is  $p < 0.001 < =$ significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ ;

Cramer's V = 0.34;

As can be seen from the table 12, the most used source was other mainstream news media. This holds true for *Tagesschau* (60.5 percent) as well as for the three alternative news media. Not surprisingly, in addition to other mainstream news media, *Tagesschau* referred in 30.6 percent of their articles to official governmental sources as well as in 26.2 to official health care institutions. Only in 1.6 percent of their articles it was not made clear which sources they used. Speaking for *Tagesschau* the results suggest a very transparent news reporting.

Taking a closer look into alternative news media it can be seen that they face higher numbers of news item in which they made not clear which sources they have used. Furthermore, they referred way less to official sources from the government or official health care institutions. This is especially the case for the politically left-wing news outlet *NachDenkSeiten* which used official sources in only 1.4 percent of their articles. A slightly different picture evolves when *RT Deutsch* is taken into consideration. Here the results indicate more similarities to mainstream news media than to other alternative news media. In 19 percent of news items, they refer to official government sources or health care institutions such as the RKI and Stiko. These

results raise the question whether the usage of sources is also connected to the resources news outlets have at disposal. It can be assumed that it may be easier for *Tagesschau* as well as *RT Deutsch* to attend press conferences. When split up by the two time periods the data sample shows no significant differences. Summarizing the results for source usage it can be concluded that hypothesis five holds true. Although alternative news media differentiate themselves from mainstream news media and tend to put them in an antagonistic role, they do rely on mainstream news media when it comes to sources.

However, the data is limited to the fact that it did not ask for specific sources, therefore the analysis offers only an overview on different types of media sources. It can be argued that a deeper analysis of the sources that have been used would give more insights into the way alternative news media adapts stories and frames from mainstream news media and give a hint if it works the other way around as well.

## 7.7 Overarching Health Severity Frame

The last frame that plays an important role in the news coverage of the vaccine process is the health severity frame. Although the vaccination process and the COVID-19 pandemic in general affects various policy fields, it is a health crisis above all. Thus, it can be assumed that a health severity frame in which the risks for or against the vaccine or getting infected with the Sars-Cov virus are considered.

The codebook defines three different types of risks assessments. The first health severity frame focuses on the risks of COVID-19, the second health severity frame focuses on the vaccination risks and the third health severity frame is a neutral risk assessment in which both risks are displayed and taken into consideration. As described earlier overall the health severity frame has been used especially by *Tagesschau* (mainstream news media) with 38.7 percent and *RT Deutsch* with 15 percent. *Compact* and *NachDenkSeiten* used that frame only to a low degree.

A striking result that is apparent from the table is the overall use of neutral risk assignment. Although the mainstream news media used that frame to some degree (14.9 percent) it is surprisingly low. In 84 percent of their articles that contained a health severity frame, *Tagesschau* used focused solely on COVID-19 risks instead of a balanced weighting of all risks.

Yet, one could argue that at least in the second time period the risks of getting infected with COVID-19 was higher and more dangerous than getting side effects from the vaccines.

Table 12- Usage of Health Severity Frames Differentiated by News Media (cross tabulation with row percentages)

Sources	Alternative News Media			Mainstream News Media	
	Compact No. (%)	NDS No. (%)	RT Deutsch No. (%)	Tagesschau No. (%)	Total No.
<i>Risk assessment with focus on COVID-19 risks</i>	0 (0)	4 (25)	43 (38.4)	158 (84)	205 (55)
<i>Risk assessment with focus on vaccination risks</i>	56 (98.2)	11 (68.8)	66 (58.9)	2 (1.1)	135 (36.2)
<i>Neutral risk assessment</i>	1 (1.8)	1 (6.3)	3 (2.7)	28 (14.9)	33 (8.8)
<b>Total</b>	<b>57 (100)</b>	<b>16 (100)</b>	<b>112 (100)</b>	<b>188 (100)</b>	<b>373 (100)</b>

Alternative News Media: *Compact, RT Deutsch, NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
*N= 670; author's own calculations*

Pearson Chi-Square = 229.84; p-value is  $p < 0.001 < \text{significance level of } \alpha = 0.05$ ;

Cramer's V = 0.55; 1 cell (8.3 percent) have expected frequencies less than 5

Monte Carlo simulation Chi Square= 109.77 (news media); 120.34 (health severity frame); p-value=  $< 0.001 < \text{significance level } \alpha 0.01$ ; 99 percent confidence interval; 0 cells with expected frequencies less than 5

Based on 100.000 sampled tables

Therefore, it can be assumed that the usage of a neutral risk assessment was higher during the first time period when the risks of vaccine side-effects were still discussed in public sphere. Differentiating the findings by time period it shows that *Tagesschau* used the third health severity frame during Mid-March and Mid-April 2021 in 23 news items (25 percent). This usage decreased over time with a usage of only 5.2 percent for November 2021. Overall, it can be summarized for mainstream news media that *Tagesschau* relied more on the first health severity frame with a focus on the risks of getting infected with COVID-19 which is in line with scientific consensus that was already established by then. These results are also similar to the usage of fear frames in which *Tagesschau* tended to emphasize the fear of consequences for people when people will not get vaccinated.

*Compact* and *NDS* however appeared to be unaffected by the scientific knowledge relating to the risks assessment of side-effects or getting infected with COVID-19 that was established in April 2021. Both alternative news media relied on a risk assessment that focused solely on the risk of vaccine risks in 98.2 percent and 68.8 percent of all news articles that contained a health severity frame. This observation does not change significantly over time. A slightly different picture is provided by *RT Deutsch* which didn't use neutral risks assessment to a high degree but rather presented first two health severity frames to a more or less similar degree with a slight emphasis (58.9 percent) on the vaccine risks. However, here it needs to be noted that *RT* used a health severity with focus on vaccine risks mostly in relation to vaccines that were approved by the EU by that time (*BionTech/Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson*). The health severity frame with a focus on the risks of getting infected with COVID-19 was presented only in relation to Russian vaccines such as *Sputnik V*. Although it might seem like *RT Deutsch* had a more balanced reporting on the risks assessment, it changes when the specific vaccines are included in the analysis. Summarizing the results about the health severity frame it can be concluded that all three alternative news media have their anti-scientific framing in common and thus again, place themselves somewhat in opposition to mainstream news media. Yet, the inclusion of the vaccines also discloses how the Russian alternative news media changes its own narrative when it plays into Russian interests.

## VIII Discussion

This thesis set out to get a better understanding on how alternative news media framed the COVID-19 vaccination process.

In the introduction the question was raised on how alternative news media is embedded in the media landscape. This thesis provides four main takeaways that might help to understand how ‘alternative’ alternative news media really are and to what extent their narrative of the counterpart of mainstream news media holds true.

First and foremost, the framing analysis shows that they indeed use similar frames like mainstream news media which partly contradicts the first hypothesis (*Contrasting ‘Tagesschau’, all alternative news media will rely on different frames for the vaccination process in Germany in order to put them self as the counterpart of mainstream news media*) Although, all three alternative news media put themselves as a counterpart of the mainstream the analysis suggests that Semetko and Valkenberg’s common news media frames are not only reserved for mainstream news media. They show similar usages regarding the conflict frame, responsibility frame, morality frame and the economic consequences frame<sup>41</sup>. Especially the first frame is commonly used among all four-news media. Yet, whereas mainstream news media mostly delimits its perspective to political conflict, alternative news media tend to include news media itself repeatedly as a participating actor of the conflict<sup>42</sup>. Additionally, regarding sources, it can be argued that they seem to make use of mainstream news media mechanisms and cannot be limited to being the antagonist of mainstream news media.

The second main finding partly contradicts previous research and the notion of alternative news media being the affected advocates by holding political leadership accountable throughout the crisis. In the context of the German vaccination process, alternative news media did not emphasize the responsibility frame to a high extent. Their overall low usage of the responsibility frame contributes to the question whether alternative news media live up to their own expectations of holding political leadership accountable. Yet, this does not at all mean that they do not openly counter the hegemonial system or are congruent to mainstream news media.

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<sup>41</sup> See table 2

<sup>42</sup> See chapter 7.1.2

When using the responsibility frame, findings suggested here that all alternative news media blamed the German government the most for being the one responsible for the crisis.

In this sense, the third take away of this thesis is the amplification of fear by alternative news media. All three alternative news media used the fear frame to a significant high extent, although with different connotations. Whereas the far-right wing news media *Compact* emphasizes all three types of fear frame, the left-wing news media NDS focuses more on the fear of oppression. Another picture is offered when RT's usage of fear frame is taken into account. The Russian alternative news media focuses mostly on the side effects as well as on long-term effects in relation to mRNA vaccines that were approved in the EU at that point. This utilization of fear frame and misinformation is in line with previous research on alternative news media that observe a connection between disinformation ecosystems and alternative news media. Although this was not in main focus of the thesis it can be argued that this high usage of fear frames can have implications for news consumers of alternative news media. Being exposed to disinformation, misinformation and in this context anti-democratic content bears the risks not only in relation to the question on whether someone should get vaccinated but also on their trust in the democratic society. This underlines the challenge on how to deal with alternative news media as they "*were and still are legitimate voices...*" (Schwarzenegger 2022: 2) of the public sphere. If the debate on alternative news media is to be moved forward, a better understanding of the distribution of misinformation and the amplification of fear frames by alt-media needs to be further developed. This might be underlined by the assumption that the COVID-19 crisis might not be the last crisis societies face.

The nuanced fear frame usage results also lead to the last and fourth main finding which is the understanding of alternative news media as a diverse conglomerate. Coming back to the overarching question on how truly alternative news media are, overall, it can be concluded that this study strengthens the idea that there are differences among different alternative news media when it comes to framing with some being closer to mainstream news media (*RT Deutschland*) and others being an actual counterpart to mainstream news media. Having the quote of Boberg et al. in mind who characterized alternative news media as a "*photo negative of what and how large the mainstream media reports on; the outlines are the same, but they are mirrored with reversed colors*" (Boberg et al. 2020a: 17), this thesis contradicts their findings insofar as it highlights the variety of alternative news media framing. Whereas this observation holds true to some aspects such as the usage of the specific health severity frames, other examples such



as their high usage of different fear frames underlines the understanding of alternative news media as their own diverse conglomerate that might adapt dominant news frames from mainstream news media to some extent but with a broad range of different connotations and meanings. In that sense, alternative news media might, despite their political diverging perspectives offer generic news stories to some degree. Yet, they cannot be reduced to the assertion as being a homogenous counterpart of mainstream news media. Their different frame use indicates that their political orientation is indeed an important factor to some degree. Hence, future research should include alternative news media not only from the far-right spectrum but also focus on outlets that are ruled by other states or have a different political orientation. This way, a more nuanced picture on the entire alternative news media landscape can be provided.

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## X Appendix

Appendix 1: Main Frame itemized by time period for each news media (1<sup>st</sup> time period)

<i>Frame</i>	Alternative News Media			Mainstream News Media	<i>Total</i> <i>No. (%)</i>
	<i>Compact</i> <i>No. (%)</i>	<i>NDS</i> <i>No. (%)</i>	<i>RT Deutsch</i> <i>No. (%)</i>	<i>Tagesschau</i> <i>No. (%)</i>	
<i>Conflict</i>	2 (10)	18 (52.9)	13 (14.6)	22 (17.6)	55 (20.5)
<i>Human-interest</i>	1 (5)	1 (2.9)	16 (18)	17 (13.6)	35 (13.1)
<i>Economic</i>	1 (5)	2 (5.9)	1 (1.1)	5 (4)	9 (3.4)
<i>Consequences</i>					
<i>Morality</i>	1 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0.8)	2 (0.7)
<i>Responsibility</i>	1 (5)	4 (11.8)	4 (4.5)	8 (6.4)	17 (6.4)
<i>Fear/Scaremongering</i>	13 (65)	9 (26.5)	39 (43.8)	30 (24)	91 (34)
<i>Health Severity</i>	1 (5)	0 (0)	16 (18)	42 (33.6)	59 (22)
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>20 (100)</b>	<b>34 (100)</b>	<b>89 (100)</b>	<b>125 (100)</b>	<b>268 (100)</b>

Alternative News Media: *Compact*, *RT Deutsch*, *NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
*N= 670; author's own calculations*

Pearson Chi-Square = 66.86; p-value is  $p = < 0.001$  => significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ ;

Cramer's V = 0.55; 14 cells (50 percent) have expected frequencies less than 5

Monte Carlo simulation p-value=  $< 0.001$  => significance level  $\alpha 0.01$ ; 99 percent confidence interval; Cramer's  
V= 0.29

Based on 100.000 sampled tables

Appendix 2: Main Frame itemized by time period for each news media (2<sup>nd</sup> time period)

<i>Frame</i>	Alternative News Media			Mainstream News Media	
	<i>Compact</i> No. (%)	<i>NDS</i> No. (%)	<i>RT Deutsch</i> No. (%)	<i>Tagesschau</i> No. (%)	<i>Total</i> No. (%)
<i>Conflict</i>	16 (29.6)	50 (47.2)	51 (45.9)	33 (25.2)	150 (37.3)
<i>Human-interest</i>	12 (22.2)	3 (2.8)	8 (7.2)	12 (9.2)	35 (8.7)
<i>Economic</i>	3 (5.6)	6 (5.7)	3 (2.7)	4 (3.1)	16 (4)
<i>Consequences</i>					
<i>Morality</i>	1 (1.9)	4 (3.8)	2 (1.8)	7 (5.3)	14 (3.5)
<i>Responsibility</i>	6 (11.1)	14 (13.2)	3 (2.7)	16 (12.2)	39 (9.7)
<i>Fear/Scaremongering</i>	16 (29.6)	26 (24.5)	30 (27)	2 (1.5)	74 (18.4)
<i>Health Severity</i>	0 (0)	3 (2.8)	14 (12.6)	57 (43.5)	74 (18.7)
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>54 (100)</b>	<b>106 (100)</b>	<b>111 (100)</b>	<b>131 (100)</b>	<b>402 (100)</b>

Alternative News Media: *Compact*, *RT Deutsch*, *NachDenkSeiten*; Mainstream News Media: *Tagesschau*  
*N*= 670; author's own calculations

Pearson Chi-Square = 140.6; p-value is  $p < 0.001$  => significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ ;

Cramer's V = 0.59; 8 cells ( 27 percent) have expected frequencies less than 5

Monte Carlo simulation p-value=  $< 0.001$  => significance level  $\alpha 0.01$ ; 99 percent confidence interval;

Based on 100.000 sampled tables

## Appendix 3: Codebook

### A Study Outline

#### I Purpose of the study

The purpose of this content analysis is to investigate the framing of the different COVID-19 vaccines among various alternative news media in Germany in 2020 and 2021. Relying on previous studies that have been done in different fields of research (crisis communication, framing research & health care research) the analysis will use 7 predefined frames with additional subcategories. Additionally, the tone as well as the use of source will be investigated. The study contains news items from mainstream news media: *Tagesschau* ([tagesschau.de](https://www.tagesschau.de)), left-wing alternative news media: *NachDenkseiten* (<https://www.nachdenkseiten.de>), right-wing alternative news media: *Compact* (<https://www.compact-online.de>) and Russian alternative news Media: *RT Deutsch* (<https://de.rt.com>).

#### II Sampling Units

As described in the method section, this study investigates four different online news sites from that are all part of German alternative news media landscape. Covering a broad range of alternative news media, these online news sites represent different political orientation. Furthermore, for a comparison to the general news media landscape in Germany an additional mainstream news media, in this case public broadcasting news media, will be added (*Tagesschau*).

#### III Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis are news items that appear on the predefined four different news sites within the predefined sampling period.

#### IV Definition of relevant news item

In relation to Strömbäck et al. (2012) a news item is defined as an article on a website that consists of a text. In the previously mentioned online news sites (*NachDenkseiten*, *Tagesschau*, *RTDeutsch*, *Junge Freiheit*) all full news articles are coded that are found when searching the predefined keywords: *Impfung, impfen, Vakzine, Impfstoff*.

Furthermore, news items should only be coded if they make an actual reference to the vaccines in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. News items which contain only contain information on other vaccines should not be coded. Make sure, the news item is published within the defined sample period. News items that refer to international issues regarding the vaccination should also be coded.

If a news item is shorter than two sentences it is not considered as a full news article and thus should not be coded. Regardless of whether the news item contains an additional picture or video, the content of these is irrelevant for the study and thus should not be coded.

#### V Sampling

As described in the method section the sampling is scheduled in two time periods. The first sampling period is from the 1st of November to 30<sup>th</sup> November 2020, the second sampling period is from the 1st of November to 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021 (Germany). A total of eight weeks is coded.

**Sampling units:** 4 internet sites (of the previously mentioned newspapers)

**Sampling period:** 15<sup>th</sup> March to 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021 (Germany), 1st November to 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021 (Germany)

**Selection criteria:** news items that refer to the COVID-19 vaccines or the vaccination process in Germany

**Sampling:** sample of eight weeks. All news items that are found under predefined keywords are coded

**I Formal categories**

- 1 Coder
- 2 Story identification number
- 3 Date
- 4 Publication date
- 5 Name of the medium
- 6 Length of news article
- 7 Headline of the news article

**II frame analysis**

- 8 conflict frame
- 9 human interest frame
- 10 economic consequences frame
- 11 morality
- 12 responsibility
- 13 fear/ scaremongering
- 14 health severity/risk magnitude

**III Negativity & Style**

- 15 tone

**IV Sources & Vaccine & Context**

- 16 Sources
- 17 Vaccines
- 18 Political Context

### **Conflict Frame (8)**

Description: “emphasize conflict between individuals, groups or institutions as a means of capturing interest” (Semetko& Valkenburg 2000: 95)

#### **Subcategories**

Between whom there is conflict?

- 1 Government vs. opposition
- 2 Political actor vs. the public
- 3 expert vs. political actor
- 4 Public (*pro vaccine*) vs. public (*anti vaccine*)
- 5 Media vs. politics
- 6 Media vs. public
- 7 Alternative news media vs. mainstream news media
- 8 Expert vs. expert (e.g., Healthcare experts, virologists...)
- 9 Politics (national level) vs. politics (state level)
- 10 Party politics
- 11 No information

### **Human interest Frame (9)**

Description: “brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem.” (Semetko& Valkenburg 2000: 95)

#### **Subcategories**

*What impact do they emphasize?* (In relation to Ogbodo et al. 2020: 261)

Positive (reporting the positive impact from the vaccine process) vs.

Negative (reporting the struggles from vaccine process)

Who is in focus of the Human-interest frame?

- 0 No information
- 1 Someone who had side effects from vaccination (patient)
- 2 Someone who is pro the vaccine (example: someone who is waiting for the vaccination)
- 3 Someone who is against the vaccine
- 4 Political actor (government)
- 5 Political actor (opposition)
- 6 Institutional authority
- 7 Someone who is vaccinated and got COVID-19 (vaccine breakthrough)
- 8 Someone who is not vaccinated
- 9 Someone else

### **Economic consequences frame (10)**

Description: “This frame reports an event, problem, or issue in terms of the consequences it will have economically on an individual, group, institution, region, or country (Semetko& Valkenburg 2000: 96)

#### **Subcategories**

*For whom there will be consequences?*

- 1 Government
- 2 Political establishment in general
- 3 Public as a whole
- 4 Individuals (self-employed gastronomy, public figures)
- 5 Companies that produce the vaccines
- 6 International Organization (WHO)
- 7 Healthcare institutions (e.g. hospitals, doctor’s practice, vaccination centers)
- 8 Traditional/ Mainstream News Media
- 9 Alternative News Media
- 10 Opposition
- 11 No information

### **Morality Frame (11)**

Description: “This frame puts the event, problem, or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions” (Semetko& Valkenburg 2000: 95)

#### **Subcategories**

- Individualism vs. solidarity

### Responsibility Frame (12)

Description: "This frame presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual group" (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000: 96)

#### Subcategories

*Who is responsible for the crisis?*

- 0 No information
- 1 (German) Government (*can also refer to other governments, if they report on other countries*)
- 2 Society as a whole
- 3 Individuals who don't want the vaccine
- 4 Political actors as individuals (Jens Spahn, Angela Merkel, Karl Lauterbach, ...)
- 5 Scientists (Christian Drosten, Hendrik Streeck)
- 6 Mainstream news media
- 7 Alternative news media
- 8 Corporate responsibility (BioNTech, AstraZeneca)
- 9 Health care institutions (Stiko, EMA, Hospitals)
- 10 People who support the vaccine
- 11 other

### Fear Scaremongering/Alarmist/Fear (13)

Description: "Stories that are exaggerated to cause fear or panic among the public" (Ogbodo et al. 2020: 259) "Unsubstantiated claims blow the risk out of proportions." (Dan/ Raupp 2018: 211)

#### Subcategories

- fear for the vaccine (side effects & long-term effects)
- fear of COVID-19
- fear for oppression of the state

### Health Severity/risk magnitude (14)

Description: "The impact of a health risk on human life as a whole" (Dan/ Raupp 2018: 210) "The story mentions the level or size of a risk effect, for example likelihoods or rates of injury, illness, mortality or other risk-related consequences" (Hove et al. 2015: 1328)

#### Subcategories

Does the story mention the level or size of a risk effect (injury, illness, mortality or other risk-related consequences) of getting infected with COVID-19? (yes/no)

Does the story mention the level or size of a risk effect (injury, illness, mortality or other risk-related consequences) when getting the vaccine? (yes/no)

→ if both *no* then no health severity

→ if both *yes* then neutral risk assessment

→ if (1) *yes* & (2) *no*, then risk assessment with focus on COVID-19 risks

→ if (1) *no* & (2) *yes*, then risk assessment with focus on vaccination risks

# I Formal Categories

## 1 Coder

- 1 Marie Fröhlich
- 2 ...

## 2 Story identification number

It's a running number, that is ascribed to every news article that is coded (ascending order: 1, 2, 3, ...). When another news article from different websites is coded, this number should continue.

## 3 Date

Insert the sampling date with the following format: DDMM  
e.g.: 1005 (10.05.2022)

## 4 Publication date

Insert the date the news article was published with the following format: DDMMYYYY  
Code "0" if there is no information about the publication date

## 5 Name of the medium

Insert the name if the specific medium the news article appears in

- 1 RT Deutsch
- 2 NachDenkSeiten
- 3 Tagesschau
- 4 Compact

## 6 Length of news article

Code the length of the news article by copying the text into word and use the word count (without blanks). Insert the number of words.

## 7 Headline of the news article

Insert the Name of the headline. If there is no headline, code "0".

If the headline makes use of capital letters, copy the exact same upper and lower case

*Format: open*



## II Frames

### 8 Conflict Frame

*Description of the frame:* As described in the method section, this framing analysis will base its operationalization by relying on Semetko and Valkenburg and their predominant frames that occur in news (2000). According to them the conflict frame “*emphasize conflict between individuals, groups or institutions as a means of capturing interest*” (Semetko& Valkenburg 2000: 95). This frame presents the issue in terms of a confrontation of two or more contrasting arguments on the issue. It emphasizes the disagreement, disagreement and confrontation between two sides which can be taken by different actors. Possible indicators for this are comparisons between different political actors on how to proceed with the vaccination process, as well as conflicts between health care experts that criticize political actors on how they implement the vaccine policy in Germany. Investigating the question between whom there is a conflict, it is important to note, that the different types of conflict are understood as reciprocal. If there is more than one conflict, note the most prominent.

(1) *Does the story reflect disagreement between parties-individuals-groups-countries?*

0 no

1 yes

(2) *Does one party-individual-group-country reproach (vorwerfen) another?*

0 no

1 yes

(3) *Does the story refer to two sides or to more than two sides of the problem or issue?*

0 no

1 yes

(4) *Does the story refer to winners and losers?*

0 no

1 yes

(5) Between whom there is a conflict? (NOTE: a political actor can also refer to parties, or politics in general)

- 1 Government vs. opposition
- 2 Political actor vs. the public
- 3 expert vs. political actor
- 4 Public (*pro vaccine*) vs. public (*anti vaccine*)
- 5 Media vs. politics
- 6 Media vs. public
- 7 Alternative news media vs. mainstream news media
- 8 Expert vs. expert
- 9 Politics (national level) vs. politics (state level) (or EU level vs national level)
- 10 Party politics (conflict between two different parties)
- 11 No information

## 9 Human interest Frame

Description of the frame: “brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem.” (Semetko& Valkenburg 2000: 95). With reference to a health crisis, it embraces the “*impact on the lives of those affected*” (Dan/Raupp 2018: 210). With regard to the vaccine indicators for this frame could be the presentation of certain sub-groups that were treated differently due to specific health conditions in the vaccine process in forms of portraits or interviews. Given examples of these subgroups are pregnant women, children or elderly people.

(1) Does the story provide a human example or “human face” on the issue?

0 no

1 yes

(2) Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy, or compassion?

0 no

1 yes

(3) Does the story emphasize how individuals and groups are affected by the issue/problem?

0 no

1 yes

(4) Does the story go into the private or personal lives of the actors?

0 no

1 yes

(5) *What impact do they emphasize?* (In relation to Ogbodo et al. 2020: 261)

0 No information

1 Positive (reporting the positive impact from the vaccine process)

2 Negative (reporting the struggles from vaccine process/ negative impact of the vaccine)

3 Both

(6) Who is in focus of the Human-interest frame? *NOTE: As described before, this can also be the case for groups.*

0 No information

1 Someone who had side effects from vaccination (patient)

2 Someone who is pro the vaccine (example: someone who is waiting for the vaccination)

3 Someone who is not vaccinated or is against the vaccine

4 Political actor (government)

5 Political actor (opposition)

6 Institutional authority

7 Someone who is vaccinated and got COVID-19 (vaccine breakthrough)

8 Someone else

## 10 Morality frame

Description of the frame: This frame puts the event, problem, or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions” (Semetko& Valkenburg 2000: 95). Possible Indicators for this frame are normative or moral suggestions on how to behave (to get vaccinated or not).

Given examples of this application of morality would be the messages to get vaccinated for the greater good, it may promote solidarity or individualism (e.g. individual responsibility, individual freedom) as a value of today’s society as well as the message that if people die, its god’s will.

(1) Does the story contain any moral message?

0 no

1 yes

(2) Does the story make reference to morality, God, and other religious tenets?

0 no

1 yes

(3) Does the story offer specific social prescriptions about how to behave?

0 no

1 yes

(4) Does the story emphasize individualism as a key moral/ principle of our society?

0 no

1 yes

(5) Does the story emphasize solidarity as a key moral/ principle of our society?

0 no

1 yes

## 11 Economic frame

Description of the frame: *“This frame reports an event, problem, or issue in terms of the consequences it will have economically on an individual, group, institution, region, or country (Semetko& Valkenburg 2000: 96). Given examples for this frame could be the storyline of a possible mandatory vaccination and its financial implication for people who would lose their job if they don’t want to get vaccinated, as well as self-employed citizen who are facing revenue declines due to the so called 3G rule or 2G rule. Furthermore, this frame could also refer to biotechnology companies that produce the vaccines (e.g. BioNTech)*

(1) Is there a mention of financial losses or gains now or in the future?

0 no

1 yes

(2) Is there a mention of the costs/degree of expense involved?

0 no

1 yes

(3) Is there a reference to economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action?

0 no

1 yes

(4) *For whom there will be consequences?*

- 1 Government
- 2 Political establishment
- 3 Public in general
- 4 Self-employed Individuals (e.g. gastronomy)
- 5 Companies that produce the vaccines
- 6 International Organization (WHO)
- 7 Healthcare institutions (e.g. hospitals, doctor’s practice, vaccination centers)
- 8 Traditional/ Mainstream News Media
- 9 Alternative News Media
- 10 Opposition

## 11 No information

### 12 Attribution of responsibility

Description of the frame: According to Semetko and Valkenburg this „*frame presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual or group.*“ (2000: 96). With regard to the vaccination process this can refer to the German government's, the European Union's or the vaccine producer's obligation to provide enough vaccines or take action in forms policy implementations. Possible indicators for the usage of this frame might be buzzwords like villains and heroes in this crisis.

(1) Does the story suggest that someone there is someone responsible for the issue/problem?

0 no

1 yes

NOTE: (Filter Question: If yes →

(2) Who is responsible for the crisis? (*multiple answers possible*)

0 No information

1 (German) Government (*can also refer to other governments, if they report on other countries*)

2 Society as a whole

3 Individuals who don't want the vaccine

4 Political actors as individuals (Jens Spahn, Angela Merkel, Karl Lauterbach, ...)

5 Scientists (Christian Drosten, Hendrik Streeck)

6 Mainstream news media

7 Alternative news media

8 Corporate responsibility: vaccine producers (BioNTech, Astrazeneca)

9 Health care institutions (Stiko, EMA, Hospitals)

10 People who support the vaccine

11 Opposition

12 other

(3) Does the story suggest that someone has the ability to alleviate the problem?

0 no

1 yes

(4) Who is responsible for solving crisis? (*Filter Question*)

0 No information

1 (German) Government (*can also refer to other governments, if they report on other countries*)

- 2 Society as a whole
- 3 Individuals who don't want the vaccine
- 4 Political actors as individuals (Jens Spahn, Angela Merkel, Karl Lauterbach, ...)
- 5 Scientists (Virologists, epidemiologists)
- 6 Mainstream news media
- 7 Alternative news media
- 8 Corporate responsibility: Vaccine producers (BioNTech, Astrazeneca)
- 9 Health care institutions (Stiko, EMA, Hospitals)
- 10 People who support the vaccine
- 11 Opposition
- 12 other

(5) Does the story suggest solution(s) to the problem/issue?

0 no

1 yes

(6) Does the story suggest the problem requires urgent action?

0 no

1 yes

### 13 fear/scaremongering frame

Frame description: Referring to Ogbodo et al. fear frames are "*Stories that are exaggerated to cause fear or panic among the public*" (Ogbodo et al. 2020: 259). Other "*Unsubstantiated claims blow the risk out of proportions.*" (Dan/ Raupp 2018: 211). With reference to the vaccination crisis this could result in reporting on side effects of vaccines, and an emphasis on the uncertainty of possible long-term effects of the vaccines. Additional possible indicators could be the use of buzzwords (*shock, fear, dread, horrific, panic*).

(1) Does the news item bring up arguments about the lethality of the 'deadly vaccine', mounting death toll'?

0 no

1 yes

(2) Does the news item bring up arguments about the side effects (e.g. pericarditis, myocarditis, inflammation of heart muscle, Sinus vein thrombosis, blockage of blood vessels in the brain) as being more dangerous than getting the COVID-19 infection?

0 no  
1 yes

(3) Does this news item bring up arguments about possible long-term effects of different COVID-19 vaccines? (e.g. gene modification)

0 no  
1 yes

(4) Does the news item bring up arguments about possible health conditions for people as a consequence if the public won't get vaccinated?

0 no  
1 yes

(5) Does the news article bring up arguments for the threat of oppression by comparing the restrictions to the former Nazi regime and using buzzwords like *Staatsterror*, *Impfterror*, *Corona Diktatur*?

0 no  
1 yes

#### 14 health severity/risk magnitude

Description of the frame: *"The impact of a health risk on human life as a whole."* (Dan/ Raupp 2018: 210). Given examples on how this frame is operationalized are numerical information on the risk, risk comparisons as well as mortality statistics (Dan/ Raupp 2018: 213).

(1) Does the story mention the level or size of a risk effect (injury, illness, mortality, or other risk-related consequences) when getting infected with COVID-19 and thus promotes the vaccine as the way out of the crisis?

0 No  
1 yes

(2) Does the story mention the level or size of a risk effect (injury, illness, mortality, or other risk-related consequences) when getting the vaccine and thus promotes the vaccine as a reason for the crisis?

0 No  
1 Yes

→ if both *no*, then no health severity frame

→ if both *yes*, then neutral risk assessment

→ if (1) *yes* & (2) *no*, then risk assessment with focus on COVID-19 risks



→ if (1) *no* & (2) *yes*, then risk assessment with focus on vaccination risks

### III Negativity & Style

#### 15 Negative vs. positive tonality (In adaption of Strömbeck et al. 2012)

**Description:** *What is the overall tone of the story? Does the report convey primarily a positive, negative, balanced or neutral impression of the vaccines, the vaccine process, or a possible mandatory vaccination?*

Indications of *negative tonality* are references to political failure, fiasco, disaster, crisis, frustration, collapse, flop, denial, rejection, neglect, default, deterioration, resignation, skepticism, threats, cynicism, defeatism or disappointment. Indications of *positive tonality* are references to political success, problem solutions, achievement, improvement, advance, prosperity, accomplishment, enthusiasm, hope, benefit, gain, sustainability, gratification or accomplishment.

If a report does not reflect any indications of negative tonality or of positive tonality towards politics, political records, conditions or views, then it has to be coded as „0 –neutral“. If a report reflects about equal indications of positive and negative tonality, then code „2 –balanced/ambivalent“. (Strömbäck et al. 2012)

*Example:*

0 neutral

1 predominantly negative tonality

2 balanced/ambivalent

3 predominantly positive tonality

#### **Main frames & Subframes**

*Description of main frame:* Analyzing the news item, the article can contain several frames with different importance. If there are more than 1 frame in the news item, this variable aims to operationalize the most important frame of the article. The main frame refers to the most visible frame in the news item. Taking the headline, picture as well as the space into account will give indication for the differentiation between main frame and possible subframes (maximum two sub frames).

##### **1) What is the Main frame of the article?**

0 not applicable

1 Conflict frame

2 Human Interest frame

- 3 Economic consequences frame
- 4 Morality frame
- 5 Responsibility frame
- 6 Fear/ scaremongering frame
- 7 Health severity/ risk magnitude frame

**2) What are the subframes of the article? I**

- 0 no subframes
- 1 Conflict frame
- 2 Human Interest frame
- 3 Economic consequences frame
- 4 Morality frame
- 5 Responsibility frame
- 6 Fear/ scaremongering frame
- 7 Health severity/ risk magnitude frame

**3) What are the subframes of the article? II**

- 0 no subframes
- 1 Conflict frame
- 2 Human Interest frame
- 3 Economic consequences frame
- 4 Morality frame
- 5 Responsibility frame
- 6 Fear/ scaremongering frame
- 7 Health severity/ risk magnitude frame

## IV Sources, Vaccines & Political Context

### 16 Source usage

(1) What Sources does the news item refer to?

- 0 no sources used
- 1 Mainstream news media sources
- 2 Other alternative news media sources
- 3 official governmental sources
- 4 official health care institutions (e.g., WHO, Robert Koch Institute, EMA, STIKO, Max Planck Institute)
- 5 other
- 6 no clarification which sources have been used

## 17 Vaccines

- 0 no specific vaccines mentioned
- 1 Russian Vaccines (Sputnik V, EpiVacCorona, EpiVacCorona-N, Sputnik Light)
- 2 EU approved mRNA vaccines (Biontech/Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson& Jonhson)
- 3 other

## 18 Political Context

(1) What is the political context the news item covers the vaccine process?

- 0 no information
- 1 Germany
- 2 EU
- 3 US
- 4 Russia
- 5 other