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The Populist Threat to Public Service Media (PSM): Experiences, Responses and Impact of Populist Attacks on PSM Representatives*

Johanna Wolleschensky and Annika Sehl

Department of Journalism, Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Eichstätt, Germany

ABSTRACT

Public service media (PSM) across Europe must contend with delegitimising media criticism that is often characterised by the use of populist rhetoric. This delegitimising media criticism, referred to here as populist attacks, can originate from both political actors and segments of the public. However, little is known about how PSM respond to populist attacks. Using 26 semi-structured interviews with German PSM representatives, this study examines how they perceive and respond to populist attacks, as well as the effects of these attacks on PSM. The results indicate that populist media criticism of PSM follows four distinct lines of argumentation. As the accusations are in part PSM-specific, we propose the concept of anti-PSM populism. Anti-PSM populism has become commonplace for PSM and leads to various effects, which are systematised on different levels: individual, content and organisational. Overall, populist attacks do not lead to long-term self-censorship but do result in temporary self-censorship on social media. The results are discussed in the context of the media freedom discourse, and a matrix is introduced to help determine whether certain adaptations constitute self-censorship.

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Public service media; antimedia populism; populist attacks; Germany; harassment; self-censorship

Introduction

Public service media (PSM) across Europe face increasing pressure from both political actors (e.g., Ekman and Widholm 2023) and segments of the public, particularly online users (e.g., Prochazka and Schweiger 2016). While media criticism is not inherently harmful to democracy and can play an essential role in holding media institutions accountable (Prochazka and Obermaier 2022, 452), it is also used as a political tool to delegitimise media organisations (Egelhofer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2021, 654). PSM are particularly vulnerable to such attacks due to their reliance on public funding—which frequently becomes a focal point of political debate (e.g., Holtz-Bacha 2021)—and their dependence on public acceptance to maintain legitimacy.

CONTACT Johanna Wolleschensky johanna.wolleschensky@ku.de
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*The interviews were partly conducted while the authors were still affiliated with the University of the Bundeswehr Munich.

Several authors have argued that delegitimising criticism of PSM often originates from populist politicians (Holtz-Bacha 2021; Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2022). However, delegitimising media criticism is not limited to populist politicians. Instead, it is often characterised by the use of populist rhetoric (Egelhofer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2021, 658–659), which can also originate from ordinary citizens. Accordingly, we define this form of delegitimising criticism—rooted in populist rhetoric and originating from a variety of actors—as populist attacks. We further argue that such attacks pose a unique threat to PSM due to their dependence on public funding and broad societal support.

Although existing studies have examined how populist attacks from politicians affect audiences (e.g., Bos et al., 2023) and journalists (e.g., Panievsky 2022), no research has specifically investigated how PSM—as a particularly vulnerable form of media—experience and perceive populist attacks from a diverse range of actors. Key aspects of journalists' experiences with populist attacks have not been sufficiently explored. These include identifying which topics, from the PSM journalists' perspective, trigger particularly strong populist attacks, which actors are perceived as the most prominent sources of such attacks, and the argumentative patterns underlying delegitimising media criticism rooted in populist rhetoric. Furthermore, little is known about how PSM journalists in Germany respond to such populist attacks or the consequences they perceive these attacks to have.

Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by examining how populist attacks—whether from political actors or members of the public—affect PSM and how representatives within these institutions perceive and respond to such populist attacks.

Empirically, this study is based on 26 semi-structured interviews conducted with German PSM journalists. It examines (1) the experiences of PSM journalists with populist attacks, (2) how they respond to such attacks and (3) the impact these attacks have on PSM institutions and their representatives.

Theoretical Framework

Populist Attacks as Delegitimising Media Criticism Rooted in Populist Rhetoric

Media criticism plays a crucial role in democratic societies, as it helps regulate the press without resorting to censorship (Egelhofer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2021, 654; Wyatt 2019). However, it is important to differentiate between legitimate rational criticism and illegitimate emotional cynicism—that is, between legitimate media criticism and criticism aimed at delegitimising the media (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019, 1223). Egelhofer, Aaldering, and Lecheler (2021, 655) describe these two forms as "good" and "bad" media criticism. Indicators of delegitimising media criticism, according to Egelhofer, Aaldering, and Lecheler (2021, 655–658), include incivility and a lack of justification for the criticism.

Furthermore, delegitimising media criticism is often voiced by populist politicians and typically relies on populist rhetoric, which accuses the media of being part of an elite, spreading misinformation and exhibiting a liberal bias (Egelhofer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2021, 658–659). This type of media criticism is closely linked to what Krämer (2018, 453) terms antimedia populism. Antimedia populism is defined as "a set of attitudes that perceives journalists as part of a bad, self-serving elite that is detached from the people and that disregards the people's interests" (Fawzi and Krämer 2021, 3306). Like populism in

general, antimedia populism can be expressed by both politicians and citizens. Among the latter, it is estimated that approximately one-tenth hold antimedia populist attitudes (Fawzi and Krämer 2021). Theoretically (Fawzi 2020) and empirically (Fawzi and Krämer 2021), antimedia populism is associated with several dimensions of the "thin-centred ideology" of political populism (Mudde 2004, 544), including anti-elite attitudes, the notion of a homogeneous "people", and anti-outgroup sentiments (Fawzi 2020).

Bringing these strands together, Fawzi (2020) proposes labelling this form of delegitimising media criticism, which relies on populist rhetoric, as "populist media criticism" (39). At the same time, building on Neverla's work (2019), she argues that the term media criticism is, in fact, a misnomer in this context, as such expressions are inherently anti-enlightenment, anti-democratic and anti-pluralistic. Based on this argument, the present article conceptualises delegitimising media criticism that employs populist rhetoric and is rooted in antimedia populist attitudes as *populist attacks*. These attacks can originate from both populist politicians and citizens who hold antimedia populist attitudes.

While some studies have examined the prevalence of antimedia populism among the public (e.g., Fawzi and Krämer 2021) and others have analysed delegitimising media criticism using content analysis (e.g., Egelhofer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2021), little is known about journalists' perspectives on populist attacks (for exceptions, see Koliska and Assmann 2021; Panievsky 2022). Research has explored how individual journalists deal with terms like "fake news" or accusations such as "Lügenpresse" (English: lying press) and how they perceive the legitimacy of such criticism (e.g., Koliska and Assmann 2021; Lischka 2019). However, most studies focus on attacks from politicians (e.g., Koliska, Chadha, and Burns 2020; Lischka 2019). Consequently, there is limited knowledge about journalists' perceptions and experiences of populist attacks from a variety of actors.

Moreover, these studies rarely focus on PSM, which, due to their public funding, can be considered particularly vulnerable organisations in this context. Many studies that deal with the relationship between populism and the media focus on commercial media (e.g., Lischka 2019) or include PSM as one of many organisational forms (e.g., Koliska and Assmann 2021).

Populist Attacks and Public Service Media

Although antimedia populism generally refers to established media, PSM are particularly targeted (Holtz-Bacha 2021; Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2022). They are considered the media elite and thus part of the establishment (Engesser et al. 2017, 1118–1119). Holtz-Bacha (2021) assumes that there are various reasons why PSM specifically are at the centre of populist media criticism. One reason is "populists' fundamental scepticism towards institutions that are to set limits on the exercise of power in democratic systems and thus provide for checks and balances" (Holtz-Bacha 2021, 225). Another reason for populists criticising PSM is the (legal) organisation. In particular, populists accuse PSM of being too proximate to the state and political parties, e.g., through the Supervisory Board (Holtz-Bacha 2021, 225), which is why Fawzi (2020) argues that PSM organisations are the "ideal-typical media enemy of populist actors" (45). In this context, populists state that the established parties exert influence on PSM and therefore question their credibility and legitimacy (Esser, Stepinska, and Hopmann 2017, 376).

This is also expressed in terms such as "Systempresse" (English: regime press) and "Staatsfunk" (English: state broadcasting) (Koliska and Assmann 2021).

Another reference to this antimedia populism is the public service remit. In this context, populists refer to journalistic norms and turn them against the media itself (Panievsky 2021). This relates in particular to PSM's obligation to balance, impartiality and diversity (of opinions) and the task of enhancing national culture and promoting social, political and cultural cohesion (German Interstate Media Treaty (MStV) 2020, §26). At the same time, some legal requirements or values of PSM do not correspond with the right-wing populist ideology, such as including minorities in order to ensure social inclusion. While PSM are also required to represent the position of minorities, right-wing populists criticise them, for example, for reporting too positively on migrants or focusing too much on minorities instead of on ordinary people (Fawzi 2020, 47). Accordingly, the pluralism of PSM contradicts the anti-pluralism of populists (Holtz-Bacha 2021). In this respect, it is important to understand how PSM representatives perceive populist attacks against them, as it might impact PSM representatives and their (editorial) work.

Although several scholars have theoretically explored, why PSM have become a central target of populist attacks, there is a lack of empirical research investigating how PSM and their journalists perceive these attacks, how they respond to them and what consequences they entail. The need to focus specifically on PSM stems from their unique vulnerability to populist criticism. As Conrad (2023, 86) highlights, "from undermining the legitimacy of journalism by construing professional journalists as part of the corrupt liberal elite, it is only a relatively small step to demanding the defunding of public-service media". Similarly, Holtz-Bacha (2021, 230) observes that populist movements in several European countries have "successfully pushed for financial cuts in the last years".

Of course, the impact of such attacks on PSM funding depends largely on the funding mechanisms in different countries, e.g., licence fees or tax-based models. However, the precarious state of PSM across Europe—including the abolition of PSM in Slovakia and Liechtenstein—suggests that their survival is not guaranteed if public trust and acceptance decline due to populist attacks (e.g., Egelhofer et al. 2022; Smith 2010) that create an anti-PSM climate. Sustained erosion of public trust and acceptance could ultimately undermine the foundations of PSM, regardless of the legal and structural protections in place. This heightened vulnerability underscores the importance of examining how PSM are specifically affected by populist attacks.

Journalists' Experiences, Responses to and Consequences of Populist Attacks

Although there is a lack of empirical research specifically on PSM journalists, several studies shed light on general journalistic experiences, responses, and consequences of populist attacks. A large part of recent research deals with the media's reactions to the "lying press" accusations. According to a qualitative study in Germany (Koliska and Assmann 2021), many journalists (including PSM journalists) do not associate the "lying press" accusation with their performance, nor do they want to take up the term so as not to normalise it. They usually reject such accusations, although some (PSM) journalists also admit that they seem to have lost touch with some segments of the population. While the study does not focus specifically on PSM, the authors note that PSM are reacting

more strongly to accusations of the "lying press", which they attribute to the "institutional identity of public broadcasters and their mandate, which is to serve, educate, and inform the public" (Koliska and Assmann 2021, 2743). Therefore, they aim to regain audience trust, strengthen journalistic norms, and adopt transparency, participation, and fact-checking.

In addition to rejecting populist media criticism, there are other (digital) ways of dealing with antimedia populism, such as blocking or ignoring it, deleting criticism, rationalising it by perceiving it as part of the job and engaging in counter-speech (Cheruiyot 2024). In addition to rejecting criticism, e.g., by moralising, journalists can even feel honoured by being the target of fake news accusations (Lischka 2019).

While journalists in the US and Germany largely reject populist accusations, e.g., by seeing them as unjustified (Denner and Peter 2017) or considering it ridiculous to change journalistic practices because of them (Koliska, Chadha, and Burns 2020), populist attacks in Israel appear to have an impact on news coverage (Panievsky 2022). As a result of populist Benjamin Netanyahu's accusations that the media are too left-wing and biased towards him, journalists self-censor their reporting. Panievsky (2022) describes this as "strategic bias", which is a "form of ideological bias, where journalists knowingly slant the news to favor one candidate, party or political camp—regardless of their personal beliefs and without informing their audience—as a response to challenges to their public credibility and legitimacy" (815). As a result, journalists tend to lean to the right because they do not want to confirm the accusation of being too left-wing. Furthermore, Kim and Shin (2022) show that hostility has a chilling effect on Korean journalists "that could infringe on individual journalists' autonomy and editorial independence" (13).

In addition to these attacks, which can be clearly identified as populist due to their rhetoric and the actors involved, some scholars also associate general online harassment with populist attacks (e.g., Macaraig and Hameleers 2022). For instance, Waisbord (2020) connects his concept of mob censorship—defined as "bottom-up, citizen vigilantism aimed at disciplining journalism" (1031)—with populist attacks on the press.

Those attacks on journalists are becoming increasingly common. Most German journalists have already faced aggression and hostility (Loosen et al. 2023, 15). Although harassment of journalists can originate from a wide range of actors, a German study by Papendick et al. (2020) shows that attacks are often politically located around the far-right populist party Alternative für Deutschland (English: Alternative for Germany, AfD). The German report by Reporters without Borders (2023) also locates attacks on journalists within the right-wing populist and "Querdenker" milieu (German movement that strongly criticises anti-Covid-19 political measures and, in some cases, denies the existence of the virus), especially at demonstrations.

Another strand of research also deals with online hostility towards journalists. A German study (Obermaier, Hofbauer, and Reinemann 2018) shows that about one fifth of respondents are (very) often affected by hate. Most respondents believe that attacks on journalists in general and on themselves have increased.

Thus, it can be concluded that "[w]hile hostility toward the press […] is not a new phenomenon, journalists – especially women journalists – have become increasingly regular targets of harassment as populism rises globally" (Miller and Kocan 2024, 279).

As a consequence of this development, self-censorship tendencies are also evident in Germany (Loosen et al. 2023, 14). Papendick et al. (2020) show that about 15 percent of

the 322 journalists surveyed had decided not to cover certain issues for fear of being attacked, which in part also affects reporting at public events (e.g., protests). Such self-censorship tendencies as a result of general hostility are also evident in other studies, which "seems like threats and abuse of journalists 'work'" (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016, 887). Self-censorship tendencies—"defined as the act of intentionally and voluntarily withholding information from others in the absence of formal obstacles" (Bar-Tal 2017, 4)—can occur due to various anticipated negative implications, e.g., for oneself and the ingroup (e.g., hostility towards journalists/PSM in general), for others (e.g., attacks on sources or political parties) or an idea/belief (e.g., information is a means of promoting populist ideas) (Bar-Tal 2017, 9–10).

In addition to self-censorship, an anti-press discourse can lead journalists to question their views more than usual and try to improve their reports to avoid negative comments (Kim and Shin 2022; Post and Kepplinger 2019). Other authors also indicate that hostility towards journalists, though not always from populists, can lead to fear and emotional reactions like stress eating and drinking alcohol (Chen et al. 2020; Holton et al. 2023; Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020; Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016; Post and Kepplinger 2019, 2439; for contrasting results, see Obermaier, Hofbauer, and Reinemann 2018).

In this context, many studies also point to the importance of peer and organisational support when experiencing hostility (Chen et al. 2020; Kantola and Harju 2023; Springer and Troger 2021), with some criticising a lack of support from organisations (e.g., Holton et al. 2023; Papendick et al. 2020). Specific measures that have been implemented in editorial offices include the opportunity to talk to colleagues, legal support, monitoring of public contributions, contact persons in the newsroom, training opportunities and security guards at events (Papendick et al. 2020).

Research Questions

As previous research has largely neglected the journalistic perception of populist attacks—particularly in the context of PSM—the following research questions are addressed:

RQ1: What are the experiences of PSM representatives with populist attacks?

RQ2: How do PSM representatives respond to populist attacks?

RQ3: What impact do populist attacks have on PSM representatives and their (editorial) work?

Study Context: Public Service Media and Populist Parties in Germany

Within Germany, PSM consists of the federal Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (ARD), a consortium of nine regional PSM organisations, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF; national television PSM organisation), and Deutschlandradio (a national radio PSM organisation) (Sehl 2024). As in other countries, PSM in Germany should provide a programme which is independent of market and state (Mazzone 2019, 4). According to their remit, they are obliged to address all citizens, inform them, support opinion building in the democratic society and educate and entertain them (MStV 2020, §26, 1). Among other requirements, their

offers need to be objective and impartial and present a diversity of topics and perspectives (MStV 2020, §26, 2).

Despite having a relatively older audience, PSM continue to show the highest levels of trust and news consumption compared to other media (Hölig 2023). Nevertheless, this is not true for people with populist attitudes (Schulz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019, 26–28).

Funding is provided through a household levy that has to be paid regardless of use and has repeatedly been the subject of political debate. Although the German funding model is considered relatively secure against political influence, it has not been entirely immune to political attempts to influence the amount of funding (Sehl 2024).

These political pressures have intensified with the rise of the AfD, a right-wing populist party that is partially classified as far-right by the German domestic intelligence service. Having secured more than 20 percent of the vote in the 2025 federal election, the AfD has positioned itself as a strong opponent of PSM, frequently labelling it "Staatsfunk" (English: state broadcasting). The party has openly called "for reducing PSM by abolishing the licence fee" (Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2022, 14), challenging the existing funding model and increasing the political strain on PSM—not least by mobilising citizens and AfD supporters against PSM.

Method

To answer the research questions, semi-structured interviews with 26 PSM representatives in Germany were conducted. The sample includes representatives of all nine regional broadcasting corporations (ARD), ZDF and Deutschlandradio as well as funk—the online-only youth-oriented network from ARD and ZDF. Our sample mostly includes political journalists (e.g., from news and magazine programmes, in part with a special focus on right-wing populism), but also social media managers, since populist actors often spread accusations and hostilities in the comments sections on social media (Blassnig et al. 2019, 632–633). To obtain a wide range of perspectives, we conducted interviews with PSM representatives in strategic positions (e.g., editors-in-chief, editorial managers) and operative positions (e.g., reporters, social media editors) (see table 1). The sampling strategy followed the snowball principle by first approaching specific journalists based on their position. Access to further participants was then provided by the PSM organisations. The interviews were conducted in German between August and December 2022. For this article, the quotations were translated. Participants were provided with a data protection information sheet in advance, containing all information about the purpose, voluntary participation, anonymity, processing, storage and deletion of the data. In the interview itself, which was audio-recorded, the most important points were discussed again verbally and consent to the interview was recorded.[1] To protect the journalists, their answers were anonymised.

As previous research demonstrates, journalists can identify populist politicians, but their definitions of populism vary. While some define it as an ideology, others see it as a political strategy marked by demagogy, oversimplification and manipulation (Stanyer et al. 2019). Therefore, while the term "populist politicians" was used in the interviews, the broader concept of populism was generally avoided. Instead, the interviews began by outlining examples of populist attacks on PSM, both from populist parties and from citizens. Participants were then asked about their experiences with such attacks (see appendix).

Table 1. Sample overview.

Characteristics of the interview partners[a]		Number of interviewees
Gender	Male	17
	Female	9
Position	Strategic/ managerial staff	20
	Operational staff	6
Genres	News/Magazine	14
	Social Media	8
	Others[b]	4
Broadcasting Organisation (regional)	BR	2
	HR	1
	MDR	2
	NDR	2
	Radio Bremen	1
	RBB	3
	SR	1
	SWR	5
	WDR	1
Supraregional organisations	DRadio	4
	Funk	3
	ZDF	1

Notes. [a]The characteristics were derived from names and job titles. [b]Others include chief-editors and managers of special genres.

In this context, PSM representatives were asked about the specific allegations made against them, the platforms and channels through which they encountered these attacks, the topics that triggered the criticisms and the actors involved. Additionally, participants were asked about hostilities associated with populist attacks, including the forms of harassment, the topics involved and the actors responsible. Thus, all the topics identified by those interviewed as particularly triggering populist attacks emerged inductively in the interviews.

It is important to note that this approach cannot fully ensure that interviewees exclusively discuss populist attacks as opposed to legitimate media criticism—and indeed some of the PSM representatives in our sample also reported legitimate media criticism. However, we believe that this is the only feasible way to examine journalists' experiences of antimedia populism emanating from both the public and politicians without explicitly using the term "populism". By understanding populist attacks as delegitimising media criticism based on populist rhetoric, we can also assess the accusations mentioned by the interviewees as populist media criticism with relative clarity. Studies that focus exclusively on politicians have the advantage of assuming familiarity with the concept of "populist politicians". However, our approach is grounded in the belief that it is essential to examine the experiences with populist attacks from all types of actors, not just politicians, as the rhetoric of populist politicians often spreads to like-minded people in the public (Egelhofer et al. 2022).

The interviews further explored how PSM representatives respond to populist attacks and the impact of these experiences on their professional and personal lives. Finally, respondents were asked whether their newsrooms provide support in dealing with such attacks.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed with the software MAXQDA according to the principles of content-structuring content analysis (Rädiker and Kuckartz 2022). In a first step, the interviews were coded with the thematic blocks of the interview

guide (e.g., accusations: topics, actors, channels). New categories were then added inductively in a second step (e.g., for topics: refugee crisis, Covid-19 pandemic, Russia—Ukraine conflict).

Results

RQ1: Experiences with Populist Attacks

Regarding *RQ1* and, more specifically, the extent to which PSM representatives experience populist attacks, we can draw conclusions about (1) the general perception of populist media criticism of PSM, (2) the range of accusations and hostility and (3) the issues where populist attacks are particularly prevalent.

General Perception of Populist Media Criticism

The respondents perceive populist media criticism as widespread and growing in recent years. For example, respondents believe that "voices are getting louder". An interviewee describes: "Not a day goes by when this is not an issue and we do not talk about it, especially in internal, professional, collegial discussions". The PSM representatives see either the so-called refugee crisis or the Covid-19 pandemic as the starting point for this development. With regard to terms such as "Lügenpresse", one interviewee suggests that the term has "become winged", while others perceive that it has been replaced by other terms and has "gone out of fashion". While some perceive populist media criticism primarily as an online or social media phenomenon, others describe it as a development that mainly takes place "on the street", i.e., at protests. According to the interviewees, before the Covid-19 pandemic began, the frequency and intensity of attacks differed between different PSM organisations. Some mainly West German and smaller regional PSM organisations at the time even considered themselves an "island of the blessed" as compared to the larger and East German PSM organisations. However, as one interviewee states, the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic marked a "cutting point, where we were woken up from this island of the blessed".

Perceived Actors Involved in Populist Attacks

Focusing on the actors who, according to the respondents, are particularly involved in populist attacks, it becomes clear that PSM representatives perceive this primarily as a development originating from the audience or broader public. While some respondents locate the actors expressing populist delegitimising criticism close to the AfD, referring to them as AfD supporters, sympathisers or "private individuals who are in the circles of these populist movements", others assume that such populist attacks now come from a broader spectrum of individuals.

Of course, some respondents also emphasise that they perceive this populist criticism of PSM mainly from AfD politicians. However, in general, PSM representatives seem to associate populist attacks more with the public than with specific populist politicians.

Range of Accusations and Hostilities

In line with the proposed definition of populist attacks, we can theoretically distinguish between delegitimising media criticism rooted in populist rhetoric (i.e., accusations

etc.) and hostilities (i.e., insults, verbal attacks, physical attacks). While we can trace whether the accusations qualify as populist attacks based on their argumentation structure—as they contain core characteristics of antimedia populism—this is less clearly possible in the case of hostilities. However, since various authors (e.g., Waisbord 2020) closely link harassment with populist attacks or consider it a cause, and because respondents mentioned these hostilities in the context of populist attacks after being prompted accordingly, we will also discuss the findings on experiences with hostilities at this point—recognising that the line between populist and non-populist attacks may be blurred here.

Accusations. Regarding accusations, the interviews provide empirical evidence on specific populist claims directed at PSM representatives, which can be divided into four lines of argument. Two of these are specific to PSM.

Line of argumentation 1: Accusation of manipulation of reality. A frequently mentioned populist accusation is that PSM do not represent reality but lie, hide or distort facts. The term "lying press" is also mentioned in this context. This is also linked to the accusation of systematic manipulation. Theoretically, the accusation can be seen as referring to the construction of a "corrupt elite" that wants to harm the people and, accordingly, reflects the anti-elitism of antimedia populism.

Line of argumention 2: Accusation of left-wing bias, one-sidedness and partiality. Many PSM representatives also report that they are accused of being "left green stained" (German: *linksgrünversifft*) or, more generally, left-wing. This is also expressed in the accusation of being driven by ideology. In this context, interviewees cite campaign terms such as "transgender ideology" or "gender gaga". This is closely linked to accusations of biased or unbalanced reporting and lack of neutrality. Moreover, there are accusations that PSM do not give voice to critics or minority opinions, ignore AfD politicians and lack diversity in their interviewees. Theoretically, this line of argument refers to the homogeneity of "the people", which in populist logic is neither ideological nor left-wing or green, but "normal". In addition, the cluster also refers to anti-out-group populism, as the criticism comprises alleged overreporting and thereby favouring of out-groups like immigrants or trans people. In part, however, the accusation is also specific to PSM, because populists refer to the public service remit, indicating that it is not being fulfilled accordingly.

Line of argumention 3: Accusation of being close to the government (PSM-specific). In addition, respondents report that they are often accused of being close to the government or of serving as "state radio", of being controlled by politicians and of following orders. This is closely linked to the accusation that PSM take information from parties and the government without questioning it, or simply follow political lines. Correspondingly, PSM are accused of lacking independence. This perceived closeness to the state is also cited by many respondents as a reason why PSM in particular are the focus of populist media criticism. Even though the accusation of being close to the state is directed in part against all established media, this accusation is PSM-specific as it refers primarily to the organisation and structure of PSM.

Line of argumention 4: Accusation of compulsory funding and wasting money (PSM-specific). In financial terms, PSM are also accused by populists of wasting money and of being funded by compulsory fees. Many interviewees describe fee funding as a "trigger point" which, when combined with other accusations, leads to

> PSM being a simple enemy image in the broadest sense. Many people mistake the fact that they have to pay this fee with the belief that they have a direct right to influence the programme. Many believe that the media must present exactly what they themselves want to see and hear.

Another interviewee also refers to this link: "That's why people like to interpret it in the way that if I have to pay for it, then it must be in my interest". This line of argument, however, is located on a different level. It is subordinate to the other lines of argument as, from the populists' perspective, by not implementing the will of the people, PSM delegitimises itself for funding by the people.

The systematisation of accusations thus shows that PSM are also empirically the particular focus of populist media criticism, since they are not only subject to general accusations such as manipulation of reality and one-sided reporting, but also to PSM-specific accusations such as proximity to the state and the resulting delegitimisation of funding. Accordingly, we argue that this type of antimedia populism can be conceptualised as anti-PSM populism. This anti-PSM populism specifies antimedia populism by referring primarily to (a) the organisational form and structure of PSM, (b) the public service remit and (c) the form of funding, in addition to the central elements of antimedia populism (Fawzi 2020).

Hostilities. Looking at hostilities—which are more closely associated with the hate speech discourse—we can distinguish between digital and non-digital and verbal and physical hostilities. In addition, the interviews include not only personal experiences of hostility directed at the interviewees, but also many secondary experiences. That is, reports of hostility directed at colleagues in the newsroom or organisation.

While most interviewees agree that the frequency of accusations has increased, there is less agreement about the frequency of hostilities (e.g., insults, verbal attacks, physical attacks) over time: on the one hand, respondents believe that the number of hostilities is increasing—especially in the analogue world, but also in the digital realm, where it is perceived as "part of everyday life". On the other hand, some respondents believe that digital hostilities are decreasing or that their frequency has not changed in recent years. One respondent highlights the differences between digital and analogue hostility, noting that analogue hostility has increased, while digital hostility has become a daily occurrence.

The spectrum of hostilities described in the digital realm ranges from "savage name-calling, via social media, via letters, etc.", to insults in private messages on social media, hate mail and even death threats. Offline, hostility also ranges from personal harassment through insults to physical assault and direct death threats.

It should be noted that most interviewees report secondary experiences when asked to describe hostility—i.e., hostility against colleagues within their organisation or their own newsroom. Respondents also occasionally talk about specific waves of violence and sexualised violence against women as well as against interviewees or sources. However, many interviewees do report hostility directed at themselves. In the case of community managers, the hostility mainly takes the form of indirect insults on social media. More prominent individuals or respondents with leadership roles appear to be particularly exposed to hostility via email—which in this context often means they are confronted with death threats.

Topics. Regarding specific issues on which populist attacks occur more frequently than others, three issues are mentioned very often: (1) the Covid-19 pandemic, (2) the so-called refugee crisis and the year 2015 and (3) Russia and the war in Ukraine.

The Covid-19 pandemic is mentioned by many respondents as a particular breaking point or as the starting point for the intensification of accusations and hostilities: "But since then it has just been extremely intensified and it's not going down". Only a few respondents say that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the outrage was directed less at journalists and more at politicians and policies.

However, many respondents also see the so-called refugee crisis and the year 2015, when there was a peak of refugees arriving in Germany, as a starting point for accusations and hostility towards PSM. Slightly fewer, but still many respondents also cite Russia and the war in Ukraine (and subsequently the energy crisis) as a particularly contentious issue fostering populist hostilities. Here, the main accusation was that the coverage was pro-Ukrainian.

Respondents also mention issues such as gender-sensitive language, economic issues, religion, social inequality or food as other "trigger issues".

RQ2: Responses to Populist Attacks

The distinction between accusation and hostility is also important when considering responses to populist attacks (RQ2). PSM usually respond to (populist) accusations (e.g., biased reporting) through community management or by replying to letters to the editor. One interviewee mentioned that "vehemently denying accusations gets you nowhere; you need to engage with them intensively", whether they come from populists or other sources. Most participants strive to engage in constructive discussions, de-escalate tensions and foster dialogue "as long as there is some common ground for discussion. People can be emotional and upset or perceive our work as biased, and that can be discussed". However, the emergence of a dialogue depends on the critic's openness to constructive conversation. If they are not, or if community management lacks resources, there are no specific responses. Instead, comments are only checked for adherence to netiquette. In general, PSM representatives feel it is their duty to address and endure accusations because they are publicly funded media. Several interviewees emphasised the importance of taking the audience and their criticisms seriously.

While many PSM representatives state that they often respond to accusations, they usually delete hostile and abusive comments and sometimes refer them to a public prosecutor, highlighting the importance of legal measures to defend themselves. PSM representatives typically do not respond to hostility: "There is a line between polemics, strong criticism to which we respond calmly, and the point where it crosses lines into threats. Then we must also respond legally". Consequently, some PSM organisations have developed standardised workflows for forwarding threats to the public prosecutor.

RQ3: Impact on PSM Representatives and Their (Editorial) Work

The effects of populist attacks (*RQ3*) mentioned by PSM representatives in the interviews can be systematised into direct impact on the individual and content level and indirect impact on the organisational level.

Direct Impact: Individual Level

Populist attacks have an individual impact on PSM representatives. Some interviewees speak of a massive impact on their personal lives—for example, of having become "a bit paranoid" after direct hostility. One reporter stated that a death threat he received at a demonstration "did something to him and kept him busy for weeks". As a result, some respondents also reported that journalists had withdrawn from the public sphere or no longer wanted to engage with certain issues. Regarding digital hostility and so-called "shitstorms", one participant described how this is a great challenge even for robust people and can "take a lot out of you". Gender-specific effects are also assumed in this context, but these are mostly mentioned by men. "There are individual authors who were very impressed by this and have since changed their behavior and are more careful about how they appear on camera so as not to provoke stupid comments about their appearance".

Direct Impact: Content Level

The effects on reporting (content level) concern (1) self-censorship and (2) the quality of reporting.

Self-Censorship. Regarding self-censorship, PSM representatives tend to assume that the attacks do not lead to topics being avoided. One participant in a leading position stated:

> Yes, of course, one should not commit suicide out of fear of death. So, we must avoid saying we're not going to cover it because we're going to wet our pants. No, we have to say, we must spend money and hire a security company and send five strong guys with us. Then things will be different. So, in that sense. But we definitely don't avoid issues because they have conflict potential.

This view is also shared by other interviewees who consider it important to "counterbalance tyranny and populism". This is also seen as an important responsibility of PSM:

> Firstly, PSM should not deny problems out of a misunderstood defence mechanism, for example, towards populist or radical forces. Of course, PSM need to address issues related to migration, whether it's crime, housing shortages, social fraud or anything else. Problems should not be glossed over. In this regard, we should heed what Rudolf Augstein said: Report things as they are.

However, one participant assumes that sometimes people are "afraid of covering a certain topic". He also noted, however, that to date, it has never been the case that a journalistic piece was not produced for this reason. Another interviewee also believed that journalists are increasingly afraid to report on particularly confrontational issues following threats—which he believes is also part of the populists' strategy. In such cases, other staff cover these issues. This view is shared by another journalist, who suggested that some journalists (in other newsrooms) have metaphorical inner scissors in their heads. These tell them:

> Come on, I'm not going to do this piece or we're not going to put it on Facebook because we can't deal with it. It's not so much the fear of threats, it's that you just can't do it anymore from a work point of view. […] And if you want to see that as a restriction on freedom of the press, it already exists.

This view is also shared by another PSM representative, but framed more as a responsibility to sources and others concerned. In this context, the interviewee described how a social media post about Jewish life was postponed for weeks due to concerns about antisemitic comments.

The effects that do emerge—particularly noted by social media editors—concern how social media posts are handled: whether posts are shared, how they are prepared and when they are published, as the following statement shows:

> But there are consequences, for example, with social media, in that one already plans strategically – in daily planning – and only posts certain topics, certain content at specific times of day. […] To make it concrete: topics expected to provoke criticism or waves of indignation are usually not posted in the evening.

The fact that controversial topics are not posted at times when fewer community management staff are available is also confirmed by many other participants. However, one respondent stated that this does not apply to news brands with a strong focus on current events. In terms of content preparation and issue framing, one respondent from the social media sector described paying particular attention to individual words —such as "Russian war of aggression"—and carefully considering whether to link topics like energy saving to the war, as this had triggered many populist attacks from the audience. PSM representatives also suspect that populist attacks have an impact on journalistic research—for example, that journalists who report on demonstrations and are personally attacked become more cautious. However, this is more of a suspicion than a concrete incident.

Quality of Reporting. In addition to these effects, which tend to be negative from a democratic theory perspective, some participants also report positive effects, particularly in terms of quality: "Quality standards […] are rising partly because of this burning glass under which we are currently working". For example, arguments with populist politicians in interviews have led to better preparation and an even stronger focus on facts. This can also be attributed to the increased reflection on one's own actions triggered by the populist accusations. In this regard, an interviewee explained that the organisation carries out checks after (populist) accusations to examine if the criticism was legitimate. In the case of legitimate criticism, such accusations also lead to internal improvements. Another interviewee also reported that the populist attacks made them more transparent about recording original sound bites or publishing interviews.

In general, PSM representatives—as already mentioned—seem to be increasingly concerned about the choice of words and framing, so that they do not speak of "Querdenker", for example, but of supporters of the "Querdenker"-movement, "to try, and I think we can do that in that sense through clean language and so on, to shape a certain image, fairness, etc., or to do our part to ensure that it does not get such a platform".

Indirect Impact: Organisational Level

These direct impacts on the individual and content level in turn lead to indirect impact at the organisational level. This mainly concerns more staff in community management and changes in workflows in social media management—for example, the introduction of first-level moderation, which pre-filters comments.

Furthermore, in the context of hostility, many support measures have been established in PSM organisations. Respondents reported legal measures and close cooperation with the judiciary or the organisation's own legal department. Many respondents also report psychological support or care, which can be provided internally or externally to those being attacked. This does not apply only to journalists who are specifically targeted, but also to people in community management who are confronted with significant hostility on a daily basis. In other PSM organisations, the possibility of psychological support has been suggested but not yet implemented. Other support measures for those affected include personal talks with superiors or colleagues.

In terms of prevention, journalists are often provided with security support at demonstrations. This also implies lower levels of flexibility for journalists during demonstrations, which makes their work more difficult and likely influences the content level. According to one participant, prior to 2015, it was not necessary to take security personnel to demonstrations.

In addition, there are certain security concepts that allow PSM representatives and their families to be evacuated or information to be blocked at the residents' registration office. However, it is sometimes difficult to implement such prevention and support measures, and the authorities are not always perceived as helpful. Some interviewees also mentioned training within the organisation as a support measure, as well as advice on how to deal with hostility in individual cases. One person also reported cooperation with initiatives against hate. As a preventive measure, one journalist also stated that his staff do not appear by name–neither in articles nor in research—but send journalistic enquiries, for example, via general email addresses.

Discussion

In sum, our study shows, based on an analysis of interviews with PSM representatives, that populist attacks have become commonplace for PSM. At the same time, the analysis suggests that these populist attacks started in the context of the so-called refugee crisis in Germany and have not decreased due to various crises (Covid-19, Russia—Ukraine war). Interestingly, when the focus of the study is not restricted solely to populist politicians, the respondents tend to emphasise populist attacks originating from the public rather than from political figures. This finding suggests that future research should also broaden its scope, not only examining the perception of attacks by populist politicians but also considering all actors who engage in populist rhetoric.

Since the accusations are characterised by specific arguments, we have proposed that populist media criticism—which, in addition to anti-elitism, a notion of the homogeneity of the people and anti-outgroup attitudes (Fawzi 2020), also refers to the organisational form and structure of PSM, the public service remit and the form of funding—can be considered anti-PSM populism, which expands antimedia populism by incorporating PSM-specific arguments.

Building on Cheruiyot (2024), the study indicates that PSM representatives partly block, delete and ignore hostility and accusations from people who are not interested in personal interaction (consolidation and filtering), but in some cases also report such incidents to the public prosecutor. In other cases, PSM representatives also discuss the accusations with those interested in dialogue (counter-discourse).

As populist attacks on PSM have already increased since 2015 according to the interviewees, the organisations have now established several support and preventive measures—for example, legal measures, psychological support, personal talks with superiors, withholding names from publication, security concepts and training. The fact that security is now required at demonstrations shows that hostility is not only reaching PSM online but has also become a problem for media freedom in physical spaces—which is in line with existing studies on non-governmental attacks on media freedom (Miller and Kocan 2024; Papendick et al. 2020). This reduces journalistic flexibility in covering demonstrations for security reasons and can also lead to the emergence of fear spaces and greater reluctance among journalists to cover such events.

In addition to these consequences at an organisational level, which include the strengthening of social media moderation resources, populist attacks also have an impact at the individual and content level. Following Kim and Shin (2022) and Post and Kepplinger (2019), our interviewees partly report positive effects of the populist attacks, as they appear to encourage PSM representatives to improve their reporting and reflect more critically on their work.

In contrast to Kim and Shin (2022) and Panievsky (2022), who have pointed towards strategic bias, self-censorship and a chilling effect stemming from attacks, our study does not support systematic self-censorship for German PSM organisations. Instead, it seems that PSM representatives make specific adaptations at different stages of the journalistic production process. These contrary findings might be influenced by differences in the political and media systems.

The adjustments reported by the interviewees are often motivated by a desire to protect themselves, their colleagues or employees, or other groups such as minorities and sources (see Table 2). Against this backdrop, our matrix systematises the various adaptations in the journalistic production process according to Domingo et al. (2008) and identifies the reasons for these adaptations—specifically, whom they are intended to protect—and whether information, articles or topics are withheld. The matrix facilitates the analysis of different adaptations to assess whether they represent self-censorship in line with the definition of Bar-Tal (2017).

Table 2. Matrix of adaptations in the journalistic production process due to (anticipated) populist attacks.

Stages in the production process	Access and Observation	Selecting and Filtering	Editing and Processing	Distribution
Reported adaptation	Security personnel are required when reporting on protests	Attacked journalists do no longer wish to personally report on certain issues	Adaptation of word choice, especially on social media	Adaptation of publication time, especially on social media, due to lack of staff
Reasons for adaptation	Protection of journalists	Protection of journalists	Protection of journalists, others (sources, minorities), and ideas	Protection of journalists and organisation, and others (sources, minorities)
Withholding of information	No	Not necessarily	No	Temporary

Note. Source: Analysis of interviews with PSM representatives. Adjustments at the interpretation level (Domingo et al. 2008) were not reported by the interviewees.

Thus, we argue that the adaptations in the processes of (1) *access and observation*, (2) *selecting and filtering* and (3) *editing and processing* are not elements of self-censorship, as no information or articles are withheld—even if these adjustments are made to protect certain groups or ideas. However, they can still be considered problematic from a media freedom perspective, as they are made out of fear of populist attacks.

The adaptations at the (4) *distribution* level are also not necessarily elements of self-censorship, as information is not completely withheld but rather delayed. In these cases, PSM representatives temporarily withhold their work to protect themselves, their organisations, sources or minority groups. As this aligns with the definition of self-censorship by Bar-Tal (2017), we argue that such adaptations can be interpreted as a form of self-censorship—specifically, temporary self-censorship on social media. At the same time, this may be viewed as a rational response to limited social media moderation capacity, aimed at avoiding reputational damage. Furthermore, the interviewees argue that this does not apply to time-sensitive content.

To summarise, while we observe certain adaptations of behaviour due to populist attacks on PSM, self-censorship tendencies seem to occur only sporadically, which corresponds with results of other studies (e.g., Papendick et al. 2020). Nevertheless, this remains problematic from a media freedom perspective. Therefore, the trend of not posting on social media at certain times or when few staff are available—and the fact that journalists increasingly monitor their framing—should be closely observed by both researchers and journalists.

To counter self-censorship—or what might be called temporary self-censorship on social media due to lack of staff—organisations should increase community management resources, as some community managers themselves have requested. Currently, the role of social media management in PSM organisations tends to be underestimated from the perspective of social media editors, with some even calling for directors to engage with social media management.

While the analysis of the interviews has shown that PSM organisations have built up support measures, they could still invest more in preventive measures. Current measures—such as talks, psychological support, legal aid and counselling—only begin in the post-attack phase, when psychological damage may have already occurred. In addition, organisations should more carefully consider the length of working shifts for community managers who are tasked with moderating uncivil discourse and attacks.

Not only the PSM organisations themselves, but also the authorities and the judiciary are called upon to do more to punish and prevent attacks on media freedom, as journalists are increasingly concerned about the insufficiency of legal measures (Loosen et al. 2023). To ensure an independent and powerful PSM, according to Panievsky (2021, 2148), antimedia populism and anti-PSM populism should be treated as a form of censorship and taken seriously as a threat to journalists' independence. Accordingly, more measures need to be taken to protect the independence of the media.

Nevertheless, the study has wider implications for PSM, but also for media organisations more broadly. It has shown how PSM at different levels are affected by attacks rooted in populist rhetoric—and how they can be strengthened to prevent or deal with them.

Beyond the contribution to research on PSM specifically, this also adds to the practical perspective and implications on how PSM can support their representatives best to face or avoid these attacks. However, it is important to note that while some findings apply specifically to PSM, such as the distinctive argumentative strategies of anti-PSM populism, others may also apply to private-sector media organisations, for example, the organisational impact or how journalists respond to populist attacks. Likewise, the practical implications we have outlined can be adopted not only by PSM organisations but also by private-sector media companies.

Another important insight for journalism research in general is—as pointed out above—that populist rhetoric against media organisations is used not only by political actors but by citizens as well, which highlights the need for future research to include the latter and not focus solely on politicians.

Although this research project has captured the range of accusations and hostilities, support measures and effects, it cannot answer the question of which support measures are perceived as particularly helpful or what prevents self-censorship and/or psychological damage. Furthermore, the qualitative research design does not allow conclusions to be drawn about the frequency and prevalence of populist attacks. In addition, the influence of social desirability must also be taken into account.

Future studies could also quantitatively analyse populist attacks on PSM and compare them with those targeting private-sector media. Comparisons with PSM organisations in other countries—where populist parties play a different role and where PSM is regulated and financed differently, for example in terms of independence—are also desirable. Likewise, researchers could study anti-PSM populism from an audience perspective. Furthermore, future studies should focus on temporary self-censorship tendencies and critically examine whether specific adaptations constitute self-censorship. Our study—with its contribution to the theoretical conceptualisation of anti-PSM populism and its matrix to define self-censorship—can be helpful here.

Note

1. As interviews with journalists are expert interviews, it is ethically justifiable and appropriate to record the consent verbally, but to document this (e.g. by recording the consent) (RatSWD 2017, 34).

Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data are not available.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Johanna Wolleschensky http://orcid.org/0009-0006-1233-1669
Annika Sehl http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8949-569X

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