

Journalistic Roles in Light of Populism: How German Public Service Media Representatives Discuss Their Coverage of Populists and How They Perceive Their Role

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Abstract

Public service media (PSM) face a democratic dilemma when covering right-wing populism: They are expected to be impartial and ensure pluralism in their reporting. This requires them to give visibility to a range of views, including those of far-right parties, while safeguarding democratic principles such as non-discrimination and human dignity. In this context, it is essential to understand how PSM representatives reflect on their reporting of right-wing populism. Drawing on the concept of journalistic roles, this study examines PSM representatives' narrated role performance and role orientation in reporting on populism. Based on semi-structured interviews with twenty-six German PSM representatives, the findings reveal that journalists perceive past reporting mistakes and partly believe that PSM have contributed to the rise of populism. Regarding their role orientation, PSM representatives emphasize that they do not wish to exclude populist actors from coverage unless they make anti-constitutional statements, a stance they justify by the democratic election of these figures. More broadly, PSM representatives take on three distinct role orientations when reporting on populism: as disseminators, they aim to provide neutral coverage of events; as watchdogs, they seek to critically scrutinize populist actors; and as educators, they strive to inform the public about problematic developments within populist parties. Against the backdrop of the growing support for the German populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), this study contributes to existing research by

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proposing a conceptual framework for reporting on populism and offering qualitative insights into how PSM representatives navigate their role in covering the AfD.

Keywords

public service media, populism, journalistic roles, Germany, semi-structured interviews

Introduction

Reporting on populism poses a challenge for media organizations. This is particularly true for public service media (PSM). Because of their commitment to diversity of opinion and impartiality (European Broadcasting Union 2014), PSM may also include populist views in their reporting. However, excessive attention may strengthen populist parties by making them appear more important (Bos et al. 2011; Maurer et al. 2023). In addition, a democratic dilemma arises when covering right-wing populism, because PSM must balance impartiality and pluralism with their commitment to non-discrimination and democracy (Hien and Norman 2023).

Against this background, the question arises as to how PSM should deal with populist parties. However, existing research has rarely focused on PSM or journalists themselves, relying mainly on content analyses of their roles as initiators, gatekeepers, or interpreters (e.g., Wettstein et al. 2018). As a result, little is known about how PSM representatives reflect on their coverage of populists. Accordingly, this study addresses this gap through twenty-six semi-structured interviews with German PSM representatives in strategic and operational positions, exploring how they reflect on covering populists and their cognitive and normative roles in this context. Thus, the focus is on PSM in Germany—embedded in a normative regulatory framework and a political landscape marked by a cordon sanitaire around the populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), that is, a principled refusal to collaborate with it (Axelsen 2024: 277), despite the fact that recent polls occasionally place the party first (Infratest dimap 2025).

The interviews indicate that PSM representatives partly believe that PSM have contributed to the rise of the German populist party AfD and admit some mistakes in the early phases of coverage. Regarding their role orientation, the interviews reveal that journalists are strongly oriented toward the public service remit and primarily adhere to journalistic norms, aiming not to exclude populists from coverage.

In this respect, this study contributes to existing research by (1) offering qualitative insights into how German PSM representatives navigate their role in covering the AfD and (2) proposing a conceptual framework for reporting on populism in general.

Literature Review

Public Service Media in Germany and Their Normative Framework

German PSM emerged from the post–World War II democratization process. Following the British BBC model, but organized federally,¹ PSM (then termed public service

broadcasting) were established as “an instrument of democratic re-education and de-Nazification by the Allied occupational forces” (Hien and Norman 2023: 1164).

The legal foundation of their work—and the formulation of the public service remit—is defined by the interstate media treaty (Medienstaatsvertrag [MStV] 2020) as well as by individual PSM (inter-)state treaties for every PSM organization (Schulz et al. 2008). While the MStV binds PSM to normative quality standards, such as “independent, factual, truthful, and comprehensive information and reporting,” “to respect the principles of objectivity and impartiality,” and “to present the widest possible diversity of topics and opinions in a balanced manner” (MStV 2020, 26 [2]; authors’ translation), the individual PSM (inter-)state treaties partly even explicitly spell out that PSM should support liberal democracy. For example, the Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk (MDR) interstate treaty states that MDR “contributes to the realization of the liberal-democratic constitutional order” (MDR-Staatsvertrag 2021, 8 [1], authors’ translation). The Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) law elaborates on this commitment, stating that the WDR is supposed to “promote non-discriminatory coexistence in the federal states and the state, [. . .] to advocate for peace and social justice, defend democratic freedoms, and be committed to the truth” (WDR-Gesetz 2023, 5 [4], authors’ translation). At the same time, all individual PSM (inter-)state treaties share common principles that emphasize objectivity, impartiality, and diversity of opinions and topics. Accordingly, Hien and Norman (2023: 1165) conclude: “In these laws the core dilemma [. . .], between openness, impartiality and pluralism on the one hand, and strong protections of democratic values, on the other, emerges clearly.”

The Relationship Between Journalism and Populism

In the twenty-first century, populism has become a widely used political term, but its definition varies among scholars, politicians, and journalists (e.g., Stanyer et al. 2019). This study follows Mudde’s (2004) ideational approach, which conceptualizes populism as a thin ideology dividing society into “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” emphasizing anti-elitism and the homogeneity of the people (Mudde 2004: 543). While this minimal definition applies to all forms of populism, this paper focuses on right-wing populism, the dominant type in Europe (Spittler 2018: 100). Right-wing populism constructs the people not only in contrast to the elite, but also against out-groups, portraying them as a “culturally or ethnically bounded collectivity” threatened by outsiders (Brubaker 2017: 363). Although it can theoretically address democratic deficits, right-wing populism conflicts with pluralism and minority protections, posing threats to liberal democracy (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Vittori 2022).

The media are considered one factor contributing to the rise of populism (Brubaker 2017). In communication science, the populist communication of established media is called media populism (Krämer 2014; Mazzoleni 2008), and “can be understood as the media’s use and dissemination of certain elements of populist ideas and styles” (Wettstein et al. 2018: 478). In this regard, Esser et al. (2017) distinguish between populism by the media and populism through the media. While from the populism by the media perspective, media outlets actively spread their own populist messages, the populism through the media perspective emphasizes “some sort of ‘media

complicity” (Mazzoleni 2008: 50) between media outlets and populist parties, because the outlets—albeit unintentionally—spread the populists’ messages. In this way, Mazzoleni (2008: 50) argues that European media “contributed to a legitimization of the issues, key-words and communication styles typical of populist leaders.” Indeed, Maurer et al. (2023) showed that media coverage of AfD provocations, such as trivializing the Holocaust, increased public awareness of the party. While populism by the media is particularly associated with tabloids and talk radio (Bobba et al. 2025; Krämer 2014; Wettstein et al. 2018), there is evidence that populism through the media can also apply to PSM. PSM can trigger negative emotions by simply reporting on topics that are particularly in the focus of populists (e.g., migration), which in turn can lead to support for populist movements (Kieslich and Marcinkowski 2020).

Therefore, another way journalists deal with populist parties could be to criticize them to minimize the unintended effects of populist-related coverage (Wettstein et al. 2018: 478). However, populists often perceive the media as part of the “corrupt elite” (Mudde 2004: 543) and react by criticizing journalists through the core elements of their ideology, a phenomenon known as anti-media populism (Fawzi 2020). Consequently, journalists may also self-censor to avoid anti-media populism (Panievsky 2021, 2022). In this respect, journalists may also lean more rightward to prevent being accused of political bias toward the left, which Panievsky (2022: 809) calls “strategic bias.”

Research on the media coverage of populist actors has primarily been based on content analysis (e.g., Herkman 2017; Krüger and Zapf-Schramm 2019). The results for Germany, for example, showed that the AfD, which was elected to the German Bundestag in 2017, saw an upward trend in its frequency of appearance in major news broadcasts between 2013 and 2018 (Krüger and Zapf-Schramm 2019). For Scandinavia, Herkman (2017) found that the coverage of populists is dependent on their political situation, whether they are established parties within the political spectrum (normalization of coverage) or gaining strength (increased coverage). In addition, Esser et al. (2017: 366–367) observed three patterns in the coverage of populism: (1) When other parties do not cooperate with populist parties (and form a cordon sanitaire), populist parties generally receive less attention in media coverage; (2) negative coverage can also lead to the success of populists; and (3) the media has a critical view of populist parties out of concern for democracy. Thus, “the populist ideology poses a challenge to journalism” (Krämer and Langmann 2020: 5645)—especially to PSM.

PSM are particularly relevant, because they face the democratic dilemma that arises from their regulatory framework, which is to balance “norms of inclusivity, pluralism and impartiality while at the same time protecting norms of non-discrimination and the protection of human dignity” (Hien and Norman 2023: 1161). In this respect, the pluralism and diversity requirement, which is part of the public service remit, contradicts the anti-pluralism of (right-wing) populist parties (Holtz-Bacha 2021: 225).

At the same time, PSM are a focus of populist anti-media populism (Holtz-Bacha 2021; Sehl et al. 2022) and are thus part of the “corrupt elite” as conceptualized by Mudde (2004: 543). Although there is a lack of empirical studies dealing with how PSM representatives cover populist actors, Hien and Norman (2023: 1166)—while not

conducting an empirical study themselves—traced the publicly debated journalistic discourse on how PSM should handle the AfD. They highlighted a debate “among journalists crystalized in one side arguing for the exclusion of the AfD while others emphasized the importance of journalistic values of impartiality and pluralism, keeping an inclusive stance vis-à-vis the AfD” (Hien and Norman 2023: 1167). Accordingly, they concluded that “journalists are far from united on how to deal with the AfD” (Hien and Norman 2023: 1168) and suggested that differences in how populist actors are treated in coverage among the nine regional German PSM organizations may also be linked to regional variations in voter support for the AfD.

Krämer and Langmann (2020) examined journalistic reflections on reporting about the AfD through an analysis of meta-journalistic discourse. They found that most articles advocated a neutral, professional approach—reporting critically without demonizing the AfD—since it was “not their responsibility to defeat [right-wing populism]” (Krämer and Langmann 2020: 5655). Similarly, interviews with Norwegian journalists showed a sense of duty to report on extremism but also support a “relatively restrictive approach to the inclusion of voices deemed extremist to avoid amplifying and legitimizing these actors” (Larsen 2021: 117). Arguments for including extremists ranged from informing and warning the public to upholding journalistic quality and countering extremism. An interview study in the Benelux region further indicated that right-wing populist parties are often included because of their electoral relevance, while other journalists reject giving such movements any platform (de Jonge 2019).

However, there is a lack of interview studies focusing on PSM representatives, especially in Germany, and their role orientation in reporting on populism.

Journalistic Roles in Light of Populism

Despite some insight into the journalistic understanding of the concept of populism (Stanyer et al. 2019), research in communication science has rarely dealt with journalists’ role conceptions in light of (right-wing) populism. Following Hanitzsch and Vos (2017: 120), journalistic roles “are the discursive articulation and enactment of journalism’s identity as a social institution.” In this respect, the concept of journalistic roles helps to understand what journalists consider adequate in their work (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017: 120). While many studies have dealt with journalistic roles, the concepts under study are labeled differently and inconsistently (Hanitzsch and Örnebring 2019). Only a few authors have provided a systematization of perspectives on journalistic roles (e.g., Mellado et al. 2017). Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) proposed distinguishing between normative role orientations (what journalists ought to do), cognitive role orientations (what they want to do), practiced roles (what they do in practice), and narrated roles (what they say they do).

In light of the tremendous scholarship dealing with journalistic roles, researchers have developed numerous dimensions of different roles. For example, Weaver et al. (1986) established the dominant roles of adversary, disseminator, and interpreter, which they later expanded to include the role of populist mobilizer (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996). Usually cited as one of the first role distinctions (Hanitzsch 2018) is

Cohen's (1963: 17–54) dichotomy of neutral and participant roles. Later, Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) proposed a systematization of eighteen political roles along six political functions of journalism (informational-instructive, analytical-deliberative, critical-monitorial, advocative-radical, development-educative, and collaborative-facilitative). While the disseminator role (informational-instructive dimension) focuses primarily on reporting things “as they are” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018: 153), the watchdog role (critical-monitorial) takes on a more active role in which politics and businesses are critically scrutinized. Being more interventionist, the missionary role (advocative-radical) embraces certain political ideologies or values, and in the educator role (development-educative), the main aim is to enlighten and act as a teacher. In the context of right-wing populism, interventionism especially plays a major role. Interventionism “reflects the extent to which journalists pursue a particular mission and promote certain values” (Hanitzsch 2007: 372). In this regard, journalists can either play an active role, for instance, in promoting social change, or they can see themselves as neutral observers of events.

While there has not been much research combining journalistic roles with coverage of populist actors, Wettstein et al. (2018) proposed three roles: (a) journalism can fulfill a gatekeeping function and spread the messages of populists or “close the news gates to populist political actors” (Wettstein et al. 2018: 478; gatekeeping role); (b) journalists can be interpreters of populist positions and evaluate them positively or negatively (interpreter role); and (c) they can be originators of populism themselves (initiator role). By analyzing media outlets in ten European countries, they found that media outlets dominantly have a skeptical position toward populists and evaluate them in a negative way—especially in countries with a political cordon sanitaire. Although the authors offered useful insights into the roles journalists play in light of populism, they did not explicitly connect these roles to the theoretical framework of journalistic role conceptions.

Focusing on right-wing extremism and reporting on right-wing extremists, German journalists tend to have a passive understanding of their role and primarily follow the norm of objectivity (Baugut and Neumann 2019). In contrast, the role of German journalists appears to be more interventionist when it comes to minority issues such as antisemitism (Baugut 2021). Accordingly, journalists “strongly condemned antisemitism and often articulated a perceived duty to advocate for and give a voice to Jews” (Baugut 2021: 545). Overall, however, there is a lack of research on journalists' understanding of their role in the coverage of right-wing populism and populists.

This is particularly true for PSM, who find themselves in the democratic dilemma described above. In addition, there is a conflict between an active and interventionist role orientation in covering issues related to right-wing populism (such as antisemitism) and PSMs' ascribed role as a neutral observer (Steinigeweg 2022: 368).

Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

Since there is a lack of both theoretical considerations and empirical studies on journalistic roles in the coverage of populist actors, we propose a conceptual framework

for studying journalistic roles in the context of populism. In doing so, we integrate the proposals of various authors on how journalism operates in the context of populism (initiator, gatekeeper, interpreter, see Wettstein et al. 2018; as well as populism through the media and populism by the media, see Esser et al. 2017) and combine the identified dimensions with theoretical reflections on journalistic roles (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; 2018). Table 1 provides an overview of selected theoretical approaches and systematizations for theorizing journalistic roles in the context of populism.

In line with the considerations of various scholars, the question of whether journalists perceive themselves as originators of populism (initiator role; Wettstein et al. 2018) primarily relates to an assessment of their past work and thus to their narrated role (performance), meaning what they say they do (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Journalists may perceive their role in different ways: (a) they may believe they play no role in initiating populism (no initiator role); (b) they may acknowledge that they have contributed—perhaps unknowingly—to the dissemination of populist messages (populism through the media); or (c) they may believe they actively spread their own populist messages (populism by the media; Esser et al. 2017).

While the gatekeeping role (closing the gates or not) and the interpreter role (how to evaluate populists' positions; Wettstein et al. 2018) can also relate to narrated role performance and retrospective evaluation, they are even more strongly linked to normative considerations and the “institutional values, attitudes, and beliefs individual journalists embrace as a result of their socialization” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017: 125). This, in turn, raises the question of what they want to do, meaning their cognitive role orientation, which is shaped by their normative role orientation—that is societal expectations, and, in the case of PSM representatives, the public service remit.

Thus, we examine the extent to which journalists seek to exclude populist actors from news coverage (gatekeeping role; Wettstein et al. 2018) or, conversely, integrate them into their reporting. Additionally, we explore how journalists interpret and evaluate populist positions (interpreter role; Wettstein et al. 2018). The interpreter role, in particular, can be reflected through established role dimensions (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). For example, if journalists believe they should neither judge nor evaluate populist positions, they embody the role of a neutral disseminator (informational-instructive dimension²). Conversely, if they perceive their role as informing the public about problems, their role orientation aligns more closely with that of an educator (developmental-educative dimension).

Following this conceptual framework, we investigate both narrated role performance and the cognitive and normative role orientation in the coverage of populist actors by PSM representatives, who, due to the public service remit, find themselves in the aforementioned democratic dilemma (Hien and Norman 2023).

Therefore, we focus on PSM representatives and pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do PSM representatives in Germany reflect on their initiator role regarding PSMs' coverage of right-wing populism and related issues (*narrated role performance*)?

Table 1. Overview of Selected Theoretical Approaches and Systematizations for Theorizing Journalistic Roles in the Context of Populism.

General journalistic roles		Systematizations of the relation journalism-populism	
Cognitive role orientation	Informational-instructive function	Initiator	Populism through the media
Normative role orientation	Disseminator, Curator, Storyteller (<i>roles</i>)	Gatekeeper	Populism by the media
Narrated role performance	Analytical-deliberative function Analyst, Access Provider, Mobilizer (<i>roles</i>)	Interpreter	Esser et al. 2017
Practiced role performance	Critical-monitorial function Monitor, Detective, Watchdog (<i>roles</i>)	Wettstein et al. 2018	
Hanitzsch and Vos 2017	Advocative-radical function Adversary, Advocate, Missionary (<i>roles</i>)		
	Developmental-educative function Mediator, Educator, Change Agent (<i>roles</i>)		
	Collaborative-facilitative function Facilitator, Collaborator, Mouthpiece (<i>roles</i>)		
	Hanitzsch and Vos 2018		

RQ2: What is German PSM representatives' *role orientation* (cognitive and normative) in light of covering right-wing populism and related issues regarding (a) their gatekeeping role and (b) their interpreter role?

Method

Because of the lack of previous research, we chose to apply an explorative approach. To this end, we conducted twenty-six semi-structured interviews with German PSM representatives. The sample includes representatives of all nine regional PSM organizations (ARD), the nationwide PSM television organization ZDF, the nationwide PSM radio organization Deutschlandradio, and *funk*, ARD and ZDF's online-only youth-oriented network. Our sample mainly includes political journalists (e.g., from news and magazine programs, in part with a special focus on right-wing populism), but also social media editors who must navigate their roles within an environment where anti-media populism is increasingly widespread (Fawzi 2020: 48). To maximize heterogeneity, our sample included PSM representatives in strategic positions (e.g., editors in chief and editorial managers) and operative positions (e.g., reporters and social media editors; cf. Table 2). The sampling strategy followed the snowball principle by first addressing specific journalists based on their positions. Access to additional participants was provided by the PSM organizations and the participants. The interviews were conducted in German between August 2022 and December 2022. At the time, the AfD was polled between 12 and 15 percent in Germany (Infratest dimap 2025).

With respect to data protection,³ participants received an information sheet beforehand outlining all relevant details regarding the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, anonymity, and procedures for data processing, storage, and deletion. During the recorded interview, key aspects were reiterated verbally, and consent to participate was documented through the recordings.⁴

The interview guide comprised questions about the perceived role of PSM journalism regarding the rise and strengthening of populism and populist parties (narrated role performance). In addition, the interview guide included questions about the cognitive and normative role in light of populism and the extent to which PSM must include or exclude populist politicians in public debates from the perspective of the interviewees (details in Section A of the Supplemental Materials). The interviews were conducted virtually, and, in a few cases, by telephone for technical reasons, and lasted between thirty-five and eighty minutes, with an average duration of fifty minutes. Part of the interview data focused on populist media criticism and harassment directed at PSM; the findings from this section have been published in a separate publication (Wolleschensky and Sehl 2025).

After transcription, the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach of Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022), who refer to it as content-structuring content analysis, and with the support of the software MAXQDA. This approach represents one variant of qualitative content analysis (cf. Schreier 2014) and was chosen because it enables the systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of

Table 2. Characteristics of the Interviewees.

Characteristics of the interview partners ^a		Number of interviews
Regional PSM organizations	Bayerischer Rundfunk	2
	Hessischer Rundfunk	1
	Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk	2
	Norddeutscher Rundfunk	2
	Radio Bremen	1
	Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg	3
	Saarländischer Rundfunk	1
	Südwestrundfunk	5
	Westdeutscher Rundfunk	1
National PSM organizations	Deutschlandradio	4
	funk	3
	Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen	1
Genre	News/Magazines	14
	Social media	8
	Other ^b	4
Position	Strategic/Managerial staff	20
	Operational staff	6
Gender	Male	17
	Female	9

Table adapted from Wolleschensky and Sehl (2025), with minor modifications.

^aThe characteristics were derived from names and job titles.

^bOther includes chief-editors and managers of special genres.

topics and their interrelations (cf. Chew and Tandoc 2024; Lehner 2025; Weikmann and Lecheler 2024).

A defining characteristic of this thematic analysis is its combination of deductive and inductive category development (cf. Lehner 2025; Weikmann and Lecheler 2024). Following Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022), the procedure typically proceeds in several iterative phases. In the first coding phase, the material was coded using a set of main categories that were deductively derived from the interview guide or directly linked to the study’s research questions. The entire dataset was then coded according to these main categories. In the next analytical phase, the initially broad main categories were refined inductively through the development of subcategories. For each main category, all coded text passages were compiled and examined in detail to identify recurring themes, distinctions, or dimensions within the material. Once the system of subcategories had been established, a second round of coding was conducted, in which the material previously coded under the main categories was re-coded using the more detailed subcategories. The inductive and deductive codes used were documented in a codebook in MAXQDA (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022; cf. Sorce 2021; details in Section B of the Supplemental Materials).

To provide context while maintaining anonymity, only a general description of the role of the respondents will be given, not specific job titles. The quotes were translated into English for this article.

Findings

Reflection on PSMs' Coverage of Right-wing Populism and Related Issues (Narrated Role Performance)

In terms of their narrated role performance, PSM representatives' views varied when it came to the role of PSM in bolstering populism (*initiator role*). On the one hand, PSM representatives expressed the opinion that PSM has not played a significant role in the rise of populism in Germany. In this regard, they questioned what alternative approaches could have been taken in reporting on migration and the AfD: "If we contribute to populism by reporting on things, I would question that very strongly. [. . .] So, what would be the alternative? Not to report on it? [. . .] That idea doesn't occur to me" (220822, Social Media, Managerial). Some of them also believe that the influence of the media is being overestimated: "I'm of the opinion that those who raise the accusation that too much media coverage of populists helps them are overestimating the impact of what's possible, especially in PSM. Those are lines of argument from the 1980s" (230822, News, Managerial).

On the other hand, other PSM representatives believe that PSM has indeed unintentionally played a role in bolstering populism through their reporting. For example, one respondent pointed out that court decisions require PSM to include populist parties in times of elections, which consequently gives them partial responsibility for the rise of populism. Some of them even cited communication science studies on the subject (e.g., Maurer et al. 2023):

Professor Maurer made us journalists painfully aware that there is a correlation between the level of support for the AfD in opinion polls on the one hand, and their presence in the media—and thus, of course, also in our own coverage—on the other. (160822, Other, Managerial)

The reasons for this perceived responsibility given by the interviewees can be systematized into topic-related and actor-related reasons.

Regarding *topic-related reasons*, the interviewees argued that, especially at the beginning, terms and topics were adopted without reflection. On the one hand, they believe that some topics (e.g., migration) were sometimes reported on too positively or that real issues (such as integration problems) were not properly addressed. For example, one respondent stated:

I don't believe that there would be no populism if PSM had done everything right. But PSM did contribute to it. And I at least partly share the analysis that, during the refugee crisis—especially at the beginning—the reporting focused very much on positive examples, on helpfulness, but also on positive examples among the refugees themselves, such as the first

student, the first one to get a job, while the problems were, for a long time, largely ignored in PSM. (250822, News, Managerial)

On the other hand, they also argued that there was too much coverage of populist topics, such as migration.

Concerning *actor-related reasons*, some interviewees saw mistakes in the overrepresentation of AfD representatives in the coverage: “I think, especially at the beginning, when the AfD emerged, it already received extremely high attention, even though the AfD wasn’t that large, and the media in general, I believe, contributed to amplifying it” (260922, Social Media, Operational). They also cited false balance or the selection of guests in talk shows as errors in reporting. One interviewee argued as follows:

When it came to the issue of migration, there was certainly a disproportionate amount of space given to party representatives, including representatives of the AfD. So of course, we also have to keep an eye on our overall programs and make sure that we reflect social reality and social conditions. (150922, Other, Managerial)

Another respondent also saw a kind of “pendulum effect” (German: *Schweinezyklus*), where overrepresentation and underrepresentation alternate.

I would have wished for more courage there—actually in many phases of the development. Looking at the AfD again now, I would have preferred a somewhat more balanced selection of guests. It feels like a pendulum effect, a kind of journalistic cycle where either almost no one is invited, even though it’s a relevant group, or far too many are invited, which in turn creates a false balance and gives them too much weight. (130922, Other, Managerial)

The interviewees also saw mistakes in the preparation of interviews with AfD politicians, or more generally, that many were not prepared for the rise of populists in Germany: “I believe that many PSM journalists were not prepared to conduct debates with populists, and especially with right-wing populists, and that this in fact encouraged them” (140902, Magazine, Managerial).

Other reasons included reporting too negatively about the AfD or focusing too much on scandals involving the AfD.

PSM Representatives’ Role Orientation in Light of Covering Right-wing Populism and Related Issues

In terms of the cognitive and normative role orientation of PSM representatives in dealing with (right-wing) populism, the results can be analyzed through the lens of the gatekeeper and interpreter roles (Wettstein et al. 2018).

With regard to *the gatekeeper role* it was a common view (based on this qualitative sample) among interviewees that German PSM representatives did not seek to exclude populist politicians from their coverage unless these politicians had expressed dehumanizing positions in the past. They gave various reasons for this. The most

dominant reasons were that the AfD is democratically elected, and that the number of AfD voters is large and must also be represented in PSM, as one interview argued:

They represent a relevant part of the electorate and a relevant part of our audience. Our audience is also our financier, our client. [. . .] And in this respect, we can't really exclude anyone from the political debate. Unless there are criminal offenses, violations of principles enshrined in the constitution, then of course it's not possible. (140901, News/Magazine, Managerial)

Other reasons were that, as an opposition party, AfD positions are also politically relevant. In some cases, the view was also held that no one was entitled to be covered. Some interviewees indicated that they themselves maintain statistics on the representation of various parties, for example, in interviews, to ensure a broader diversity of perspectives. Others, however, disagreed with the non-statutory but often advocated concept of proportionality, in which a party's airtime is directly linked to its electoral success. They argued that coverage should be determined by subject matter and viewpoints rather than proportional representation in parliament.

Regarding the *interpreter role*, the PSM representatives said that it was not their job to evaluate populism, but that they must take on a neutral role. In particular, they argued that PSM should not point fingers because this "transcends its intended function. Journalism—including PSM—can only describe what is. It cannot paint the world as it should be" (230822, News/Magazine, Managerial). The general perspective was that PSM should not take an activist stance here. One interviewee explained that he believes "it's not our task to, for instance, act as a counterbalance to certain political or societal trends. It's also not, by the way, our task as media to diminish the AfD" (241022, News/Magazine, Managerial). In this context, it was argued that it is not the task of PSM to combat populism. However, there were also interviewees who assumed that PSM could indirectly combat populism by providing information and context:

I don't think we should interpret our role as having a sort of political mandate to combat populism. Instead, I believe our mandate is twofold: to accurately portray what is happening, and to provide people with context, presenting different perspectives. Ultimately, good information is the best antidote to populism. (140902, News/Magazine, Managerial)

However, populism was not seen as implicitly negative by all respondents:

I am not one of those who demonize populism per se. First, it simply means listening to the voice of the people. It has something to do with the majority, with the masses. I don't find that reprehensible in the first instance. And I also think that it's our job as PSM—that's why we exist—to pick up on topics that are on the agenda of the broad majority of society and throw them into the discourse. (241022, News, Managerial)

However, the respondents see the role of PSM as watchdogging populism and populist actors, for example, through investigative research or fact-checking. However, this is considered to be in line with the role of a neutral mediator:

We have to present what is. And this also includes depicting undesirable developments. And populism is, in a way, an undesirable development. You don't necessarily always have to do this as a sender and commentator, but by indirectly reporting it. So, others criticize it and you simply portray it. (130901, News/Magazine, Managerial)

In this regard, the common view was that populist parties should be treated like all other parties because "only in this way can public service journalism function properly without the famous victim role, into which the populists then also like to slip, possibly even being justified in parts" (230822, News/Magazine, Managerial). In addition to this watchdog role vis-à-vis populists, the watchdog role is also emphasized for certain topics:

I believe that you always do populists a big favor if you completely omit social problems from your reporting and then leave them to others. And I believe that PSM can handle this extremely well because there are no dependencies on special interests and it is therefore indeed possible to extensively cover all problems. (010901, Social Media, Managerial)

The watchdog role is also accompanied by an educational role. However, this role is defined less as a teacher and more as an enlightener in the Kantian sense. In this context, the interviewees were not only interested in reporting neutrally but also in informing the audience about certain developments and topics. This applies in particular to disinformation and populist statements that are anti-constitutional: "We have the classic enlightenment function of informing people about what is going on there, what potential dangers emanate from this area of populism" (160822, News/Magazine, Managerial). Another interviewee put it as follows:

We have to clarify, clarify, clarify. So, I think that's the biggest thing. I don't think many people know what the term populism means. In other words, that's where you basically have to start and explain what it actually is. How does something like this come about? Perhaps simply discuss the psychological perspective. And then we need to educate people; in other words, we need to teach media literacy. (220822, Social Media, Managerial)

Accordingly, the mandate of PSM is once again seen as being broader than simply reporting neutrally. On the other hand, the interviewees also distanced themselves from the missionary role and did not want to provide information in a certain direction. As one PSM representative said:

It's about education. And it is definitely not about indoctrination. It's not about me as a journalist telling people what they should think. It's about me putting the facts on the table and then saying, "Now form your own opinion". (250822, News/Magazine, Managerial)

To summarize, the interviews revealed three role orientations: that of the neutral disseminator, that of the watchdog aiming to monitor populist actors, and that of the educator who seeks to inform the public about problematic developments. In contrast, the missionary role was perceived critically and tended to be rejected. However,

journalists individually emphasized these roles to varying degrees—not all of them equally identified with all three. Still, no systematic differences in the role conception between PSM representatives in the news, magazine, and social media sector, nor between operational and strategic staff were found.

Discussion

As outlined, PSM face a democratic dilemma in their reporting on right-wing populism: They are required to report impartially and ensure pluralism while simultaneously upholding fundamental democratic values such as non-discrimination and human rights (Hien and Norman 2023). However, this democratic dilemma and the ways in which PSM representatives reflect on it have so far received limited scholarly attention, as most existing studies have focused on content analyses. Therefore, based on twenty-six semi-structured interviews, the present study has shed new light on how PSM representatives reflect on their own role in the rise of the populist party AfD in Germany (narrated role performance) and how they define their role (cognitive and normative role orientation).

Regarding narrated role performance, the results can be interpreted in terms of the *initiator role* (Wettstein et al. 2018). The interviewees reflected on the mistakes that PSM made in reporting on right-wing populism—these mistakes are seen as a reason why PSM journalism partly contributed to the rise of populism. Various reasons were mentioned that can be systematized into topic-based and actor-based reasons, providing the basis for further research (including content analyses). While the interviews primarily addressed the populism through the media perspective (Esser et al. 2017), the interviewees rarely mentioned the populism by the media perspective. This can be interpreted as an indication that they do not see themselves as responsible for spreading populist messages.

Regarding role orientation, we analyzed the results through the lens of the *gate-keeper and interpreter roles* (Wettstein et al. 2018). In terms of the gatekeeping of populist actors, it is evident that PSM representatives did not want to close the gates unless populists made anti-constitutional statements. Their main justification for covering the AfD was that the party was democratically elected. Thus, the normalization of coverage (Herkman 2017) also seems to apply to Germany and PSM, aligning with previous findings from other countries (de Jonge 2019). However, these results contradict the results derived from content analysis (Esser et al. 2017), which suggests that a political cordon sanitaire leads to less attention for populist parties. This contradiction likely arises from the gap between role performance (practice) and role orientation (rhetoric; Mellado and van Dalen 2014). Further studies need to clarify the reasons for this gap in the context of reporting on populists and populism and whether anti-media populism plays a role here.

Regarding the *interpreter role*, it is evident that PSM representatives have various role orientations when reporting on populists (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). This refers to three main dimensions: the informational-instructive, the critical-monitorial, and the developmental-educative functions of journalism (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). (a) In the

context of reporting on right-wing populists and the AfD, PSM representatives mainly have a neutral disseminator role understanding. They emphasized that they wanted to report what was happening without fulfilling a finger-wagging function. (b) In addition to this neutral disseminator role, the watchdog role is particularly significant. While PSM representatives emphasized that populist actors should be treated like other politicians, the results show that watchdogging populism and populist actors is seen as an important task. In this context, fact-checking and investigative research are particularly emphasized, and PSM representatives see themselves as an early warning system. (c) Furthermore, an educator role is also apparent, aligning with the above roles. In this context, PSM representatives emphasized that they wanted to inform the public about certain developments. The educator role is seen more as an enlightener than a teacher, as described by Hanitzsch and Vos (2018).

Overall, PSM representatives see themselves as minimally interventionist; they do not want to pursue a specific mission or promote certain values (Hanitzsch 2007). Accordingly, they do not want to counteract populism and populist parties, although some believe that good information can counteract populism.

Building on these findings, the reflections of PSM representatives must be understood within the normative and legal frameworks that defines their remit. While the MStV and the individual PSM (inter-)state treaties bind PSM both to impartiality and to the protection of democratic values, the interviews suggest that they are privileging impartiality over democratic defense. This dynamic can possibly be situated in a context in which PSM representatives are attacked and delegitimized by populist actors for allegedly lacking neutrality (Wolleschensky and Sehl 2025). Similar to Panievsky's (2022: 809) concept of "strategic bias," which shows how Israeli journalists adopt right-leaning reporting to avoid being labeled leftist, German PSM journalists may also exercise a form of restraint. Their mandate to defend democracy and ensure pluralism, non-discrimination, and other fundamental democratic norms may therefore be enacted more implicitly out of concern for potential accusations of lacking neutrality. As Hien and Norman (2023: 1172) concluded, "it seems, professional ethics of journalists and a broader concern with safeguarding the public service media as a guarantor for impartial and non-political reporting often trumps the perceived need to respond forcefully to actors like the AfD."

However, in this context, the new role of watchdogging populism can also be seen as an attempt to fulfill a variety of normative tasks arising from the public service remit (inclusivity, pluralism, impartiality, non-discrimination, and protection of human dignity; Hien and Norman 2023). Compared to exclusion from reporting (building a media cordon sanitaire), this appears to be more in line with the public service remit, which requires impartial and pluralistic reporting and diversity of opinion. Thus, PSM journalists translate normative tensions resulting from the public service remit into professionalism-driven strategies (for similar findings, cf. Krämer and Langmann 2020), defending democracy not through a missionary role orientation, explicit political positioning, or exclusion (closing the gates) from public discourse, but through neutral dissemination, watchdogging populism, and educating the public about potential threats to democratic values.

However, the extent to which this represents a PSM-specific approach to populists remains an open question that still needs to be investigated. Additionally, social desirability must be considered, as well as the fact that there are differences between role orientation, narrated role performance, and actual role performance (measured through content analysis; Mellado and van Dalen 2014). Furthermore, the results cannot be generalized. Further studies should also aim to compare German PSM representatives with PSM representatives in countries where populists are already part of the government and where PSM organizations are more dependent on them due to their funding or governing structures. This dependency may result in a role orientation that focuses more on neutral reporting than on critically watchdogging. In this context, further longitudinal studies could examine how journalists' role orientation changes when the role and strength of populists in a country shift and whether this also leads to changes in their approach to gatekeeping.

Overall, our study makes two contributions to the current research. Regarding its theoretical contribution, we present a conceptual framework that connects previous research on journalistic roles with research on populism coverage, thereby building on existing studies (Esser et al. 2017; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 2018; Wettstein et al. 2018). This framework could serve as a foundation for a (new) research strand that focuses on journalists' perspectives on their reporting of populism. In this regard, empirically, our study is among the first to explore the role conceptions of PSM representatives who find themselves in the democratic dilemma described by Hien and Norman (2023). Our findings suggest that through the newly emerging role of watchdogging populism, PSM representatives attempt to reconcile various normative responsibilities derived from the public service remit.

The extent to which journalistic roles in the context of right-wing populism will develop over time and against the backdrop of the yet unpredictable success of right-wing populists in Germany remains a question that future research will have to answer.

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Ethical Considerations

As recommended by the Rat für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsdaten (RatSWD 2017: 25–6), the study was evaluated using a self-assessment questionnaire (RatSWD 2017: 46) to determine whether formal institutional ethics approval was necessary. Based on this assessment, and because the participants were not considered a vulnerable population, could not be personally identified, and were not exposed to any risks beyond those of everyday life, no formal ethics approval was required.

Consent to Participate

All participants gave their informed verbal consent prior to participation, which was documented via audio recording.

Consent for Publication

Informed verbal consent for the publication of non-identifying information was obtained from all participants and documented by audio recording.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The participants of this study did not provide consent for their data to be shared publicly. To protect participant privacy and prevent potential re-identification, supporting data are not available.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In Germany, PSM consists of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (ARD), a consortium of nine regional PSM organizations (BR, HR, NDR, MDR, SR, SWR, Radio Bremen, RBB and WDR), Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), a national television PSM organization, and Deutschlandradio, a national radio PSM organization (Sehl 2024).
2. As previously indicated, Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) classified different roles based on functions that conceptually bundle similar roles, since journalistic roles also arise from the functions attributed to journalism by society.
3. As recommended by the Rat für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsdaten (RatSWD 2017: 25–6), the study was evaluated using a self-assessment questionnaire (RatSWD 2017: 46) to determine whether formal institutional ethics approval was necessary. Based on this assessment, and because the participants were not considered a vulnerable population, could not be personally identified, and were not exposed to any risks beyond those of everyday life, no formal ethics approval was required. As the study therefore did not involve ethical considerations beyond data protection and informed consent—such as the handling of potential psychological or social risks, exposure to sensitive topics, or the need for debriefing—the institution's data protection officer at that time provided guidance regarding the research protocol. This consultation included procedures to ensure safe data collection, storage, handling, and measures to guarantee anonymization and participants' privacy.

The information sheet provided to participants, which contained all relevant information regarding the study, was also reviewed as part of this consultation.

4. Given that the interviews involved journalists acting as experts, it was ethically permissible to obtain consent verbally, provided that this was appropriately documented, for instance, through an audio recording (RatSWD 2017: 34).

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