

Comparing Frame Repertoires of Mainstream and Right-Wing Alternative Media

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Comparing Frame Repertoires of Mainstream and Right-Wing Alternative Media

Abstract

Under the premise that the use of alternative news frames is a key characteristic of alternative media, this study examines frame repertoires of alleged mainstream media and right-wing alternative media (RAM) in Germany. This endeavor is based on quantitative content analyses of eighteen news websites, including seven RAM, on two issues: immigration and the coalition talks following the German federal elections 2017. In multidimensional scaling models, we inspect how the media outlets relate to each other. The results show two types of RAM that deviate from the mainstream in different ways. The first type is clearly distinguishable by its interpretive style and heavy use of alternative frames. Media of this type openly oppose immigration, the German government and mainstream media. The second type, consisting of international news providers like *RT*, exhibits a more descriptive style and frame repertoires that are similar to conservative mainstream media. We discuss this as a strategy to establish credibility and highlight perspectives for further research on RAM.

Key words: *right-wing alternative media, framing, multidimensional scaling, content analysis, ideology, Germany*

Word count: 8383

Introduction

The internet has provided new facilities for alternative media to reach large audiences and to weaken the interpretive authority of legacy news media by challenging the dominant perspectives on public issues (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018). Although this change could foster diversity

and democratic discourse, especially far-right alternative media have received particular attention recently due to their popularity along with peculiarities that could contribute to a disruption of the public sphere (Entman and Usher 2018). Researchers in the US have noted an ideological asymmetry in that right-wing alternative media form an ecosystem of their own, which is clearly separated from the mainstream media and characterized by a liability toward misinformation and reinforcing feedback dynamics (Faris et al. 2017; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). Media on the left side of the ideological spectrum, in contrast, were found to be less detached from the mainstream and more receptive to correcting mechanisms. So far, however, there is little research on the situation in other countries like Germany that have experienced a similar rise of right-wing alternative media (Heft et al. 2020). Furthermore, Rone (2018; 2019) has argued that the common focus on disinformation is too narrow, since many of the stories published by alternative media are not fake news but rather exhibit a hyperpartisan bias (see similarly, Mourão and Robertson 2019). For this reason, she recommends analyzing the frames in RAM content. The present study therefore follows the approach by Norocel et al. (2017) and uses framing analysis to map the positions of German news outlets in the public sphere, exploring how alleged RAM differ from the mainstream media and relate from each other.

Frames and frame repertoires

According to Gitlin's (1980, 7) definition, "[m]edia frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse." Entman (1993) further specified that frames fulfill four functions: they (a) define situations or events as (un)problematic, (b) identify causal conditions or responsible actors, and (c) make moral judgments of these circumstances, thereby

(d) justifying and endorsing specific courses of action. Since problem definitions, causal interpretations, and moralization serve to legitimize and rationalize certain policies (Edelman 1988, 21–22), frames resonate to varying degrees with different ideologies. However, a single application of a particular frame by a media outlet is only a limited indicator of its ideological profile. A distinct ideological profile unfolds from a consistent, one-sided use of mutually supportive frames (Baden and Springer 2017). For instance, content analyses of RAM have identified a ‘pars-pro-toto strategy’ by which outlets repeatedly report on incidents of immigrant criminality, quoting stories from local news media that are of marginal ideological significance in themselves. A constant focus on such incidents—while simultaneously ignoring crimes with other perpetrators and foregoing depictions of immigrants in other roles—leads to a clear ideological perspective on immigration as a threat to national security (Bühl 2010, 247–248; Nygaard 2019, 12; Rone 2018, 7). It is therefore necessary to analyze broader frame repertoires, i.e. sets of frames used by a media outlet in the coverage of an issue. These repertoires can then be interpreted in terms of distinctness and diversity to obtain an accurate picture of the outlet’s editorial line (Baden and Springer 2017).

Framing in alternative media

Since frames convey ideological perspectives on reality, the degree with which frame repertoires of specific outlets deviate from those of the mainstream media can be conceived as an indicator of how alternative these outlets are. This approach incorporates a gradual perspective on the alternative—mainstream relationship viewing these labels as poles of a continuum rather than binary categories (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Rauch 2016). Accordingly, the approach can yield different constellations of how outlets that identify as alternative relate to the mainstream media.

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Most obviously, studies can show clear contrasts between the frame repertoires of different news media indicating that these belong to distinct spheres of public discourse. For instance, von Nordheim, Müller, and Scheppe (2019) found clear differences in framing when they compared the coverage of the so-called refugee crisis by the German right-wing weekly *Junge Freiheit* to that of three quality newspapers. Their analysis shows that the *Junge Freiheit* provided an ethnocentric perspective on immigration, neglecting the global dimension of immigration and xenophobic attacks against refugees. Similarly, Ylä-Anttila, Bauvois, and Pyrhönen (2019) investigated how a Finnish RAM outlet covered immigration in comparison to a leading mainstream newspaper, identifying distinct alternative frames like the portrayal of the Finnish people as victims of foreign terrorists.

However, alternative media can also diverge in more subtle ways from the mainstream. For instance, in a content analysis of RAM in Germany, Frischlich et al. (2020, 158) found that “[a]lternative viewpoints were carefully inserted into the overall communication flow, veiled by articles that could as well have been published in any of the mainstream news media sites”. Furthermore, there can be discrepancies between the self-portrayal as alternative on the one hand and empirically observable framing on the other. Robertson and Mourão (2020) argue that some self-proclaimed alternative outlets only mimic alternative media practices while presenting conservative viewpoints that are in fact prominently featured by the mainstream media (see also Nimmo 2016).

What is more, studies can find a convergence between mainstream and alternative media (Kenix 2011). Norocel, Szabó, and Bene (2017) located the positions of Hungarian and Bulgarian RAM in the respective country’s public sphere by analyzing similarities to mainstream media in the framing of two domestic issues per country. Network analyses revealed that the far-right outlets remain isolated from the mainstream in Bulgaria, but are partially integrated into the polarized mainstream in Hungary as they employ similar frame repertoires as the center-right media.

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Scholars argue that the mainstream media in Germany take a critical stance toward RAM isolating them in a ‘cordon sanitaire’, which would suggest a rather strong distance between these media (Heft et al. 2020). So far, however, no systematic studies have examined the framing of multiple alternative media across issues. The present study therefore seeks to address this gap with the research question:

RQ1: Do the frame repertoires of German right-wing alternative media show clear differences compared to the frame repertoires of mainstream media?

Besides this aggregated view, it is necessary to examine how RAM relate to each other. For instance, Horne, Nørregaard and Adalı (2019) identified ‘spirals of sameness’ within alternative media communities that result from extensive copying of each other’s content. However, other scholars point to significant differences within the spectrum of RAM (Holt 2019, 31). Heft et al. (2020) showed that some alternative media have rather conventional websites resembling those of traditional mainstream media in terms of thematic categories, while others maintain a more alternative appearance. Similarly, Nygaard (2019) demonstrated that besides an interpretive style of reporting, RAM can also adopt a rather descriptive journalistic style serving an ‘appearance of objectivity’. However, there is little research with regard to differences in framing between RAM. Therefore, we ask:

RQ2: How do German right-wing alternative media differ in terms of their frame repertoires?

Issues of the present study

We selected two issues that were prevalent in news coverage during the timeframe of our study in November 2017 and had the potential for competing news frames that align with different ideological orientations: (a) immigration, and (b) the coalition talks following the latest German federal election.

Immigration

An issue of steady public attention, immigration became a dominant topic of news coverage in the wake of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, where Germany was the main receiving country in Europe, arousing harsh criticism from far-right populists and RAM (Baldauf et al. 2017). The mainstream media, in contrast, largely framed refugees favorably, presenting them primarily as victims of social grievances (Greck 2018; Joris et al. 2018). This changed, however, in the aftermath of New Year's Eve 2015, when groups of immigrants sexually assaulted women in Cologne (Bielicki 2019). Many mainstream media reacted by setting a stronger focus on immigrant crimes (Maurer et al. 2019).

Coalition talks

The German federal elections in September 2017 were followed by an unprecedentedly long period of government formation (Bräuninger et al. 2019). The social-democratic SPD declared immediately after the election that they would not continue the grand coalition with the CDU/CSU. Thus, the latter, which had received the most votes, started preliminary negotiations over a so-called Jamaica coalition with the free-market oriented FDP and the Greens. These negotiations failed, however, as the FDP withdrew from the talks after four weeks on November 20. Since the CDU/CSU ruled out coalitions with the far-right AfD and the Left Party, public debates discussed a minority government and snap elections as options besides a

new grand coalition. Eventually, the SPD gave up its resistance in March 2018 and continued the coalition with CDU/CSU.

Method

Sample

We conducted standardized manual content analyses of articles published on 18 popular German news websites. Eleven of these sites could be regarded as mainstream and seven as RAM. As commercial mainstream media we selected the online news websites with the widest reach between January and September 2017 based on ratings from German media market analysts. Outlets were selected if they had continuously more than 50 million visits per month (IVW) or more than 10 million unique users per month (AGOF). Among them are the website of Germany's most popular tabloid (bild.de), two news sites by email providers (web.de, t-online.de), one website of a TV news channel (n-tv.de), two online outlets from conservative (focus.de, welt.de) and two from liberal print media (spiegel.de, zeit.de). Additionally, we included the website of Germany's most important quality newspaper (sueddeutsche.de) and the websites of the national public-service broadcasters (tagesschau.de, zdf.de/nachrichten).

Since the reach of most alternative media is not assessed by traditional media analysts, we included outlets as RAM in our sample when they fulfilled three criteria. First, based on analyses provided by 10000flies.de, we selected those outlets that had reached more than one million interactions (likes, shares and comments) per month on Facebook and Twitter from January to September 2017. Second, based on their self-presentations, we identified those media that claimed to be alternative, anti-mainstream, or representing a counter-public. Third, based on literature reviews, all of the outlets had to be associated with the right-wing political spectrum. In the following analysis we therefore use the label RAM as a provisional term to

refer to these outlets as it reflects the properties these outlets allegedly have in common. Apart from that, however, these outlets cover a broad spectrum and vary substantially regarding their background.

The *Junge Freiheit* (jungefreiheit.de) is probably the oldest and most important news outlet associated with the German ‘New Right’ (Fuchs and Middelhoff 2019). Inspired by rising left-wing alternative media, the weekly was found in 1986 with the intended purpose of forming a right-wing alternative to conservative mainstream media (Paulwitz 2011). Scholars see the *Junge Freiheit* as fulfilling a bridging function between the established conservative spectrum and more radical forces (Pfeiffer 2004, 191).

Even closer to the mainstream may be *Tichys Einblick* and *Achse des Guten* as these blogs are run by former and current mainstream journalists intending to close perceived gaps in the reporting of the traditional news media (Bax 2018; Pletter 2017). Accordingly, on their homepages the outlets claim to address questions ‘that are swept under the carpet’ (tichyseinblick.de) and to oppose ‘the mainstream of the conformists’ (achgut.com).

Of a somewhat different nature are the Russian media *SNA* (formerly: *Sputnik*) and *RT DE* (formerly: *RT Deutsch*), both of which are financed by the Russian government and produce German news websites. Furthermore, both outlets cultivate an ‘underdog’ image (Yablokov 2015), which becomes evident in their ‘About Us’ sections where they claim to ‘report on what other media are silent about’ (snanews.de) and to provide ‘a counterpoint to the one-sided and often interest-driven media mainstream’ (de.rt.com). Although their editorial right-wing stance may be less explicit, *RT DE* and *SNA* are affiliated with the far-right in several ways. Both outlets frequently provide a platform to far-right politicians interviewing them as experts (Shekhovtsov 2018, Ch. 5). Moreover, researchers found *SNA* to be biased in favor of the far-right party AfD (Applebaum et al. 2017) and *RT* to constitute a central node in the German far-right YouTube sphere (Rauchfleisch and Kaiser 2020).

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The *Epoch Times* is another international news organization maintaining a German editorial office and news website. In contrast to the Russian outlets, however, it is not controlled by a foreign government but associated with the oppositional Chinese Falun Gong movement (Zhao 2003). Similar to the outlets presented before, the *Epoch Times* aims to establish itself as an alternative media in several countries. The European print edition is advertised with the slogan ‘Get Real News Other Media Don’t Report’ (subscribe.epochtimes.eu) and the German office promotes its podcast claiming to broach ‘issues that are overlooked – or avoided – by other media’ (Epoch Times, n.d.). Hettena (2019) claims the German website is more radical than its American counterpart and strongly engages in stirring up sentiment against refugees. In line with that, Bachl (2018) found the *Epoch Times* to be frequently linked in discussions on Facebook pages affiliated with the AfD.

The last alternative outlet, *Anonymous News*, differs from the other alternative media in our sample by a complete lack of transparency and professional structures. After its former suspected operator was arrested for illegal arms trafficking, the site remains in operation, although it is unclear by whom (Gensing 2020). Hosted in Russia, the website disseminates fake news and conspiracy theories directed against mainstream politicians and minorities (Gensing 2020). On social media, *Anonymous News* claims to provide ‘news and information that the political-media complex conceals’.

Since the content analyses were part of a larger media effects study, the timeframes under study comprise 16 days in November 2017 (1.–8., 23.–30.). In these periods, we sampled all articles published on each of the three topics under study. Relevant articles were identified by searching the RSS feed of each page¹ and subsequent manual checks whether the respective issue was present in the headline or lead of the article. The total samples comprise $n=441$ articles on immigration and $n=916$ articles on the coalition talks. More detailed case numbers are presented in the Appendix.

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Coding of frames

The frame analysis followed a manual holistic approach. We first identified generic and issue-specific frames both deductively through literature reviews and inductively through qualitative inspections of the articles in our sample. In the following standardized content analysis, we coded for every article whether each applicable frame was either absent or—when present—a minor or a major perspective of the text. For the latter, the frame had to be used in the headline or lead of the article (Baden and Springer 2017, 186). If a frame was present, we coded whether it was used by the author themselves (*active framing*) or whether it was only used by external actors that were quoted by the author without any statement about the frame's validity (*passive framing*) (Scheufele and Engelmann 2014, 99). However, when the author approved of the frame or when they quoted external actors in support for her own frame, we coded this as an instance of active framing. When a frame was merely presented to criticize or refute it, the frame was coded as absent.

Immigration frames. Frames of immigrants and refugees can be classified along two dimensions: a role dimension specifying whether immigrants are presented as agents or targets, and a valence dimension specifying whether the actions involved are presented as harmful or beneficial for the target (Lams 2018). Combined they result in four categories of immigrant frames: intruders (active/negative), victims (passive/negative), benefactors (active/positive), and beneficiaries (passive/positive).

Four frames assessed different forms of presenting immigrants as a threat (Baldauf et al. 2017; Benson 2013; Milioni et al., 2015). The *economic burden frame* stresses the costs that immigrants cause to their host countries. The *security threat frame* addresses criminal activities by immigrants. The *cultural threat frame* presents the culture and values of immigrants as being incompatible with or detrimental to the host societies' culture. The *asylum fraud frame* accuses immigrants of cheating in asylum procedures.

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We coded three types of victim frames (Benson 2013; Milioni et al. 2015). The *global causes frame* addresses grievances that forced migrants to leave their home countries. The *humanitarian suffering frame* depicts precarious situations under which migrants suffer on their journey or in their host countries. The *xenophobia frame* problematizes hostility towards immigrants in their host countries.

Three types of benefactor frames were coded (Benson 2013; Milioni et al. 2015). The *cultural enrichment frame* was present when a news story portrayed immigration as a chance for more cultural diversity. The *willingness to integrate frame* puts emphasis on immigrants' efforts to adapt themselves to their host countries. The *economic opportunity frame* highlights potential positive effects of immigrants on their host countries' economy.

Finally, we coded one frame that emphasizes problems that are allegedly caused by activities meant to benefit immigrants, namely the *do-gooder frame* presenting advocates of immigration as arrogant, naïve or moralistic.

Frames of the coalition talks. We coded two types of frames in the news coverage of the coalition talks. The first type concerns whether the behavior of political parties and their members during the coalition talks is presented as *positive* (e.g., when a party is presented as cooperative or upright) or *negative* (e.g., when a party is blamed for failed negotiations). This frame was coded separately for each party involved in the coalitions talks: CDU, CSU, SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens, and FDP. The second type of frame concerns whether possible outcomes of the government formation process are presented as desirable and/or undesirable. Given that both perspectives could be present in the same article, *endorsement* and *rejection frames* were coded separately for each outcome: snap elections, a minority government, a Jamaica coalition, a grand coalition, and Angela Merkel's re-election as chancellor.

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Generic frames. In addition to the issue-specific frames, we coded two generic frames that could be applied to each issue. The *politicians vs. the people frame* presents German politicians as not acting in the interest of the people, e.g. by portraying them as corrupt, deceitful or abusive of their power (Kluknavská and Hruška 2019). This frame is similar to conceptions of a ‘populist master frame’ (Aslanidis 2016; Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017), but was less rigidly defined, i.e. it was not necessary that the people were framed as a homogenous entity or morally pure (see Katsambekis 2020). The second generic frame was the *media propaganda frame*, comprising accusations of biased or untruthful news coverage (Figenschou and Ihlbæk 2019; Kluknavská and Hruška 2019).

Reliability

The lead author trained groups of two coders per topic. To ensure sufficient reliability, two pretests were conducted with each group, coding subsamples of five random articles per issue and source when possible. When outlets in our sample had published less than ten articles on one of the issues, only the available articles were included in the pretest. This resulted in sample sizes of $n = 89/88$ for immigration and $n = 85/80$ for the coalition talks.

Since all frame variables showed uneven distributions, which strongly affects Krippendorff’s Alpha, we followed recommendations in content analysis literature (Lacy et al. 2015; Quarfoot and Levine 2016) and additionally calculated the reliability coefficient Gwet’s AC, using the R package irrCAC (Gwet 2019). When Krippendorff’s Alpha was below .65 after the second pretest, Gwet’s AC had to be above .90 for a variable to be included in the following analyses. These criteria were met by all of the variables presented above (see Appendix for the single values of all included variables).

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Data analysis

For the statistical analyses, data of individual articles were aggregated on the outlet level, so that each outlet constitutes one case and each frame variable indicates the mean dominance of this frame in the outlet's coverage. For this purpose, the absence of a frame in an article was counted as 0, its minor presence as .5 and major presence as 1, resulting in an index from 0 to 1. Accordingly, when a particular frame variable has a value of .10, this could mean that the frame was a minor perspective in every fifth article or a major perspective in every tenth article (or a mixture of both). Additional indices for active and passive framing indicate the absolute amount of a frame's total dominance that results from its active/passive use. For instance, if a frame has a total dominance mean of .22 and was solely used actively, the active dominance mean would be .22 and the passive dominance mean would be .00. If the frame was used actively and passively in equal shares, both means would have values of .11.

We used these variables to compute exploratory multidimensional scaling (MDS) models for every topic with the R package SMACOF (de Leeuw and Mair 2009). Based on calculations of Euclidean distances, MDS generates a configuration of points that reflects the dissimilarities between different objects (here: media outlets) across multiple variables (here: frame dominance). These points and distances can be displayed in two- or three-dimensional plots, allowing visual inspections of the relationships between objects. For the sake of simplicity, we opted for two-dimensional models, which proved to be well interpretable and highly significant in permutation tests against the assumption that the configurations were obtained randomly ($p < .001$, 500 replications) (Mair, Borg, and Rusch 2016).

To facilitate interpretation of the models, we took two additional steps. First, we partitioned the MDS configurations via visual inspections into two main regions, i.e. 'sub-sets of points that are *connected* (i.e., each pair of points in a region can be joined by a curve whose points lie completely within this region), *non-overlapping*, and *exhaustive* (i.e., each point lies

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in exactly one region)' (Borg, Groenen, and Mair 2013, 71). Such regions are similar to clusters but do not necessarily represent distinct groups with minimal intra-class variance and are less formally obtained (Borg, Groenen, and Mair 2013, 73). They are used here primarily to group data points so that comparisons of the frame dominance means between regions can give a general sense of the substantive differences underlying the physical distances.

Second, we fitted some of the frame variables as biplot vectors into the MDS models by regressing them on the two dimensions of the models (Greenacre 2010, Ch. 4). Due to the high number of frame variables that were included in the analyses, we display only a selection of these vectors that have a high R^2 and point in different directions. The R^2 indicates how well the respective frame variable is represented by the two dimensions and, in turn, how well it explains the distances between news outlets.

To account for differences resulting from an outlet's editorial style, we reran our analyses three times for each topic, including the total frame use, only active framing, and only passive framing, respectively, and compared the results.

Outlets that had published less than ten articles on the respective issue were excluded from the analyses.

Results

Framing of immigration

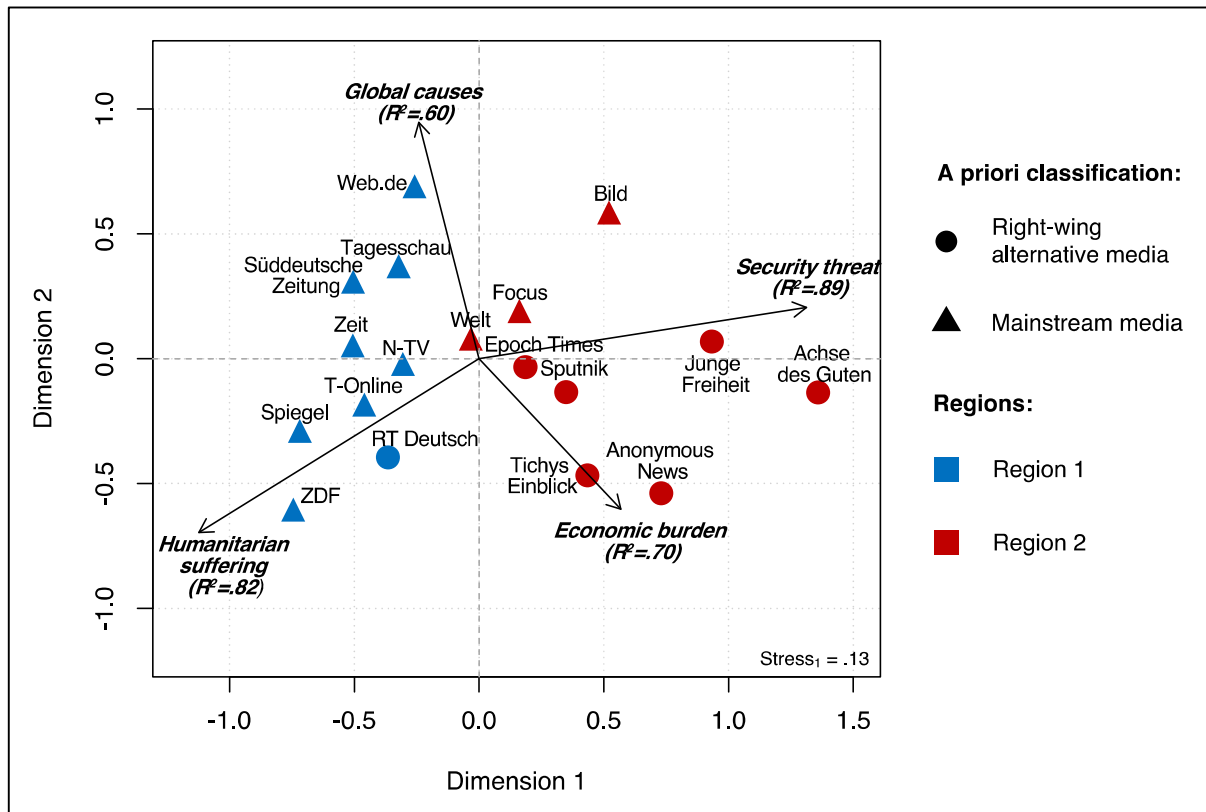


Figure 1. Multidimensional scaling plot of dissimilarities in the framing of immigration (selected frame variables as vectors)

The MDS model in Figure 1 appears to partially reflect the ideological orientations of the outlets. The RAM are located on the right, the conservative mainstream media *Focus* and *Welt* are located in the center, and the other mainstream media on the left. Exceptions are the Russian outlet *RT Deutsch*, which is close to mainstream media, contrary to its a priori classification as an alternative outlet, and the tabloid website *Bild*, which is farther on the right than some of the RAM. No clear border divides mainstream media and RAM.

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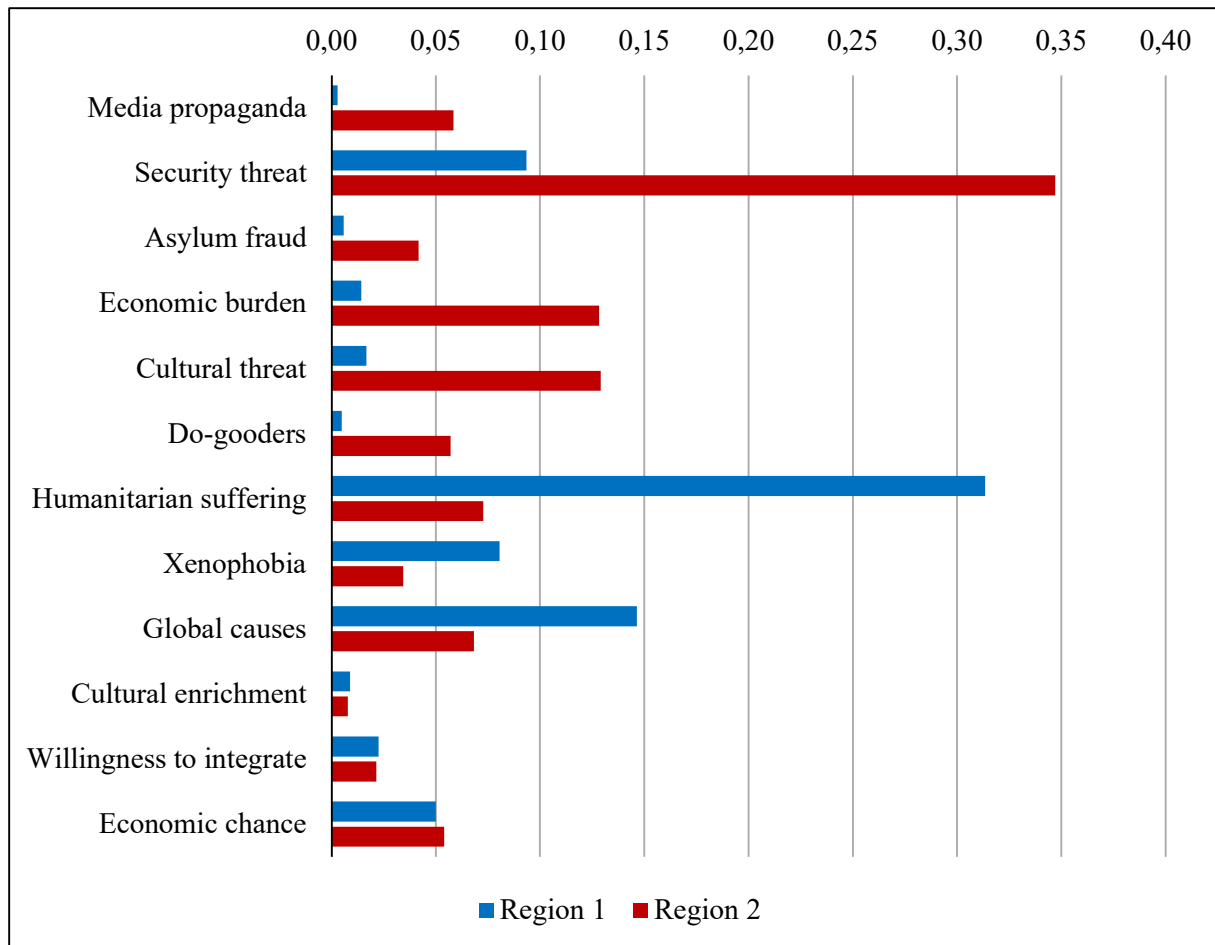


Figure 2. Mean dominance of selected immigration frames by region (see Fig. 1 for regional affiliations)

As the frame dominance means in Figure 2 show, frames portraying immigrants as a threat or burden for host countries prevail in region 2 on the right side of the plot. Especially the security threat frame is more dominant than in region 1 which contains most of the mainstream media. While this particular frame is also present in region 1, although to a lesser extent, other frames presenting immigrants as a threat for the economy or culture of the receiving countries are almost exclusively used by the media in region 2. The same is true for frames attacking the media or advocates of immigration.

Nevertheless, Figure 1 shows that this region is marked by fairly large distances between some of the outlets, indicating considerable variation among them in terms of framing. More detailed inspections of the frame values show that the farther an outlet is on the right, the more threat frames and the less victim frames are used. For instance, the dominance of the security threat frame in the RAM *Achse des Guten* and *Junge Freiheit* exceeds .50, which

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means that the vast majority of articles on immigration in these outlets emphasizes criminal activities by immigrants. Furthermore, frames presenting the media as propaganda channels and immigration advocates as do-gooders are exclusively used by RAM farther away from region 1 and are largely absent in outlets near the center like *Welt* or *Sputnik*. The tabloid *Bild* constitutes a special case in this region, as it is farther on the right than some of the RAM, but exhibits large distances to all other outlets. This can be explained by the fact that *Bild* has the third-highest dominance of the security threat frame ($M = .44$), but hardly uses other frames that are popular among other outlets at the far-right, such as the cultural threat frame ($M = .06$) or the media propaganda frame ($M = .00$).

In region 1, there is a dominance of victim frames shedding light on miseries of refugees or grievances that force people to leave their home countries. While these frames are also used by the media in region 2, they are mostly absent at the far-right of the spectrum. Differences in region 1 are due to the varying dominance of the global causes frame, which is more present in the upper half of the region, and the humanitarian suffering frame, which is more present in the lower half. Frames that portray immigrants as agents of positive change can be found in both regions, but are rarely used in general.

When we only consider active frame use, i.e. instances when frames were used by the authors of the articles, dissimilarities between mainstream media and RAM become more pronounced. Conservative mainstream media like *Welt* and *Bild* move closer to the mainstream region on the left, while RAM *Junge Freiheit*, *Tichys Einblick*, *Anonymous News* and *Achse des Guten* keep distance to all other outlets. This means that while conservative mainstream media are somewhat similar to RAM in terms of their frequent reporting on immigrant criminality, mainstream journalists—unlike authors of RAM—do this more often by quoting external actors rather than raising such accusations themselves. Due to the high use of active framing by RAM, distances to the mainstream diminish when only incidents of passive framing

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are considered. Instead, media that rely heavily on reporting statements from external actors, like *RT Deutsch* and *Web.de*, are remote from the center.

With regard to RQ1, we can conclude that some RAM are clearly distinguishable from all mainstream media by their heavy use of threat frames as well as specific oppositional frames that are rarely used elsewhere. Furthermore, these RAM largely avoid victim frames that could raise sympathies for immigrants. Hence, these outlets show clear ideological profiles resonating with nationalist worldviews. Other alleged RAM, like *Sputnik*, *Epoch Times* or *RT Deutsch*, are more reserved and show no ideological tendencies substantially different from mainstream media, thereby mismatching their a priori classifications. This implies that while these media present themselves as alternative media, they maintain a rather assimilated style. Thus, with respect to RQ2, some RAM made more active use of clearly alternative frames, while others exhibited a more conventional reporting on immigration.

Framing of the coalition talks

The MDS model in Figure 3 shows that most mainstream media form a dense region on the left side, which also encompasses the alternative outlet *Epoch Times*, being again close to conservative mainstream media *Welt* and *Focus*. *Sputnik* and *RT Deutsch* exhibit a larger distance to the center of this region, but are still closer to the media on the left than to the other alternative media on the right side of the plot. Similar to the issue of immigration, the latter represent *Tichys Einblick* and *Achse des Guten* (*Junge Freiheit* and *Anonymous News* were excluded from the analysis because they had published less than ten articles on the coalition talks during our timeframe).

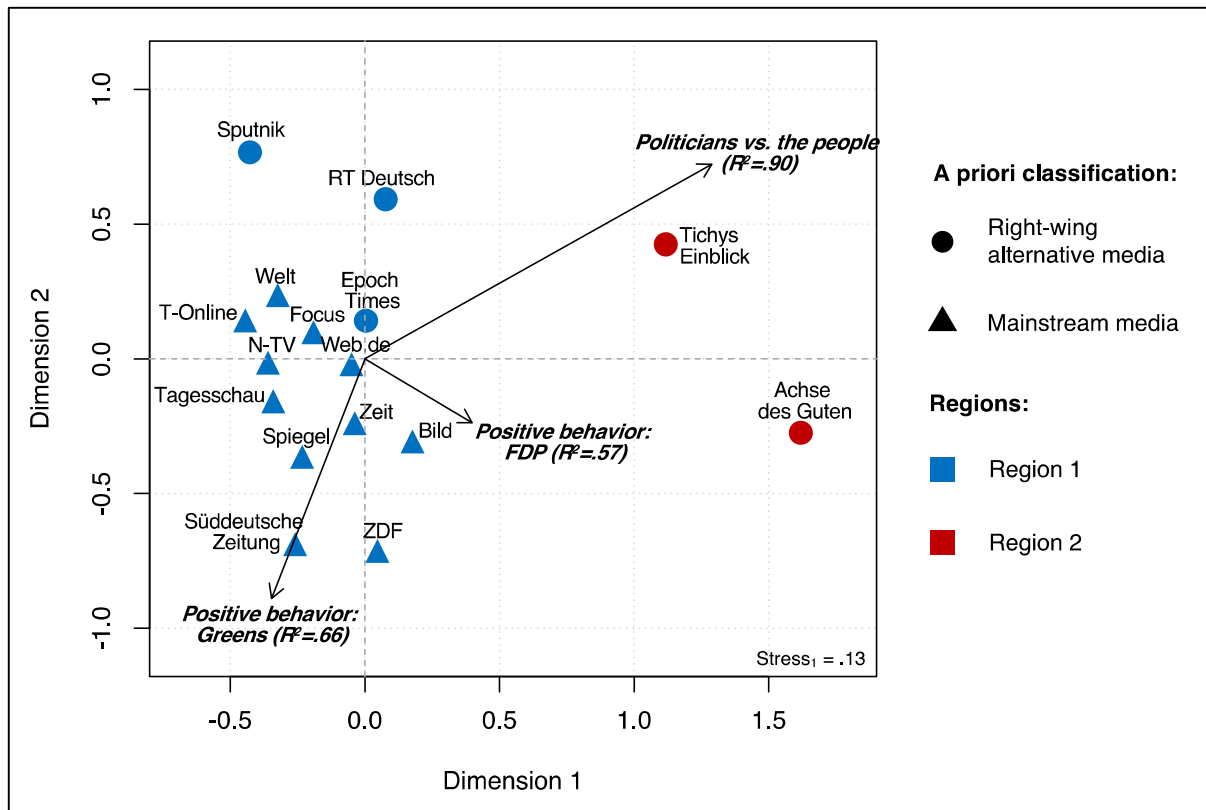


Figure 3. Multidimensional scaling plot of dissimilarities in the framing of the coalition talks (selected frame variables as vectors)

Mean comparisons reveal several substantial differences between the two regions (see Figure 4). Region 2 stands out by a strong use of the politicians vs. the people frame, depicting the political elite as working against the interests of the German voters. This accusation is accompanied by criticism of media for illegitimate bias in favor of certain parties and coalitions. Consequently, there are also differences in framing the involved parties and possible outcomes of the coalition talks. The RAM in region 2 portray the behavior of the Greens and CDU particularly negative and consequently argue against the formation of a Jamaica coalition which would involve the two parties and against the continuation of Merkel's chancellorship. In contrast, the FDP, which had stopped the negotiations over a Jamaica coalition, receives a more favorable coverage than in region 1. Also, articles embracing a minority government are more prevalent among the two alternative outlets in region 2. While similar in their tendency, both outlets differ in their emphasis on these frames: *Achse des Guten* was

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more focused on criticism of politicians, whereas *Tichys Einblick* more frequently approved the behavior of the FDP.

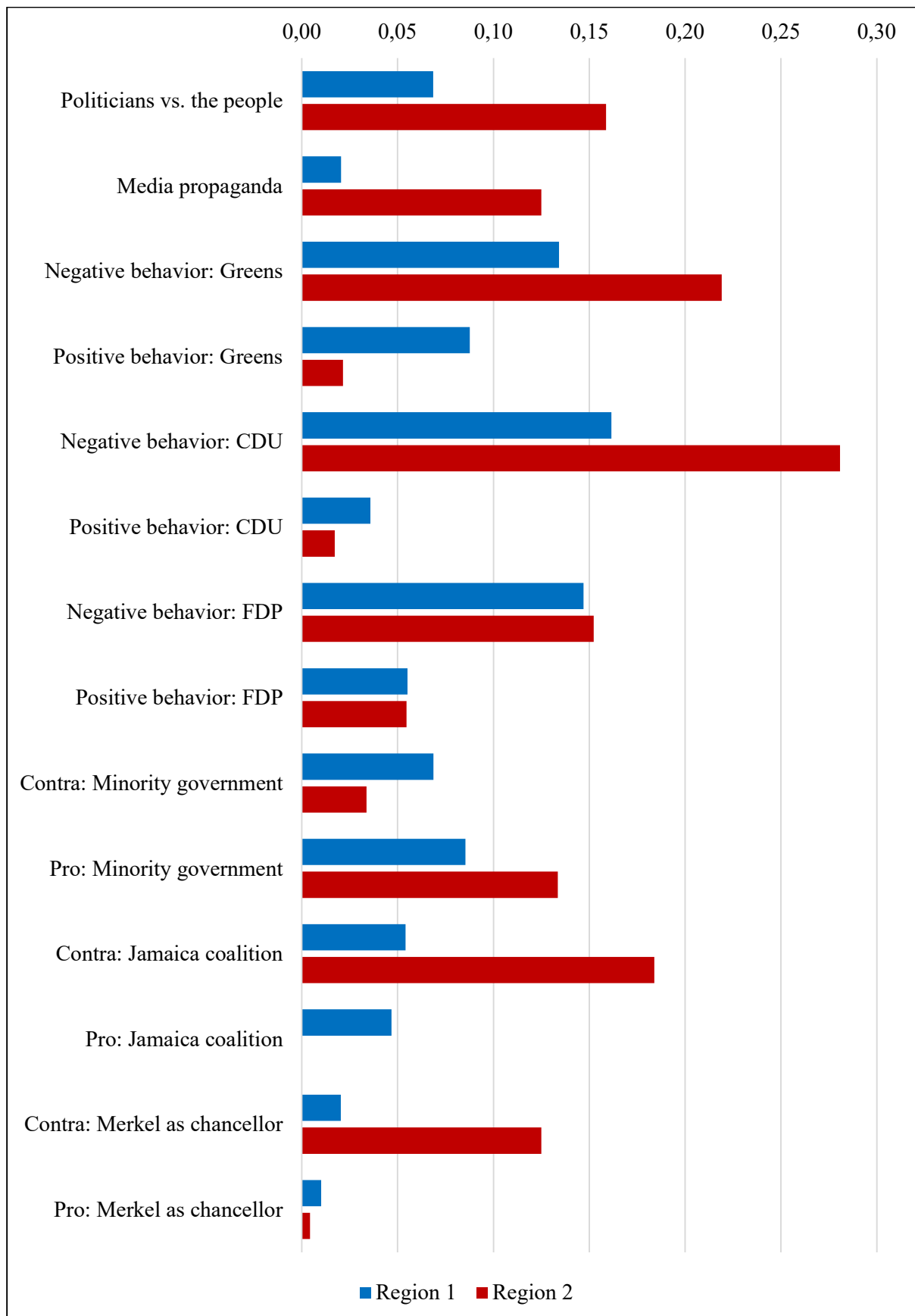


Figure 4. Mean dominance of selected immigration frames by region (see Fig. 3 for regional affiliations)

Region 1 is marked by a more balanced framing of the behavior of the parties, although the Greens receive the most positive and least negative coverage. Frames in favor of and against the different outcomes are similarly dominant in this region. Two pairs of outlets are located with some more distance above and below the center of the region. Inspections of the frame dominance means reveal that behavior frames are over- and underrepresented in these areas, respectively, compared to the rest of region 1. The most extreme example is the frame portraying the FDP's behavior in negative terms, which is more dominant in the coverage of *Heute* ($M = .26$) and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* ($M = .28$) than in articles from *Sputnik* ($M = .04$) and *RT Deutsch* ($M = .08$). On the other hand, coverage in favor of the FDP is also more common in the reporting of *Heute* ($M = .09$) and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* ($M = .08$) and less common in articles from *Sputnik* ($M = .00$) and *RT Deutsch* ($M = .04$), although this gap is less pronounced. There are no considerable differences between these two subregions with regard to endorsements and rejections of the possible outcomes of the government formation process.

When comparing this plot to the MDS model of the active framing indices, region 1 becomes denser with all outlets closer to its center, increasing the distances to region 2, which remains unchanged. An MDS plot of passive framing, however, brings *Tichys Einblick* and *Achse des Guten* closer to region 1, while *RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik* disconnect from the mainstream media. This can be explained by the fact that the mainstream media rarely use active framing and frequently use passive framing, which distinguishes them from interpretive RAM. Thus, framing dissimilarities result primarily from which actors are given most space in their news coverage. *RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik*, however, do not only avoid active framing but also use passive framing to a lesser extent than mainstream media, which is why their

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news coverage is more different to mainstream media when only the passive framing is considered.

With regard to RQ1, we can conclude that the more interpretive RAM *Achse des Guten* and *Tichys Einblick* set counterpoints to the mainstream media by opposing Merkel's CDU, the Greens and a possible coalition of these parties. This antagonism towards the CDU, traditionally representing the center-right of the political spectrum, can be explained by the fact that the party is criticized for moving to the left under the leadership of Angela Merkel. RAM consequently fear that the government would become more open for progressive ideas in a coalition with the Greens. Nevertheless, the RAM do not take a purely destructive perspective as their support for a minority government (of CDU/CSU, without the Greens) indicates some confidence in representative democracy. In contrast, *RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik* differ from mainstream media only by having less pronounced editorial lines and not through a particular use of alternative frames as their classification as RAM would suggest. The conclusion with respect to RQ2 is therefore similar to the topic of immigration in that we can identify two types of RAM which differ in their degree of active framing and conformity with the mainstream.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to compare frame repertoires of German mainstream media with those of news outlets that could be classified as RAM according to their self-descriptions and previous research. Standardized content analyses of the reporting on two issues—immigration and the coalition talks following the federal elections 2017—and subsequent MDS yielded different pictures. The model of frame repertoires on immigration resembled a continuum with a rather seamless shift from conservative mainstream to far-right outlets. The analysis of the coverage of the coalition talks showed more clearly a division between mainstream media

and RAM, although this did not apply to all media that were classified as RAM in advance. In both analyses, we identified two types of RAM that correspond with the different editorial styles that Nygaard (2019) identified in her study of Scandinavian RAM.

The first type employed a rather confrontational and interpretive style, making strong use of active framing. These media were clearly distinguishable from the mainstream media through their frame repertoires, expressing hostility toward immigrants, the German government, and mainstream media. From an empirical perspective, these media thereby contribute to the diversity of frames in the public sphere. However, “[d]iversity is not an end in itself, but can be used as means for reaching democratic goals such as an informed citizenry or an inclusive public discourse“ (Loecherbach et al. 2020, 607). From this normative perspective, the frame diversity we found is not really desirable since ethically and factually questionable frames such as the ‘do-gooder frame’ or the ‘media propaganda frame’ are rather likely to promote misinformation and cynicism towards democratic institutions and human misery.

The second type of RAM, consisting of the international outlets *RT*, *Sputnik* and the *Epoch Times*, was less distinguishable from the mainstream media and employed a rather assimilated and descriptive style. While their framing was similar to conservative mainstream media, their coverage contained less frames in general and fewer incidents of active framing in particular compared to all other outlets. This means the authors were less likely to contrast or complement the dominant frame of an article with other frames and were more likely to report the perspectives of external actors rather than providing substantive interpretations of their own. This finding underlines the ambivalent identity that the outlets of this type pursue: While cultivating the image of provocative suppliers of alternative content, they also strive to maintain reputation as professional news media by formally adhering to Western journalistic standards (Hutchings and Tolz 2020; Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021). As there is little doubt that media like the Russian outlets *RT* and *Sputnik* are information warfare tools of the Kremlin (see e.g., Elswah and Howard 2020), this double role likely serves strategic purposes.

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Since their background is publicly known, these media must be careful in order to reach a wide audience, which forbids the use of plain propaganda. The professional “appearance of objectivity” (Nygaard 2019) could thus be seen as a form of mainstream news mimicry to overcome skepticism and to establish credibility (Atkinson et al. 2021). Moreover, it may be a strategy to embed articles with a clearly alternative framing in a flood of more neutral ‘alibi content’ where they vanish from a quantitative perspective. Accordingly, the ‘alternativeness’ of these media may be too subtle to be assessed in standardized content analyses like the present study. Especially since the period under investigation was quite short and rather represents a momentary snapshot of a broad sample of German news media, less frequently occurring frames might not have been sufficiently captured. In addition, the choice of issues in the study at hand may partly account for the lack of a clear alternative profile for some of the alleged RAM. As scholars who have studied the content of *RT* point out, much of the outlet’s reporting resembles the neutral style of news agencies, as long as the events are not related to Russia’s policies (Hutchings and Tolz 2020; Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021). Thus, it is likely that these outlets apply alternative frame repertoires only to issues that affect strategic goals of their producers. Alternative frame repertoires might therefore have become more manifest in the analysis of other issues. For instance, issues involving Russia’s foreign-policy interests like the Ukrainian crisis are more likely to be framed in alternative ways by *RT* and *Sputnik* than the German federal elections.

Nevertheless, even when alternative frames are not present, these media could have an impact on the general public by making certain established frames more salient that fit their course, which could also reinforce these frames in the mainstream media coverage. Further research should therefore investigate whether and how mainstream media react to the salience of issues and frames in the content of alternative media.

As mentioned above, the two types that we found mirror the two strategies that Nygaard (2019) identified in her study of Scandinavian RAM. Moreover, the international broadcasters *RT*, *Sputnik* and *Epoch Times* offer news in several languages, making it likely that they pursue similar strategies in other countries. It is thus plausible that our findings are generalizable beyond Germany and that similar types of alternative media exist in other countries. However, to date there is little internationally comparative research. There is reason to assume that the relationship between mainstream media and new interlopers varies between countries, e.g., some media systems may be more open to far-right frames than others (Heft et al. 2020; Norocel, Szabó, and Bene 2017). Future studies should therefore look beyond the context of single countries. The MDS method that was used here could be a fruitful approach for such endeavors that aim to grasp a bigger picture as it facilitates visual exploration of multivariate data. For instance, it could be employed to map the frame repertoires of multiple news outlets from different countries to examine where there is stronger alignment and divergence between RAM and domestic mainstream media, as well as how RAM relate to their foreign counterparts.

¹ Search queries:

Immigration: einwander* OR flüchtling* OR wirtschaftsflüchtling* OR armutsflüchtling* OR migrant* OR wirtschaftsmigrant* OR armutsmigrant* OR migration* OR geflüchtete* OR asyl* OR ((flucht* OR flucht*) AND (deutschland OR europa)) OR willkommenskultur OR bahnhofsklatscher* OR kulturbereicherer* OR armutszuwander*

Coalition talks: koalitionsverhandlung* OR jamaika* OR regierungsbildung* OR minderheitsregierung OR koalitionsbildung* OR regierungsbeteiligung* OR (neuaufgabe AND (groko OR „große koalition“ OR „großen koalition“)) OR neuwahl* OR „neue groko“ OR sondierungsgespräch* OR „neuen groko“

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Appendix

Table 1. Number of articles per outlet and issue

	Immigration	Coalition talks	Total
Mainstream media			
Bild	16	51	109
Focus	46	117	206
Heute (ZDF)	8	33	63
N-TV	31	88	176
Spiegel	18	62	146
Süddeutsche Zeitung	15	32	82
Tagesschau	18	62	125
T-Online	14	58	100
Web.de	9	79	152
Welt	62	102	253
Zeit	28	79	161
Alternative media			
Achse des Guten	12	12	24
Anonymous News	10	0	10
Epoch Times	53	72	161
Junge Freiheit	26	3	32
RT Deutsch	19	13	59
Sputnik	15	24	117
Tichys Einblick	11	29	40
Total	411	916	2016

Note. Articles could cover more than one topic, which is why the total numbers of articles do not equal the summed numbers of issue-specific articles.

Table 2. Means and intercoder reliability coefficients of all included variables

Variable	M (SD) ^a	AC ^b	α^c	Percent Agreement
Coalition talks				
Politicians vs. the people	.05 (<.01)	.93	.49	.94
Media propaganda	.01 (<.01)	.96	.65	.96
<i>Negative behavior</i>				
Greens	.13 (.27)	.89	.76	.93
FDP	.15 (.29)	.89	.74	.93
CDU	.16 (.29)	.75	.73	.84
CSU	.15 (.29)	.88	.73	.92
SPD	.08 (.22)	.93	.73	.95
<i>Positive behavior</i>				

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Greens	.08 (.24)	.92	.64	.94
FDP	.05 (.17)	.96	.66	.97
CDU	.04 (.13)	.93	.64	.94
CSU	.03 (.13)	.91	.43	.92
SPD	.04 (.15)	.94	.43	.95
<i>Endorsement</i>				
Snap elections	.01 (.08)	.97	.49	.97
Minority government	.08 (.22)	.95	.80	.96
Jamaica coalition	.04 (.16)	.98	.81	.98
Grand coalition	.08 (.22)	.93	.64	.94
Merkel as chancellor	.01 (.09)	.98	.00	.98
<i>Rejection</i>				
Snap elections	.12 (.25)	.92	.76	.95
Minority government	.07 (.19)	.96	.86	.97
Jamaica coalition	.05 (.19)	.95	.67	.95
Grand coalition	.10 (.23)	.93	.59	.95
Merkel as chancellor	.02 (.11)	.98	.65	.98
Immigration				
Politicians vs. the people	.02 (<.01)	.93	.57	.95
Media Propaganda	.02 (<.01)	.97	.59	.97
Global causes	.10 (.27)	.89	.67	.92
Humanitarian suffering	.18 (.36)	.92	.67	.89
Xenophobia	.07 (.23)	.95	.36	.95
Cultural enrichment	.01 (.07)	.99	.50	.99
Willingness to integrate	.02 (.12)	.95	.31	.95
Economic opportunity	.06 (.20)	.98	.64	.98
Economic burden	.06 (.20)	.98	.84	.98
Security threat	.22 (.39)	.84	.73	.90
Cultural threat	.08 (.25)	.98	.87	.98
Asylum fraud	.02 (.13)	.95	.45	.96
Do-gooders	.03 (.14)	.96	.62	.96
Active/passive framing^e	—	.82	.80	.90

Notes. All coefficients are based on three coders that differed between topics.

^a Based on the whole sample of individual articles.

^b Gwet's AC2 with linear weights for all variables except the active/passive variable whose coefficient is unweighted.

^c Krippendorff's Alpha with ordinal weights (Krippendorff 2011, 6) for all variables except the active/passive variable whose coefficient is unweighted.

^d Only coded as absent in the pretest, therefore no calculation of reliability coefficients possible.

^e Classification whether a frame was used actively or passively. The coefficients are based on all cases where at least two coders had rated the same frame as present in an article.