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# **INTERMEDIA AGENDA-SETTING FROM THE FAR RIGHT? THREE CASE STUDIES ON SPILLOVER EFFECTS BY ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN GERMANY**

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# Intermedia Agenda-Setting from the Far Right?

## Three Case Studies on Spillover Effects by Alternative Media in Germany

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### Abstract

Right-wing alternative media can increase their public impact if they succeed to set their issues on the mainstream media's agenda. In three qualitative case studies, the present article explores whether and how such intermedia agenda-setting occurs in Germany. Special attention is given to spillover effects between different actors, both at the level of attention and tone towards the issues. Furthermore, the analysis of news articles is supplemented with Twitter data to account for the role of social media. Two of the case studies indicate that right-wing alternative media contributed to push pseudo-scandals into the mainstream. The analyses also reveal alternative news outlets with particular agenda-setting power and point to the crucial role of tabloid media as a bridge to the mainstream. The third study, however, which centered on the Global Compact for Migration, presents a case where intermedia agenda-setting failed. Against this background, the article discusses the conditions under which intermedia agenda-setting by right-wing alternative media is likely to occur and how journalists should deal with such attempts.

**Key words:** alternative media, intermedia agenda-setting, far right, scandals, Twitter, Germany

## Introduction

The internet offers right-wing alternative media (RAM) and other challengers of mainstream news media plenty resources to increase their public impact. They can access original sources and first-hand information online, which compensates some of their disadvantage toward journalistic mainstream media having correspondents and access to news agencies (Broersma & Graham, 2013, p. 461). As a result, alternative media are less constrained to react to the agenda of the mainstream media by criticizing and reframing their coverage. Instead, it becomes easier for them to raise own issues and build alternative agendas. In addition, social media allow them to draw public attention to their issues, circumventing the mainstream media as traditional gatekeepers (Jungherr et al., 2019; Pfetsch et al., 2016). Moreover, social media increase the chance for spillover effects: if alternative media reach a critical mass that amplifies a particular issue, mainstream media could become aware of it and pick it up (Pfetsch et al., 2013). The intense competition established news media face online increases the pressure to cover sensational issues that promise to generate clicks (Jungherr et al., 2019). Thus, RAM issues could find their way to the agenda of a broader public via intermedia agenda-setting (IAS) (Jungherr et al., 2019; Tran, 2016).

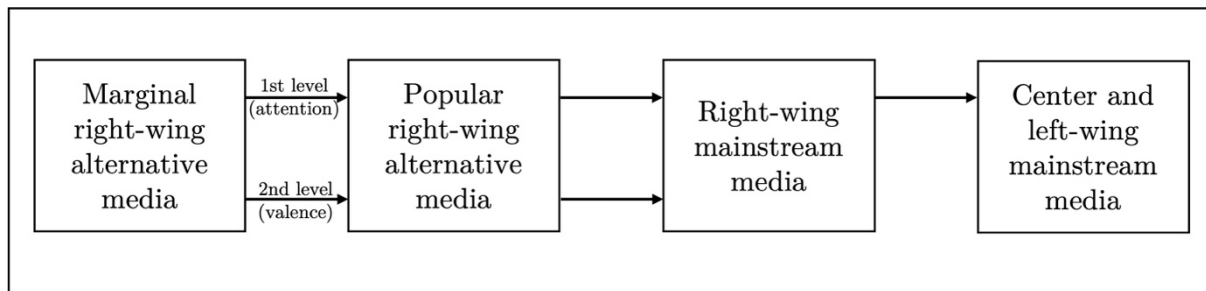
Evidence from the United States lends support for the IAS power of RAM. An early case is the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal that was leaked by a previously unknown blog agitating against liberal politics (Meraz, 2019; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004). More recent studies, however, suggest that instead of exposing real misdeeds RAM are more prone to raise fake scandals and disinformation campaigns, which can also contribute to IAS by forcing mainstream journalists to debunk their claims (Benkler et al., 2018; Faris et al., 2017; Meraz, 2019; Rojecki & Meraz, 2016; Vargo et al., 2018). These studies also indicate that this phenomenon is quite unique to the far right of the ideological spectrum as corrective mechanisms are more effective on the left.

To date, however, IAS by RAM has been hardly investigated in the context of Germany that differs from the United States in many respects. Nevertheless, Germany has seen a similar rise of RAM and there is at least anecdotal evidence of incidents in which they succeeded to set issues on the mainstream media’s agenda. The present study therefore examines three of such cases systematically, employing qualitative analyses supplemented with quantitative data, to investigate whether IAS by RAM occurs in Germany and to explore the mechanisms and central actors behind it.

## Literature review

Alternative media are news outlets that oppose the mainstream media by criticizing their content and promoting alternative issues and frames (Holt et al., 2019; Klawier et al., 2021). That these issues and frames can enter the mainstream was observed already in the 1980s, when alternative media were generally located on the left side of the political spectrum. In three case studies, Mathes and Pfetsch (1991) found IAS by the German alternative newspaper *taz* on mainstream media following a series of spillover effects: After the *taz* had started continuous reporting, left-leaning mainstream media like *Spiegel* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) began to cover the issues, followed by conservative mainstream media like *Welt* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ). While media from both sides of the political spectrum started paying attention to the issues, which constitutes the first level of agenda-setting, however, only the left-leaning mainstream media also adopted the aspects and valence of the alternative news coverage, which constitutes the second level of agenda-setting (McCombs, 2014, pp. 50–55).

In recent years, especially right-wing alternative media have emerged in many Western countries, exhibiting a similar anti-establishment stance but from a position of fundamental opposition against immigration, globalization, gender diversity, and political correctness (Holt, 2019, p. 6). This raises the question whether these RAM have a similar agenda-setting potential like their left-wing precursors. Recent studies from the United States found a pattern remarkably similar to that observed by Mathes and Pfetsch (1991), but in the opposite direction. Most notably, research on the role of partisan media in the 2016 presidential election discovered an “attention backbone” (Faris et al., 2017, p. 17) or “propaganda pipeline” (Benkler et al., 2018, pp. 33–34), allowing issues to migrate from the far-right margins of the media ecosystem into the mainstream news as illustrated in Figure 1. The driving force behind this mechanism is a dynamic that the authors call “network propaganda”, i.e., collective efforts by multiple actors of a far-right ecosystem to push misleading content on the public agenda to advance their ideological goals (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 33; see also Zhang et al., 2023). These propaganda messages include completely fabricated stories but also mixes of facts and fantasy, misrepresentation and decontextualization of information, distractions, and false insinuations (Faris et al., 2018, p. 128).



**Figure 1:** The “propaganda pipeline” (own illustration based on Benkler et al., 2018)

Besides alternative media, far-right ecosystems involve members of political parties and activist groups, independent partisan influencers, and multiple private individuals following these actors on social media. The lines between these actors and alternative media can be blurred, however. Although alternative media can be formally identified by their appearance as journalistic news brands with editorial structures and regularly published news items, only some of them employ a conventional journalistic style, while others publish opinionated content similar to other partisan actors commenting on current events (Nygaard, 2019). Moreover, the editorial structures of alternative media can be centered on individuals (Hetzl et al., 2022, p. 512), and influencers or activists can work as authors for alternative media. RAM can play a unique role, however, by serving as hubs that aggregate information from different actors of the dispersed far-right sphere (Starbird et al., 2018), as well as content from mainstream media corresponding with their ideological agenda (Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022). Apart from that, they can create original news stories raising own issues and viewpoints. For other actors from the network, RAM can therefore serve both as multipliers of their messages and as sources of information that they can use to promote and justify their political goals (Törnberg & Nissen, 2022). Particularly popular RAM, like Breitbart in the United States, can also have an impact beyond the far-right ecosystem, forcing conservative mainstream media like Fox News to adopt their issues (Benkler et al., 2018). This subsequently increases the pressure on other mainstream media to take up these issues, often with the intent to rebut the claims (Benkler et al., 2018).

Although a similar far-right media ecosystem has established in Germany (Guhl et al., 2020), it can be expected that its IAS power is more limited than in the United States. Studies have shown that German mainstream media exhibit a critical stance toward right-wing populist actors (Esser et al., 2017; Wettstein et al., 2018), resulting in unfavorable conditions for IAS by RAM. Consistent with this, an automated content analysis of the reporting on the refugee crisis found that the *Junge Freiheit*, one of Germany’s most important RAM, primarily reacted to the mainstream media agenda instead of determining it (von Nordheim et al., 2019). Since it cannot be assumed, therefore, that

German RAM influence the agenda of mainstream media on a regular basis, the present article pursues an in-depth investigation of three cases in which IAS from RAM was particularly likely to explore the basic question:

*RQ1: Does intermedia agenda-setting from right-wing alternative news media to mainstream news media occur in Germany?*

In this connection, it is possible that RAM do not influence the mainstream agenda directly, but that IAS occurs via indirect paths (Wong & Trilling, 2023). Mainstream journalists may not actively follow RAM, but could become aware of their issues through other actors amplifying RAM content on social media. This could be influential actors from the far-right spectrum, like activists or politicians, but also by ordinary users who react on issues from RAM and increase their visibility (Lim et al., 2022), which seems particularly likely when RAM engage in scandalization and incite outrage among their audiences. This may then raise the attention of mainstream journalists and serve as a story idea (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Parmelee, 2014). Especially Twitter can be expected to serve as a channel for such indirect IAS effects due to its public structure and popularity among journalists. The second research question addresses this possible mechanism:

*RQ2: Does the intermedia agenda-setting from right-wing alternative media to mainstream media follow an indirect path by triggering issue-related posts on social media?*

Another important aspect to analyze is whether there are specific outlets that take leading roles like Breitbart in the United States. So far, it is unclear whether similar media exist in Germany. Moreover, the possibility of indirect IAS suggests that it is also necessary to look whether there are specific RAM outlets serving as agenda-setters for the far-right ecosystem itself. The present study therefore investigates:

*RQ3: Are there right-wing alternative media with particular agenda-setting power within and beyond the far-right sphere?*

Besides the far-right ecosystem, the present study also seeks to examine the IAS dynamics among mainstream media in more detail. The research literature reviewed above has shown that IAS often follows a stepwise process of ideological proximity, i.e., that right-leaning mainstream media adopt issues from RAM first and then function as agenda-setters for left-leaning mainstream media. Again, however, it is unclear, whether such spillover effects can be observed in Germany, too. Since news audiences are less polarized in Germany than in the United States (Newman et al., 2017, p. 39), it is possible that

conservative news outlets are more immune against IAS attempts from the fringes and feel less urged to pick up scandalized issues to satisfy their recipients. Left-leaning media could even be more likely to address current developments in the far-right sphere from a watchdog perspective. The following research question therefore addresses the occurrence of spillover effects along ideological lines:

*RQ4: Does the intermedia agenda-setting follow a stepwise process of spillover effects from right-wing alternative media to right-leaning mainstream media, and from these to left-leaning mainstream media?*

In addition to the first level of agenda-setting, the “propaganda pipeline” also suggests that media with a similar ideological leaning as the agenda-setter likely make similar claims in their coverage, resulting in a similar tone towards the issues, while other media show greater differences. This means, if RAM scandalize an issue, right-leaning mainstream media could be expected to exhibit a similar negative tone. Left-leaning mainstream media, on the other hand, should take a positive or neutral account on the issues. Yet, another possibility would be that conservative mainstream media engage in boundary work, i.e., that they strive to delegitimize the issues of far-right interlopers presenting a threat to their position (Nygaard, 2020). The final research question addresses these possible mechanisms on the second level of agenda-setting:

*RQ5: Do right-leaning mainstream media, in contrast to left-leaning media, adopt a similar tone as right-wing alternative media?*

## **Methods**

Studies have investigated IAS with different methods, using time series (e.g., Meraz, 2011), hyperlinks (e.g., Meraz, 2009), references (e.g., Wallsten, 2013), or text-matching (e.g., Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019) as indicators for spillover effects between news outlets. Unless an outlet explicitly refers to another as the source, however, these methods do not allow causal conclusions since other factors like real-world events or third parties could have influenced the agendas under study (Pfetsch et al., 2013, pp. 17–18; Wong & Trilling, 2023, p. 29). For instance, politicians or social media publics could serve as agenda-setters for mainstream and alternative media alike. Moreover, it is not possible to claim that no IAS occurred when no source is cited, because sources can be used without being referenced. Especially in the context of the present study, it is quite possible that mainstream media do not cite RAM despite adopting their issues, because the



mainstream media are concerned about their reputation and do not want to grant the interlopers legitimacy. A rigorous investigation of IAS therefore requires an in-depth analysis and discussion of individual cases. For this reason, the present study conducts qualitative content analyses of the news coverage of single issues that are supplemented with quantitative data to obtain a broader picture of each case. The study thereby answers recent calls for more qualitative agenda-setting research to better understand how news agendas are passed and adopted (Perloff, 2022, p. 490; Vargo, 2018, p. 115).

### *Cases of the present study*

The article studies three cases that were selected for two reasons. First, since the article’s aim is to investigate whether and how IAS by RAM occurs in Germany, the cases were deliberately chosen because the occurrence of IAS could be expected in advance. This means, for each issue, there were claims that it was covered by RAM first and entered the mainstream news afterwards. Second, each case could be confined to a clear time period, making it possible to study its whole development. Besides these commonalities, the issues differ in terms of how much attention they received, and which actors they involved. However, it could not be avoided that the issues share some thematic similarity as two of them are concerned with immigration, which constitutes a key topic of the far right.

*AAS brochure.* The first case deals with the outrage around a brochure that was published in September 2018 by the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung (AAS), an antiracist non-profit foundation. The brochure was meant as an advice for day-care centers on how to deal with children from far-right parents. Critics, however, saw the brochure as an instruction to indoctrinate children and to denunciate parents with unpleasant political views. The AAS deems this a disinformation campaign by RAM based on misinterpretations and decontextualized quotes (Rahner, 2021). Although the AAS had faced similar attacks before (Salzborn, 2016), the foundation claims that these reached a new level of intensity in the case of the brochure (Rahner, 2021, p. 259).

*KiKa documentary.* The second issue is a controversy around a documentary titled “Malvina, Diaa und die Liebe” (Malvina, Diaa, and the love), which was aired in November 2017 by the public TV channel KiKa as an evening program for older children and adolescents. The program dealt with the teenage relationship of a German girl and a Syrian refugee. The documentary did not contain any commentary by the author and portrayed the conflicts arising from the different cultural backgrounds of the protagonists (Götz, 2018). Weeks after its release, the right-wing blogger Oliver Janich scandalized

the program and incited public outrage, accusing the station of Islamizing the youth (Semmer & Riesmeyer, 2020). Both the station and the protagonists faced hate messages, which intensified when it turned out that the protagonist Diaa was 19 instead of 17 years old as the KiKa had mistakenly communicated before (Semmer & Riesmeyer, 2020).

*Global Compact for Migration.* The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) is a non-binding treaty initiated by the United Nations to establish common standards for migration. The negotiations were accompanied by sharp debates, in the course of which several countries, like the United States, Austria, and Poland, declared to vote against the compact or to abstain from voting in the United Nations General Assembly in December 2018, where the GCM was formally endorsed (Badell, 2020). Previous studies showed that the German mainstream media largely ignored the GCM for months, while an alliance of RAM, politicians of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and activists of the Identitarian movement started mobilizing against it (Conrad, 2021; Haller, 2019; ISD, 2018; Klinger et al., 2022; Rone, 2021). The studies disagree, however, whether it was the agitation of the right-wing alliance (Klinger et al., 2022) or the announcement of the Austrian government to quit its support for the treaty (Conrad, 2021; Haller, 2019) that eventually made the German mainstream media pick up the issue.

### *News media sample*

I included seven news outlets that represent the German mainstream media: FAZ, Welt, Bild, SZ, Spiegel, Focus, and taz. The first six outlets were chosen, because all of them belong to the most-cited German news brands and can thus be regarded to have leading roles in the German media system (MediaTenor, 2018). Furthermore, they represent different ideological leanings: SZ and Spiegel are traditionally considered as quality media with a left-wing tendency, FAZ, Focus and Welt as quality media with a right-wing tendency, and Bild as a right-wing tabloid (Maurer & Reinemann, 2006, p. 130). To obtain a broader picture, the taz was included as the seventh outlet, an originally alternative medium that now represents the left margin of the mainstream ideological spectrum (Blöbaum, 2006). Empirical research has shown, for instance, that the FAZ, Bild and Welt more likely frame immigrants as a threat, while the SZ and taz present immigration more often as a chance (Goedeke Tort et al., 2016; Maurer et al., 2019). Moreover, studies have found that Welt is the most-shared news site among representatives and supporters of German right-wing parties on Twitter, while the Spiegel dominates among left parties (Serrano et al., 2018, p. 46; von Nordheim & Rieger, 2020, p. 413).

To identify relevant RAM, I first reviewed studies examining which pages are frequently shared by far-right actors like the AfD on social media (Bachl, 2018; Serrano et al., 2018; von Nordheim & Rieger, 2020; Wegener, 2020). From these lists, I selected seven outlets that researchers classified as RAM, because they publish news articles on a daily basis, present themselves as alternative, and focus on right-wing themes such as opposition against gender diversity and immigration (Heft et al., 2020; Klawier et al., 2021, 2022; Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022): Achse des Guten, PI-News, Journalistenwatch, Junge Freiheit, Philosophia Perennis, Tichys Einblick, and Compact. In addition, I included three outlets that could not be unequivocally identified as RAM: the Russian outlets RT DE and Sputnik, and the Epoch Times, associated with the Chinese Falun Gong movement. Although these media also present themselves as alternative news media and are frequently shared by right-wing actors, they lack clear right-wing thematic foci (Müller & Freudenthaler, 2022) and frame repertoires (Klawier et al., 2022). However, there is clear evidence that these media fulfill alternative media functions for the far-right ecosystem as outlined above: They form central nodes connecting different communities in the far-right sphere (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020), provide other alternative media with original content that they can re-use, and frequently offer far-right actors a platform to disseminate their messages in interviews (Benkler et al., 2018, pp. 243–245; Shekhovtsov, 2018, Chapter 5; Starbird et al., 2018, p. 8).

For each issue and outlet, I sampled all online articles by searching for issue-specific terms<sup>1</sup> on Nexis (Bild, Welt, Spiegel), the media’s own archives (SZ, FAZ), or the outlets’ websites (all other outlets), and then manually selecting all articles that mentioned the respective issue in the headline or lead. The sampling periods were not restricted with the exception of the GCM, where the sampling period ended on December 19, 2018—the day the United Nations formally endorsed the treaty. The sampling took place a couple of months after each issue had ended. To check whether outlets had deleted articles before, I repeated the searches on mediacloud.org, an open-source platform that stores the publication histories of news media from all over the world by retrieving their RSS feeds. If the query results contained items that were missing from the samples and were not available on the outlet’s website anymore, they were accessed via archive.org.

The final samples comprise  $n=1,283$  articles for the GCM,  $n=82$  articles for the KiKa documentary, and  $n=56$  articles for the AAS brochure. The supplemental online material contains a list of all article URLs (<https://osf.io/jzvah>).

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<sup>1</sup> Migrationspakt; Diaa Kika; Broschüre Amadeu-Antonio-Stiftung

## *Content analysis*

As a first step, the publishing dates of all articles were assessed to examine the issue careers, i.e., which outlet started covering the issues at which point. Afterwards, I conducted a qualitative analysis to check for spillover effects, inspecting all articles on each issue in chronological order and making annotations about the events, claims, and speakers they featured, their tone toward the issue, and the sources they referred to. This process followed an integrative approach, i.e., the articles were constantly compared with previous annotations to check for implicit and explicit connections between them. If the articles referred to sources that were not part of the sample, these sources could also become part of the analysis to get a more complete picture. Special attention was paid to articles at the beginning of each issue career as this is the phase in which IAS likely occurs. Later articles were inspected more cursorily with the aim of checking whether new events or claims emerged and whether the tone changed, which initiated new phases of in-depth coding in order to investigate the occurrence of IAS.

## *Twitter sample*

To supplement the content analyses and to control for social media dynamics, I retrieved Twitter data for each case study. Twitter was chosen due to its public structure and because it is the most-cited social media platform in German news media (MediaTenor, 2018). The data were accessed via the Twitter Search API using the R package *rtweet* (Kearney, 2019) and Twitter's own *searchtweets* package for Python.<sup>2</sup> For economic reasons, I did not retrieve all individual tweets that were posted on each issue, but ran three types of queries:

First, to assess the overall amount of attention for each issue, I used the *counts* endpoint to retrieve aggregated data of the number of tweets addressing the issue per day, which includes retweets and tweets that were deleted after they were posted (Twitter, n.d.). However, Twitter points out that the counts are only estimates of the real number of tweets and not necessarily exact (Twitter, n.d.). The time frames started with the first date the issues could have been scandalized, i.e., the day the documentary was aired, the brochure was published, and the negotiations around the GCM started. Thereby, it was possible to check whether social media attention followed the news coverage or preceded it. To account for the brevity of tweets and to minimize the probability of false positive counts, two of the issue-specific queries for retrieving the Twitter data were somewhat more complex than the search terms for collecting the news articles. To

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<sup>2</sup> The code with all queries is included in the supplemental online material (<https://osf.io/jzvah>).

prevent the inclusion of false positives, the queries were also tested in periods before there could be any true positives (e.g., before the KiKa documentary was aired).

Second, to assess how often the articles of each outlet in the sample were shared on Twitter, I ran separate API requests using the same queries as above adding the domain of each outlet. This way, only those tweets were counted that both matched the search terms and contained a hyperlink to the respective website. Thereby, it was possible to analyze whether single media outlets sparked social media attention leading to indirect IAS.

Third, in addition to the aggregated data, individual tweets addressing the issues were collected via the *search* endpoint for periods where the count data revealed a sudden increase in the overall number of posts. During these peaks, spillover effects are particularly likely to occur, either from news media to Twitter or in the opposite direction. The individual tweets were used for manual inspections of the first and the most-retweeted posts of each peak to identify the causes of the rise in social media attention and to check whether RAM were involved.

## Results

### *AAS brochure*

The first article in the sample was published on October 19, 2018, by the alternative outlet Philosophia Perennis more than six weeks after the AAS had released the brochure. The article linked to a YouTube video by AfD parliamentarian Nicole Höchst from the previous day and cited an accompanying press release. Closer inspections of the video, the press release, and the article show that Philosophia Perennis adopted the politician's position one-to-one. Both compared the brochure to authoritarian practices of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), accusing the AAS of encouraging caregivers to spy on parents with undesirable beliefs, and of indoctrinating children with leftist ideology by undermining traditional gender roles. The article generated first attention for the issue on Twitter, getting approximately 439 shares in two days. However, as Table 1 shows, only one alternative outlet took up the issue on the following day and the attention on Twitter decreased quickly. Two new articles that the Junge Freiheit published on November 2 did not resurge social media attention and for about one month there were almost no tweets on the issue. However, one of these articles brought up the new claim that the brochure would denounce girls who wear dresses and braids as coming from far-right families.

**Table 1:** Issue career of the AAS brochure in news media and on Twitter

Date	Alternative media articles			Mainstream media articles			Total articles	Total tweets	
	Phil. Peren.	Tichys Einblick	Other outlets	Bild	Welt	Other outlets			
	Oct.	19	1	-	-	-			-
	20	-	-	1	-	-	1	140	
	...	-	-	2	-	-	2	139	
Nov.	26	1	-	-	-	-	1	0	
	27	-	-	1	-	-	1	100	
	28	-	1	-	-	-	1	621	
	29	1	-	5	1	1	9	847	
	30	-	-	5	-	2	9	510	
Dec.	1	-	-	2	-	-	3	922	
	2	-	-	1	1	-	2	805	
	3	-	-	5	-	-	5	405	
	4	1	-	1	-	-	2	128	
	5	-	-	2	-	-	2	230	
	6	-	-	2	-	-	2	124	
	...	1	-	4	-	-	6	587	
Jan.	15	-	-	2	1	-	3	109	
	16	-	1	2	-	-	3	54	
	17	1	-	-	-	-	1	381	
	18	-	-	-	1	-	1	108	
	... <sup>1</sup>	-	-	-	-	-	1	98	
Sum		6	2	35	4	3	6	56	6,640
Shares on Twitter		781	796	651	46	76	213	—	—

*Notes.* Ellipses represent interim periods with few articles and tweets per day.

Other alternative media outlets: Achse des Guten, Compact, Epoch Times, Journalisten-Watch, Junge Freiheit, PI-News, RT, Sputnik.

Other mainstream media outlets: FAZ, Focus, Spiegel, SZ, taz.

An extended version of this table is included in the supplemental material (<https://osf.io/jzvah>).

<sup>1</sup> Until January 24.

On November 26, Philosophia Perennis published a second article on the issue, once again citing an AfD parliamentarian who repeated the claim about the dresses and braids. Although not generating many shares on Twitter, the article was followed by an op-ed

column of the local tabloid B.Z. on the same day. Although this first mainstream article did not cite any sources, it strongly resembled the previous coverage as it drew comparisons to the GDR, addressed the dresses and braids, and accused the AAS of encouraging spying. With regard to RQ1, this similarity in content as well as the temporal proximity indicate that this is indeed an instance of IAS from RAM on mainstream media. Although it remains unclear what exactly triggered the spillover effect due to the lack of hard evidence like a referenced source, it is unlikely that it was mediated by social media as inquired by RQ2. Like Table 1 shows, the social media attention for the issue was very low up to this point and grew only in the following days when other alternative media picked up the reports of *Philosophia Perennis* and B.Z. Especially articles from *Tichys Einblick* received significant numbers of shares. Thus, with regard to RQ3, this outlet is the third RAM besides *Philosophia Perennis* and *Junge Freiheit* whose agenda-setting power becomes evident in this case study: *Philosophia Perennis* was the first outlet that scandalized the brochure, triggering further reports by other RAM and some attention on social media, which *Tichys Einblick* strongly enhanced, whereas the *Junge Freiheit* was less salient on social media, but made specific claims that dominated the subsequent discourse around the issue, also beyond the far-right sphere.

The latter became apparent on November 29, when *Bild* addressed the indignation about the brochure for the first time. Although the article neither mentioned alternative media nor AfD politicians explicitly, two politicians from the center-right CDU were quoted who engaged in a similar scandalization as the previous reports, drawing GDR comparisons and broaching the dresses and braids. Other conservative mainstream media, *Welt* and *Focus*, followed on the same day with articles interviewing further CDU politicians who addressed the same aspects. With a little more delay, other mainstream media from both sides of the political spectrum began reporting on the issue, citing press statements or social media posts from several CDU politicians who criticized the brochure. In response to RQ4, whether IAS follows a stepwise process of ideological proximity, these dynamics suggest that it did in the present case. In this connection, the attention from mainstream politicians, which was likely triggered through interview requests from conservative mainstream media, appears to constitute a mediating factor, that created a news value for other mainstream media. As a notable exception, however, the *taz* did not pick up the issue at all, suggesting that the IAS power of RAM did not reach to the left margin of the mainstream media spectrum. Moreover, another limitation of the RAM influence becomes apparent on the second level of agenda-setting, since conservative mainstream media did not adopt the negative tone of the RAM as suggested by RQ5. Instead, throughout the whole discourse, most mainstream articles, both by right- and left-leaning media, had a neutral tone and simply reported on the criticism, without expressing own opinions.

### *KiKa documentary*

After the documentary was aired on November 26, 2017, it was not covered by any of the media in the sample and received no attention on Twitter for six weeks. In line with a previous analysis (Semmer & Riesmeyer, 2020), the Twitter data show that public indignation stirred on January 7, 2018, when a YouTube video by far-right blogger Oliver Janich generated first attention for the issue. A closer inspection of the tweets shows that some of them tagged AfD politicians, alternative media figures, and then Bild chief editor Julian Reichelt—all of which soon contributed to draw further attention to the issue. On the same day, several AfD accounts posted tweets and the alternative media Philosophia Perennis and PI-News published first articles on the documentary, addressing the mature appearance of the teen protagonist Diaa and accusing the documentary of Islamizing the German youth. Several other alternative media and Bild followed one day later (see Table 2). Although the Bild article did not refer to any alternative media directly, it quoted a social media post of the AfD politician Dirk Spaniel, linking the article from Philosophia Perennis. With regard to RQ1 and RQ2, this indicates an indirect IAS effect from RAM on mainstream media that was mediated by social media reactions on RAM content by AfD representatives. Yet, since the issue was already present on Twitter when RAM picked it up, it is possible that the issue had caught the attention of Bild journalists before, especially since its chief editor had been tagged in early tweets. Thus, although the findings indicate that RAM contributed to set the issue on the mainstream media agenda, there is no clear evidence that they were the main cause for this. Apart from that, with regard to RQ3 the findings show that Philosophia Perennis was again the first alternative outlet that covered the issue and triggered statements from AfD politicians and articles from other alternative media. This finding is consistent with the previous case study and corroborates the outlet’s agenda-setting power within the far-right ecosystem.

The first Bild articles on January 8 and 9 likely inspired articles from the other conservative mainstream media Focus, FAZ, and Welt in the following days, which quoted the same post by AfD politician Spaniel, and a tweet from Bild chief editor Reichelt. Apart from that, Bild and other conservative mainstream media quoted critical statements by politicians from the established parties CDU and FDP, and published own commentaries. All of the commentators criticized the KiKa for providing an inaccurate age of the protagonist and for the program’s lack of a pedagogic context, but did not echo more extreme claims from RAM or AfD politicians like the Islamization topos. Especially Welt, Focus and FAZ also gave voice to advocates of the documentary like pedagogics and the responsible editor.



**Table 2:** Issue career of the KiKa documentary in news media and on Twitter

Date	Alternative media articles			Mainstream media articles			Total articles	Total tweets
	Philo. Peren.	PI- News	Other outlets	Bild	Welt	Other outlets		
Jan. 7	1	1	-	-	-	-	2	664
8	-	1	5	1	-	-	7	2,022
9	-	1	7	2	1	1	12	3,292
10	-	-	3	1	1	3	8	2,418
11	1	1	3	1	1	-	7	1,192
12	-	-	1	1	-	-	2	1,270
13	-	1	4	1	-	3	9	2,252
14	2	1	1	1	1	1	7	3,774
15	2	1	5	-	-	1	9	2,315
16	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	1,964
17	1	-	-	-	1	1	3	767
18	-	-	2	-	-	-	2	381
... <sup>1</sup>	2	-	7	-	-	5	14	4,184
Sum	9	7	38	8	5	15	82	26,549
Shares on Twitter	858	283	1,266	2,093	1,392	500	—	—

*Notes.* Ellipses represent interim periods with few articles and tweets per day.

Other alternative media outlets: Achse des Guten, Compact, Epoch Times, Journalisten-Watch, Junge Freiheit, RT, Sputnik, Tichys Einblick.

Other mainstream media outlets: FAZ, Focus, Spiegel, SZ, taz.

An extended version of this table is included in the supplemental material (<https://osf.io/jzvah>).

<sup>1</sup> Until February 17.

The left-leaning media in the sample, however, showed a clearer contrast to the RAM coverage. Soon after the first Bild articles, the taz published a commentary in defense of the documentary criticizing the tabloid and the AfD. The SZ published similar comments with a positive tone toward the documentary after the issue had largely disappeared from the other media's agenda. The Spiegel did not publish any articles on the issue at all. Accordingly, these findings are in line with the assumption of RQ4 that conservative mainstream media take up the issue first and then contribute to set the issue on the agenda of left-leaning mainstream media. Also with regard to RQ5, this case study partly confirms the expected second-level agenda-setting: All conservative mainstream media adopted a negative tone toward the issue, although less extreme than that of the RAM,

while left-leaning mainstream media took a clear antagonistic stance. Like in the previous case study, however, some left-leaning mainstream media remained unaffected of the IAS attempts from the far right at all.

### *Global Compact for Migration*

Although the United Nations started consultations on the GCM in April 2017, there were no news reports on it until December 3, when Donald Trump announced the United States' withdrawal from the negotiations. Some alternative and mainstream media covered this event based on news agency material without providing any background information about the GCM and without generating social media attention for the issue.

The level of public attention remained low throughout the first half of 2018. In this timeframe, the sample contains only two articles from the Epoch Times and one from the Junge Freiheit. The Junge Freiheit article was authored by an assistant of the AfD politician Martin Hebner and criticized the alleged secrecy around the GCM. The article further claimed the GCM would undermine Germany's sovereignty and would set off an unprecedented mass migration. Similar claims were made in one of the Epoch Times articles quoting a YouTube video from Hebner.

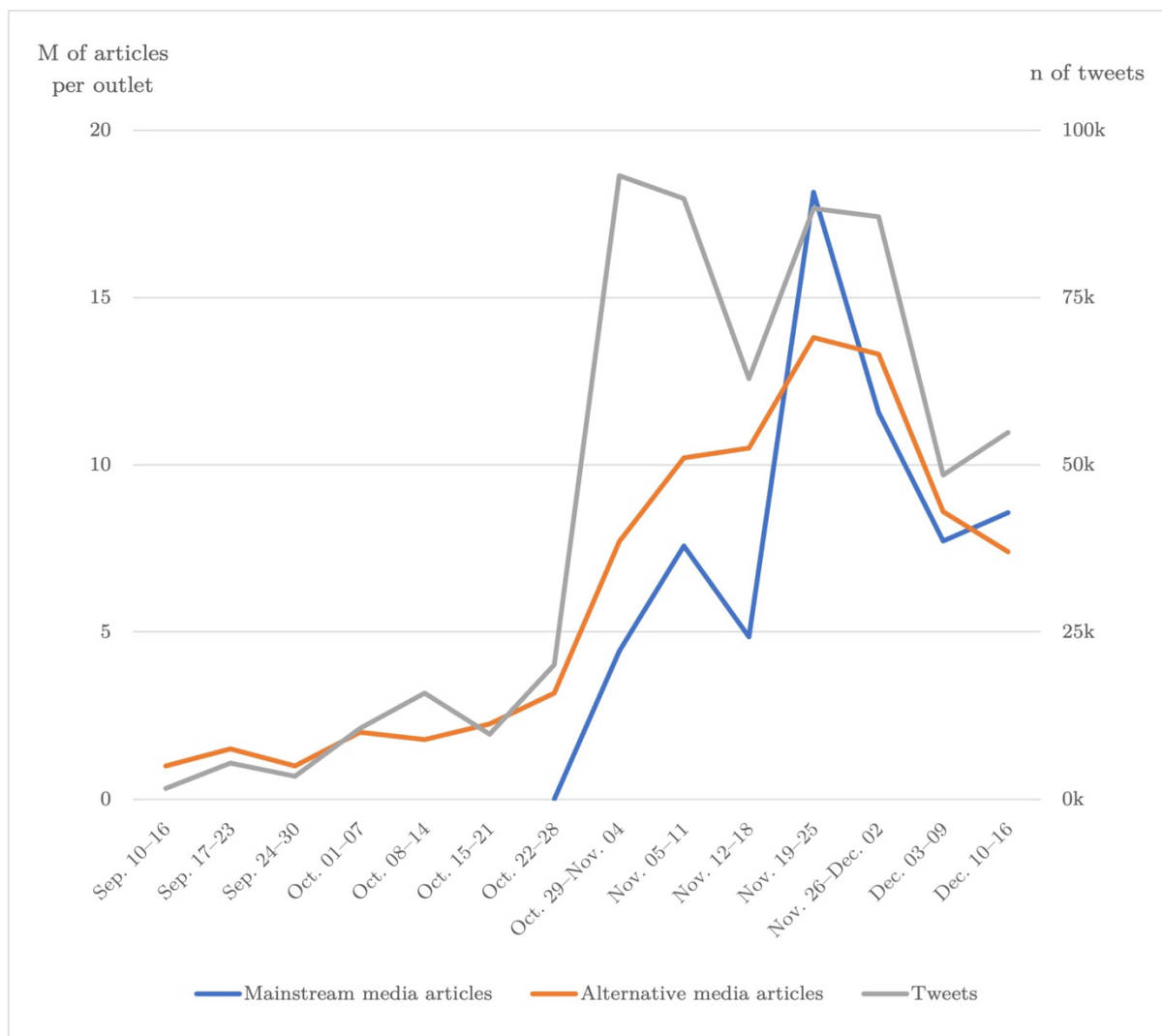
In July 2018, some alternative and all mainstream media, except Bild, reported that the United Nations reached final agreement on the compact and mentioned hesitance by the Hungarian government, again quoting news agencies. In contrast to the first reports in December 2017, the news coverage elicited some modest attention on Twitter this time (588 tweets in two days). Closer inspections of the tweets show that they were dominated by shares of posts from AfD politicians and mainstream news articles. Moreover, the news around the agreement on the GCM were succeeded by a couple of RAM articles in the following days. While some of these articles repeated Hebner's predictions of mass immigration, other articles, most notably by Tichys Einblick, drew less dramatic scenarios but still criticized the GCM for facilitating migration and propaganda. As the first mainstream outlet in the sample, Welt published an in-depth article citing several voices in favor and against the GCM, including Hebner, whose claim that the compact would weaken Germany's sovereignty was refuted by the authors. After this small peak, attention fell off again: Throughout August there was no day with more than 100 tweets on the issue and only two outlets published an article: Tichys Einblick repeated its criticism of the GCM, while the Spiegel published an interview with an economist who endorsed the compact because it would strengthen the rights of migrants and would target fake news, populism, and incitement.

In September, attention to the GCM rose significantly among RAM and on Twitter. The main agenda-setters were far-right activists such as Martin Sellner, whose tweets

and petition against the GCM were widely shared and served as a source for several RAM articles. As shown in Figure 2, this evolved into steady RAM coverage in October, accompanied by a rising number of tweets that rarely fell below 1000 per day. The articles often dismissed the compact's alleged non-binding nature and claimed that it would be implemented into national law soon after its approval. Furthermore, the RAM frequently reported on parliamentary and civil resistance against the GCM in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, citing right-wing politicians, Swiss and Austrian mainstream media, and the French news agency AFP. As Table 3 shows, especially articles from Tichys Einblick and Philosophia Perennis generated strong social media attention, with some articles receiving more than 1000 shares on Twitter.

All mainstream media, on the other hand, did not publish a single article on the GCM for at least two months until October 31 when the Austrian government declared not to sign the GCM. This event was covered by all media in the sample and set off an avalanche of further coverage that lasted until the United Nations approved of the GCM in December (see Figure 2). Especially the arousing debate within the government party CDU as well as further withdrawals by foreign governments constantly prompted new reports. Beyond that, the mainstream media published several fact-checking articles, interviews, and commentaries. A closer analysis of these articles shows that Welt and Bild followed a rather ambiguous line. On the one hand, they published articles repeating claims from RAM like the imminence of mass immigration destabilizing the German social system. On the other hand, they also published articles disputing the credibility of RAM and attempting to debunk their conspiracy theories. Other mainstream media, both right- and left-leaning, more consistently pursued the latter and argued in defense of the GCM.

In view of this issue career, the case of the GCM has some parallels to the other two case studies but also exhibits clear differences. Similar to the other cases, an alliance of RAM, AfD politicians and far-right activists tried to draw public attention to an issue that was largely ignored by the mainstream media. Also with respect to RQ3, the findings of the third case study are quite consistent with those of the other two analyses as they corroborate the significant roles of the Junge Freiheit for raising issues within the far-right sphere as well as Tichys Einblick and Philosophia Perennis for raising attention of a wider public on social media. As Table 3 shows, both outlets exceeded most mainstream media in terms of shares on Twitter.



**Figure 2:** News media output and Twitter attention during the final phase of the discourse around the GCM

However, in contrast to the previous case studies, this analysis yields a negative answer to RQ1 as it found no indication for IAS from RAM on mainstream media. Also with regard to RQ2, there was no evidence that any other actors of the German far-right spectrum were successful in triggering mainstream reports or that the generated social media attention for the GCM had such spillover effects. Instead, the analysis showed that political decisions and traditional sources (i.e., news agencies) triggered mainstream media coverage.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, there were no spillover effects among mainstream media (RQ4) and no consistent evidence for second-level IAS (RQ5). Although the coverage of

<sup>3</sup> Although the decision of the Austrian government might have been influenced by far-right activists and alternative media, which remains beyond the scope of this study (see Conrad, 2021).

the conservative mainstream media Bild and Welt exhibited again a similar tone and similar claims as the RAM, they also criticized the far-right campaign against the GCM.

One reason for the fact that the issue did not spill over into the mainstream may be that the GCM was an abstract international agreement and therefore not attractive for tabloids like Bild, which played an important bridging function in the other two cases dealing with more concrete scandals, but was the last mainstream outlet covering the GCM. Another likely explanation is the lack of conflict among mainstream parties that appeared to be a crucial news factor for mainstream media (see similarly, Haller, 2019, p. 27). In the other two case studies, the mainstream media could spark such conflict by interviewing CDU politicians who had not commented the issues in public before. In the case of the GCM, however, the CDU was itself in charge as the major governing party and was not challenged by any other established party.

**Table 3:** News media output on the GCM and shares on Twitter by outlet

	<b>Alternative media</b>			<b>Mainstream media</b>		
	Philosophia Perennis	Tichys Einblick	Other outlets	Bild	Welt	Other outlets
Total articles (M per outlet)	83	88	640 (80)	37	127	308 (62)
Shares on Twitter (M per outlet)	30,660	29,567	49,087 (6,136)	9,207	30,210	17,751 (3,550)

*Notes.* Other alternative media outlets: Achse des Guten, Compact, Epoch Times, Journalisten-Watch, Junge Freiheit, PI-News, RT, Sputnik.

Other mainstream media outlets: FAZ, Focus, Spiegel, SZ, taz.

An extended version of this table is included in the supplemental material (<https://osf.io/jzvah>).

## Discussion

In three initial case studies, the present article explored the occurrence of IAS by RAM in Germany. Two of the studies found strong indication that RAM contributed to set far-right issues on the agenda of mainstream media. However, due to a lack of explicit references from mainstream media to RAM and the fact that other actors from the far-right ecosystem made similar efforts to push the issues, the exact mechanisms behind the spillover remain somewhat unclear. It is possible that RAM had no direct effects on mainstream media, but raised the attention of other influential far-right actors, most

notably AfD politicians, or a critical mass of social media users, which then made the issues newsworthy for mainstream journalists.

Three alternative outlets stood out across the analyses and appeared to play significant roles in the IAS process. *Philosophia Perennis* and *Tichys Einblick* were among the first to cover the issues and attracted the attention of social media users and other RAM. Moreover, the *Junge Freiheit* was able to set the focus on certain aspects that dominated subsequent coverage by alternative and mainstream media. Other RAM, such as *Compact* or the Russian media *Sputnik* and *RT*, were of minor importance. With regard to the mainstream media, the case studies suggest that the Axel Springer outlets *Bild* and *Welt* played a similar role like *Fox News* in the United States: They picked up the far-right issues first and served as a bridge to the agendas of other mainstream media and politicians. Although *Bild* and *Welt* did not adopt alternative media claims one-to-one, their tone partly resembled that of RAM, while other mainstream outlets differed more clearly from them. These results suggest that RAM could have an impact on the public, even if their direct audiences might be small. A critical mass of a few hundred social media users could be sufficient to attract the attention of mainstream journalists who may then present these issues to a much broader audience.

When such agenda-setting attempts occur, coordinated campaigns are quickly suspected behind them. However, the erratic careers of the issues studied above speak against a top-down organization. Especially in the case of the GCM, there was no sudden start after which all RAM pushed the issue, but it took months until their agitation gained momentum. Therefore, such dynamics may be better explained by coorientation of like-minded but independent actors instead of coordination by a few strategic minds, like authors of similar studies have noted before (Klinger et al., 2022, p. 15; Salzborn, 2016, p. 9). Nevertheless, such IAS attempts should not be viewed as exceptional incidents, but as part of an ongoing agitation of far-right actors against progressive institutions (see e.g., Salzborn, 2016). While the case studies of the present article provide first indications that these attempts can be successful and how this can happen, it is unclear whether these analyses describe regularities. Future studies could therefore use computational methods as proposed by recent research for large scale investigations of how often and under which conditions IAS attempts succeed (Wong & Trilling, 2023).

This leads to the final question of how mainstream journalists should deal with such IAS attempts. Some authors argue that journalists should engage in thorough gate-keeping and should exclude the issues of right-wing interlopers rigorously from the sphere of legitimate debate (Hopp & Ferrucci, 2020, pp. 13–14; Nygaard, 2020, p. 13). Even critical reports about them should be avoided as they could popularize the issues. However, this view ignores that RAM can raise legitimate issues like the GCM that was neglected by mainstream media despite of its reasonable news value. Moreover, when alternative outlets generate attention for their issues on social media, this could cast

doubts among people who cannot find information from reliable sources on the matter. At some point, public pressure could become too high forcing the mainstream media to cover the issues in order to correct wide-spread disinformation. Monitoring RAM and countering them at early stages may thus be more effective and could inoculate the public against far-right propaganda (Altay et al., 2023).

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