

# Revue des Interactions Humaines Médiatisées

Journal of Human Mediated Interactions

**Rédacteurs en chef** : Sylvie Leleu-Merviel & Khaldoun Zreik

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*Journal of Human Mediated Interactions*

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## Editorial

Ce numéro spécial de la *Revue des Interactions Humaines Médiatisées* revient à une formule invitée comme cela s'est déjà produit par le passé, pour la dernière fois en 2018.

Il s'agit donc d'un millésime atypique dans la production de la revue, qui abandonne temporairement sa forme habituelle de trois articles longs en varia. En effet, le numéro propose sept articles plus courts, qui sont des versions retravaillées et complétées de travaux sélectionnés parmi ceux présentés lors du colloque international « Journalisme et plateformes 2 : information, infomédiation et *fake news* » organisé par l'axe 4 de l'IMSIC et qui s'est tenu à l'École du Journalisme et de Communication de l'Université d'Aix-Marseille (EJCAM), à Marseille, du 20 au 22 janvier 2021. Ce colloque international est le deuxième volet d'un rendez-vous « Journalisme et plateformes » dont le premier volet, « de la symbiose à la dépendance », a été organisé par le LERASS à Toulouse en 2019.

L'ensemble est consacré aux fake news, au fact-checking et à l'éducation aux médias et à l'information. Le numéro a été coordonné par Pauline Amiel et Alexandre Joux, qui ont effectué tout le travail de reviewing et de supervision scientifique. Ils présentent l'ensemble du numéro dans l'article d'ouverture. Nous les remercions pour l'exigence dont ils ont fait preuve dans ce travail.

**Nous vous souhaitons à toutes et à tous une très bonne lecture et nous vous remercions de votre fidélité.**

**Sylvie LELEU-MERVIEL et Khaldoun ZREIK**  
Rédacteurs en chef

# Fake News and the Corona Crisis in Germany: Public Broadcasting Counter Strategies on Instagram

*Fake News et la crise de la Corona en Allemagne : Stratégies de contre-attaque des médias publics sur Instagram*

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**Abstract:** Fake and manipulated information have proven to be dangerous means of disinformation. This became particularly evident in times of a health crisis like Corona. The success of these manipulated news is in part due to the fact that public discourse has become more and more fragmented, with various social media platforms taking over news aggregation functions for millions of readers. The increasing reliance on social media gives people access to a wider range of sources and 'alternative facts', some of which are at odds with official advice, misleading, or simply false. In this context, specific platform logics come into play, which are based on algorithmic and personalized news feeds, hashtags, and specific narratives. But the Corona crisis has brought public broadcasting back into the picture as it reminded us how open we have become to such conspiracies and misinformation. During the pandemics, many people turned to trusted sources of news including public broadcasting media, including their digital channels.

To understand better, how the main public broadcasters in Germany (ARD and ZDF) used Instagram during the pandemics, and how they counter-acted against conspiracy and disinformation, a content analysis of selected Instagram channels was carried out. In terms of content, both the stories and the (audio) visual and textual elements of the postings have their own agenda setting function and can as such add important arguments to the news menu. We also isolated five specific, platform based communication strategies, which confirm the importance of this type of journalistic reporting.

**Keywords:** Social media, digital publics, Fake News, disinformation, digital conspiracy, public media, Instagram journalism.

**Résumé:** Les informations fausses et manipulées se sont avérées être des moyens dangereux de désinformation. Cela est devenu particulièrement évident en période de crise sanitaire, comme lors de la pandémie de la Corona. Le succès de ces nouvelles manipulées est en partie dû au fait que le discours public s'est de plus en plus fragmenté, avec diverses plateformes de médias sociaux prenant en charge les fonctions d'agrégation d'actualités pour des millions de lecteurs. La dépendance croissante aux médias sociaux donne aux gens un accès à un éventail plus large de sources et de "faits alternatifs", dont certains sont en contradiction avec les conseils officiels, trompeurs ou tout simplement faux. Dans ce contexte, des logiques de

plateforme spécifiques entrent en jeu, qui reposent sur des flux d'actualités algorithmiques et personnalisés, des hashtags et des récits spécifiques. Mais la crise de la Corona a remis les médias publics à l'ordre du jour, en rappelant à quel point nous sommes devenus ouverts à de telles conspirations et désinformations. Pendant la pandémie, de nombreuses personnes se sont tournées vers des sources d'information de confiance, y compris les médias publics, y compris leurs chaînes numériques.

Pour mieux comprendre comment les principaux diffuseurs publics en Allemagne (ARD et ZDF) ont utilisé Instagram pendant la pandémie, et comment ils ont lutté contre les conspirations et la désinformation, une analyse de contenu des chaînes Instagram sélectionnées a été réalisée. En termes de contenu, tant les stories que les éléments (audio) visuels et textuels des publications ont leur propre fonction de définition de l'agenda et peuvent ainsi ajouter des arguments importants au menu des actualités. Nous avons également isolé cinq stratégies de communication spécifiques basées sur la plateforme, qui confirment l'importance de ce type de reportage journalistique.

**Mots-clés:** Médias sociaux, publics numériques, fausses informations, désinformation, conspiration numérique, médias publics, journalisme sur Instagram.

## 1 Introduction

Long before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the term “fake news” had evolved from minor distortions of the truth to a deliberate propagation of disinformation, often with the aim of manipulation and propaganda. The effectiveness of such manipulated news, leading to regulatory responses by numerous countries worldwide, can be attributed in part due to the increasing fragmentation of public discourse. Various social media platforms have assumed roles as news aggregators for millions of readers.

In this context, the digital public sphere has been profoundly influenced by algorithmic and personalized news feeds, undisclosed news sources, and the significant surge in news traffic. This transformation has fragmented the digital public sphere into what Thimm (2015) refers to as “mini-publics.” Traditional control of information access by journalists has waned, giving individuals greater access to a diverse range of sources and advice, some of which may be misleading or entirely false. During the COVID-19 crisis, this toxic mixture of manipulated information and half-truths had particularly detrimental effects, influencing the health decisions of individuals seeking reliable information through the media. As evidenced by the latest Reuters report, the COVID-19 crisis brought about significant changes in news consumption patterns. In Germany, the previously reported 12-point decline in the reach of TV news was partially reversed as many people turned to trusted news sources, including public service media (Reuters Institute, 2020). Moreover, certain social media platforms assumed a central role during this period.

To shed light on journalistic strategies employed by German public broadcasters during the COVID-19 pandemic, this contribution focuses on digital journalism within the context of new social media strategies, particularly on Instagram. The primary emphasis is on three German public broadcasting channels (ARD, ZDF, funk) and their efforts to combat fake news and conspiracy narratives during the pandemic.

## 2 Mediatization and digital journalism

Journalism has undergone significant transformations over time, representing a continuous process of adapting to evolving media technologies. This has not been a sudden or abrupt development, but rather a continuous process of media change, adaptation of media practices under the constant flow of new technology. Media driven social change is one of the core concepts of the ‘mediatization approach’, which is the theoretical background of this paper. Mediatization describes the interconnection of human communication with media and the resulting social and cultural changes, or as Couldry and Hepp (2013, p. 6) summarize: “Generally speaking, *mediatization is a concept used to analyze critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other*” (italics in the original).

Couldry and Hepp see quantitative as well as qualitative aspects in mediatization processes, such as the increasing temporal, spatial and social spread, or the specificity of certain media within socio-cultural change. Krotz (2007) characterizes these changes within the public, political, secular, institutional and private spheres, and in daily life, as a pivotal “meta-process” (Krotz, 2007, p. 257), thereby levelling mediatization with globalization or industrialization. Media have become so important because of how they are used in communicative behaviour within society and how they help construct reality perceptions of society. The spheres of mediated worlds are manifold, as Hjarvard (2008, p. 3) points out:

*As a concept mediatization denotes the processes through which core elements of a cultural or social activity (e.g., politics, religion, language) assume media form. As a consequence, the activity is to a greater or lesser degree performed through interaction with a medium, and the symbolic content and the structure of the social and cultural activities are influenced by media environments which they gradually become more dependent upon*

Mediatization processes have also dramatically changed journalism. Whether on YouTube or Facebook, as a tweet or Instastory – journalistic content is no longer tied to traditional media channels but can now also be found on all social media platforms. According to the Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute (2018), television and the Internet, including social media, are the most widely used weekly news sources in Germany. Social media platforms have seen increased use as news sources, surpassing print media since 2020. Public service broadcasters have embraced social networks for diverse purposes, including digital adaptations of traditional media formats and exclusive content for these platforms. Instagram, with its evolving features, has gained popularity in recent years (Beisch & Schäfer, 2020).

Within the German media system, public broadcasting plays a central role, since it has the mandate to provide basic information, education and entertainment services to the citizens and is financed by all households through an “audio-visual contribution”, comparable to the one in France or in the UK. Public service broadcasting is intended to ensure objectivity, diversity of opinion, and political information for decision-making of the citizens. In the process of digital mediatization, both new potential for journalistic work and new challenges have become apparent.

Firstly, the typical function of journalists as gatekeepers loses its relevance – everybody is free to produce content, comment postings by other authors or produce media of all sorts. Hence, in principle, any person with an internet access can distribute content on the net. As a consequence, disintermediation is taking



place, in which the intermediate step of publishing and editing of content by editorial offices becomes obsolete. In this sense, journalists have become less “gatekeepers” but more of “gatewatchers”: As observers they provide an orientation service by identifying relevant content on the internet, referring to it or processing it in their own reports instead of primarily publishing their own information (Bruns, 2018). But also new tasks are emerging for journalists and editors, such as the long-term monitoring and updating of contributions, the moderation of discussions and the research of additional content. New challenges also concern the credibility of sources, the identification of manipulated identification or manipulated content, as well as the possible dissemination of misinformation.

### **3 Journalism on Instagram**

Journalistic practices on Instagram are a relatively recent phenomenon. The platform allows users to apply filters to images and videos and share them on Instagram and other social media platforms. Users can follow other accounts, engage through comments, or like posts. Instagram, part of Facebook since August 2012, has continually introduced new features, including the photo card tool for sorting images by location, the 'stories feature' for creating video or photo sequences, and the introduction of IGTV for longer videos and reels for short-form content, akin to TikTok.

Instagram's popularity has surged in recent years, ranking second only to Facebook and WhatsApp in weekly usage in 2020 and becoming particularly favored among younger Germans (up to 29-year-olds), with a 65% usage rate (Beisch & Schäfer, 2020). The platform is not just for entertainment; it increasingly serves as a news medium. In 2020, 38% of 18- to 24-year-olds in Germany reported using Instagram as a source for COVID-19-related news (Newman et al. 2020, p. 20).

Public broadcasters have long been active on social media platforms, recognizing the opportunity to reach younger audiences. Journalistic content on Instagram can be shared as posts on the home feed, within Instagram stories, or as IGTV videos. Given Instagram's highly visual nature, analyzing Instagram also involves considering the role of images, their expressiveness, documentary capabilities, and their informational functions for news (Leaver et al., 2017). The story function on Instagram is particularly multimodal, allowing the combination of text, images, and video. Stories can be purely textual, share other content, or include zooms or boomerangs – a series of photos in a loop (Laestadius, 2017). Users can further enhance content through design elements, stickers, mentions (@), hashtags (#), or location tags, contributing to the platform's multimodal presentation of content.

Instagram offers new avenues for digital storytelling, encompassing a variety of forms such as those generated via digital tools, those involving networked participation or interactivity, those distributed via digital platforms, or those consumed on digital platforms (Jenkins, 2017). Instagram enhances political storytelling possibilities, as demonstrated by Liebhart and Bernhardt's analysis of political storytelling in Austria (2017). However, these creative features can also be exploited by producers of fake news and conspiracy narratives.

#### 4 News in the Age of social media: The fake news epidemic

In the context of political information and consequential decision-making, particularly in elections, there has been a growing concern regarding the role of manipulated, false, or entirely fabricated information. This concern gained significant attention, notably after the 2016 United States presidential elections, where manipulated information was believed to have influenced the electoral outcome (Fletcher et al., 2018). Since then, there has been substantial discourse surrounding the proliferation of false information, particularly on social media platforms. In an attempt to provide a clearer definition, Zimmermann and Kohring (2018) argue that the term "fake news" should be replaced with "current disinformation" to establish a comprehensive and operational definition based on explicit theoretical criteria (p. 527). Furthermore, differentiating based on intentionality, Fletcher et al. (2018) introduce the concept of "fake news by design" for cases involving intentional manipulation.

Yap et al. (2018) propose a practical framework to distinguish various degrees of manipulation:

- ***News that has no factual evidence.*** The person creating the content has no factual evidence to prove it, nor data to substantiate it. The content is fictional.
- ***News that may be partly true but also partly false.*** The person creating the content uses some truth that can be easily verifiable as leverage for gaining some form of credibility. Then false information is integrated into the story.
- ***News that deliberately exaggerates to mislead.*** The person creating the content begins with facts or verifiable situations, but then exaggerates details, such as claiming to see 2,000 ships when in reality there were only 200 ships.
- ***News that is weaponized to destroy society, people, economies, or certain groups.*** The person creating the content confuses the information or uses deception and manipulation to destroy people, society, groups of people, and economies or business organizations.

In addition to these categories, a new form of disinformation emerged during the COVID-19 crisis: conspiracy theories and conspiracy storytelling. These narratives are characterized by intentionality and secrecy (Butter & Knight, 2020). Conspiracy theories suggest that conspirators execute intricate, long-term plans flawlessly, leaving subtle traces that only conspiracy theorists can discern, while the majority remains oblivious to these alleged developments (Butter & Knight, 2020).

The belief in conspiracies gained prominence during the global pandemic. Germany, for instance, witnessed substantial demonstrations influenced by conspiracy narratives, including claims of dark powers attempting to control the population or allegations of Bill Gates endeavoring to inject tracking chips into people's bodies. The crisis saw a surge in conspiracy ideology channels and groups. Many individuals found themselves grappling with close associates who suddenly embraced conspiratorial beliefs or adhered to drastic disinformation, as propagated by movements like QAnon. Addressing such false and misleading information necessitates countermeasures, either through private individuals engaging in counter-speech or journalistic sources. In this contribution, we examine three selected Instagram channels operated by German public broadcasters and assess their strategies for combating dangerously false information related to COVID-19.

## 5 Analysis of Instagram strategies by public media

In January and February 2020, we conducted a comparative study to analyze the information strategies and Instagram activities of three prominent public broadcasting channels in Germany. The analysis employed a three-step methodology: first, categorizing news thematically and identifying news values; second, isolating news related to the pandemic for detailed analysis; and third, conducting a fine-grained analysis using a developed coding scheme.

The initial analysis revealed a significant increase in overall social media usage, with nearly half of adult online users (48%) and a substantial 72% among 18 to 24-year-olds obtaining

In January and February of 2020, a comparative study was carried out in order to compare the information strategies and Instagram activities of three important public broadcasting channels in Germany. A three-step technique was applied during the analysis. First, the news was categorized thematically, and news values were identified. Secondly, news concerning the pandemic were set aside for analyses, and third, fine grained analysis was carried out based on the developed coding scheme.

First analysis showed that the increase in the use of social media overall was striking. Almost one in two adult online users (48%) obtained information about the virus in social media; in the group of 18 to 24-year-olds, the figure is 72%. In 2020, 37% of the online users surveyed are using Instagram as a source of news, in 2019 the figure was 34%. The primary focus of our research centered on the nature of journalistic information as a response to fake news. To address this, we filtered the posts of prominent channels that engage in counteractions and provide information related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In our study, we conducted a comparative analysis of the activities on Instagram channels belonging to (1) ARD-Tagesschau, (2) ZDF-heute, and (3) "FUNK", the public broadcasting youth channel. We examined how these broadcasters informed and responded to fake news and conspiracy theories within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic during the selected months.

The following materials were incorporated into our study:

- Posts within the feeds of the two primary public news channels, namely 'tagesschau' and 'zdfheute,' focusing on anti-fake news content, which encompassed 48 posts and 3 stories.
- Feed posts from the public broadcasting youth channel 'funk,' comprising 15 posts and 3 stories.

To ensure the relevance of our findings, we applied a categorization approach that distinguished between surface, content, and narrative aspects, including but not limited to:

- Digital storytelling and Instastories
- Textual content and semantic cues
- Feed posts with links to additional information
- Utilization of stickers
- Fact-checking efforts
- Infographics and animated tables

Building upon these fundamental characteristics, we conducted a specific exploration for innovative formats that emerged during the COVID-19 crisis. The journalistic use of social media platforms provided immediate and creative avenues for applying the distinctive media logic inherent to each platform. In particular, the youth-oriented channel 'FUNK' demonstrated its capacity for interactivity, responsiveness, and entertainment value.

Among the materials we analyzed, we identified novel formats, such as platforms for user-generated questions and personal contributions, interviews, music segments, and comedy content. Notably, the fact-checking aspect garnered significant attention from the public, as many user inquiries centered around the conspiracy theories that dominated public discourse in Germany during the extended period of May 2020.

## 6 Instagram profiles of the selected channels

At first, the channels themselves will be introduced briefly. The two primary news channels exhibited relatively similar Instagram presences. The second-largest German television network, ZDF, with its flagship news program titled “Heute” (“today”), boasted nearly 8.2 million followers as of the study period in January 2020. These channels disseminated COVID-19-related news on various topics and utilized Instagram Stories to cover themes like “corona wave”, “corona test”, and “corona hotspots”. Additionally, on the IGTV (Instagram-TV) platform, shorter videos addressing vaccination progress and fundamental COVID-19 information were accessible on their YouTube-connected channel.

Based on these basic features, we particularly looked for new formats created during the crisis. Journalistic use of social media platforms opens up immediate and creative ways of applying the media logic of the respective platforms, and particularly the young channel 'FUNK' proved to be interactive, responsive and entertaining. Among the materials analyzed there were new formats such as a space for user questions and personal uploads, interviews, music, comedy, etc. Particularly the fact checking channel got a lot of attention by the public, as many user questions were focused on the conspiracy theories, which dominated the public discourse in Germany during many weeks in May of 2020.

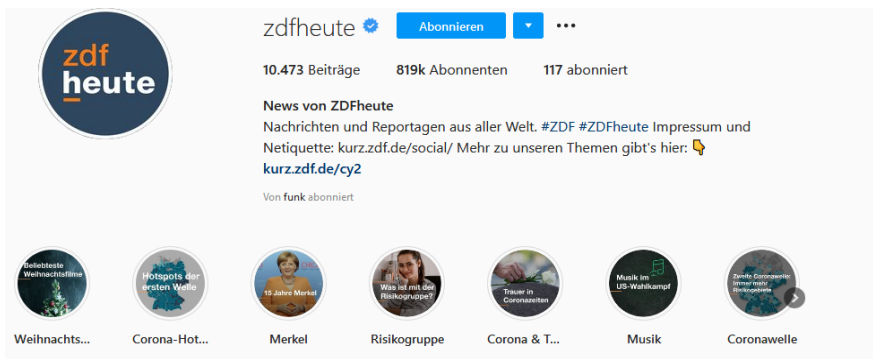


Figure 1. Profile and intro ZDFheute, January 12th, 2021

Interestingly, the introduction header not only refers to the overall identity of the channel (“new and news reports from all over the world”), but also to the “netiquette”, pointing to regulation and rule orientation of interaction on their account.

The second news channel, the flagship news program of the ARD is the “tagesschau”. Their initial self-presentation refers to the news functions (“Nachrichten/news”), but also to the way they present the news (“Erklärgrafiken” (info graphics) and “special moments from all over the world”):

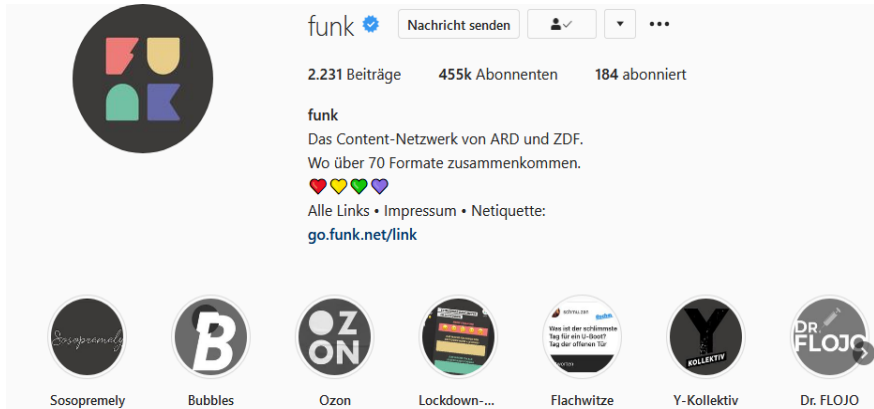


Figure 2. Profile and intro ARD “tagesschau” (January 12th, 2021)

Quite differently organized and based on a “content network” is “funk”. Wikipedia describes funk as “a German video - on - demand service operated by the public broadcasters ARD and ZDF. Further on: “Funk describes itself as a content network. [...] Funk is aimed at people between the ages of 14 and 29 who rarely use the traditional means for public broadcasting. [...] Funk produces over 70 different, regularly published programs for social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Spotify, Snapchat, and the funk.net web app. These are played out on their own channels or accounts. The programs focus on information, orientation and entertainment. In addition, some series are distributed under license, some in the original English version. The individual programs are produced by various private production companies, the company's own production companies or the broadcasters themselves.”

The description above points to a challenge for analyses: as funk hosts a lot of different channels, an in-depth analysis of all of them would be neither feasible nor productive, as some of them are centered on other issues like comedy or music.

In order to follow up the aims of this study, only those channels of funk were selected which present clear journalistic content, including on the ground reporting and live footage referring to the Corona pandemic, fake news and conspiracy narratives. Those were the channel “Y-Kollektiv” (journalism), “Mr Wissen-to-Go” (Science Information) and “Lockdown”.



**Figure 3.** Content Network 'funk' (Jan. 12th, 2021)

Funk at the time had nearly 460 000 subscribers, which differed however concerning the individual channels.

The following results were obtained and will be highlighted by some screen shots. Overall, our study shows, how public broadcasting journalism can adopt digital platforms and use them creatively and hence help to inform particularly younger audiences, which often can no longer be reached by mainstream media.

## 7 Digital storytelling and science communication

In our comprehensive analysis, we observed that all of the selected channels consistently employed fact-based storytelling, often relying on references to reputable scientific institutions and authoritative sources. The first screen shot deals with “long term effects of corona vaccinations” and was chosen to depict this strategy. This post refers by using a photographic image to the “Paul Ehrlich Institute”, a well-established and renowned medical institution, and uses the original quote. The text states that there are “generally no long-term effects known of any vaccination”. This kind of post belongs to one of the most important strategies of anti-fake news storytelling during the pandemic: science communication. By employing a strategy with a visual and textual underpinning of scientific results the news channel employs typical strategy of qualitative journalism, which tries to counterbalance fake and manipulated information about unknown side effects of the covid vaccination:



Figure 4. Science communication narrative by 'funk' (Jan. 13th, 2021)

This first example of science communication as a core strategy can be confirmed for the other channels as well, however, with different storytelling techniques. Whereas the first example in image 4 employs a classical strategy by depicting a nurse and a quote by an acclaimed medical institution, the second example demonstrates another technique: a so-called infographic. In this post the different vaccines are listed by technology, origin, and validation for Europe:

**CORONA-IMPfstOFFE IM VERGLEICH**

Quelle: Deutschlandfunk & Wirtschaftswoche

Hersteller	BIONTECH / PFIZER, DEUTSCHLAND	MODERNA, USA	ASTRAZENECA, UK	SPUTNIK V, RUSSLAND
Art des Impfstoffes	<b>mRNA Impfstoff:</b> Der Bauplan für das Spike-Protein des Virus wird geimpft, sodass der Körper es selbst produzieren kann. Das Ergebnis ist eine Immunantwort.		<b>Vektorimpfstoff:</b> Ein harmloses Virus mit der Erbinformation für das Spike-Protein wird verabreicht, der Körper produziert eine Immunantwort.	
Zugelassen in	EU, USA, Großbritannien, Israel u.v.m.	USA	Vereinigtes Königreich	Russland, Ungarn
Aussichten für die EU		Die Prognose für eine Zulassung ist ziemlich gut.	Laut aktuellen Studien weniger wirksam als mRNA, trotzdem gut.	Schlecht. Die EMA stuft den Impfstoff nicht als aussichtsreichen Kandidaten ein.

Informationen zum Coronavirus (COVID-19) findest du hier: [bundesgesundheitsministerium.de](https://www.bundesgesundheitsministerium.de)

**funk** • Abonnieren

**funk** Vor einigen Monaten gingen noch hunderte Hersteller ins Rennen um den Corona-Impfstoff. Jetzt kristallisiert sich langsam heraus, welche Kandidaten tatsächlich verimpft werden. Deshalb haben wir uns die meist diskutiertesten Impfstoffe einmal genauer angesehen.

Meist diskutiert heißt übrigens nicht zwangsläufig vielversprechend: Obwohl über Sputnik V viel gesprochen wird, gilt der Impfstoff in der EU nicht als aussichtsreicher Kandidat. Stattdessen stelle Gesundheitsminister Spahn in Aussicht, dass bis Mitte des Jahres die bisher weniger diskutierten Impfstoffe von Curevac oder Johnson & Johnson zugelassen werden könnten.

mRNA-Impfstoffe sind übrigens eine ganz neue Entwicklung. Genveränderungen, wie manchmal befürchtet, können dadurch nicht

Gefällt 12.594 Mal

3. JANUAR

Kommentar hinzufügen ... [Posten](#)

Figure 5. Infographic strategy on vaccine details and recommendations by ‘funk’ (Jan. 12th, 2021)

The explanatory information in the textual body next to the graphic employs a typically less formal and younger writing style. The readers are being addressed in the nonformal way of “du” (like the French “tu”), the journalists describe their news research in a personal way (“so we checked the most disputed vaccines”) and in a more colloquial writing style. Overall, more than 52% of the posts and stories analyzed used science-based information.

The next screen shot demonstrates another part of the funk network channels, “Mr.Wissen2go”. He is, by identity, a science journalist and always reports on science issues. Here, his YouTube video is a part of the funk network as IGTV and warns that Corona stays “dangerous in 2021”:





Figure 6. Mr. Wissen2Go, Instagram TV (IGTV) (Jan.15th, 2021)

Particularly the TV- tool (IGTV) is employed frequently, as it offers more time and design options for visual reporting. Apart from using the typical affordances of the platform, more general social media logic is employed, such as hashtags, comments, likes, etc.

A third strategy, notably employed by the more conventional TV channels “heute” and “tagesschau” involves the selection of topics that resonate with younger audiences. An illustrative example is the depiction of a story involving a young individual who fell victim to COVID-19 and has not yet fully recovered. This narrative sheds light on the various health challenges she continues to face (as depicted in figure 7).

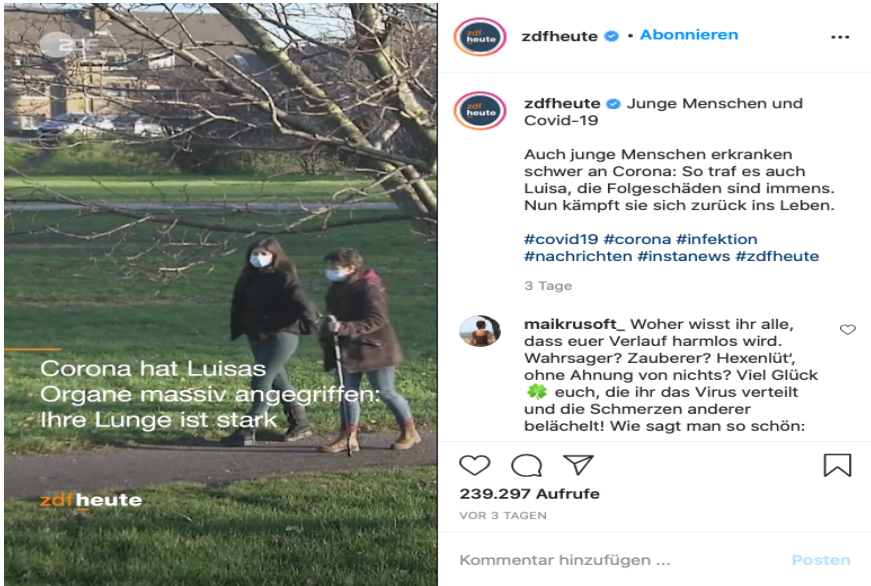


Figure 7. Story about a young corona victim (“Luisa”) (zdfheute, Jan. 14th, 2021)

This post uses a personal experience and reports about “Luisa”, whose “organs were massively impacted and who fights back to life”. In this post we can see a clear personalization strategy, which is aimed at the younger Instagram audience by topic choice.

Summing up for the overall storytelling, three main journalistic strategies were identified:

- (1) Strategy 1: Images plus facts is the most frequently used method.
- (2) Strategy 2: use of platform logic like #hashtags
- (3) Strategy 3: targeted language: “young” language, personal address, younger storylines and wording.

The next step of analysis was dedicated to the analysis of actions against conspiracy theories.

## 8 Counter strategies against conspiracy narratives as journalistic challenge

All three public channels inform about conspiracy myths, most of them with a professional neutrality. As it can be seen below, the above explained strategy 1 (image plus facts) is also employed for this context.

## QANON IN DEUTSCHLAND

**Q** **QAnon ist ein Verschwörungsmythos**, der 2017 in einem Internetforum entstand. Anhänger\*innen glauben unter anderem an den **“deep state”**, eine geheime Elite, die Kinder entführe, um sich an deren Blut zu verjüngen.  
Quelle: Deutschlandfunk

**Q** Die Bewegung ist deshalb so gefährlich, weil sie **antidemokratische und antisemitische Feindbilder** verbreitet. Um gegen den **“tiefen Staat”** vorzugehen, wird zu **Gewalt bis hin zu Terror** aufgerufen.  
Quelle: Amadeu Antonio Stiftung

**Q** QAnon ist **auch in Deutschland verbreitet**. Der deutschsprachige Telegramkanal hat rund 160.000 Abonnent\*innen. Das ist die **größte QAnon-Community in Europa**.  
Quelle: Telegram, Lawrence & Daris, 2020 / Hope Not Hate

**Q** Die Bewegung hat während der **Pandemie** viele **neue Anhänger\*innen** gefunden und sich zum Teil mit **Reichsbürger\*innen** vermischt. Außerdem wurden Verschwörungsgläubige immer wieder auf Demos **gegen die Corona-Politik** gesichtet.  
Quelle: ZDFheute, Land Baden-Württemberg

**Figure 8.** *QAnon in Germany (zdfheute, Jan. 13th. 2021)*

As Germany has the largest QAnon community in Europe – the Telegram messenger is home to a follower group of nearly 170 000 members – some posts refer to the dangers of this rather bizarre thinking.

But politically more relevant and influential, particularly during the height of the Corona pandemic in early 2020, was a self-acclaimed protest group called “Querdenker” (“maverick thinkers”), which organized massive on the ground protests with thousands of participants. In one of the news reports by the Instagram channel “y-collective” of funk, a participatory approach is taken by the journalists, who interview young protestors in the streets:



**Figure 9.** Instagram 'y.kollektiv' channel, report on the conspiracy group of 'Querdenker'

This kind of news report by the y.kollektiv, as illustrated in image 8 above, reflects an important approach of Instagram journalism, with a feel of being right on site with the protestors, enriched by the critical commentary and text based details in the feed.

## 9 Summary and outlook

The examination of various fake news narratives surrounding the coronavirus has revealed that the prevailing sense of uncertainty in society provides fertile ground for rumors, conspiracy theories, and other forms of contemporary disinformation. Therefore, the role of trustworthy and well-structured information provided by public broadcasters has never been more crucial. Our analysis demonstrated that public broadcasters employ platform-specific strategies and effectively harness the media dynamics of Instagram. While this style of social media reporting is especially tailored to younger audiences, it has also gained traction among other demographic groups.

With its distinct style, dedicated sections for news items and stories, it's noteworthy that this type of news reporting enriches social media news through its provision of audio-visual content that is both relevant and engaging for a wide spectrum of individuals. In terms of content, both the stories and the visual and textual elements within feed postings serve to set agendas and introduce important issues into the news discourse.

However, it's imperative not to underestimate the influence of fake news during times of uncertainty. The fact that reputable scientists and public media entities invest considerable efforts in debunking false information and countering conspiracy narratives with established facts often proves ineffective. For those who have distanced themselves from the official narrative, any attempt to challenge the viewpoints of so-called "YouTube doctors" is often dismissed as "state

propaganda”. This phenomenon increases the risk of a “post-factual” or “post-truth” society, characterized by destabilization and widespread confusion. As a consequence, journalists must harness the power of social media reporting to identify and combat online disinformation. In an era where misinformation and fake news can spread rapidly across digital platforms, social media reporting serves as a vital tool for journalists to uncover and address inaccuracies, conspiracy theories, and deceptive narratives. By actively engaging with social media channels, journalists can monitor emerging trends, track the dissemination of false information, and provide fact-based, accurate reporting to counteract the impact of disinformation on public discourse and decision-making. This proactive approach not only helps maintain the integrity of journalism but also contributes to promoting informed, evidence-based discussions in the digital age.

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