Introduction

The diffusion of Russian-originated conspiracy theories within German mass media has become a significant focus in both media studies and political science. Scholarly and policy-oriented research has converged on understanding how narratives, especially those emanating from Kremlin-aligned sources, are introduced, adapted, or amplified across different media ecosystems in Germany. This review synthesizes findings across peer-reviewed literature, think tank reports, and empirical studies to offer a structured and critical overview. The media landscape is divided analytically between mainstream outlets (e.g., ARD, ZDF, *Der Spiegel*, *Bild*) and alternative/fringe media (e.g., RT DE, *Compact*, *NachDenkSeiten*, and Telegram channels), as their roles in the dissemination process differ significantly.

Conceptual Framework: Conspiracy Theories and Information Influence

Russian disinformation campaigns often utilize conspiracy theories as a strategic narrative tool (**Yablokov2015**). These narratives commonly frame geopolitical events as part of secretive, malign Western plots, exploiting psychological vulnerabilities such as uncertainty, fear, and distrust in institutions (**Moelder2021**). Theoretical approaches from strategic communication and media effects literature have highlighted conspiracy theories' capacity to erode democratic consensus and polarize publics (**LemkeHabegger2022**).

Channels of Dissemination: Mainstream vs. Alternative Media

3.1 Mainstream German Media

Mainstream German media, including public broadcasters (ARD, ZDF) and legacy print outlets (*Spiegel*, *FAZ*, *Bild*), generally do not directly propagate Russian conspiracy theories. Rather, their role is more often associated with reactive debunking or critical framing of Russian narratives (**Toepfl2023**). However, some scholars note that sensationalist tabloids like *Bild* may inadvertently amplify narratives through click-driven headlines, even when intending to debunk (**Henriksen2024**).

Moreover, in rare cases like the "Lisa case" (2016), mainstream outlets provided significant coverage that was initially driven by false claims disseminated by Russian state media, later corrected but not without initial amplification effects (**Moelder2021**).

3.2 Alternative and Fringe Media

In contrast, alternative media platforms in Germany have played a central role in legitimizing and circulating pro-Russian conspiracy narratives. Outlets such as RT DE, Sputnik Germany, *Compact Magazine*, and *NachDenkSeiten* have been documented to share unverified claims, especially around themes like NATO aggression, COVID-19 conspiracies, and Ukraine war falsehoods (**BeselerToepfl2025**; **Henriksen2024**).

Fringe media often adopt a pseudo-journalistic veneer, selectively citing Kremlin sources or aligned actors to produce epistemic legitimacy for their audiences (**Rodriguez2020**). These platforms also often cooperate algorithmically and ideologically with other right-wing or populist outlets, reinforcing message repetition across platforms (**Welker2025**).

Social Media and Messaging Platforms

Social media—especially Telegram, YouTube, and Facebook—serve as amplifiers and distribution nodes for Russian conspiracy theories among German-speaking users (**Dogruel2023**). Analysis of Telegram channels has shown how German-language conspiracy groups repackage Russian narratives (e.g., "biolab" or "Nazis in Ukraine" tropes) into locally resonant messages (**Angermaier2025**).

These channels often serve as bridges between Russian state propaganda and anti-government sentiment in Germany, particularly during crisis events such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russian invasion of Ukraine (**Stoecker2025**).

Strategic Objectives and Political Alliances

Russian disinformation in German media spaces is not randomly distributed but strategically targeted. Scholars argue it is aimed at:

- Undermining EU and NATO credibility,
- Deepening polarization in German society,
- Strengthening ties between pro-Russian German actors and Russian elites (**BeselerToepfl2025**; **Kopilow2022**).

There is also evidence that German far-right media ecosystems act as willing partners in disseminating Russian-origin narratives, owing to ideological affinity and shared enemies (e.g., liberal democracy, U.S. foreign policy) (**Welker2025**).

Empirical Studies and Quantitative Findings

Recent empirical research into Russian conspiracy theory dissemination across digital platforms—especially Telegram and YouTube—has yielded a variety of datasets, some of which focus on German, Russian, and English-language content.

6.1 German-Language Telegram Data

A number of studies specifically address German-language conspiracy discourse on Telegram:

- Angermaier (2023) performed a quantitative analysis of German-speaking conspiracy groups on Telegram, examining structural properties of message dissemination **angermaier2023**.
- Dogruel et al. (2023) compiled a dataset of over 2 million Telegram messages from fringe German channels related to COVID-19 and conspiracy narratives **dogruel2023**.
- Pustet et al. (2024) introduced the TelCovACT corpus, which supports conspiracy theory detection in German using large language models **pustet2024telcovact**.
- Weber et al. (2022) conducted a long-term content analysis of German-language Telegram protest groups opposing COVID-19 measures, identifying dominant conspiracy narratives **weber2022**.

6.2 Multilingual and Russian-Backed Content

Several projects also investigate multilingual dissemination and the presence of Russian-backed content:

- Willaert & Tuters (2025) conducted an inductive study on 129 public Telegram channels associated with Russian digital diplomacy in multiple European languages including German and Slovakian **willaert2025golden**.
- Henriksen & Kristensen (2024) studied RT and Sputnik content disseminated across European alternative media, with a focus on German Telegram and YouTube posts **henriksen2024**.

- La Morgia et al. (2023) introduced the TGDataset, comprising over 120,000 Telegram channels in English, German, and Russian. The dataset supports research on emergent conspiracy theories such as "Sabmyk" **lamorgia2023tgdataset**.

6.3 Cross-Platform and Network Analyses

Other works explore the diffusion of conspiracy content across platforms:

- Hoseini et al. (2023) analyzed the globalization of QAnon across Voat, YouTube, and Telegram, observing the increasing prevalence of German-language QAnon discourse post-2020 **hoseini2023globalqan**
- Willaert (2024) examined cross-platform narrative coalitions on Telegram, highlighting YouTube links and German-language disinformation clusters **willaert2024narratives**.

Gaps in Existing Research

Despite growing attention, several research gaps remain:

- **Audience reception studies**: There is limited understanding of how German audiences interpret or internalize Russian conspiracy theories across different media types.
  Parse reactions below text, (it can be done very easy) we can classify them as just positive vs negative or more complex emotions - joy anger, surpise, fear disgust

- **Cross-platform dynamics**: Few studies robustly trace narrative evolution across platforms (e.g., RT DE → Telegram → YouTube → Facebook).
  Doing this we can as well trace the roots, like wich russian mass media spread it , which of them are cited by german media. For instance:

1. Antispiegel directly citing Russian Mass media TASS

2. Antispiegel directly claiming it translated TASS : See here
3. Antispiegel in short telegram post gives link to full text on webpage, then on the webpage there is a link to Russian news "Vesti"See here

Secondly find the difference between original russian conspiracy narrative and German

- **Longitudinal impact analysis**: The long-term effects on political attitudes or voting behavior in Germany are under-explored.
- **Mainstream media complicity**: While mainstream media are largely resistant, more subtle forms of amplification through journalistic routines warrant deeper investigation (**Toepfl2023**).