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How Right-Wing Extremists Use and Perceive News Media

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Abstract

We investigate how right-wing extremists use, perceive, and try to provoke news media coverage. Findings from qualitative interviews with former leaders of right-wing extremist groups in Germany, who served as key informants, show that reports on right-wing extremism are used and trigger feelings of being personally affected. Consequently, right-wing extremists show hostile-media and third-person perceptions. These perceptions influence both emotions and behaviors among right-wing extremists, for example, they cause right-wing leaders to strategically monitor news media to exploit them for political goals. Our findings are presented along with a model and are accompanied by a discussion of the implications for responsible journalism.

Keywords

media effects, right-wing extremism, qualitative interviews, reciprocal effects, hostile media

In July of 2011, 77 people died from a terrorist attack in Norway. Anders Breivik, the right-wing extremist who was convicted of the murders, announced afterward that his primary motivation in committing the attack was to get global media attention and thereby the opportunity to spread his ideology (Strommen & Stormark, 2015). Several later right-wing extremist attacks purposely imitated Breivik's action, revealing the challenges that the news media faces in reporting on such cases (Fisher, 2016). These attacks have led to an international media discussion about how to report on Breivik and similar would-be terrorists without becoming their mouthpiece or disseminating their ideology (Whitehouse, 2013).

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Several related questions arise about the precise effects of media coverage on already-radicalized individuals. Specifically, how does media coverage affect people who already belong to the right-wing extremist scene? Are their attitudes strengthened, indicating cognitive radicalization? Does it inspire them to imitate the attacks, indicating behavioral radicalization (Neumann, 2013)?

It is challenging for the media to report on topics involving radicalized ideologies, such as Breivik's rampage, the numerous refugee camps that have been set on fire over the last few months in a number of European countries, or the violent crimes committed by terror organizations such as the so-called Islamic State (Nacos, 2002). In such cases, journalists are confronted with the key question of how to inform the public without neglecting a moral responsibility to consider potential consequences, such as strengthening or disseminating radicalized ideologies (Kepplinger & Knirsch, 2001). The ethics of responsible journalism thus require knowledge of media effects in a broader sense.

A comprehensive understanding of the effects of news reports therefore requires research not only on how such reports are perceived by a general "democratic" audience, but also on how they are perceived by people who already share extremist thoughts, be it right-wing extremism or Islamist extremism. Communications studies dealing with extremism have mainly focused on the analysis of propaganda content and its underlying strategies (e.g., Caiani & Wagemann, 2009; Salem, Reid, & Chen, 2008); moreover, they have typically only explored the impact of propaganda or media coverage of right-wing populist leaders on the common, nonradicalized audience—what we have termed the democratic audience (e.g., Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2011; Rieger, Frischlich, & Bente, 2013). However, as it is difficult to get access to extremist groups, there has been a lack of studies exploring the news media's impact on already-radicalized individuals, even though this impact can have severe consequences. This study therefore seeks to provide novel insights into how extremist leaders and followers use, perceive, and seek to provoke media coverage.

There are at least three reasons to assume that people holding extremist beliefs react to news media coverage in ways that differ from the reactions of average democratic citizens. First, extremists are characterized by extraordinarily high levels of political interest, attitude importance, and involvement regarding their ideology—antecedent factors that significantly influence how individuals perceive and react to media exposure (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Second, in contrast to ordinary democratic citizens, extremist groups are typically characterized by strategic public relations (PR) activities by themselves that seek to provoke favorable news media coverage. In this regard, right-wing extremist organizations resemble social movements, as they strive to get media attention to fundamentally change people's minds and to achieve goals such as recruitment and mobilization of supporters (Rucht, 2004). Third, right-wing extremists may differ from ordinary democratic audiences in that their organizations and actions are more likely to become objects of media coverage—both willingly and unwillingly. Consequently, findings on the impact of news media content on democratic audiences cannot be simply transferred to members of extremist groups. This article therefore seeks to close this research gap

by investigating media impacts on the right-wing extremist scene in Germany. As our study opens a new research field and as it is extremely difficult to get research access to a larger number of right-wing extremists, we decided to use a qualitative research design. Therefore, we conducted in-depth interviews with seven former high-ranking right-wing extremists who willingly left the scene in recent years. We assume that our interviewees are able to accurately reflect on the dynamics of the scene as they were active members for several years and, most importantly, at this point in their lives, have no interest in withholding strategic information.

Our article begins with a background section that introduces and defines key concepts. It introduces the concept of reciprocal effects (RE; Kepplinger, 2007; Lang & Lang, 1953) and theorizes about its applicability to news coverage of the right-wing extremist scene. This concept connects media use with perceptual phenomena, such as *hostile-media* (Hartmann & Tanis, 2013; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) and *media influence presumptions like the third-person effect* saying that people tend to perceive that the media has a stronger effect on others than on themselves (Davison, 1983; Gunther & Story, 2003). Moreover, the concept considers emotions and behavioral effects (Kepplinger, 2007). This background section also discusses the relationship between social movements and media, although our focus remains on the role of the media at the individual level. Next, we explain our study's methodology. We then present our results for each research question and a compressed model of our findings. This is followed by a detailed discussion. Finally, our conclusion examines the implications of our findings for responsible journalism as well as potential avenues for future research.

News Media and Right-Wing Extremism

There is no generally accepted definition of right-wing extremism (Mudde, 2000). However, there seems to be a consensus that right-wing extremism can be understood as an ideology characterized by different features, among them racism, nationalism, antipluralism, antiparliamentarianism (Blee & Creasap, 2010; Falter & Schumann, 1988; Macridis, 1989). Although there may be country-specific elements, right-wing extremism is an internationally relevant phenomenon (Mammone, Godin, & Jenkins, 2013). Right-wing extremist individuals are typically gathered into organizations that can be partially understood as social movements (Klandermans & Mayer, 2006). There are both violent and nonviolent right-wing extremist movements in Europe (Goodwin, 2012). The right-wing extremist scene is not monolithic, even within any given country. Germany appears as an interesting case, not only due to the German history of Nazism, but also because contemporary Germany's experience with right-wing extremism is fairly typical among other countries and includes a variety of right-wing extremist groups. These groups include both nonviolent movements and political parties who have members at least in a few state parliaments (Kiess, Decker, & Brähler, 2016), as well as more extreme organizations such as the Skinheads who endorse Nazi ideology and legitimize violence (Goodwin, 2012).

Any attempt to understand right-wing extremists as political actors or as parts of a social movement (e.g., Kincaid, 2017) raises questions about how they strategically use news media to achieve their ideological goals (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2012). In essence, social movevements need news media coverage to try to foster a certain public image and to mobilize large numbers of supporters (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Rucht, 2004). As social movements and their protest events may be ignored by the news media (e.g., Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Hocke, 1999), social movements may adopt additional or alternative tactics, which can be grouped into four broad strategies: (a) abstention, that is, withdrawal from attempts to influence the news media; (b) attacks on the news media, for example, violence against journalists; (c) adaptation to the internal logic of news media coverage, for example, by staging pseudo-events and provocations to attract greater coverage; and (d) seeking alternative ways to address the public, especially, through use of scene-internal media (Rucht, 2004). Regarding (d), research has shown that extremist organizations particularly use the Internet for the dissemination of propaganda, as well as for mobilization and for the formation of a collective identity (e.g., Caiani & Parenti, 2016; Rieger, Bente, & Frischlich, 2013).

Although there have been at least a few studies concerning the content and effects of right-wing extremist propaganda on typical democratic audiences (e.g., Rieger et al., 2013), the effects of news media coverage of right-wing extremism on right-wing extremists themselves have not yet received the attention they deserve. We therefore do not know to what extent concerns should be raised when media coverage of right-wing extremism is, for example, superficial, emotional, exaggerated, and/or stereotyped (Udris, Ettinger, & Imhof, 2007; Schafraad, Scheepers, & Wester, 2008). Although there has been some research on the relationship between media coverage of right-wing extremist violence and the number of resultant xenophobic assaults (Esser & Brosius, 1996; Koopmans & Olzak, 2004), those studies focus on aggregate level effects and therefore do not deliver insights into how right-wing extremists perceive and process news media coverage. Against this background, we aim to close this research gap by exploring the relationship between news media and right-wing extremists on a psychological level. Our focus on the "news media" encompasses all mass media news content produced by journalists for print, broadcast, or online media outlets. Additional media, such as scene-produced media for internal or external use, is considered only in terms of its relation to news media (e.g., right-wing newspapers that refer to journalistic news media reports) or insofar as it provides a platform for distribution of journalistic news content (e.g., through social media channels).

Conceptualizing News Media Effects on Right-Wing Extremists

In line with previous research, we regard media effects as the sum consequence of how media content is used and subsequently perceived and processed (e.g., Maurer, 2014). An exploration of the relationship between the news media and right-wing extremists requires a comprehensive approach because right-wing extremists can be affected by

both existing and future media coverage of right-wing extremism (Kepplinger, 2007). Although the first is in line with extant research on media effects, the latter takes into account that right-wing extremists may follow a deliberate PR strategy like other political actors who try to provoke media coverage (Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2014). Following the concept of RE (Kepplinger, 2007), we will differentiate between media use, perception, and effects.

Media Use

It is known that not only journalists but also right-wing scene-media provide coverage of right-wing extremist-linked events and organizations. However, there is a lack of research on whether and how members of the scene use and select news media reports. This leads to our first research question:

RQ1: How do former right-wing leaders describe right-wing extremists' use of news media reports?

Perception

The concept of RE assumes that those at the center of media coverage—the "protagonists"—tend to pay close attention to the media coverage of themselves, and it posits that two perceptual phenomena result (Kepplinger, 2007). First, these protagonists tend to perceive media coverage about themselves as contrary to their opinion—this is known as the hostile-media effect (Hartman & Tanis, 2013; Vallone et al., 1985). Moreover, studies have found that cognitive and affective involvement and distinct beliefs, all of which are factors that characterize extremists, can intensify hostile-media perceptions (Hansen & Kim, 2011; Matthes, 2013). Second, people in general tend to perceive that media coverage has a stronger effect on others than on themselves—the third-person effect (see e.g., Davison, 1983). Research has dealt with the relationship between these perceptual phenomena (Perloff, 2009; Tsfati, 2007), showing that the third-person effect is particularly strong among individuals who perceive that a news media report is contrary to their opinion (Dohle & Hartmann, 2008). Perloff (2009) has suggested self-enhancement as a psychological motive behind the third-person effect.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the hostile-media and third-person effects are relatively strong among right-wing extremists. Accordingly, it may be assumed that extremists feel themselves to be little influenced by media coverage that they perceive as hostile, whereas they presume that it strongly influences those who represent the status quo they want to change. However, there has been a lack of concrete research on this subject, although the third-person and hostile-media effects are generally well documented (Matthes, 2013; Perloff, 2009). We therefore derive our second research question:

RQ2: How do former right-wing leaders describe right-wing extremists' perception of news media reports on right-wing extremism?

Effects

The concept of RE can also be taken as a framework to understand the emotional and behavioral effects of news media perception (e.g., Kepplinger, 2007; Kepplinger & Glaab, 2007). Moreover, these emotional and behavioral effects can in turn cause new media coverage. As protagonists of media coverage are personally affected by the coverage, they usually show very strong emotional effects (Kepplinger & Glaab, 2007). Assuming that individuals tend to strive for positive self-perceptions, negative media coverage should therefore lead to negative feelings such as anger and desperation, whereas positive reports should evoke positive emotions such as pride or gratification (Kepplinger & Glaab, 2007). However, it is unknown if this holds true for right-wing extremists, who (as discussed above and in greater detail below) may possibly benefit from media coverage that portrays them as violent threats to democracy. Although it is plausible to assume that such coverage could inspire anger in addition to positive emotions within extremist groups, it seems unlikely that feelings of desperation would result. External rejection could plausibly even strengthen in-group cohesion (Bierhoff, 2002). Further research is therefore needed.

The potential behavioral effects of media on its protagonists may be explained by the "influence of presumed media influence" approach (Gunther & Story, 2003). This approach argues that, because media protagonists presume media influence on third parties, the protagonists therefore try to control their media image by means of certain actions. These actions can be categorized according to the point of time at which they occur (Kepplinger, 2007). Anticipatory reactions seek to provoke media coverage; this is often a typical goal of democratic political actors (Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2014). Immediate reactions refer to direct interactions between journalists and subjects of media coverage (in this case right-wing extremists), such as during an interview. Corrective reactions are the consequence of existing news coverage (Kepplinger, 2007). All in all, this gives rise to our third research question:

RQ3: How do former right-wing leaders describe the emotional and behavioral effects of news media coverage of the right-wing extremist scene on right-wing extremists?

Method

The main challenge was getting access to members of the scene. Following Grumke and Klärner (2006), we define the right-wing extremist "scene" as the inner circle of a social movement which determines its direction. The right-wing extremist scene in Germany is characterized by an increasing use of violence and consists of approximately 23,000 people (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, 2016) who belong to different right-wing extremist groups, such as extremist parties, comradeships, or the Identitarian movement. Although there are several points of conflict between the different groups, they all have in common the pursuit of a social and political revolution and the wide dissemination of a right-wing extremist ideology (Stöss, 2010).

Because it is methodologically difficult to gain access to a larger number of active right-wing extremists (who see scholars as opponents rather than as impartial actors) and due to the explorative character of the present study, we decided to utilize a qualitative survey design focusing on former leaders as key informants (Flick, 2014; Payne & Payne, 2004). An interpretive approach was also useful in our search for the causes behind the interviewees' assessments. Therefore, we conducted semistructured, problem-centered expert interviews (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009) with seven individuals (hereafter referred to as scene-leavers) who had willingly left the right-wing extremist scene but who had previously held high-ranking positions within the scene.

Participants

We chose to interview scene-leavers instead of active members due to an assumption that honest and authentic survey answers from active members of the right-wing extremist scene would be hard to achieve; presumably, they would either refuse to participate or else would answer strategically to create or tailor a particular image. We expected that, compared with current followers, scene-leavers would be less strongly ideological and would show scholars more unbiased, in-depth reflections on the media's role and impact on the scene. Therefore, we chose to conduct interviews with scene-leavers to obtain exclusive insights into the dynamics of the scene, including its internal perceptions of and reactions to news media, which scholars cannot easily explore with other methods.

In particular, we chose to interview high-ranked scene-leavers because they could not only reflect on their own relations to the media, but could also serve as experts regarding the more widely held perspectives of other right-wing extremists and followers. This latter assumption was based on the facts that (a) scene leaders had been followers before they gained leadership positions and (b) especially in hierarchical organizations with strong internal control and the principle of authoritarian submission, such as right-wing extremist organizations (Altemeyer, 1988), the leadership ranks seem to be well informed about their followers' views. These former scene leaders thus served as "key informants," that is, individuals who have "knowledge about other people, processes or happenings that is more extensive, detailed or privileged than ordinary people, and who are therefore particularly valuable sources of information to a researcher" (Payne & Payne, 2004). Thus, due to their privileged access to information about relevant groups and decision-making processes (Meuser & Nagel, 2009), the interviewees were able to provide information not only about their own experiences, but also and especially about the scene in general.

However, we faced challenges in recruiting participants as it is hard to get access to the limited number of formerly high-ranked scene-leavers, as they risk being attacked by active members who wish to deter the publication of insights into the scene. Contact with participants was made by the Institute for the Study of Radical Movements which closely collaborates with EXIT-Germany, the biggest institution supporting people who want to leave the right-wing extremist scene. EXIT-Germany did the outreach and personally asked seven scene-leavers for participation, as they were considered capable of

Table 1. Key Informants' Characteristics.

Participant	Age	Organization	Duration of involvement	Use of violence	Reason for exit
A	27 years	Comradeship	9 years	Yes	Positive contacts to immigrants
B	26 years	Identitarian movement	9 years	No	Positive contacts to left-wing extremists
C	37 years	Comradeship	15 years	Yes	Rejection of violence
D	22 years	Comradeship	4 years	Yes	Fear of being attacked by left-wing extremists
E	24 years	Identitarian movement	3 years	No	Rejection of violence
F	23 years	Skinhead/ hooligan	2 years	Yes	Fear of prosecution
G	22 years	Right-wing party	5 years	No	Ideological doubts

critically reflecting on their experiences in the scene. All of them agreed to participate. We were thus able to obtain access to leading former members of different right-wing extremist groups, the majority of which are not restricted to Germany but are part of international movements. For example, this is true for the Identitarian movement (e.g., Virchow, 2015). Moreover, we were able to interview former leaders from both violent and nonviolent groups, thereby reflecting what is probably the most important distinguishing characteristic among extremist groups. Our participants used to be members of comradeships, skinhead groups, the Identitarian movement, and a German right-wing party, the "National Democratic Party" (NPD). Although skinhead groups and most comradeships are willing to use violence and follow an ideology that is closely related to the "folkish" ideas propagated during the "Third Reich," members of the Identitarian movement rather try to dissociate from violent groups. They support the conception of "ethnopluralism," which calls for the purity of the cultural identities of different ethnic groups (Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community, 2017; Vorländer, Herold, & Schäller, 2018).

Overall, seven formerly high-ranking members of right-wing extremist groups, all of which had previously been topics of media coverage, were interviewed. Their average age at the time of our interviews was about 26 years; their duration of involvement ranged from 2 to 15 years; and they differed somewhat in their use of violence and their reasons for leaving the scene, ranging from ideological doubts to personal crises.

Table 1 gives an overview of the participants' key characteristics.

Interview Process

Interviews were conducted in June and July of 2014. The duration of the interviews ranged from 1 to 3 hr and totaled about 14 hr of interview material. Overall, the participants were consistently characterized by extremely high levels of reflection and a deep

understanding of the subject matter, which was reflective of their former high-ranking positions and correspondent rhetorical training. Due to the need to preserve the anonymity of the participants much as possible, as most of the scene-leavers are continuously threatened by former comrades and as the participants disclosed some information which could have legal consequences, the participants have been assigned labels here as Participants A to G.

Interpretative Analysis

We used a qualitative interpretive approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ziebland & McPherson, 2006). After reading the interview transcripts and discussing their content, we coded the interview material to assign them to relevant sections. We used the media effects literature with a special emphasis on RE to develop our interpretation. All of the developed ideas were coded for three overarching categories: media use, media perception, and media effects. In our presentation of the results in the following section, we focus on statements which mostly represent the interviewees' statements and which were not contradicted by any other statement. Despite differences in the participants' organizations, ages, duration of involvement, use of violence, and their reasons for leaving the scene (see Table 1), their answers concerning our three research questions did not differ substantially from one another. This suggests that our sample of seven leaders is able to represent the right-wing extremist scene to a degree that is acceptable given the methodological challenges mentioned above. Furthermore, we discussed our results with experts who work in a prevention and deradicalization organization, allowing us to evaluate participants' statements from a wider contextual perspective.

Findings

Media Use (RQ1)

First of all, it was noted that media use differs according to the hierarchy level of the particular member. Leaders tracked a wide range of news media and then reframed it in line with the organization's ideology; the reframed content was then published in scene-specific media outlets such as right-wing extremist newspapers, Internet platforms, or social media sites (Participant A). Participant G elaborated on use of this tactic with an example:

> For example, if mass media reported about poverty among the elderly in Germany, we shared this report on right-wing extremist Internet sites to make clear that all of the immigrants get a lot of money from the state and that the German population falls by the wayside.

Generally, simple links to news articles on social media platforms were used for recruiting potential scene members, who often might not recognize the propaganda purposes, particularly when the news media reported about issues that seemed to support the right-wing extremist ideology. Social media platforms provide the

ability to tailor content, and it is well known that they can serve as echo chambers, isolating individuals from diverging views and opinions (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Kaderbhai, 2017); therefore, it does not come as a surprise that social media use plays an important role in cognitively radicalizing and eventually recruiting individuals. According to our participants, after successful recruitment, the use of scene-specific media became extremely important, because "a certain isolationism of the world view can only be kept up when you take the information from the correct news" (Participant E).

As a consequence, followers were instructed to use only scene-specific media, which were framed as the only credible news sources (Participant F). The ways in which the different leaders sought to control the flow of information to followers illustrated that the different right-wing extremist organizations were all characterized by "Führerprinzip" (literally "leader principle"), which requires obedience to leaders and elites. This kind of polyarchic leadership bears resemblance to the concept of two-step flow, from opinion leaders to the mass (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948).

According to the participants, the ideological reason for the establishment of right-wing extremist media was the idea of an unspecific day X, on which the current political system will collapse and the right-wing extremist scene will come to power. Participant A stated, "On that day X, the scene wants to be able to replace the current system completely. This includes mass media."

Lower ranking activists tended to avoid direct use of news media content. The only exception was the use of news media coverage of right-wing extremism. This exception was explained by the sense of shared social identity formed within the scene:

> The aim of the right-wing extremist scene is to form a "Volksgemeinschaft" [people community], and it is relatively closed. We perceive ourselves as a scene, as a body, we feel connected. And therefore you feel affected by everything that is reported about the scene, because you are committed in that formation, because that formation mirrors your ideals. Therefore reports about the scene itself usually are received by all members of the scene intensively. (Participant F)

Although a member's identification with his or her own group was stronger than his or her identification with the entire scene, the feeling of being affected by media coverage emerged in response to media reports on both an individual's own group and other right-wing extremist groups, and led to high attention to all news media reports on the right-wing extremist scene. This could even lead to collecting media reports on oneself as well as on the group. Being often in the center of media coverage was regarded as an indicator of an outstanding active commitment to the goals of the movement (Participant A). In particular, reports on events which had been self-staged by the scene, including reports on demonstrations, were tracked attentively (Participant C). Overall, these findings support the underlying concept of RE that protagonists of media coverage give extraordinarily intensive attention to media reports covering them.

Furthermore, our participants stated that hierarchy and social identity within the scene were not the only important factors in the media selection process; the ideological

orientation of the specific group was also important. Although more traditionally oriented "folkish" groups preferred to use traditional media such as books or propaganda newspapers, members of the hooligan or Identitarian movements preferred to use the Internet to seek information and entertainment and to connect with each other (Participant E).

Media Perception (RQ2)

The significance of scene-specific media, as described above, already suggested the finding that no credibility is ascribed to news media (Participant F). Correspondingly, news media coverage of right-wing extremism was usually perceived to be biased and hostile. Reports portraying the scene in an unflattering light were categorically rejected and ascribed to infiltration by the state to destroy the right-wing extremist scene. Right-wing extremists used the narrative of victimhood and argued that the media and the state had conspired with each other to corporately fight the scene. Because the scene did not perceive a free press, right-wing extremists' rejection of the political system extended to the media. Given their victimhood narrative, media reports on the right-wing extremist scene tended to be perceived as confirming the media's hostility toward the scene. Thus, our findings suggest that right-wing extremists demonstrate hostile-media perceptions (Hartmann & Tanis, 2013; Matthes, 2013; Vallone et al., 1985). As a consequence, members of the right-wing extremist scene perceive media coverage as unfair. For example, articles describing extremists as violent during demonstrations were considered to be wrong (at least by groups which did not want to be portrayed as dangerous). Instead, members of the scene perceived an actor–observer bias (Jones & Nisbett, 1971), meaning that they blamed the media for neglecting situational factors that caused the violence (Participant E).

Concerning the perception of media influence, our findings indicated a strong third-person effect (Davison, 1983). Right-wing extremists did not feel themselves to be affected by the "untrustworthy" media coverage; instead, they perceived themselves as "the only ones who did not forget the truth, who are immune against mass media which are controlled by the state" (Participant A). In contrast, they perceived that the media had a strong impact on the general public. For example, participants believed that "societal re-education" after World War II was only enabled by the news media's dissemination of political lies (Participant B). It was also assumed that the public believed the media's negative and, it was felt, stereotyped coverage of the scene. Paradoxically, the biased media image was perceived as an advantage when it came to recruiting new members. Participant B explained,

> When we got in touch with adolescents at a demonstration, for example, then we tried to show them that we are nice and intelligent. Many of them told us that they were surprised as they expected us to be dumb and bald. This was the breeding ground for our argument that mass media are infiltrated by the state and try to keep us small.

The assumption that the negative media portrayal was swallowed by the public also led right-wing extremists to blame the news media for negative changes in their social environment. Participant A stated, "When a Nazi loses his job, it is mostly because of media coverage, so a personal hate emerges." And further, "When there are assaults on Nazis, the media are blamed for it. Because according to the world view of the comradeship scene, counter-demonstrators are sort of re-educated idiots." Generally, the feeling of being rejected by society was also ascribed to media influence, leading to the perception that the reason why the right-wing extremist movement was not yet fully successful was not due to the ideology itself, but rather due to hostile news media coverage. Interestingly, high-ranking activists even blamed the news media for "unworthy" members joining the scene. Participant B stated, "I really used to think that the mass media are to blame for it as they have always portrayed us as dumb, violent and drunk. No wonder that those people were attracted by our group."

Moreover, right-wing extremists perceived the news media as not only untrustworthy, hostile, and influential on third persons, but also as insecure in political debates. As journalists often refused to respond to the arguments of the right-wing extremist ideology, right-wing extremists felt superior: "I always thought that journalists were afraid of arguing with us because they knew that they would lose as our arguments are much better" (Participant D).

Overall, our findings supported the literature consensus that strong cognitive and affective involvement (which seems to be typical of right-wing extremists) enforces hostile-media perceptions (Matthes, 2013). Moreover, these hostile-media perceptions seem to enforce third-person perceptions (Dohle & Hartmann, 2008; Tsfati, 2007). This is at a minimum true for cases in which individuals (such as right-wing extremists) need to feel superior to the masses for as long as the masses overwhelmingly reject their extremist ideology; this rejection is in turn believed to be a consequence of the media's influence, bringing the argument full circle. Our results therefore supported the finding that self-enhancement is an important factor in explaining third-person perceptions (Perloff, 2009).

Media Effects (RQ3)

Emotions. It was first noted that the emotional effects of media coverage on right-wing extremism depend essentially on the media image sought by a particular group (Participant E). Although some groups sought to be portrayed as extraordinarily moral and trustworthy, others wanted to be portrayed as extremely violent based on an assumption that they would attract followers who were ready for anything. Participant E stated, "It's like some kind of a brand, because you know you are portrayed as the danger par excellence in mass media. This is a very important way of identification for certain groups. This also attracts many people."

However, although different groups wanted to be portrayed in different ways, all groups within the right-wing extremist spectrum had in common that they wanted to be taken seriously. Participant G stated, "The state and mass media are foes. And the best thing you can expect from a foe is that he takes you seriously and perceives you

as strong." This mind-set was why negative reports on actions of the scene paradoxically led to positive emotions such as gratification; they were perceived as a "reward" (Participant A) or even as an "honor" (Participant C). However, this was only the case when the reports were based on negative stereotypes. Coverage was felt to be annoying when members of the scene were portrayed as foolish in unprecedented ways. Moreover, anger was evoked by media portrayals that contradicted the intended message of a right-wing extremist group, for example, the image of being a radical alternative to the system (Participant E). Active members could even become irritated by media coverage revealing double moral standards within the scene:

> When journalists can really prove that Nazis consumed pornographic videos with children or something like that, this leads to anger and maybe even doubts. Because many right-wing extremists say that they are the only ones who are still moral people in a multicultural world without any morals. And when it turns out that they did unmoral things their authenticity is put into question.

The fact that right-wing extremists show relatively strong emotional responses to media reports can be traced back to their relatively strong hostile-media and third-person effect perceptions, which in turn seem to be influenced by intensive use of news reports on the right-wing extremist scene. However, participants also indicated that right-wing extremists could become inured to annoying reports: "You get used to it. It is like you tell your child every day that it does something wrong. One day, it [the child] does not care anymore" (Participant F).

Behavior. As it can be assumed that emotional reactions to media—among other factors—can have an impact on an individual's behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010), in this section, we will characterize media effects on behavior according to the point of time at which they occur (Kepplinger, 2007). We distinguish between anticipatory, immediate, and corrective effects in consequence of the media perceptions mentioned above.

Anticipatory effects. The impact of future media coverage is shown by individuals' and groups' attempts to provoke media reports (Kepplinger, 2007). The influence of presumed media influence-approach (Gunther & Story, 2003) seems to be able to explain behavioral effects within the right-wing extremist scene. Our participants indicated that right-wing extremist scene members anticipated that the public would be influenced by media coverage of the scene and therefore employed numerous deliberate tactical strategies, sometimes including intentional acts of violence, to influence and proactively generate media attention. The use and purpose of tactics can be only briefly outlined here.

Participant G pointed out that as some right-wing extremist groups intended to cultivate a violent media image, it was not surprising that some individuals committed crimes explicitly to *proactively* generate media attention. Participant B made a similar point:

> Imagine there are right-wing extremists who mess up a synagogue with blood, destroying the windows by throwing a pig head through it. Mass media serve as a means to spread that this is happening. So it is not only this one specific Jewish community that is threatened, but all Jewish communities. So it's also about creating a scene of violence.

However, rhetorical provocations, PR activities, and scene-internal mascots play a much more important role than violence in right-wing extremist organization's assertive impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) strategies. For example, Participant B reported that

> The right-wing extremist scene once had the mascot "the cookie monster." This was a Neo-Nazi dressed in a cookie-monster-costume who handed out stickers with right-wing extremist slogans to children in school yards. They did not think that they could actually win new members with this campaign but they wanted to get media attention and they got what they wanted.

To coordinate PR activities, such as demonstrations, leaders used private messages on social media platforms to communicate behavioral codes to followers, ranging from dress codes to instructions not to talk to journalists. Thus, internal communication on social media platforms played an important role in controlling the scene's media image, to make proactive staged events successful.

Immediate effects. Journalists can exert influence on extremists during interactions with them. Our findings showed that right-wing extremists were very careful about talking to journalists. Mostly, they did not give interviews at events and tried to avoid direct interactions with journalists. Low-ranked activists, in particular, were not allowed to talk to journalists. Scene leaders officially explained this to lower-ranked members with the argument that the "system media" were antagonists who should be ignored. However, the leaders' actual motivation for prohibiting interviews was completely different: They predominantly tried to avoid public exposure because of an assumption that unprofessional statements would harm recruiting efforts (Participant A). Only a few leaders were allowed to talk to journalists, but even they had to follow strict rules for communication with the media. Participant C reported that

> When it comes to talking about the holocaust, for example, we stop the interview immediately. There is no discussion. If somebody talks to media without permission or says something wrong, there are several sanctions. You can even lose your leadership position.

In addition to this cautiousness, extremists maintained extremely ambiguous relationships with journalists. On one hand, study participants remembered attempts to threaten journalists. Participant A talked about right-wing extremists who worked in the city administration of Berlin and who thus had access to data about journalists' physical addresses, which were used for intimidation of their families. This was particularly a problem for local journalists, who often had face-to-face interactions with

extremists. Participant F also talked about a journalist who was beaten up by right-wing extremists to provoke media coverage and to underline the fight against unfavorable media coverage.

On the other hand, right-wing extremists cultivated relationships with journalists that are similar to those of democratic political actors (e.g., Davis, 2009). For example, right-wing extremists tried to engage with journalists through casual conversations, thereby attempting to establish personal relationships:

> When you meet journalists during a demonstration or something, you start talking about the weather so that he can see that you are a normal person, you have something in common with him. And this is the best starting point to manipulate him ideologically. (Participant B)

Moreover, right-wing extremist groups passed information about their activities to selected journalists to receive publicity from them. Private messages on social media platforms played an important role in this, as right-wing extremists could personally inform journalists about spontaneous events such as protest marches. In addition, exclusive access to footage containing the scene's self-presentation was given to selected journalists to cultivate favorable media coverage. Although such exchanges were not strictly limited to journalists with right-wing political leanings, PR with conservative media outlets were regarded as more successful, especially by particular groups which were not extremely violent.

Corrective effects. Finally, existing news media reports can exert influence on extremists. According to our participants, the reactions of lower-ranked right-wing extremist activists were usually dominated by feelings of rejection and indifference, especially when reports could not be ideologically reprocessed through right-wing extremist channels. In contrast, the leaders responded strategically to news media coverage: "Because a big paradigm is: we pick up people where they are and we bring them to the place where we want them to be. You have to know: 'What is the status quo?'" (Participant B). By monitoring news media, leadership ranks could gauge what public opinion about certain issues looked like, particularly issues connected with emotions such as anxiety or anger, which were used strategically by scene leaders (Participant C). Participant B gave an example:

> There was a case of pedophilia in our village and as a reaction we claimed death penalty for pedophiles and organized a local demonstration. With the help of social media, we could mobilize one third of the village demonstrating with us.

Generally, social media played an important role in the mobilization and recruitment of supporters, as the right-wing extremist scene often uses neutral (i.e., no obviously propagandistic or aggressive) hashtags to reach a wider audience. These hashtags are created by scene leaders after intensive monitoring of news media coverage.

Thus, in line with the concept of RE, news media coverage can inspire right-wing extremists to take actions (e.g., occupying hashtags or staging demonstrations) that in turn can become objects of new media reports. It is therefore hard to define whether news reports are the cause or consequence of actions; the relation is characterized by reciprocity.

The impact of media coverage on the use of violence, specifically, can be diverse; the impact depends on how media reports about crimes are framed (Entman, 1993). For example, according to our participants, a media focus on an extremist's punishment for a violent crime was considered a deterrent to committing similar crimes, at least for members who harbored doubts about using violence. However, in the worst cases, a media focus on the perpetrator could inspire "hardcore" right-wing extremists. Participant C explained, "Within the scene, you are kind of a martyr when you get punished. This is a status that some members want to achieve, mainly those who do not have anything to lose." In addition to such prospects of being portrayed as a hero, intensive coverage of political and economic systemic crises could encourage violence, as the reported collapse of the system suggested the worth of fighting against its apparent final resistance. Participant B stated, "The financial crises mobilized the scene because they thought that the system, the European Union, is now collapsing and that the new era will start. Mass media coverage on crises can even lead to an escalation of violence." Overall, these findings suggest that media coverage is—in addition to a multitude of individual and situational variables—an important factor influencing decisions to use violence.

Discussion

Key Findings

Concerning *media use*, three factors played an important role: (a) Hierarchy level: Higher-ranking activists screened news media coverage to identify topics which could be used ideologically, whereas lower-level activists were instructed to avoid news media content; (b) Social identity triggered a feeling of being personally affected by media coverage of right-wing extremism, which led to close attention being given to these reports; and (c) The ideological orientation of the group influenced whether they preferred rather new or traditional media.

Concerning *perceptions of media coverage*, our participants indicated that right-wing extremists paid close attention to media reports by which they felt personally affected, which led to strong hostile-media (Vallone et al., 1985) and third-person effects (Davison, 1983). The perception that the hostile media exerted strong influence on democratic citizens provided an internal explanation for why the democratic masses were unable to recognize the superiority of right-wing ideology and therefore reject it.

The combination of hostile-media and third-person effects (Davison, 1983; Gunther & Story, 2003) led to *media effects* on both emotional and behavioral levels. At the emotional level, responses to media coverage ranged from anger to gratification. It is particularly important that journalists should understand which characteristics of their reporting typically made right-wing extremists proud or angry. Anger resulted when members of the scene felt that the media portrayed them as foolish, or when they felt

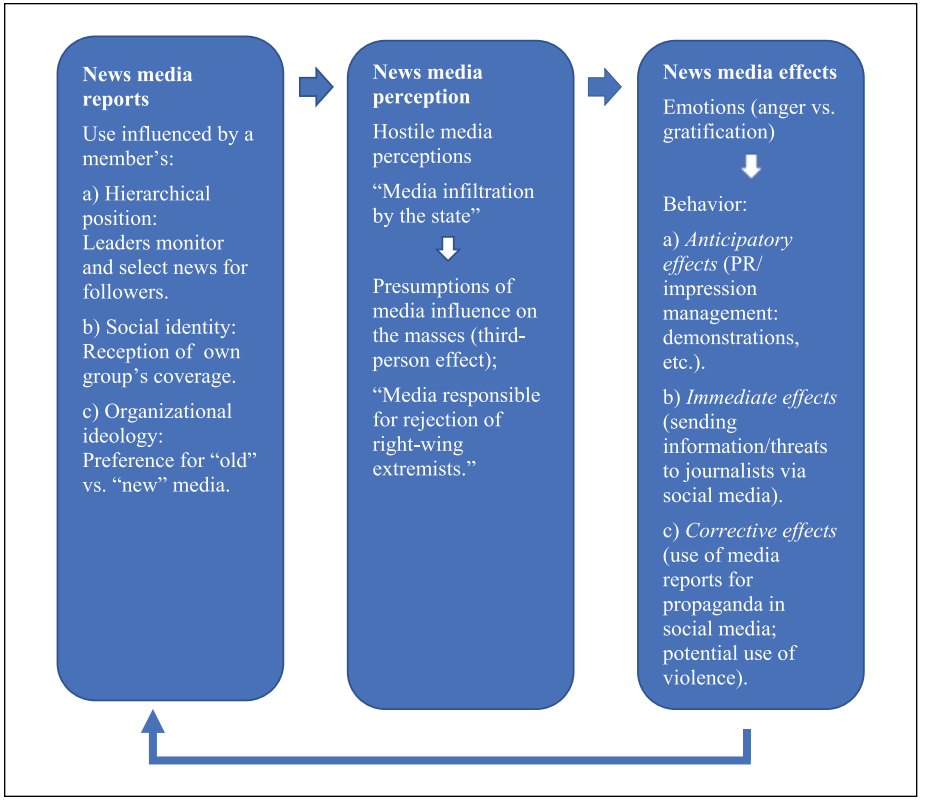

Figure 1. News media uses, perceptions, and effects among right-wing extremists.
Note. PR = public relations.

that moral double standards were being disclosed. At the behavioral level, the combination of hostile-media and third-person effects (Davison, 1983; Gunther & Story, 2003) led to strategic use of the media by right-wing extremist leaders. We found anticipatory behavioral effects (various PR strategies which aimed to proactively generate media attention), immediate behavioral effects (attempts to influence or threaten journalists via social media platforms), and several corrective effects, for example, suggesting that the way the media frames its reports on crimes—among other factors—can even have an impact on extremists' decisions to use violence. Figure 1 compresses our findings in a model.

Moreover, this model of our empirical findings confirms that RE theory is a useful framework for analyzing the news media's impacts on extremists. First, we found support for the idea that media protagonists attach more meaning to that coverage than do noninvolved third parties. Second, our results found evidence of reciprocity: right-wing extremists not only reacted to existing media reports, but also, consequently, tried to provoke media coverage. Third, our differentiation between (a) news

media use patterns, (b) news media perceptions, and (c) news media emotional and behavioral effects was analytically helpful in understanding how these phenomena were distinct but connected.

Implications for Responsible Journalism

The primary implications of our study concern a need to make journalists aware of the effects of their coverage on the right-wing extremist groups that they report on. At least three lessons can be taken from our findings. First, journalists should be aware of the audience range of their media coverage. Our findings pointed to a two-step flow of information (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948): Media coverage reached scene followers only after passing through the leadership ranks, who monitored and ideologically reprocessed media coverage for dissemination through right-wing extremist media channels. Therefore, journalists should be prepared to receive feedback from followers who lack an unbiased, direct view of their original reporting.

Second, journalists need to be aware that reports on the right-wing scene in general can make individual members feel personally affected, which can lead not only to perceptions that the media is hostile and untrustworthy, but also, following the theory of third-person effect, to assumptions that this hostile coverage has a strong influence on general members of the democratic public. Due to these twin perceptions, our results indicated that even balanced reporting on the right-wing scene could lead to strong emotional and behavioral effects, including attacks on journalists.

Third and most importantly, journalists should be aware of the different media images that different right-wing extremist groups pursue. Groups that want to be portrayed as violent benefit from corresponding media portrayals; groups that want to be portrayed as moral and civilized do not. Journalists should therefore differentiate between the true character of an organization versus its desired media image. Discrepancies should then be addressed by journalists to avoid serving as a platform for propaganda. Moreover, journalists should not exaggerate the dangerousness of the right-wing scene, which causes more "moderate" groups to feel vindicated in their perception that the news media are untrustworthy.

Against this background, our findings highlight the importance of factual, accurate, objective, and unemotional news coverage. This type of reporting would make it more difficult for right-wing propaganda to allege that the news media has been infiltrated by the state. Journalists should not abandon their professional reporting standards when it comes to covering the right-wing extremist scene. Politically motivated media reports that seek to strongly condemn right-wing extremists, for example, by exaggerating their dangerousness and condemning their ideology, simply serve as breeding grounds for further radicalization.

In contrast to the police or intelligence services, it is not the media's role to fight extremism. However, given our findings that media coverage can have tremendous effects on right-wing extremists, even influencing their decisions to use violence, in some cases, journalists should be encouraged to find a balance between the needs to inform the public and to avoid dangerous media effects—exemplified not least by

research on the Werther effect (Phillips, 1974). This does not mean that journalists should not report on newsworthy issues, only that, at least in some cases, they should take particular care in how they report: which headlines they choose, which photos they publish, and how they choose to frame the story. For example, given the finding that some right-wing extremists want to be perceived as martyrs, journalists should be particularly careful about publishing personalized photos or information.

Generalizability

Our findings mostly refer to a specifically German context, raising the question in how far our findings and implications for responsible journalism are generalizable. Although there is no doubt that the national and geographic contexts shape the specific ideologies and structures of the right-wing extremist scenes (Kiess et al., 2016), there is growing evidence of transnationalization among right-wing extremist organizations' activities, not the least in terms of communication strategies (Caiani & Kröll, 2015). This is facilitated by the Internet, which serves as a means to attract new members, to propagate ideas among like-minded people, and to connect individuals and organizations across national borders (Caiani & Kröll, 2015). Although this transnationalization of activities seems to be contradictory to the principle of ethnonationalism and national identity, right-wing extremists from different countries share certain ideologies, such as anti-immigration and antiglobalization attitudes (Caiani, 2018). Correspondingly, we interviewed members of former right-wing extremist groups which were internationally connected (Virchow, 2015). We therefore assume that our results are at least partially also valid for other national contexts. However, it is important to note that the unique German Nazi history could have specific effects on the relationship between right-wing extremists and the news media, as German journalists show a clear tendency to favor left-leaning attitudes, including a strong rejection of any semblance of right-wing extremist ideology (Reinemann & Baugut, 2013; Scherr & Baugut, 2016).

Finally, there is a legitimate question as to how far our findings on right-wing extremists can be transferred to other extremist scenes such as left-wing extremists or Islamists. On one hand, it is important to bear in mind that the specific ideology of each broad group plays an important role in the radicalization process and therefore may influence extremists' views of the media (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). On the other hand, all extremists share a commitment to fighting the status quo, which may include the media who might plausibly cover different extremist groups in similar ways. Consequently, hostile-media perceptions, attempts to strategically change unfavorable news coverage, and attempts to establish internal media do not seem to be restricted to right-wing extremists (Baugut & Neumann, 2018; Neumann, Arendt & Baugut, 2018). Comparative research is needed. For example, it could be fruitful to explore the relationships between news media and the Islamist scene which also obviously commits violent acts to get media attention (e.g., Nacos, 2002). If it can be shown that strategic attempts to make journalists the extremist's mouthpiece systematically appear in media-exposed extremist groups, it can be assumed that the attraction of those groups and the success of their propaganda strongly depend on the way the media report on them.

Limitations

As with every study, the present one has its limitations. First, there is no doubt that a larger number of interviews with former and active leadership ranks and followers would help to present a more comprehensive understanding of news media impacts on right-wing extremists. However, for methodological reasons, including security reasons, for this exploratory study on a new research topic, we focused on a small number of in-depth interviews with formerly high-ranked scene-leavers, who thus served as key informants for our study.

Second, there may be doubts about how far scene-leavers who had leading positions can give valid information about the followers' perspective, for example, about their media use. However, due to the hierarchical structure of right-wing extremist organizations, most leaders had been followers, so that the interviewees could also consider their previous experiences. Also, due to the strong internal control within right-wing extremist organizations, it can be assumed that leaders are well informed about the followers' behaviors. Moreover, all interviewees were active members for several years (Table 1).

Third, doubts remain as to how far information was deliberately or accidentally falsified or suppressed by our participants. We cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the former leaders we interviewed still maintain relationships with current leaders and followers, or that they may want to justify or promote their own past actions. To minimize this latter problem as much as possible, we asked participants to discuss media effects on the right-wing extremist scene in general, rather than asking for personalized information whose publication could create a favorable personal image or, conversely, cause prosecution. As to the issue of whether our participants had truly left the scene, almost all of the participants were actively engaged in radicalization prevention work with the organization EXIT-Germany, for example, by giving presentations at schools; this would seem to suggest that their motivation for strategically misinforming scholars should be weak.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that scene-leavers have a very specific image of the scene, possibly influenced by the process itself of leaving the scene by means of EXIT-Germany. It is possible that EXIT-Germany's deradicalization philosophy could have led participants to adopt a relatively homogeneous but perhaps somewhat artificial retrospective understanding of the scene. However, EXIT-Germany offers the most prominent deradicalization program in Germany and to the best of our knowledge, it does not substantially deviate from programs offered by smaller organizations. Apart from these problems, former leadership ranks seem to be valuable from a methodological point of view, as they are no longer or less radicalized and therefore able to give nonstrategic and nonideologically biased insights into how extremists perceive and process media coverage.

Fourth, our participants included only German scene-leavers, raising questions of generalizability; it would be interesting to conduct further research with scene-leavers in other countries, to identify transnational similarities and differences.

Fifth, it is important to acknowledge that the right-wing extremist scene is not monolithic, even within a country. However, we were able to get access to leadership

ranks who belonged to different organizations, among them violent comradeships as well as nonviolent political parties. Moreover, the results were discussed with experts who work in a prevention and deradicalization organization. Thereby, we could evaluate the statements on a wider basis.

Conclusion

This article provides insights into how extremists use, perceive, process, and try to provoke news media coverage. Future research should also include content analysis to determine whether extremist groups are successful in their attempts to influence news media coverage. This research design would require data from a larger number of right-wing extremists, ideally to include surveys among lower-ranked followers as well as interviews with higher-ranked leaders, as well as an analysis of the media outlets that different right-wing extremist organizations perceive as being most important. If it was found and documented that attempts to influence news media coverage were successful (for example, if there were found to be media reports on deliberately staged events portraying an organization in the light in which it sought to be portrayed), this would heavily emphasize that journalists and media producers bear a big responsibility when reporting on extremist groups. The present study already hints that more education and awareness among journalists are needed: "Training journalists in the ideologies and practices of extremists can also be helpful in enabling them to better understand the potential impact of their reporting" (Goodwin, 2012, p. 9). The focus on members of extremist groups who find themselves portrayed at the center of media coverage is a new perspective on media effects in collectives. It reflects that media can have strong effects on collective groups as well as on individuals belonging to those groups, with potentially disastrous consequences—at least in the case of extremist groups.

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