Article

Thinking different as an act of resistance: Reconceptualizing the German protests in the COVID-19 pandemic as an emergent counter-knowledge order

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Abstract

Massive anti-government protests erupted during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. The crisis activated a potential for resistance that has been simmering under the impositions of late-modern knowledge society. Made salient by the pandemic conditions of sudden extreme reliance on scientific (non) knowledge, the corona protestors activated this potential for resistance and constructed their own counter-knowledge order bound by shared resentment of and distrust in the established order and facilitated by digital platforms. Utilising social network analysis and structural topic modeling for digital critical discourse analysis, in this paper I explore how the corona protest counter-knowledge order is constructed with a particular focus on its contexts, roles, and hierarchies. I find that far-right and conspiracy imaginations are used to level out hierarchies and detach epistemic roles from their contexts to reinstate a superior self into interpretative power. The counter-knowledge order's inherent construction of unwarranted omnipotence points to a more fundamental resistance to the established normative orders of our society that should be addressed more effectively if we want to be prepared for future crises and not lose common ground for making sense of them.

Keywords

Counter-knowledge order, COVID-19, critical discourse analysis, knowledge order, protest, Telegram

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Introduction

Massive anti-government protests resurged in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic. Protest movements usually do not appear spontaneously; rather, their supporters are recruited from pre-existing networks of activists, and these movements are embedded in interactions with institutions, organizations, and other movements (della Porta and Diani, 2020; Rucht, 2004). During the pandemic, protest organizers accordingly focused on regions where they could build on existing anti-establishment mobilization (Plümper et al., 2021). The COVID-19 protests mobilized not only people discontent with pandemic mitigation measures and the (economic) turmoil of the crisis but also became gathering points for an initially heterogeneous group of demonstrators. Structural tensions, opportunities, and threats facilitate mobilization during crises (Almeida, 2019; della Porta and Diani, 2020: 65). Knowledge as 'a site of struggle' then becomes especially contested as social movements challenge expertise with counter-expertise, knowledge with counter-knowledge, and scientific truth-seeking with alternative epistemologies (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008; della Porta and Pavan, 2017: 297–299). During the coronavirus crisis, such mobilization was most visible in the two extremes of movements advocating for sufficient action to combat the virus and those contesting anti-pandemic measures and the institutional orders responsible for them (by states, the media, and scientists; Fominaya, 2022). In Europe, protests supporting COVID mitigation measures remained scarce, while other anti-government protests 'refocused on COVID-19 related issues' (Kriesi and Oana, 2023: 20).

Building on existing research on coronavirus protests in Germany, which has indicated the movement transcends the contestation of individual epistemic claims and even issues concerning the pandemic, I conceptualize the coronavirus protests as a counter-knowledge order that has emerged from resistance to the established knowledge order – that is, the dominant and 'fundamental order of knowledge which specifies the constitutive presuppositions, internal regulations and external conditions for the production, application, distribution, administration, implementation, utilization, etc., of knowledge in society' (Spinner, 1993: 136) that has long been simmering. Following Neuberger et al. (2023), who transferred the concept into the late-modern hybrid media system by describing the digital transformation of the knowledge order's structural dimensions, I focus on the contexts, roles, and hierarchies of these protesters' counter-knowledge order. I achieve this aim through a critical discourse analysis empowered with computational methods (Dehghan et al., 2020).

Under the conditions of a dependency on scientific knowledge (and non-knowledge; Špecián, 2022) and the participatory paradigm of a digital knowledge society (Neuberger et al., 2023), far-right and conspiratorial imaginations have offered an attractive promise of salvation for some that sought to break free of the constraints of the established knowledge order. Under the imposition of digital knowledge society to constantly perceive and perform as knowers, yet with limited agency in the established order (a general reality made salient in crisis) leveling out hierarchies and detaching epistemic roles from their respective contexts, for the protestors reinstated their perceived superior self in an alternative, counter-knowledge order. This counter-knowledge order's inherent, unwarranted omnipotence is constantly threatened, but it also allows the movement to link multiple

topics, ideological currents, and discourses, that is it retains connectivity to others' discontent with their lack of interpretative power within the established knowledge order. In the remainder of this paper, I will first give a thematical introduction to the coronavirus protests, before I conceptualize them theoretically as a counter-knowledge order. I then explain my methodological approach and finally present and discuss my findings on the functional self-constructions of the movement's counter-knowledge order.

Literature review and theory

Coronavirus protests: A brief history

The German protest movement opposing pandemic mitigation measures came to be commonly known as 'Querdenken' (describing lateral thinking or thinking outside the box). This self-designation explicitly expresses opposition to the established knowledge order. Querdenken was initially founded in Stuttgart by the experienced protester Michael Ballweg. Local initiatives offered frameworks for personalized and localized adaptations of protests as an action framework (Teune, 2021: 115). Querdenken was not exceptionally right-wing in its earliest days, but it was always open to protesters from the right (and the far-right). It was not the only organized form of mobilization, but the name for its protests became widely established outside the movement. Therefore, I will speak more accurately of 'coronavirus protests' in the following.

The coronavirus protests were often described as heterogeneous, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic (Koos, 2021; Nachtwey et al., 2020), since they seemed to mobilize milieus for conspiratorial-ideology-infused protesters whom the mainstream had not perceived as particularly susceptible to fringe beliefs. Soon, however, these protests were dominated by far-right extremists and conspiracy ideologists, and the far-right was particularly quick to adapt its ideological action framework to the pandemic (Vieten, 2020; Volk and Weisskircher, 2023). Openness to conspiracist ideation emerged as a commonality among coronavirus protesters (Hetzel et al., 2022; Liekefett et al., 2023) since a general mistrust in established orders bridged various streams of protest. This phenomenon has often been observed in far-right conspiracist and esoteric communities (Jarvis and Eddington, 2023; Meiering et al., 2020; Pantenburg et al., 2021). A possible explanation for the early prevalence of fringe beliefs in an otherwise rather heterogeneous movement is that it made a group more visible for which, 'the restrictions of fighting the pandemic come as a surprise, . . . as they are used to extensive degrees of freedom in their lives', and they 'find a connection to the conspiracy ideology scene, among others, because they share its rather individualistic concept of freedom' (Dilling et al., 2022: 237). Amlinger and Nachtwey (2022) similarly described this phenomenon as libertarian authoritarianism, which feeds on an ongoing mortification of personal freedom in society, a rupture of late modernity's promises of individualism. Following this reasoning, social power plays an important role in the movement's rejection of established orders. In other words, this phenomenon concerns not contested knowledge (what is known) but contested knowledge orders (who can know and how). Therefore, in the following, I outline the coronavirus protests as an emergent counter-knowledge order.

The coronavirus protests as an emerging counter-knowledge order

The turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic has been described as a form of epistemic crisis (Morelock and Narita, 2022; Špecián, 2022) – that is, a situation in which 'doubt about beliefs and doubt about the belief-fixation mechanisms' of a community arises (Laudan, 2001: 273). Epistemic crises as such are not new (Fleck, 2021; Foucault, 1971; Kuhn, 2015; Laudan, 2001), but the epistemic crisis of the pandemic was embedded in different conditions. The transition to a knowledge society and the participatory paradigm of digitalization have brought new resistances and demands for the legitimization of the established knowledge order and participation within it (Neuberger et al., 2019, 2023; Spinner, 1994; Weingart, 2009). While the media remain important as intermediaries, concrete epistemic practices as '[interrelated] basic elements' (Neuberger et al., 2023: 6) and the 'clear coupling of roles and phases in the knowledge process' (p. 10–11) have been dissolved in the digital knowledge society. Neuberger et al. (2023: 6) considered the implications of digitalization for our contemporary knowledge order in four structural dimensions of the knowledge order as consistent with knowledge processes, contexts, hierarchies, and roles that serve in the current work as an analytical framework to explain the counter-knowledge order of the coronavirus protests.

The resulting cacophony of expanded possibilities for knowledge distribution were branded an 'infodemic' by the WHO early in the pandemic. For the coronavirus protest movement in Germany, Telegram particularly emerged as the primary communication platform allowing the movement to bypass traditional journalism as gatekeepers while evading fact-checking and deplatforming efforts (Schwaiger et al., 2022). In their search for alternative interpretations outside the mainstream media repertoire, the protesters increasingly networked via the messenger service.[1] Telegram has over 700 million monthly active users, and it allows the creation of public and private chat rooms called *channels* or *groups*; membership is limited to 200,000 members for groups, while channels allow an unlimited number of members (Telegram, 2023). Telegram's promises of encryption and privacy, as well as its resilience against regulative efforts, have made it an attractive tool not only for activists' mobilization and networking under authoritarian regimes (Ebel, 2019) but also for extremist groups such as the Islamic State or far-right actors who would face deplatforming elsewhere (Innes and Innes, 2023; Krona, 2020; Mahl et al., 2021; Rogers, 2020;).

Within Telegram's coronavirus protest sphere, ideological and functional contexts were blurry, and established hierarchies were contested, as other authors have noted (Almodt, 2024; Otto, 2021; Zehring and Domahidi, 2023). As is typical for social movements, protestors challenged expertise with counter-expertise, knowledge with counter-knowledge, and scientific truth-seeking with alternative epistemologies (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008; della Porta and Pavan, 2017: 297–299). This practice is inherently unproblematic; the negotiation of alternatives is necessary and expected to resolve doubts about beliefs and knowledge practices in epistemic crises (Kuhn, 2015; Laudan, 2001). It becomes problematic, however, when knowers resort to extreme alternatives of radical doubt and knowledge resistance. Knowledge resistant communities remain actively ignorant by resisting the knowledge of some people or groups – that is, by actively

ignoring the available evidence and testimonies of knowledgeable others or withholding due credibility while remaining largely unskeptical of like-minded beliefs (Güler and Wikforss, 2022; McKay and Mercier, 2023; Medina, 2013).

During the pandemic, ambiguous narratives of anti-progressive and anti-establishment resistance seem to have revealed a binding function (Meiering et al., 2020) that amplified far-right discourses and communities (Dehghan and Nagappa, 2022). Holzer (2021), for instance, found that coronavirus protester networks have strong ties to alternative media and right-wing extremists. Alternative media were used to amplify counter-discourse, and some Telegram channels can be considered alternative media in their own right (Zehring and Domahidi, 2023: 8). As Holzer (2021: 153) notes, they are mostly 'parodies' of their criticized counterparts – that is, they use the style and roles of journalists (and scientists) without applying such professionals' methods. Zehring and Domahidi (2023), for instance, found that far-right and QAnon conspiracy ideologies currently play a central role in the coronavirus protest sphere. This finding mostly aligns with other research on far-right fringe communities over Telegram and the coronavirus protests (Almodt, 2024; Hoseini et al., 2023; Urman and Katz, 2022). However, examining the Irish Telegram network of coronavirus protesters, Curley et al. (2022) found that, despite the presence of far-right discourses, the far-right is not constituent of the movement or its discourses. This distinction is important since we should not be too quick to subsume the coronavirus protests under a far-right ideology. To do so would neglect this movement's specific formations and, therefore, why the far-right seems so well adapted to connect to it. As Morelock and Narita (2022: 17) stated, 'COVID-19 was a point of almost poetic synergy, where various forces could dovetail and amplify in the far-right imagination'. The far-right's connection to the protests continues a streak of mainstreamable reorientation by which the far-right has continued to re-establish its presence in non-institutionalized or loosely institutionalized politics in the past decades, and far-right spaces span from party politics to transnational social movements (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro, 2019). Under its broad umbrella conceptualization (Pirro, 2023), today's far-right connects multiple resentment-laden discourses – often employing radical normativity and religious or traditional anti-progressive and anti-government values to bridge ideological gaps between different right-wing publics while claiming victimhood and resistance roles under a perceived leftist-progressive hegemony (Evolvi, 2023; Kunst et al., 2020; Meiering et al., 2020; Reijven et al., 2020).

In sum, the coronavirus protest movement has stood for broader resistance against the established order, it was built with a reliance on far-right and conspiracist imaginaries facilitated by the use of digital platforms (Telegram), and it will likely not return to the established order by itself or with the pandemic's end. As future crises will abound, understanding the formation of this counter-knowledge order is important. Like any knowledge order, the coronavirus protest counter-knowledge order also only operates within the boundaries of widely shared (cognitive) norms – that is, within a framework that a community of knowers agrees with sufficiently for a period (Heinelt, 2019; Spinner, 1993, 1994). Therefore, I ask how the counter-knowledge order of the coronavirus protests was constructed, and I pay particular attention to the contexts, hierarchies, and roles of this construction.

Method

Critical discourse analysis

While it is well suited to analyzing the sorts of interpretative struggles I am interested in here, a key challenge of digital discourse analysis, as Dehghan et al. (2020: 160) noted, 'arises when making critical and systematic decisions on where to look'. The coronavirus protests' counter-knowledge order on Telegram is vast, requiring a guided approach to revealing its hierarchies, roles, and contexts. Much of what we focus on in massive digital trace data sets is greatly enriched if we view it through the lens of social discourse contextuality. Moreover, discourse analysis can achieve an unprecedented reach for its analytical tools when empowered with computational methods. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) and computational social science are, thus, natural partners. A mixed methods approach is timely in the study of digital and hybrid social movements. Treré (2020: 5) warned of a 'quasi-religious reliance on quantitative big data analysis' alone that would not do justice to interwoven discourse strands' complexity in protest movements. In the same vein, Szulc (2022: 10) described the 'deceptive charm of big data analytics', Rossini (2023), meanwhile, called for stronger integration of well-established qualitative methods in studying disinformation and related phenomena online.

CDA is typically applied with an interest in texts' latent or implicit meaning – that is, normalisms, ideas, or ideologies (Fairclough, 2003, 2008; van Dijk, 1998, 2009). Thus, CDA concerns not only text data's immediate, semantic content level but also how knowledge construction is bound and facilitated by discourse (Fairclough, 2003, 2008; Jäger, 2015; Machin and Mayr, 2012). As Hall (1997: 44) aptly explained: 'Just as a discourse 'rules in' certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it 'rules out' limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it'.

I followed Jäger and Jäger's conceptual approach to dividing CDA into structural analysis and in-depth analysis. To analyze the discourse's structure, I applied social network analysis and structural topic modeling to a Telegram data set. Subsequently, I selected 100 message documents for which $\theta > 0.50$ per topic randomly for in-depth analysis. In other words, computational methods helped me 'making critical and systematic decisions on where to look' (Dehghan et al., 2020: 160). However, this approach introduced at least one new uncertainty: the black box of topic modeling approaches, which is why sanity checks (asking, 'Does my selection make sense in context?') are important. For the in-depth analysis I applied Machin and Mayr's (2012, 2023) extensive CDA toolkit. Texts' implicit meanings are revealed through particular attention to nominations, structural oppositions (binary relations with other terms), word connotations and keywords (word choice and lexical choice), and suppressions (what is not said or is omitted).

Data collection and workflow

I collected data from Telegram in two steps, following a snowball procedure. I compiled an initial chatgroup references list ($n = 743$) that I collected and continuously updated via observation of discussions by German coronavirus protesters on Telegram. At this stage,

I did not employ any specific collection criteria. Rather, through immersion, I tried to establish an initial understanding of the protests. I identified further chatgroups that had been mentioned in at least 15 of the initially examined chats. The result was a final sample of 2174 public Telegram channels and groups. Here, I only consider message data during the apex of the coronavirus pandemic (January 2020–March 2022). The data collection also resulted in the subsequent development of a free GUI-based research software tool version of the scraping script, "FROG" (see here https://github.com/Froschi1860/F-R-O-G-Telegram-scraping-tool/tree/main), to make research with Telegram data more accessible to a broader scientific community.

For this study's network analysis, I extracted all forwarded messages from the full data set to compile an edge list (messages) and a node list (channels). Both lists were exported to Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009) for further analysis (11,190,159 edges and 52,425 nodes). I calculated group partitions using the Louvain modularity algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008) to detect clusters in the network. For structural topic modeling (STM), I used the STM package (Roberts et al., 2019) in R. STM is a relatively novel yet increasingly popular approach to probabilistic topic modeling. It allows the inclusion of document metadata, such as dates of publication or channel-clusters found in network analysis from which to draw inferences. The data were pre-processed in the typical manner for topic modeling (Maier et al., 2018).[2] In this study, I only used the messages of the top 20 authorities of the relevant clusters identified via network analysis, and I merged all the messages by channel and day to avoid extremely short documents. Using the available data from 10 clusters yielded 174 authority data sets and 2,327,646 messages. I matched the final model (selected via exclusivity and semantic coherence) to the full data set. Finally, I labeled topics based on their FREX[3] terms and 100 random documents for which $\theta > 0.50$ per topic and also used these for in-depth analysis to achieve a comprehensive sub-sample of the prevalent discourse.

Thus, my approach comprised three phases: (1) trying to understand who spoke (the network), (2) broadly understanding what was important to these speakers (topics), and (3) analyzing how the community's identity (in my case, its counter-knowledge order) was actually constructed (in-depth analysis). The first two steps were guided procedures to make Step 3 feasible, ecologically valid, and reliable.

Pre-structuring results: The network and topics

Network and topic overview

The full network contained 52,425 nodes, of which 2020 were full data sets that had already been scraped, and 11,190,159 edges. Louvain cluster detection was used to calculate a modularity value of 0.38, which was considerably low, contrasting with other studies on far-right networks on Telegram and other platforms, which have tended to identify highly decentralized networks (Klein and Muis, 2019; Urman and Katz, 2022). Nevertheless, this value was consistent with Zehring and Domahidi's (2023) findings concerning a similar network. Community detection identified 12 main clusters that contained at least 0.1% of all the nodes. The cut-off was low, but it seemed appropriate, given the specificity of the studied community. Moreover, it allowed for greater validity and comprehensiveness. Communities were labeled according to their top 20 authorities.

Conspiracy ideation influencers and (most influential Austrian) alternative news activists accounted for the largest proportion of the network (Cluster 0), followed by QAnon-inspired conspiracy ideologists (Cluster 1). The German Reichsbürger ('Reich Citizens') comprises groups in Germany that reject the modern German state's authority and believe the German Reich, abolished in 1945, persists. (It is comparable to the sovereign citizen movement in the US context.) These groups were mixed with right-wing and QAnon channels (Cluster 2). QAnon generally seemed to connect conspiracy ideologists' discourse transnationally. The fourth-largest cluster contained much chatting focused on right-wing content and some esotericism – interestingly, with some regional focus on Switzerland (Cluster 6). Esotericism, especially that with strong ties to right-wing extremism and conspiracy theories, comprised the fifth-largest cluster (Cluster 11), followed by right-wing extremists (Cluster 9), protest mobilization and dates (Cluster 10), forwarded English news and conspiracy theories (Cluster 5), anti-vaccination accounts (Cluster 4), and finally another esotericism cluster focused on anthroposophy, meditation, love and light, and spirituality (Cluster 8). A Russian-speaking cluster and a Spanish-speaking cluster were not considered further in the study's in-depth analyses, but they suggest interesting relations that should be investigated in future studies. Supplemental Figure 1 and Table 1 depict the identified network.

Actors in the network

To identify the most important chats, I calculated authority scores for every node. The most important information sources in the network were usually the individual opinion leaders of far-right and conspiracy fringe communities or alternative media organizations. Many of these alternative media and alt-news activists who linked large parts of the network had been well-known conspiracy ideologists prior to the pandemic (e.g. Oliver Janich, Ken Jebsen, Boris Reitschuster, and Eva Hermann). Others had emerged only recently and centered themselves around the topic of the pandemic (e.g. Auf1TV, FaktenFriedenFreiheit, Bodo Schiffmann, Wolfgang Wodarg, Eva Rosen, and Markus Haintz). Far-right conspiracy ideation, far-right extremists, and the Reichsbürger accounted for the largest proportion of channels that had been active prior to the pandemic.[4] Meanwhile, protest organizations accounted for only a small proportion of the network. Instead, the Telegram network appeared to fulfill a knowledge-building and dissemination function.

Topics in the network

The structural topic model selected for this study comprised 30 topics (Supplemental Table 2 in Appendix I) in seven main categories (COVID vaccines, COVID vaccines and alternative health, esotericism, alternative information and self-promotion, mobilization against COVID-19 measures, conspiracy theories, and right-wing extremism) and two residual categories (other topics and an unclear topic). The most prevalent topics were Topics 15 (right-wing extremism), 7 (COVID-19 regulations), 18 (anti-government or anti-measures), 2 (esotericism), 27 (anti-immigration), and 26 (protest mobilization). For

the topics' prevalence and terms, see Supplemental Figures 2 and 3 and Supplemental Table 2 (FREX terms in Supplemental Table 3 in Appendix I).

Some topics' prevalence varied significantly between Telegram clusters, but they generally aligned along the expected ideological lines of fundamental beliefs. For instance, Topic 2 (esotericism) was more prevalent in the esoteric cluster (8). Protest mobilization in Saxony (Topic 12) was mostly driven by a right-wing extremist cluster (9) and alternative news or right-wing influencers (0). Promotion (or self-promotion) was most prevalent in the esotericism (8) and protest organization (10) clusters. Military conspiracy theories (9) and right-wing extremism (15) were most prevalent in the Reichsbürger (2) and right-wing extremist (9) clusters. Most topics' prevalence did not fluctuate strongly over time. However, discourse events – such as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine or the catastrophic flooding in German Ahrweiler[5] – seemed to influence the prevalence of respective topics in the model, as one would expect. Voter fraud conspiracy theories were more prevalent around the inauguration of Joe Biden in January 2021, and they regained some importance during the German federal elections of September 2021. The focus on mobilization (Topic 7) seemed to wane around the German summer holidays. The apparent sharp drop in anti-immigration or Islamophobia (Topic 27) at the beginning of the pandemic could be attributed to early adaptation strategies by right-wing influencers and extremists (Clusters 0 and 9) or newcomers' unfamiliarity with the in-group vernacular. All the Louvain clusters' effects on topics' prevalence and such prevalence over time are presented in Supplemental Appendix II.

Discussion

Contexts: The good, the bad, and the awakened

In line with previous findings concerning the movement's nature and discourse (Almodt, 2024; Zehring and Domahidi, 2023), in the current study, constructions of the self and the other followed a, for conspiracy ideology typical, manichaeistic duality between good and evil. By this, the movement's claim to interpretative power is contextualized as legitimate, particularly when met with outgroup and mainstream contestation. This aim was achieved via three main discursive constructions: (a) illegitimacy, (b) Western collapse, and (c) the hyper-moral and cognitively superior self. These discursive boundaries held the counter-knowledge order together. The notion of *illegitimacy* allowed the movement to arbitrarily dissolve the institutional sites of epistemic authority (e.g. Foucault, 1972: 51) and the boundaries between experiential and expert knowledge. Illegitimacy facilitated roles' detachment from contexts. While medical statements, for example, are usually indivisible 'from the statutorily defined person who has the right to make them' (Foucault, 1972: 51), the movement's 'renegade' leaders (Pantenburg et al., 2021: 50) enabled protesters to achieve this detachment using the very hierarchical structures of indivisibility to dismantle them. Stories of illegitimacy revealed the movement's claim to interpretative power and contrasted this claim with continued mortification: the counter-knowledge order should have been in power but was not. An immanent Western collapse was, thus, blamed on the established order but also eagerly awaited as a long-awaited opportunity to seize power.

Western collapse conspiracy theories worsen the perceived illegitimacy of the established order by ascribing it responsibility and malicious intent. Moreover, they both explain the protestor self's lack of power and expectations. Thus, they oscillate between demise and salvation. Demise is often represented in well-known conspiracy theories such as HAARP (the belief that the US military uses weather-controlling technology to create natural catastrophes) or chemtrails (the belief that airplane condensation trails are poisonous). Conversely, *salvation* conspiracies are more closely related to specific needs and worries among their believers. In the pandemic protest context, theories concerning free energy, GESARA (the belief that a complex set of economic reforms was introduced secretly in the United States but suppressed by the Bush administration after 9/11), the hope for a global financial reset and debt forgiveness, the idea that futuristic med-beds can cure any disease and are already available for the rich and powerful, and SHAEF (the Reichsbürger belief that the Federal Republic of Germany is under Allied occupation law) were used to mitigate any inconvenience imposed by rules and regulations, which these beliefs view as illegitimate.

The protesters view themselves as holding the last line of defense against the immanent decay of the West and its (Christian) moral values; at least, they are prepared for such an event, a conviction also prevalent in far-right populism and anti-progressive fringe groups, such as preppers (Evolvi, 2023; Kelly, 2016; Mudde, 2019). Unlike the corrupt established order and the dull masses who follow it, their counter-knowledge order alone is thought to recognize the truth. Through constructions of a hyper-moral self and cognitive superiority, the movement maintains a *metacognitive exaltation* that necessitates constructions of illegitimacy and global collapse in the first place. The in-group of awakened critical thinkers faces an outgroup of conspirators and accomplices unwilling or unable to grasp the fact of global collapse and conspiracy. This cognitive style is conceptually related to what McKay and Mercier (2023: 128) described as 'hypervigilance', a form of epistemic vigilance in which others' sensory-perceptual information overweighs one's own, involving 'deluded individuals actively distrusting the sincerity and competence of their interlocutors'. In the coronavirus protest counter-knowledge order, this construction of inhibited omnipotence and unwarranted superiority can be regarded as a particularly active and socially bound type of knowledge resistance (Güler and Wikforss, 2022) with considerable radicalization potential (della Porta, 2018; Logvinov, 2019). For this knowledge order, it potently justifies claims to epistemic authority (roles) and status (hierarchy). It also explains the far-right's rapidly developed, strong connection to the coronavirus protests. Perhaps the far-right is attractive and connectible to resentment-laden movements because it offers established constructions of a counter-knowledge order that upholds their claims to superior knowledge qua social identity.

Roles and hierarchy: Detached functionality and the disposition to know less together

As Almodt (2024) also found, many actors appeared to adhere to the same indications of expertise and credibility as their established counterparts, being doctors, lawyers, journalists, and media professionals. As other authors have pointed out, however, these roles

were detached from their functional constraints yet retained their symbolic resources within the movement (Amlinger and Nachtwey, 2022; Koos, 2021; Reichardt et al., 2021). As described above, this detaching epistemic roles from their traditional contexts delegitimized the established order and justified alternative claims to power. Accordingly, it is not only the renegade medical professional, scientist, or journalist that employs the symbolic resource of epistemic authority to spread ignorance, but ultimately everyone who invokes them. As Špecián (2022) argued, during the pandemic, laypeople were confronted with the serious problem of lacking meta-expertise, especially third-party meta-expertise: How should we decide which expert's opinion in what domain has merit at a given moment? For most people, this uncertainty was bearable due to trust that the established order's authorities possessed sufficient meta-expertise. The coronavirus protesters, however, were unwilling to trust these authorities for the reasons laid out above. Experiential knowledge and common sense prevailed, which would not have been problematic in itself. As Špecián (2022: 170) aptly noted, 'common sense is, by and large, able enough to appreciate the practical value of expert knowledge'. However, within the coronavirus protester counter-knowledge order, counter-experts valued common-sense hunches as highly as scientific expertise.

The 'renegades' (Pantenburg et al., 2021: 50) from the media and sciences became what Medina (2013: 146) described as 'laziness masters' – people 'who, in a given epistemic hierarchy, are the last authority in blocking paths of interrogation, in deciding what we do not know or cannot know, the questions we cannot ask meaningfully, what we simply must rely on and leave unquestioned (no matter how arbitrary it happens to be), and so on'. Thus, they obscure power relations that actually remain stable in their principal order and absolve their followers of the responsibility to renegotiate these relations themselves, which would appeal to an alternative, less hierarchical, knowledge order (see e.g. Navin, 2013 for an analysis of the appeal of anti-vaxxer communities). Thus, a counter-knowledge order presents itself to the level of a contesting order of equal epistemic rank to the established knowledge order (see e.g. Habermas, 2021: 492) by leveling the knowledge hierarchy through epistemic authority. This construction fuels protesters' metacognitive exaltation and the perseverance of the in-group's beliefs. Špecián's (2022) call for the strengthening of institutionalized meta-expertise in preparation for future crises, therefore, seems merited; yet the problem of whether a group that perceives itself as immune to the institutions of the established order is willing to yield to any institutionalized epistemic authority remains.

The counter-knowledge order as a commodity

A point that I cannot engage with in-depth without exceeding the scope of my analysis is the economic dimension of the counter-knowledge order I have analyzed. Prevalent self-promotion, donation requests, and product or service offerings (mostly tied to group beliefs, such as alternative health remedies) – which commodify activism – showcase the economic constraints and opportunities in which hybrid media activists operate. Many activists compete for limited resources in a highly saturated alternative media market. Caught in the strong neoliberal logic and 'communicative capitalism' (Dean, 2003) of the Web and its platforms, the coronavirus protesters are no exception. 'Commodity

activism' (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012) has been widely observed in other contexts. Protesters are producers, consumers, and – as a group – a product. In the coronavirus protests, however, this commodification has not been driven by popular brands, which might have feared reputation damage by adopting coronavirus protest slogans. Rather, it has focused on in-group brands such as the right-wing publisher and outdoor or survival-product shop Kopp.[6] Access to groups is sometimes rendered exclusive (e.g. a channel about suing the Bavarian government expected its users to pay 50 euros to support this lawsuit). In return, channels offer easily personalized action templates (e.g. protest letters or pseudo-legal argumentation). Some groups have offered fabricated vaccination certificates. Thus, protesters create internal economies that produce and satisfy demand exclusively from within the movement.

Conclusion

This paper offers three main contributions to the literature. First, it integrates existing scholarship (e.g. Almodt, 2024; Holzer, 2021; Zehring and Domahidi, 2023;) on the coronavirus protests with contemporary social theory of digital knowledge society to make sense of the protestors' apparent resistance yet connectivity to the mainstream and the far-right. Based on that, it secondly, provides the conceptual framework of counter-knowledge orders to reconceptualize the corona protests. Finally, it has expanded the methodological approach and scope of studying this movement by combining computational methods with critical discourse analysis – thereby allowing for a deeper analysis of the movement's discourse.

To conceptualize counter-knowledge orders and understand how the counter-knowledge order of the coronavirus protests has been constructed in its contexts, roles, and hierarchies, I departed from the analytical framework of Neuberger et al. (2023) for a digitally transformed knowledge order. Pre-structuring the vast info-scapes of the coronavirus protesters' Telegram network with social network analysis and structural topic modeling allowed me to focus on subsequent CDA. I found that this counter-knowledge order has escaped its unease toward the established knowledge order by arbitrarily dissolving contexts of epistemic roles and hierarchies. It has achieved this aim by presenting the established order as illegitimate, describing a collapse of the Western world allegedly caused by the establishment, and proclaiming its protesters' superiority. The movement's meta-cognitive exaltation particularly merits more scholarly attention since it suggests societal issues far beyond false beliefs or misinformed, polarized groups, including a more fundamental resistance to society's established normative orders. Counter-experts have helped level hierarchies and detach epistemic roles from their respective contexts. Ultimately, they have allowed the counter-knowledge order to maintain its claim to an interpretative power that positions it, in its introspection, as superior to the established order but also deliberately as suffering continual mortification. After all, the protestors' experienced lack of interpretative power in the established digital knowledge society is real, it is made salient by the pandemic conditions, and while it may be normatively justified it puts our democratic society under serious pressure for a solution.

My inability to propose such a solution is perhaps the greatest limitation of my analysis. Nonetheless, thinking of the coronavirus protests as a resistance phenomenon beyond the pandemic - the formation of counter-knowledge orders as a concrete fulfilment of the

potential for resistance inherent in digital knowledge society - might offer future pathways toward such a solution. While my analysis helps explain the coronavirus protester counter-knowledge order, it is less revealing of other counter-knowledge orders in the past, present, or future. We should, therefore, analyze similar phenomena from a comparable angle. Moreover, we do not yet know the extent to which the coronavirus protest movement's discursive constructions are functionally unique or shared with the establishment (e.g. cognitive superiority concerning its immunization attempts versus protesters' claim of interpretative power).

Additionally, the limitation of my exclusive focus on Telegram networks is important to acknowledge. The coronavirus protests have produced uncounted artifacts that should be studied. Following Treré (2020) – that is, his suggestion that movements should be studied beyond digital trace data – I argue that we should examine other artifacts (music, pamphlets, art, new alternative social media, protest papers, and so on) more.

Also, I did not explore further developments in the movement's topical foci, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, I suspect a shift in such topics' importance. Some fluctuation in the prominence of actors and topics is to be expected. How this counter-knowledge order develops and positions itself against others that might emerge will be interesting to monitor. Incorporating an economic dimension into the study of such movements' structural cores or knowledge processes, contexts, roles, and hierarchies also seems promising. The far-right's role in helping to construct counter-knowledge orders particularly requires further scholarly attention. Finally, more targeted sampling approaches should be applied to focus on specific sub-communities, roles, or contexts. We should, in any case, continue to observe how counter-knowledge orders develop, whom they are directed against, which power relations they produce (or reproduce), and so on. I have sought to contribute to this endeavor in the current work.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Of course, deplatforming also drove users to other platforms or even great efforts to mirror established platforms such as Movipo (https://movipo.de/), a Facebook clone, or Querdenkentube (https://tube.querdenken-711.de/), a video platform that resembles YouTube but is intended for coronavirus protester videos exclusively. This shift created an alternative, hybrid media ecosystem of alternative media and 'platformed conspiracism' (Mahl et al., 2023). This ecosystem is worth studying on its own, but it is not the focus of the current article.
2. For more information on the data workflow, see Supplemental Appendix III.
3. FREX terms are terms that are both frequent and exclusive to a topic. For more information, see the STM package documentation (https://rdrr.io/cran/stm/man/labelTopics.html).
4. The number of communities by channel that were active before COVID-19 were as follows: Cluster 0, 170 channels; Cluster 9, 62 channels; Cluster 2, 59 channels; Cluster 6, 47 channels; Cluster 11, 37 channels; Cluster 1, 21 channels; Cluster 10, 12 channels; and Cluster 7, 2 channels.
5. Central and Western Europe experienced severe flooding in the summer of 2021. In Germany, towns in the Ahr Valley were particularly affected. Figures from the coronavirus protest sphere and related protest milieus took the opportunity to present themselves as helpers on their channels.
6. Kopp offers right-wing (and far-right) books, survival or outdoor equipment, supplements, and the like in Germany and Austria, as Alex Jones, for instance, does in the United States via Infowars. See also the work of Almodt (2024) to further understand Kopp's relevance in protester spheres.

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