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The epistemic crisis and the rise of the far right: toward a conceptualization of counter-knowledge orders in digital knowledge society

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Abstract Years of global crises since the turn of the millennium and recently the coronavirus pandemic have made the opening fault lines of rationality in digital knowledge society more visible. This paper draws from work on the digital transformation of knowledge societies. It considers how the conditions of this transformation have not only profoundly influenced the established knowledge order but also facilitated the emergence of *counter-knowledge orders*. Counter-knowledge orders dissolve knowledge contexts, reorganize hierarchies and claim roles in digitalized knowledge societies to create and maintain subversive alternatives freed of the established order's rules and impositions. To exemplify the analytical power of *counter-knowledge orders* as a concept, this paper considers the far right as a counter-knowledge order. This approach is shown to help reconcile the apparent contradictions and inadequacies that are criticized in the dominant counterpublic framework for studying the far right from a knowledge centered perspective. For the far right, the allure of counter-knowledge orders lies in the simultaneous assumption of different social power positions that the established order grants and withholds. The paper concludes that the far-right struggle for hegemony can ultimately be understood as an attempt to (re-) gain control over the entire knowledge process. The anti-democratic, illiberal and exclusionary presuppositions of far-right ideology at the basis of all dimensions of the far-right counter-knowledge order are well-documented in the literature. From a social-epistemologist perspective, however, it is important to stress that counter-knowledge orders are not a-priori assuming any illiberal ideology per se and may, in different contexts, even be seen as a necessity for a more just knowledge order. The simultaneous danger and necessity of counter-knowledge orders in liberal democracy merit further exploration in the future. Moreover, it is important to scrutinize

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the societal conditions that uniquely enable the far-right counter-knowledge order to capitalize on these dynamics.

Keywords Counter-knowledge order · Knowledge order · Knowledge resistance · Far right · Counterpublic · Resistance

Die epistemische Krise und der Aufstieg des Rechtsextremismus: Zur Konzeptualisierung von Gegenwissensordnungen in der digitalen Wissensgesellschaft

Zusammenfassung Die globalen Krisen seit der Jahrtausendwende, zuletzt die Coronapandemie und Kriege in Nahost sowie der Ukraine, haben Bruchlinien digitaler Wissensgesellschaften deutlicher sichtbar gemacht, die nicht nur entlang von Überzeugungen zum jeweiligen Gegenstand verlaufen, sondern die gesellschaftlichen Systeme und Ordnungen sowie die Mechanismen deren Etablierung selbst in Frage stellen. Dieser Text befasst sich damit, wie die digitale Transformation der Wissensgesellschaft und deren Bedingungen die Entstehung von Gegenwissensordnungen begünstigen. Gegenwissensordnungen nutzen die Bedingungen einer digitalisierten Wissensgesellschaft zur Auflösung von Wissenskontexten, zur Reorganisation von Hierarchien und zur Beanspruchung von Rollen innerhalb dieser Kontexte. Gegenwissensordnungen konstruieren so eine subversive Alternative, die nicht an die Regeln und Zumutungen der etablierten Ordnung gebunden ist. Zur Veranschaulichung des Konzepts der Gegenwissensordnungen, wird hier die extreme Rechte (*far right*) betrachtet und gezeigt, wie dieser Ansatz unter anderem hilft, scheinbare Widersprüche und Unzulänglichkeiten in der Analyse der Far Right in der politischen Kommunikationsforschung aufzulösen. Die Anziehungskraft einer Gegenwissensordnung für die extreme Rechte liegt in der Gleichzeitigkeit der Inanspruchnahme verschiedener Positionen sozialer Macht, die von der herrschenden Ordnung zugestanden und vorenthalten werden, d. h. in der Verknüpfung von Widerstand und Defensivität. Abschließend wird betont, wie wichtig es ist, die extreme Rechte als eine Gegenwissensordnung zu untersuchen, um ihre potenziellen Auswirkungen auf die liberale Demokratie zu verstehen. Die antidemokratischen, illiberalen und ausgrenzenden Voraussetzungen der rechtsextremen Ideologie, die allen Dimensionen der rechtsextremen Gegenwissensordnung zugrunde liegen, sind in der Literatur gut dokumentiert. Aus einer sozialepistemologischen Perspektive ist es jedoch wichtig zu betonen, dass Gegenwissensordnungen nicht von vornherein eine illiberale Ideologie voraussetzen und in verschiedenen Kontexten sogar als Notwendigkeit für eine gerechtere Wissensordnung angesehen werden können. Die gleichzeitige Gefahr und Notwendigkeit von Gegenwissensordnungen in der liberalen Demokratie verdienen es, in Zukunft weiter erforscht zu werden. Darüber hinaus ist es wichtig, die gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen zu untersuchen, die es der rechtsextremen Gegenwissensordnung ermöglichen, aus dieser Dynamik Kapital zu schlagen.

Schlüsselwörter Gegenwissensordnung · Wissensordnung · Gegenöffentlichkeit · Rechtsextremismus · Neue Rechte · Widerstand

1 Introduction

We live in a knowledge society. The transformation into a knowledge society is commonly traced back to the 1960s (David and Foray 2002; Weingart 2001/2009). Ideas suggesting that knowledge is an important—or even the most important—commodity and that citizens' productivity is bound to knowing and learning are widely accepted, and they have transformed concrete economic and education policy since the 1990s at the latest (European Commission 1995, 1997). Interpretations of this transformation as purely successful have long been criticized in critical scholarship because knowledge society has not simply freed individuals to shape their own educational life paths; rather, it has demanded submission to new, competitive, and compensatory logics of knowing and learning as civic duties (Hammer 2018; Klingovsky 2016). In extreme cases, this demand culminates in the desire for rule by the knowledgeable, an order in which being wrong or uninformed constitutes incomplete citizenship (see, e.g., Brennan's 2017 epistocracy).

Knowledge society has "multiplied the potential for resistance" to its own establishment (Weingart 2001/2009, p. 13) because it has reduced the former distance between functional systems in what Weingart (2001/2009) calls the "scientification" (Verwissenschaftlichung) of society and the "socialization" (Vergesellschaftung) of science. However, contemporary knowledge society also suffers from an inherent contradiction. Because of its *imperative to know*, its citizens are expected to constantly perceive and perform themselves as knowers with and in opposition to others. Foundationally, however, perceiving and performing oneself as a knower in knowledge society is bound to the established knowledge order (EKO)—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 1994, p. 136). Therefore, the present epistemic crisis[1] of eroding trust in epistemic authorities and previously unproblematic knowledge should be understood as ruptures created by the direct, recoiling effects of knowledge society's imposition.

Notions of crises, like crises themselves, are not scarce, unexpected, or harmful[2] in a democracy per se (Hall 1986/2018; Przeworski 2019). However, the turmoil of recent years introduced by wars and the pandemic has highlighted that there is an inherent struggle within knowledge society and its EKO. Importantly, competing and even contradictive knowledge claims have been said to be neither extraordinarily bad nor detrimental to democracy per se so long as common ground or a common reality persists (Arendt 1973; Frankfurt 2019; Habermas 1996). Whether a common reality is still existent has recently been questioned—often with a concerning lack of

[1] The epistemic crisis understood as a time of "doubt about beliefs and doubt about the belief-fixation mechanisms" (Laudan 2001, p. 273).

[2] In contrast, a historical perspective reveals that epistemic crises should be regularly expected and resolved through either restored confidence in dominant orders and their systems (and immunization against contesting claims) or the abandonment of their principles and the adoption of new principles (Foucault 1971; Heinelt 2019; Kuhn 2015; Laudan 2001).

nuance, as others have pointed out (Altay et al. 2023a; Mejia et al. 2018). However, as the radicalization of protests against coronavirus measures has shown (e.g., Almodt 2023; Primig 2024), our knowledge society is experiencing a time characterized by not only doubts about specific bodies of knowledge or epistemologies but also a fundamental rejection of the EKO as such. Therefore, I consider the manifestation of contemporary knowledge society's inherent resistance potential in what I call *counter-knowledge orders* (CKOs). Moreover, I show that societal vulnerability to radical groups such as the far right—understood here as an umbrella term for illiberal and anti-democratic right-wing actors of different kinds (Pirro 2022)—capitalizes on CKOs potential.

This paper provides three main contributions. First, I derive the concept of *counter-knowledge orders* as resistant alternatives to the EKO. These CKOs are afforded by the imposition of knowledge society with its EKO, and they are enabled by this society's digital transformation. Second, I demonstrate CKOs' potential as an analytical concept in explaining the far right's ascent. Conceptualizing far-right publics as a CKO can, for instance, help reconcile recently criticized contradictions between far-right defensiveness and resistance that disrupt their notional coherence as counterpublics (Jackson and Kreiss 2023; Pirro 2024). Finally, I suggest further approaches to researching CKOs.

2 (Counter-)knowledge orders and digitalization

Knowledge orders are socially established. We think and speak with and through others, forming and agreeing on certain methods and knowledge practices as cognitive procedures and on results as statements about reality; often, only when we breach the subtle constraints of togetherness do we become aware of them (see, e.g., Zerubavel's works on cognitive sociology, 1999, 2010). As knowers, we have always been entangled in complex "web[s] of sociomental affiliations" (Zerubavel 1999, p. 17). The simultaneous existence of different or even contradictory societal norms and constraints is not the timely exception (Weber 1956/2013, p. 16). Digitalization, however, has introduced new potential for reshuffling and contesting these norms, and it has increased the instances in which alternatives collide; as some argue a key driver for societal polarization (Bor and Petersen 2021; Rosa 2013; Törnberg 2022).

Knowledge was the most important commodity even before the internet at latest since the 1960s (Weingart 2001/2009). However, in late modernity, the internet's emergence and the later development of platform corporations introduced transformative new conditions to the EKO. Through digitalization, the social distance from former epistemic authorities has diminished at an accelerating rate as more people perceive themselves to be potential speakers and become speakers online (Baym and Boyd 2012; Spinner 1994; Weingart 2001/2009). In an era of informational abundance, contexts collapse (Davis and Jurgenson 2014; Marwick and Boyd 2011) and are subjected to constant reinterpretation, remixing, or imitation on platforms with strong economic logics and opaque curation regimes (Caplan and Gillespie 2021; Gillespie 2013). Neuberger et al. (2023) hence describe the persistent digital-

ization trend as a profound "digital transformation of the knowledge order," which they map across four structural dimensions: knowledge processes, contexts, roles, and hierarchies (p. 6). Thus, this transformation "can be understood as a process of change characterized by: (1) a dissolution of boundaries between knowledge contexts, (2) a flattening of epistemic hierarchy, (3) a more flexible order of phases in the knowledge process [of generation, verification, distribution and appropriation of knowledge], and (4) an opening of professional roles to new actors" (p. 14). The far-reaching consequence is not the late fulfillment of a *chaos* paradigm of the internet that has been longed for in early theorizing on its democratizing effects and never materialized (Freedman 2015) but, rather, the accelerated transformation of late-modern society into knowledge society. Here, knowledge is the most important commodity, and the requirement to constantly perceive oneself and perform as a knower with and in opposition to others, yet still with limited agency in the dominant knowledge order's organizing principles, has multiplied the dominant order's inherent potential to be undone. In other words, while CKOs' inevitable emergence is grounded in the imposition and contradictive demands of knowledge society and its established knowledge order, the contemporary visibility of resistance to the EKO is digitally enabled.

Conceptually, CKOs are constructed in relation to the EKO (see Fig. 1 below). But in its opposition, they dissolve knowledge contexts, reorganize hierarchies, and claim roles to create and maintain a subversive alternative freed from the dominant order's rules and impositions. Accordingly, CKOs are constructed as resistant alternatives with their own internal regulations and counter-presuppositions forming the conditions of knowing. My point is partly elusive to empirical analysis, at least in its sociological critique of knowledge society. Analyses of different cases have, therefore, yet to be conducted. I suggest empirical analyses of CKOs based on the

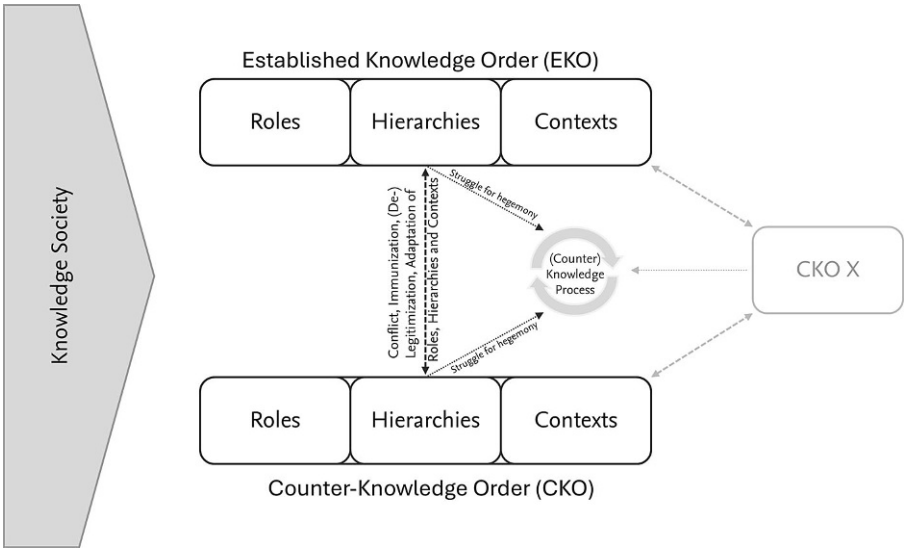

Fig. 1 The relationship of the established knowledge order and counter-knowledge orders

knowledge order's structural dimensions—that is, its *roles* (e.g., who fulfills what roles in the knowledge process?), *hierarchies* (e.g., who is deemed competent and credible as a knower, and what types of knowledge are deemed superior, legitimate, or not?), *contexts* (e.g., what relation do epistemic contexts share?), the *phases* of the knowledge process (e.g., how are roles, contexts, and hierarchies invoked, performed, and functional throughout the knowledge process?), and their relations to the EKO (where do they build on, resist, or counter the EKO?). These structural dimensions are necessarily intertwined. Moreover, they are not independent from the world that surrounds them. The circular knowledge process has, for instance, generally enabled ever-new processes for scrutinizing knowledge claims by multiple actors. In a given CKO, the knowledge process's different phases—the generation, verification, distribution, and appropriation of knowledge—may persist. However, they can be subjected to other standards based on other presuppositions, and they may necessarily arrive at other conclusions because different knowledges are deemed more or less important in the epistemic hierarchy because claiming and fulfilling roles in the knowledge process have different meanings or because contexts are legitimately transferred differently.

Thus far, I have argued that CKOs' emergence is not strictly normative. Of course, it carries normative assumptions about CKOs' necessity and expectedness under contemporary digital knowledge society's conditions because it can be read as a critique of these conditions. But the concept does not assume, a priori, a particular normative leaning; that is, every CKO should not be understood as a necessary counter to a flawed status quo or a detriment to liberal democracy, truth, or other values. These normative judgments can be made context- and case-dependent, ideally through a comprehensive analysis of CKOs' four structural dimensions and relations to the EKO. For instance, the hermeneutical marginalization of racialized *others* that is inscribed in the ideology of contemporary knowledge society or its unjust neoliberal constructions of *worthy knowers and knowledge* and *knowledgeable citizenship* can foundationally rupture belief-fixating mechanisms and structures (e.g., Bufkin 2024; Issar 2021; Medina 2013). A CKO in response to that then, is not automatically better or just—though it is not clear that any virtue-epistemic account of CKOs should be developed—but resistance to the exclusionary status quo is then necessitated and can be legitimized from any liberal democratic perspective that includes some form of intellectual humility, or an active acknowledgment of and engagement with diverse knowers and knowledges as democratic values (e.g., Baron 2019; Baron et al. 2023; Medina 2013). To acknowledge the range of normative implications of CKOs is important because the case I present below focuses on the far right, and it could suggest that CKOs generally carry a heavily negative normative load. In authoritarian contexts for instance, the established knowledge order could be closer to what we would describe as a far-right or illiberal CKO in a German context; even the established knowledge order can have authoritarian and exclusionary tendencies (e.g., radical scientism). The "counter" is thus naturally socio-culturally, politically and temporally contextualised. The simple normative requirement derived from social epistemology is that the preconditions and practices underlying a knowledge order must not be unjust. This is important to mention because a purely knowledge-sociological view easily runs the risk of being accused of moral relativism.

Normatively, emancipation from the EKO can be legitimate, for instance, if it is driven by resistance to continued unjust[3] exclusion. For example, this condition was met for the credibility deficit in healthcare that was inflicted on Black communities and at times parents, particularly mothers, qua perceived social identity (Batelaan 2022; Carel and Kidd 2017; Navin 2013). Therefore, conceiving of people with divergent worldviews, even if they are maintained by mis- and disinformation, as simply deceived, gullible, evil, or epistemically vicious adds little analytical value, and it can constitute a slippery slope to stigmatizing them as incomplete citizens or, in Cassam's (2023) terms, "less than full epistemic subjects" (p. 325). Whether, how, and why a given CKO may entail vicious or virtuous epistemic practices remains to be studied in a context- and case-based manner.

3 The far right: from counterpublics to counter-knowledge orders

Fraser's (1990) counterpublics groundwork was meant to redress the overlooking of historical inequalities in dominant theories of the public—particularly Habermas's early theorizing on a bourgeois public sphere. Counterpublics allow subaltern or marginalized groups, albeit aware of their "subordinate status" (Warner 2002, p. 86), to "invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser 1990, p. 67). Mouffe's (1999; see also Laclau and Mouffe 2001) intervention for agonistic public spaces goes in a similar direction as it rejects the idea of Olympic formal rationality as the only legitimate form of reasoning in the public, and feminist theory has since mostly focused on counterpublics as spaces that subvert hermeneutical marginalization (Fricker 2007) somehow (e.g., Elsheikh and Lilleker 2021; Warner 2002).

Conceptually, however, counterpublics have been increasingly used to describe far-right, alt-right, or conspiracy-ideological online spaces (e.g., Toepfl and Piwoni 2018; Rauchfleisch and Kaiser 2020; Reijven et al. 2020). Counterpublics' expanding application to far-right spaces renews a critique of counterpublics' diluted analytical value almost as old as the theory itself. Squires (2002), for instance, critiqued counterpublics' broad conceptualization that no longer "distinguish[es] amongst marginal publics and their activities" (p. 460). Asen (2000) anticipated "potential reductionism in future counterpublic theory" (p. 424) and thus proposed a focus on the *counter* aspect of counterpublics, "how they set themselves against wider publics or [...] the state" (p. 437). Most recently, Pirro (2024) argues that in some contexts, the far right has moved from a "counter-hegemonic to a hegemonic force" and could therefore not properly be described or understood as a counterpublic at all. Jackson and Kreiss (2023) similarly called for far-right movements' reconceptualization as defensive publics, rather than as counterpublics. They claimed that

[3] Whether exclusion is unjust depends on the knowledge process's context and phase. While access to knowledge equality is imperative, the production and verification of knowledge requires a consideration of whether individuals' inclusion or exclusion allows the best possible approximation of the truth. Exclusion qua perceived social identity alone cannot be justified.

far-right movements are characterized by "defensive actions designed to maintain, protect, or otherwise return to unequal social, political, and economic orders" (p. 9). Thus, they highlighted far-right movements' motivation to defend against others' participation attempts, particularly subaltern or marginalized communities.

I agree that "defending relations of power that institutions have traditionally protected in Western democracies" (Jackson and Kreiss 2023, p. 9) is a defining practice of far-right publics. However, I argue that the far right is not merely *counter on the surface*. Far-right movements counter the dominant knowledge order and its constraints and defend their unwarranted superiority in that order against others' participation claims. These practices differ in their assumed power positions granted by (or expected from) socially established hierarchies of knowers.

Overall, far-right publics are characterized by their wish to rule over how one ought to make sense of the world. As Pirro (2024) points out as well, counterpublics threaten this goal and attached self-image as the rightful hegemon of the far right. Generally, the generation and dissemination of counter-knowledge has always been central to movements of all sorts (Casas-Cortés et al. 2008; della Porta and Pavan 2017). Yet, during the coronavirus pandemic's epistemic crisis (Morelock and Narita 2022; Špecián 2022), the far right has adopted an acute emergency impressively fast, mobilizing the momentum of threat and uncertainty (P. D. Almeida 2019) and integrating it into the movement's discourse contesting dominant interpretations of reality and authorities (Almodt 2023; Volk and Weisskircher 2023; Primig 2024). Morelock and Narita (2022) observe, "COVID-19 was a point of almost poetic synergy, where various forces could dovetail and amplify in the far-right imagination" (p. 17). The far right imagines knowing differently as an act of resistance against both knowledge and the knowledge order. This view makes studying the far right as a CKO fruitful. I argue below, synthesizing research on far-right spaces, from alternative media studies to conspiracy theories, that the far right's *knowing differently* transcends occasional disagreement with established knowledge or epistemic authorities. Therefore, research should consider the formation of a far-right CKO and its allure among a broader public.

3.1 A far-right counter-knowledge order

As described above, emerging CKOs need not involve radicalism nor even falsehood. Digital knowledge society and its EKO have generally afforded opportunities for CKOs to form. The far right, however, is particularly well adapted to utilize such opportunities because it can assume powerful positions compared to counterpublics. This CKO's long-tested ideas about knowing differently and delegitimizing others are clearly because far-right knowers do not always operate from a subordinate position.

3.2 Roles

A core research theme on far-right spaces is their empowerment (or re-empowerment) by claiming (or reclaiming) access to roles in the knowledge process both institutionally, such as through alternative media, and individually by legitimizing

counter-roles and delegitimizing established roles. Far-right alternative media and media activists seize journalistic roles in the knowledge process. Contrasting with established journalism's mediation function, right-wing alternative media are almost exclusively controlled by organized in-group speakers. They roughly follow journalistic logics, imitating their styles without necessarily adhering to professional norms (Freudenthaler and Wessler 2022; Haller and Holt 2019; Mayerhöffer and Heft 2022; Toepfl and Piwoni 2018). Their appeal derived from their offer of counter-discourse, purportedly exclusive anti-hegemonic access to *the truth*, and unique ability to uncover lies and secrets by ruling elites, including traditional news media (Schwaiger and Eisenegger 2021). In essence, right-wing alternative media serve an inherent mistrust in media and politics (Dahlgren 2018; Holt and Haller 2017; Jackob 2010; Tsfati 2010). Right-wing alternative media assure a coherent group identity, marking in-group members, outsiders, and permissible—and impermissible—beliefs (Atkinson and Berg 2012; Chan 2017; Denner and Peter 2017; Frischlich et al. 2020; Holt and Haller 2017). Boundaries are drawn with enemy constructions that are often mere *floating signifiers*, such as "woke," "antifa," and "fake news" (Knüpfer 2020), and they are applied to immunize against others' knowledge claims—particularly mainstream journalists'.

Right-wing alternative media simultaneously claim renegade, expert, victim, populist citizen, or activist positions (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019a, pp. 1230–1232). Blending these roles claims interpretative power while resisting and delegitimizing established roles, particularly in journalism and science, which was highly evident during the coronavirus pandemic. Such "parodies," Holzer (2021) notes, mimic systems such as media or science and transfer them into right-wing pandemic protest movements. However, "the models for their forms of social reality construction are stripped of important features or adapted without reference to their original function" (p. 153, translation by the author). Right-wing alternative media usage is, therefore, often problematized; it mostly seems to serve alternative epistemologies of ignorance and knowledge resistance (Dahlgren 2018; Schwarzenegger 2021, 2022; Strömbäck 2023; Strömbäck and Wikforss 2022).

In the far-right CKO, everyone is a journalist or scientist (individual knowers are promoted to established epistemic authorities, an elevation expected from but withheld by the EKO; see the following section on the hierarchy dimension). However, leaders are instilled with excessive epistemic power. Recognized experts can function as political leaders, and vice versa—a constellation typical of ideologies (for instance, the works of Lenin, Stalin, or Mao standing as *science*). Accordingly, far-right counter-experts fulfill a double role, generating and disseminating information while blocking investigations and inward scrutiny. Thus, despite superficially mirroring established roles and invoking their inherited epistemic authority (see subsection on the hierarchy dimension), they are valued for their commitment to shared presumptions and rejection of established experts, rather than independent indicators for credibility and competence (Chapelan 2021; Eslen-Ziya 2022; Holzer 2021).

3.3 Hierarchies

Hierarchies of knowledge and knowers, intertwined with roles, are reordered in a far-right CKO—partly based on established power relations. Access to credibility is moderated by perceived social identity and exclusionist social hierarchies of, for instance, race and gender. Thus, far-right imaginations and established hierarchies of power and suppression determine who can be deemed credible or competent. Epistemic authority is generally used practically to disseminate knowledge and ignorance simultaneously (Medina 2013, p. 146). Therefore, alongside a social division of cognitive labor for knowledge is a "*social division of cognitive laziness*, a social orchestration of epistemic attitudes that gives some subjects or subcommunities a special role and responsibility in engineering and instilling the epistemic deficiencies and atrophies that support active ignorance, such as the inability to challenge certain things or to ask certain questions" (Medina 2013, p. 146; italics original). Therefore, what Medina (2013) calls "expert ignoramuses" or "laziness masters" (p. 146) can top a community's epistemic hierarchy. They are "the last authority in blocking paths to 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" (p. 146).

In its hierarchies, the far-right CKO always strives to uphold an imagined status quo of legitimate, active ignorance toward the perceived other. As Jackson and Kreiss (2023) also note, the far right assumes a privileged position, as its subjects in the dominant knowledge order relate to marginalized communities as knowers with a credibility advantage—an excess manifesting in the historical expectation of "dominating without difficulty" (Tocqueville 1990, p. 601).[4] Far-right ideas are not marginalized qua their speakers' perceived social identity. Far-right victimhood claims using exclusion rhetoric often express a desire for discursive dominance (Kunst et al. 2020), anti-feminist, misogynist, and generally extreme heteronormative discourse (Agius et al. 2022; Blee 2020; Koulouris 2018; Russell 2019; Träbert 2017), or imaginations of an ethnically pure white past and present racialized threat (Atton 2006; Cosentino 2020; Ekman 2022; Vieten 2016; Wollenberg 2014), which can be relatable discourses for the mainstream because they are not strictly fringe beliefs. As Bufkin (2024) aptly explains in the context of race, racism, and knowledge production, "sedimented forms of common-sense continue to naturalize 'race', giving what is a political artifact produced through practices of subordination at least the appearance of 'objective' facticity" (p. 12). Therefore, the far right can build on consolidated racial hierarchies that legitimize active ignorance toward racialized knowers. The far-right CKO elevates this inherited, unjust status quo of hermeneutical marginalization to an imagined, explicit epistemic value.

This CKO's knowledge hierarchy seems remarkably flat superficially, accepting scientific knowledge (as long as it's not counter to the far-right identity) as much as common sense and intuitive beliefs. While counterpublics have always entailed the

[4] Tocqueville refers here to the South's socialization into white supremacy in the USA, building on his observations from the early-mid-19th century. The inherent perceived *birthright of power* in this quote retains its explanatory power for white supremacy (the far right) today.

cultivation of alternative epistemologies, as they were traditionally excluded from participation in the knowledge process (S. Almeida 2015; Jackson and Banaszczyk 2016)*, knowing differently* in this CKO is not a means but the goal itself. Since the motivation of this goal entails both an experienced lack of participation and a perceived excess of participation by elite epistemic authorities and marginalized people, the far-right CKO does not generally permit alternative ways of knowing. Instead, it further marginalizes others' participation claims while masking its own knowledge claims, as justified through cherrypicked or *alternative facts* (Marwick and Partin 2024) or appeals to experiential knowledge and *common sense* when they are deemed useful in delegitimizing incongruent interpretations of reality (Garcia-Jaramillo et al. 2023; Rosenfeld 2011). Excess credibility is thereby provided qua far-right speakers' social identity and not generally applied to alternative epistemologies (Atton 2006). In other words, the dominant knowledge hierarchy is suspended for the in-group of perceived superior knowers but sustained for out-group others.

Disinformation and conspiracy theories thereby serve to claim victimhood and establish others as threats and legitimate targets (Ekman 2022; Mejia et al. 2018). In far-right conspiracy-ideologist spaces, therefore, the primary importance of the far right controlling the entire knowledge process (see also section below on the phases dimension) becomes most visible. Importantly, the notion of *doing your own research* that often guides idiosyncratic, closed paths of inquiry in far-right online spaces and elsewhere is generally facilitated by and expected from the web's open knowledge process (Ballantyne et al. 2022; Boyd 2018). To exist in today's knowledge society is to know for oneself, to perceive oneself and perform as a knower in opposition, better than others. Only an established, yet contested, hierarchy prevents the knower's full empowerment. However, in its extreme "bootstraps epistemology" (Ma 2023) and "metacognitive exaltation" over others (Primig 2024), far-right conspiracy-theory believers often take hypervigilant stances toward others (McKay and Mercier 2023) while posturing as better, freer, cognitively superior thinkers who take agency over their knowledge process and will not be subdued by perceived dominant hierarchies of knowers and knowledge (Altay et al. 2023b; Primig 2024). This ideology is well documented and observable on multiple platforms, imageboards, and blogs across national contexts; it is often associated with multiple far-right anti-progressive, racist, and misogynist discourses (Beyer and Herrberg 2023; Klein and Muis 2019; Wiggins 2023). Religion and traditional anti-progressive values can bridge between different right-wing conservative publics and help claim victimhood in a perceived leftist-progressive hegemony that is widely connectable (Evolvi 2023; Kunst et al. 2020; Meiering et al. 2020; Reijven et al. 2020).

3.4 Contexts

In the general dissolution of contexts in digital knowledge society, the far right offers a salvation promise by creating ideological guardrails for navigating the newly introduced complexity. Across contexts, an illiberal idea of the public lays the foundation on which many different ways of making sense of the world can co-exist (see subsection on hierarchies dimension), as long as they serve the far right's goals of dominance and exclusion. Also for this reason, the assumption of roles in the

knowledge-process that mirror established ones, for the far-right CKO, never adheres strictly to the (professional) practices of a given context. Nonetheless, those practices—such as in journalism or science—are not necessarily infallible in the EKO or immune to legitimate criticism, of course.

The far right benefits from allowing the mixing and ultimate dissolution of different epistemic contexts—cultural, scientific, experientially embodied, and so on—across role contexts and irrespective of established hierarchies because the movement's ultimate goal is the control and installment of an illiberal or anti-democratic order that spans them all. An often-invoked example is Orban's Fidesz party[5]; while not originally far-right, since Orban's first term, it has gained substantial control over all domains of public life by interweaving cultural, educational, economic, and social policy contexts with an autocratic, centralized, nationalist, and nativist identity discourse (Bozóki 2016). Different discourses from ethnonationalism to anti-genderism or religion are thereby interwoven. Some contexts, such as knowers' spiritual lives, are used specifically to instill doubt in others' belief-fixating mechanisms or the hierarchies they invoke as evident in various conspiritualist movements (Ward and Voas 2011) and broad right-wing anti-genderism shared by religious movements (Evolvi 2023). The coronavirus pandemic offered a unique opportunity, after the so-called refugee crisis in 2015–2016, for far-right mobilization across contexts. An illiberal counter-idea to coronavirus containment measures was superficially unintuitive yet attractive to many who "find a connection to the conspiracy ideology scene, among others, because they share its rather individualistic concept of freedom" (Dilling et al. 2022, p. 237). Amlinger and Nachtwey (2022) label this phenomenon new "libertarian authoritarianism", which feeds on an ongoing mortification of personal freedom and ruptured promises of late modernity, which has introduced tremendous degrees of freedom but also abundant complexity. The competition and commodification aspect of knowing—reflected in context-traversing far-right self-positioning as superior knowers—was not invented by the far-right CKO, but stems, as described above, from the general condition of the digital knowledge society.

In this CKO, not having to acknowledge or engage with others in manifold contexts absolves knowers from the consequences of socio-mental affiliations' growing complexity and contradictions in digital knowledge society. For example, the refusal to recognize racism as a phenomenon, which returned into the European consciousness with the BlackLivesMatter movement, forms the basis for cultural racism, that is so popular among the far right in Europe but has already penetrated the mainstream (Salem and Thompson 2016). As outlined above, right-wing alternative media and epistemically vicious knowledge practices—such as conspiracist ideation or misinformation and disinformation—mitigate the mortification of the imagined far-right superior knower by constructing and ensuring unwarranted epistemic authority. In other words, the far-right CKO is an expression of the expectation to be of higher

[5] Fidesz, officially known as *Fidesz—Hungarian Civic Alliance*, is a right-wing populist and national-conservative political party in Hungary, led by Viktor Orbán, which has shifted from its original liberal roots to adopt increasingly authoritarian and Eurosceptic policies since its founding in 1988.

epistemic rank than the established order and consequently those already excluded by it in all contexts.

3.5 The phases of the knowledge process

The three dimensions of roles, hierarchies, and contexts have revealed that the far-right CKO ultimately strives for total control over the knowledge process. The CKO's closed knowledge style is particularly visible in conspiracy believer spaces, where the entire knowledge process—from the topic selection through the verification of generated knowledge—is bound by the persistence of presuppositions, and the far-right's perpetuated self-construction as awakened, better critical thinkers is especially prevalent (Altay et al. 2023b; Cichocka et al. 2022; Primig 2024). Therefore in the far-right CKO, knowledge verification, as intended through the established knowledge process yet practically often delayed until after dissemination (Neuberger et al. 2023), is not skipped but is subjected to completely different standards that make it possible for everyone to participate by "doing their own research." The CKO's striving for control over the knowledge process, however, is not limited to idiosyncratic pathways to knowledge acquisition and verification. Instead, the far right has long strived to gain access to and control over the knowledge process in society as a whole through concrete policy, especially in the domains of education, science, and media (Mudde 2000, 2019).

Across national contexts, far-right success in this endeavor can be observed. Book bans' symbolic policy action in US schools, for instance, disproportionally targets marginalized interests and communities (Goncalves et al. 2024). Hungary and Poland have established similar policies throughout their illiberal turn. These policies are, of course, contested, but they also connect with persisting exclusionary discourses broadly shared in the mainstream (e.g., anti-genderism; Szabó 2024). Established epistemic authorities are particularly targeted: Since the coronavirus pandemic, now-common attacks on scientists—particularly those who worked against anti-scientific misinformation—have become more prevalent (Lewandowsky et al. 2023) because far-right networks have made these scientists legitimate targets in a malicious established order that must be undone. Media and journalists are not only replaced or imitated in the far-right CKO but also frequently attacked, both symbolically and physically, by far-right actors (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019b; Holt and Haller 2017).

The education system is the main arena where the far-right CKO struggles for dominance against the EKO. Giudici (2020), for instance, has shown that the far right in post-war Europe has long centered education as the root cause of the movement-perceived disorder in liberal society and the arena where establishing far-right interests is most important (pp. 129–130). In critical scholarship, far-right attempts to establish the movement's power in the education systems (Giroux 2019, 2023) and beyond to the realms of media and social media are often critiqued with reference to neoliberalism which grants privileged access to the far right and provides fruitful ground for its ideas (Davidson and Saull 2017; Phelan 2019). To refer back to Jackson and Kreiss (2023) conceptualizing the far right today based on its privileged status in established societal orders: the far-right CKO utilizes means provided

by digital knowledge society's status quo to undo that society's liberal foundation. What knowledge can be legitimately generated (and hence verified as legitimate), allowed to be disseminated and acquired in the far-right CKO is bound to congruence with far-right ideology. Thereby, despite its frequently populist rhetoric, the far right invokes an elitist idea of knowledge and knowing (which is, of course, also partly present in knowledge society's EKO that binds good citizenship to knowledge).

Lastly, in the knowledge process, the far right gains strategically from the recontextualization afforded by digital platforms. The acceleration of knowledge distribution and (re-)appropriation facilitates the far right strategy to quickly break societal norms and then retreat slightly, moving the boundaries of what is considered acceptable ever so slightly. Far right propaganda today thus resembles contemporary Russian propaganda (Asmolov 2019; Litvinenko 2022) in the sense that it's *chaotic*. It can spread multiple, even competing narratives about an event simultaneously. For example, Elon Musk's apparent Nazi salute at Trump's 2025 inauguration sparks various narratives: it's a fake, the Roman salute (that never existed), media exaggeration, a justified action against elites, he doesn't know, he's one of us, he doesn't know he's one of us yet. This proliferation of narratives, although diverse, converges in the mockery of public perception and how the public *knows*. In this manner, any event can become the kick-off for a far-right dog whistle campaign. In the age of transparency, uncertainty and confusion haven't vanished, they have become more powerful tools of deception than ever before, because they are participatory. Accordingly, in the far right counter-knowledge order, *not knowing* at the perpetual end of the knowledge process is transformed into a strategic propagandistic advantage.

4 What is next? studying the allure of a counter-knowledge order for and of the far right

The allure of a far-right CKO lies in undoing and reconstructing established contexts, hierarchies, and roles throughout the knowledge process. The far right can assume both a defensive position, protecting its unwarranted superior status, and resistance to the EKO's dominance. However, the movement's potential to attract large parts of society should be studied more. Far-right ideas' mainstreaming has, so far, been studied mostly through a focus on election outcomes or phenomena-driven analyses of rhetorical devices and their diffusion (e.g., Brown and Mondon 2021; Ekman 2022; McSwiney and Sengul 2024). A few studies, particularly those on illiberal democracy in Eastern Europe, have focused on how the far right manages to establish new conditions across contexts (e.g., Bozóki 2016; Buzogány and Varga 2018). Future studies on CKOs should focus on the extent to which digital knowledge society's conditions today provide reasons for citizens to seek refuge in a far-right CKO. This also means seriously engaging with the inherent global character of the phenomenon.

Digitalized knowledge society's requirement to constantly perceive oneself and perform as a knower with and in opposition to others while leaving agency relatively limited is not exclusive to the far right, and it constitutes an unconvincing construction of society. Particularly during crises, when this imposition becomes

more salient and knowledge is generally more contested, far-right imaginations of epistemic omnipotence—that is, ridding knowers of the dominant order's constraints and making them equal again to epistemic authorities—can serve as an attractive promise of salvation for many more people than talk of supposed far-right fringe groups suggest.

To further understand the far-right CKO and mitigate potential harms to liberal democracy, researchers need to study this CKO's relationship to established *contexts* of the knowledge order and the *hierarchies* that the CKO invokes and constructs. Researchers should critically assess how to, and who can, legitimately know in this far-right CKO and how these epistemic boundaries relate to mainstream power imbalances. In that regard, researchers must focus on the CKO's *roles* and their functions, not only who says what but, more importantly, the end to which epistemic authority is distributed within the CKO. Research should ask how and why the CKO distributes cognitive labor in some ways and not others (e.g., why are some far-right actors, renegade journalists, experts or media activists, more influential than others in their promotion of counter-knowledge?). Finally, researchers should identify and critically analyze the topic selection in the CKO's knowledge process. Critical analysis should focus on the underlying strategy of taking over the *knowledge process*, rather than following the agenda established by the CKO's struggle for relevance, resentment, and the replacement of the established order.

5 Conclusion

I have derived the concept of CKOs as analogous to the dominant knowledge order—"the constitutive presuppositions, internal regulations and external conditions for the production, application, distribution, administration, implementation, utilization, etc., of knowledge in society" (Spinner 1993, p. 136). I have also shown that they are consequent to digital knowledge society, but fundamentally oppose its liberal order. CKOs are constructed as resistant alternatives with their own internal regulations and counter-presuppositions of knowing. Accordingly, CKOs dissolve knowledge contexts, reorganize hierarchies, and claim hierarchical roles to create and maintain subversive alternatives freed from the dominant order's rules and impositions. Most importantly, a CKO approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the entire knowledge process and the relations of structural dimensions of the (counter) knowledge order within that. Thus, this approach can surpass purely phenomena-driven accounts of recently apparent divergences in rationality and systematically focus on their emergence's actual conditions. To exemplify the CKOs' analytical potential, I have considered viewing the far right as an emergent CKO.

The far-right CKO delegitimizes others' claims to participation in the dominant knowledge order by preserving an imagined fair history and a contradictory status quo of epistemic dominance. In addition to this defensive dimension, where it assumes a social power position that is also granted by the dominant knowledge order and grounded in superior self-constructions, resistance to the dominant knowledge order reflects the mortification of real-life limited agency in these hierarchies. In resistance to the dominant knowledge order, far-right imaginaries of unwarranted

omnipotence are maintained by declaring epistemic authority as illegitimate qua its position in the dominant knowledge order—that is, roles and contexts are finally dissolved and subordinated to belief perseverance. The far-right CKO's ultimate goal must be understood accordingly as an attempt to gain control over the entire knowledge process—and as an appeal to a neo-conservative nostalgia for a return to the supposed past of stable order and social cohesion, which never existed. Far-right spaces' immanent radicalization and mainstreaming potential have become more visible in the epistemic crises since the turn of the millennium, most recently the coronavirus pandemic, and should, therefore, be a principal focus in current research endeavors. These will require what Knüpfer et al. (2024) call "democratic clarity", that is a clear stance for democratic principles and analytical awareness to the far right's efforts to undo these principles. As proposed here, a counter-knowledge orders approach that is grounded not just in sociology of knowledge but also firmly in social epistemological principles of epistemic justice can be one of the ways to achieve this.

Ultimately, studying far-right publics as CKOs is only the beginning of more research in this direction, and the current text is limited in that regard. Much has yet to be done. For instance, as far-right discourse is transnationalizing (Froio and Ganesh 2019) and present in globalized conspiracist ideation such as Q-Anon (Himelboim et al. 2024), researchers should analyze far-right CKOs as transnational connective formations. Particularly in light of anti-migration regimes' recent resurgences in the West, we should also focus on this CKO's specific role as a powerful formation in the hermeneutical marginalization of migrant and racialized knowers. The resistance to established epistemic authorities during the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the general rise of illiberal tendencies, should spark investigations of the extent to which the principles of the far-right CKO are already dominating in some cases. This endeavor demands that scholars uphold strong normative principles and ideals of a just knowledge society, especially as far-right (inspired) governments act on their principles and cut research funding across various disciplines (Matthews 2024).

Importantly, the application of CKOs should be extended to other contexts. In my example of the far-right CKO, the *counter* is explicitly illiberal and anti-democratic, fed by established power access and resistance to the EKO. However, CKOs are not, by default, far-right. Assumptions that counter-knowledge orders are always inferior to the established knowledge order in their ability to find truth, or that they are always detrimental to liberal democratic society, would perpetuate the ideological delusion that the established knowledge order is *always right*. In reality, the conditions of today's knowledge society have produced the opportunity for a far-right CKO to emerge. The CKO concept is well suited for applications to other (also other ideological) contexts, and in that sense, it allows for the traversal of counterpublics' conceptual boundaries without assigning some level of illegitimate marginalization to otherwise dominant or marginalizing and privileged subjects. In this regard, analyzing the extent to which CKOs assume and contest social power positions and rely on socially established hierarchies of knowing will be interesting. Further, research should focus on the degrees to which CKOs rely on institutionalization—such as alternative media or counter-experts with more or less scientific approaches or alternative epistemologies of other kinds. To that end, case studies must map CKOs'

different stages and their relationships with the EKO and each other. The present paper inevitably faced a limitation in this regard. Future work should strengthen CKOs' ideology and identity aspects, particularly the interplay between social identity and legitimate knowledge, to lay a stronger foundation for discussions of subordination and power in the knowledge process and the structural dimensions of knowledge (and counter-knowledge) orders. Finally, the CKO framework's added value can be extended to mis- and disinformation studies. Scholarship of mis- and disinformation can progress by not only examining individual pieces of *fake news* and micro-level predictors for sharing, believing, et cetera but also focusing on the larger context that contributes to their effectiveness and legitimization.

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