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INFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA STRATEGIES IN GERMAN NON-STATE MEDIA DISCOURSE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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This study aims to analyse the strategies supporting the German Government's biopolitical health and life protection practices and how they were promoted in the discourse of non-state media outlets during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is assumed that non-state media used various pandemic communication strategies to achieve common biopolitical goals, striking a balance between propaganda and outreach. A comparative analysis was conducted of German publications that focused on the pandemic and appeared during the four waves (January 2020 – March 2022). A total of 54,515 texts from the German media (Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Zeit, Die Tageszeitung) were examined. Methodologically, the study draws on the Herman-Chomsky propaganda model and Jacques Ellul's concept. The results show that non-state media employ different communication strategies in line with the filters of the Herman-Chomsky model. All the media outlets maintained a balance between propaganda and public outreach, supporting the Government's biopolitical programme whilst prioritising their own interests. It can be concluded that the strategies chosen by the non-state media outlets instilled a sense of confidence, prompting the public to comply with the restrictions and measures consistent with the biopolitical agenda of the state.

Keywords:

Germany, media, pandemic, propaganda, biopolitics

In recent years, particularly since the onset of COVID-19, the principles of crisis communication have gained heightened importance. Government communication with the public through diverse channels has become vital for promptly disseminating essential information about public health measures and fostering public cooperation in the fight against COVID-19 [1]. The way communication channels present events and cause-and-effect relations has a direct impact on public consciousness [2; 3].

Research data demonstrates a deep politicization of the pandemic discourse, revealing the decisive role of politicians in shaping the agenda of traditional media [4; 6]. It can be assumed that media outlets, by broadcasting the authorities'

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point of view, play a significant role in influencing and managing the public's response during emergencies [7]. Thus, certain attitudes broadcast through the media encourage society to follow the line chosen by authorities [8]. In this regard, a question arises as to whether all media adhere to the official political agenda or act in their own interests.

It is interesting to note that during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, society seemed to have controversial attitudes to imposed restrictions, which led to a wave of protests resulting in the formation of a permanent protest movement against the restrictive measures proposed by the authorities. However, research results show that, despite all contradictions, the authorities managed to build public loyalty [9; 10]. This achievement required complex efforts, which involved various channels of communication, including non-state media.

The relevance of the study is therefore justified by the following provisions:

- the need to solve biopolitical problems during the crisis by building public loyalty to unpopular measures and maintaining a sufficient level of trust in the government to make society comply with the imposed restrictions;
- the established dependency between the search for information about COVID-19 in the media and the perception of the virus as a threat to health [11].

The aim of this research is to analyze the strategies that support the biopolitical practices of the German government to preserve the health and life of the population, and the techniques implemented in the discourse of non-state media in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The main hypothesis is that non-state media, by introducing certain speech clichés into the discourse, used various strategies to achieve common biopolitical goals in accordance with the filters of the Herman-Chomsky model.

Information and propaganda strategies in media discourse

Despite extensive research on propaganda over the past century, the topic remains highly relevant. Researchers continue to develop new definitions that align with the evolving reality and explore the novel tools employed by propagandists.

This study examines propaganda as a persuasive technology in the media, adopting Ellul's perspective [12], where it is viewed as a certain type of message used to spread or introduce a certain culture, philosophy, point of view, or even a certain slogan. Regarding propaganda strategies employed during the pandemic, this study underscores the importance of the emotional component, encompassing intimidation, along with the recurrent utilization of specific speech clichés, in shaping the resulting impact. The intimidation strategy is considered one of the leading techniques of propaganda [13; 14]. The publication of intensive care statistics and the number of deaths from the coronavirus was aimed at instilling fear of the disease. This fear played a role in motivating people to adhere to the

imposed restrictions and seek vaccination [15]. At the same time, propaganda corresponds to a sequence of well-planned messages spread over a long period of time [16], with repetition as the most effective technique [14].

Public opinion often holds a negative perception of propaganda, viewing it as a set of techniques designed to mislead people. However, it is worth noting that in certain situations, propaganda can be employed for the public's benefit, as evidenced by some studies (e.g., [17]). This brings propaganda closer to another form of persuasive communication — education. Therefore, it becomes essential to differentiate between these two types of persuasive communication.

In fact, the definition of education formulated by Poluikova is very close to the definition of propaganda presented above: the main goal of education is “to influence the addressee in order to form relevant knowledge and adequate behaviour... by persuasion through ratiocination of this or that idea”, as well as relying on “emotional and evaluative means of influence” [18, p. 63].

Both propaganda and education play a crucial role in disseminating new and useful information to help individuals adapt to unfamiliar or challenging circumstances. However, knowledge disseminated through education is independent of one's interests. Education does not force opinions and does not control the implementation of imposed attitudes; it provides a choice and may even retreat if the ideas and attitudes being broadcast are not accepted. Within the framework of education, various forms of communication are available, including interactive methods like discussions and debates. The key element in education is the recipient of information, the one who is being educated.

On the other hand, propaganda is based on the assumption that the propagandist is, *de facto*, better informed and holds the authority to determine what changes should be introduced. Propaganda shapes certain behavioural patterns and attitudes, with the propagandist taking on a central role. Unlike education, propaganda is a one-way communication [12], not involving interaction. In addition, the most important point is, perhaps, that propaganda always serves someone's interests. This is not mere information dissemination; rather, it is a one-sided and assertive broadcasting of a particular standpoint.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of diverse persuasive technologies became imperative to protect and save lives. The media and various sources played a crucial role in disseminating pertinent information to address biopolitical challenges. As a result, the goals and objectives of both propaganda and education converged during this period. The educational efforts of the media and propaganda had a significant impact on the target audience, leading to the acceptance of broadcasted opinions and specific behavioural patterns. Consequently, educational and propaganda discourses in the media were strategically directed towards influencing people's behaviour, including compliance with lockdown measures, social distancing, wearing masks, and opting for vaccination.

The context of any pandemic is marked by stress, panic and uncertainty. The results of a significant number of studies show that people's awareness of risks is the main predictor for the implementation of the recommended behaviour aimed at protecting health [11; 19; 20]. However, awareness of risks when there are no clear action algorithms aimed at minimizing them gives rise to a feeling of fear that leads to panic, while timely and reliable information about risks is aimed at streamlining fears [21].

Therefore, as an additional hypothesis for the research, it was assumed that there should have been a certain equilibrium in the media discourse between propaganda (encouraging the adoption of specific behavioural patterns through intimidation) and education (presenting objective data).

Methodology

The study is methodologically based on the propaganda model proposed by Herman and Chomsky [22]. Throughout the pandemic, every media outlet shaped its own rendition of 'reality,' sieving out information that contradicted their editorial stance or the preferences of their proprietors. Meanwhile, facets of the pandemic that coincided with the objectives of the editorial office and catered to the needs of publishers, owners, and other stakeholders received the most comprehensive coverage. During times of crisis, non-state media could align with the state's biopolitical objectives, overtly endorsing vaccination and adherence to restrictions. Alternatively, they might assume a more impartial position, taking into account the interests of publishers and proprietors. From a linguistic point of view, we follow [16], where propaganda is seen as a sequence of well-planned messages distributed by propagandists.

To test the assumption about working 'filters', three non-state media representing business and civil society were selected for the study. *Die Tageszeitung* is an employee-run cooperative that describes itself as an independent media outlet and has New Leftist views. *Die Zeit* is a liberal newspaper, part of the major publishing house Zeit-Verlag Gerd Bucerius GmbH & Co. KG (owned by the Holzbrink family) with branches in the USA and Great Britain. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* is part of Southwest German Media Holding GmbH; its goal is to inform and freely form the opinions of individuals, as well as to promote liberal and tolerant attitudes, centrism, and social liberalism.

Texts were selected using two keywords 'COVID-19' and 'Pandemie'. The data collected represented four coronavirus waves (January 2020 — March 2022). The total volume collected — 23.3 million words (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*: 38,887 texts, 14.5 million words, four waves; *Die Zeit*: 10,078 texts, 7.40 million words, three waves; *Die Tageszeitung*: 5550 texts, 1.48 million words, two waves).

After the lemmatization and removal of stop words in the texts, the most frequent phrases consisting of two lexemes (bigrams) were identified, which were then analyzed using the methods of qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis.

Bigrams were selected based on the frequency of occurrence (minimum threshold — 300 occurrences for *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Zeit* and 100 occurrences for *Die Tageszeitung*) and further sorted by the PMI coefficient (pointwise mutual information — coefficient of point mutual information) [23]. The higher the coefficient, the more often these words occur together in the corpus of texts, compared with the frequency of each word observed separately. The combination of these two indicators allows us to define a bigram as a stable speech cliché for this corpus of texts.

The assumption was made that a collection of repetitive speech clichés (bigrams) could enable the identification of strategies that uphold the German government's biopolitical practices for safeguarding the health and lives of the population. This, in turn, allows for drawing conclusions regarding the primary editorial policies in alignment with the Herman-Chomsky model.

Analysis

Süddeutsche Zeitung

The non-state publisher *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which represents the national business, was actively involved in educational activities during all four waves of the pandemic (Table 1).

Table 1

Education and Propaganda in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Media Discourse

Technology	Strategy	1 st wave	2 nd wave	3 rd wave	4 th wave
Propaganda	Intimidation	—	—	—	'Todesfall Zusammenhang' (PMI 9.10), 'Mensch sterben' (PMI 5.93)
	Official sources of information / politicization	'Angela Merkel' (PMI 11.29), 'Markus Söder' (PMI 10.48)	'Angela Merkel' (PMI 11.38), 'Biontech Pfizer' (PMI 10.85), 'Markus Söder' (PMI 10.34), 'Robert RKI' (PMI 9.32)	'Robert RKI' (PMI 8.98)	—

The end of Table 2

Technology	Strategy	1 st wave	2 nd wave	3 rd wave	4 th wave
Education	Statistics	‘Milliarde Euro’ (PMI 8.15), ‘Million Euro’ (PMI 7.54), ‘wegen Coronapandemie’ (PMI 6.58), ‘wegen Coronakrise’ (PMI 5.47)	‘Milliarde Euro’ (PMI 8.11), ‘Million Euro’ (PMI 7.53), ‘impfen lassen’ (PMI 6.85), ‘Zahl Neuinfektion’ (PMI 6.66), ‘wegen Coronapandemie’ (PMI 6.36)	‘Schülerin Schüler’ (PMI 10.31), ‘Geimpfte Genesene’ (PMI 9.77), ‘Neuinfektion pro’ (PMI 8.3), ‘Kind Jugendlicher’ (PMI 8.14), ‘Milliarde Euro’ (PMI 8.07), ‘vollständig impfen’ (PMI 7.77), ‘Million Euro’ (PMI 7.56), ‘impfen lassen’ (PMI 6.96), ‘Zahl Neuinfektion’ (PMI 6.81), ‘wegen Coronapandemie’ (PMI 6.31)	‘Schülerin Schüler’ (PMI 10.63), ‘Geimpfte Genesene’ (PMI 10.22), ‘Milliarde Euro’ (PMI 8.16), ‘Million Euro’ (PMI 7.6), ‘impfen lassen’ (PMI 6.96)
	Pluralism of opinions	‘Deutscher Presseagentur’ (PMI 9.36)	‘Deutscher Presseagentur’ (PMI 9.49)	‘Deutscher Presseagentur’ (PMI 9.44)	‘Vereinigung Notfallmedizin’ (PMI 12.03), ‘Deutscher Presseagentur’ (PMI 9.34)

Generally, the periodical publishes statistical data about all spheres of public life. For example, the economic consequences of the pandemic are described in detail (“*Million Euro*”, “*Milliarde Euro*” — *millions of euros, billions of euros*) emphasizing the damage caused (“*wegen Coronapandemie*” — *due to the coronavirus pandemic*, “*wegen Coronakrise*” — *because of the coronavirus crisis*). In addition, the data on the number of the vaccinated (“*vollständig impfen*” — *to fully vaccinate*, “*Geimpfte Genesene*” — *vaccinated recovered*, “*Schülerin Schüler*” — *student schoolgirls*) are provided. Furthermore, the publisher supports the government’s vaccination campaign by providing statistics on the number of cases, the publication of statistics from intensive care units and the number

of deaths (“Zahl Neuinfektion” — number of new infections, new cases per...), as well as the readiness of the population to be vaccinated. For example, in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 12/10/2020: “Stand Anfang November geben immerhin 55 Prozent der Befragten an, dass sie sich im kommenden Jahr “sehr wahrscheinlich” oder “wahrscheinlich” gegen das neue Coronavirus impfen lassen wollen” — At the beginning of November, 55 per cent of respondents said they were “very likely” or “probably” to get vaccinated against the new coronavirus next year).

However, the published statistics during the fourth wave can be regarded as a strategy of intimidation: “Todesfall Zusammenhang” — death associated with, “Mensch sterben” — man to die.

The publisher cites the viewpoints of prominent politicians like Angela Merkel and Markus Söder. This tendency can be attributed to the radical changes in public life, which have been tightly regulated by the state. As a result, the media extensively cover every decision made by the authorities. For example: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 02/01/2021: *Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel (CDU) hat das Versprechen erneuert, dass jeder impfwillige Bürger bis zum Ende des Sommers ein Impfangebot erhalten kann. Das Impfen sei jetzt Chefsache, so Söder. (Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) reaffirmed the promise that every citizen who wants to be vaccinated can receive a vaccination offer before the end of summer. Vaccination is now a top priority, says Söder).*

In the second wave, BioNTech Pfizer appears among the frequently cited sources, which marks the official strategy concerning the need for vaccination in the media discourse, along with Robert Koch Institute, a nationwide health-monitoring agency of the German Federal government, which formulates recommendations, assesses the situation, and broadcasts the state biopolitical agenda.

On the other hand, throughout the period, Deutsche Presse Agentur (dpa), a German news agency that broadcasts the opinions of politicians, experts and representatives of civil society, is frequently used as a source of information. During the fourth wave the opinion of the professional community, the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine (‘Vereinigung Notfallmedizin’) is also found in media discourse. By including these sources, the publisher realizes the principle of pluralism of the opinions presented. However, the inclusion of the Association’s data can also be seen as an intimidation strategy and promotion of vaccination during the fourth wave. For example: in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 03/24/2022: “Auf den Intensivstationen saarländischer Krankenhäuser lagen 56 erwachsene Patienten mit COVID-19, wie aus Daten der Deutschen Interdisziplinären Vereinigung für Intensiv- und Notfallmedizin (Divi) vom Donnerstag hervorgeht (St and 7.06 Uhr). Neun dieser Patienten mussten beatmet werden” — According to the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine (Divi), on Thursday (as of 7:06 a.m.), there were 56 adult patients with COVID-19 in the intensive care units of Saarland hospitals. Nine of these patients required ventilation.

Thus, the pool of the sources cited suggests support for the government's bi-political programme along with a strategy of intimidation (albeit mostly in an implicit form). Nevertheless, it cannot be unequivocally stated that the propaganda strategy prevails in the discourse of this publisher.

Die Zeit

The strategies employed by *Die Zeit* are similar to those of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, as the publisher seems to avoid explicit propaganda through intimidation. There are also obvious differences in the sources cited (both state and independent). The list of strategies is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Education and Propaganda in *Die Zeit* Media Discourse

Technology	Strategy	2 nd wave	3 rd wave	4 th wave
Propaganda	Intimidation	—	—	—
	Official sources of information/politicization	'Markus Söder' (PMI 11.38), 'BioNTech Pfizer' (PMI 10.84), 'Angela Merkel' (PMI 10.32), 'Robert RKI' (PMI 8.36)	'Angela Merkel' (PMI 10.37), 'Robert RKI' (PMI 8.29)	'Olaf Scholz' (PMI 10.26), 'RKI melden' (PMI 6.79)
Education	Statistics	'Neuinfektion pro' (PMI 7.60), 'aktuell Zahl' (PMI 6.26), 'vergangen Woche' (PMI 6.19)	'Milliarde Euro' (PMI 8.4), 'binnen Tag' (PMI 7.35), 'meist Neuinfektion' (PMI 7.06), 'Million Euro' (PMI 6.85), 'aktuell Zahl' (PMI 6.46), 'impfen lassen' (PMI 6.45), 'neu Fall' (PMI 5.07)	'Milliarde Euro' (PMI 8.82), 'impfen lassen' (PMI 6.75), 'aktuell Zahl' (PMI 6.25), 'neu Fall' (PMI 5.34)
	Pluralism of opinions	'Zeit online' (PMI 9.4)	'Armin Laschet' (PMI 10.77), 'Zeit online' (PMI 9.23)	'Zeit online' (PMI 9.3)
Other	—	'Bürgerin Bürger' (PMI 10.80)	'jung Mensch' (PMI 5.13), 'Million Mensch' (PMI 5.06)	'allgemein Impfpflicht' (PMI 8.77), 'Million Mensch' (PMI 5.22)

In general, the tone of the discourse can be defined as quite positive (as there is no strategy of intimidation). The publisher, rather, tends to present pallid statistics on the number of infections (*“Neuinfektion pro”* — *new cases on*, *“vergangen Woche”* — *last week*, *“binnen Tag”* — *per day*, *“meist Neuinfektion”* — *most new cases*, *“neu Fall”* — *new case*), and economic consequences (*“Million Euro”*, *“Milliarde Euro”* — *millions of euros, billions of euros*).

It is also interesting to note the heightened interest in the discussion of social problems related directly to the virus as well as to the quarantine, lockdown, and vaccinations (*“Million Mensch”* — *“millions of people”*, *“Bürgerin Bürger”* — *citizens*). In addition, a group of children and adolescents (*“Jung Mensch”*) is distinguished in the third wave and is discussed not only in terms of morbidity and the vaccination campaign (although this topic prevails), but also with respect to social problems. For example: in *Die Zeit*, 06/02/2021: *“Junge Menschen haben ein anderes Zeitgefühl. Ihnen fehlt die Erfahrung, dass Krisen wieder vorbeigehen. Ihr Leben ist hier, in der Pandemie, ein Danach gibt es nicht.” Das sagt die Psychiaterin Carola Bindt, die die Kinder- und Jugendpsychiatrie am UKE leitet. (Young people have a different sense of time. They lack the experience that crises end. Your life here in a pandemic, there is no after. So says psychiatrist Carola Bindt, the head of child and adolescent psychiatry at the UKE).*

The publisher includes official sources of information (Robert Koch Institut, Markus Söder, Angela Merkel, Olaf Scholz) in the discourse and broadcasts the state biopolitical programme. At the same time, it positions itself as the source of the most up-to-date and reliable information on the incidence of COVID-19 in Germany (*“Zeit online”*, *“aktuell Zahl”* — *actual figures*), implementing a strategy of education and pluralism of opinions, and thus it seems to distance itself from pro-government data sources. For example: in *Die Zeit*, 05/01/2022: *“ZEIT ONLINE besucht daher täglich diese Seiten und sammelt so selbst die Daten. Dies ist aktueller, allerdings können sich so die Zahlen von RKI und ZEIT ONLINE unterscheiden. Die aktuellste Zahl der bestätigten Infizierten allein ergibt zudem noch kein umfassendes Bild über das Infektionsgeschehen. Gezeigt werden immer nur Fälle, die auch getestet wurden”* — *ZEIT ONLINE visits these sites daily and thus, collects data on its own. This data is more current, but RKI and ZEIT figures online may differ. In addition, the actual number of confirmed cases does not yet give a complete picture of the ongoing infection, only those cases that have also been tested are shown).*

In addition, during the third wave, Armin Laschet, the chairman of the Christian Democratic Union Party, appears among the most frequent sources. He acts as a representative of civil society.

Despite the presence of official sources of information, there is no evidence that the publisher takes an active pro-government stance. COVID-19 is not depicted explicitly as a threat that brings death, and rather, the plurality of different opinions indicates a neutral stance aimed at informing the population about the risks and ways of protection (vaccination) in a timely manner.

Die Tageszeitung

Unlike the two media scrutinized above, Die Tageszeitung represents civil society as a subject of biopolitics. This status affects the strategies used by the publisher (Table 3).

Table 3

Education and Propaganda in Die Tageszeitung Media Discourse

Technology	Strategy	3 rd wave	4 th wave
Propaganda	Intimidation	‘Coronavirus anstecken’ (PMI 8.82), ‘Zusammenhang Virus’ (PMI 8.32)	‘gemeldet Todesfall’ (PMI 10.37), ‘Mensch sterben’ (PMI 5.87)
	Official sources of information / politicization	‘Ständige Impfkommision’ (PMI 11.72), ‘Jens Spahn’ (PMI 10.27), ‘Biontech Pfizer’ (PMI 9.71)	‘Jens Spahn’ (PMI 11.83), ‘Olaf Scholz’ (PMI 10.8), ‘Karl Lauterbach’ (PMI 10.21), ‘Robert RKI’ (PMI 8.89)
Education	Statistics	‘Nachricht Coronakrise’ (PMI 10.09), ‘Geimpfte Genesene’ (PMI 9.46), ‘Milliarde Euro’ (PMI 8.64), ‘Kind Jugendliche’ (PMI 7.77), ‘Million Dose’ (PMI 7.3), ‘vollständig impfen’ (PMI 6.92), ‘impfen lassen’ (PMI 6.53)	‘Nachricht Coronakrise’ (PMI 10.33), ‘Geimpfte Genesene’ (PMI 9.92), ‘Milliarde Euro’ (PMI 8.7), ‘Million Euro’ (PMI 6.93), ‘impfen lassen’ (PMI 6.82)
	Pluralism of opinions	—	‘Deutscher Presseagentur’ (PMI 10.14)
Other	—	—	‘allgemein Impfpflicht’ (PMI 8.15)

Of the three media analyzed, Die Tageszeitung uses the intimidation strategy most intensively, publishing statistical data, where the emphasis is laid not only on the number of infections (“*Coronavirus anstecken*” — *get infected with the coronavirus*) but also on the number of deaths from the coronavirus, (“*Zusammenhang virus*” — *associated with the virus*, “*Mensch sterben*” — *a person to die*). For example: in Die Tageszeitung, 02/07/2022: “*196 weitere Menschen starben im Zusammenhang mit dem Virus*” — *Another 196 people died due to the virus*.

In addition, similar to the publications of Süddeutsche Zeitung and Die Zeit, the discourse is focused on statistics that describe the progress of the vaccination campaign (“*Geimpfte Genesene*” — *vaccinated recovered*, “*Kind Jugendli-*

che” — adolescent children, “Million Dose” — millions of doses, “vollständig impfen” — to fully vaccinate, “impfen lassen” — to vaccinate), as well as the economic consequences of the pandemic (“Milliarde Euro”, “Million Euro” — billions of euros, millions of euros).

The main sources of information broadcast to the audience are official ones: Health Ministers Jens Spahn and Karl Lauterbach, as well as Chancellor Olaf Scholz (during the fourth wave). The ‘security professionals’ who support the state biopolitical agenda also appear in press: the Permanent Commission for the Vaccination of the Population (*Ständige Impfkommission*) and the Robert Koch Institute, while an alternative opinion is presented sporadically (*Deutsche Presseagentur* — the fourth wave).

In addition, the discussion on the general duty to vaccinate (“*allgemein Impfpflicht*”) is in the spotlight.

For example: in *Die Tageszeitung*, 02/06/2022: “*Die Frage, ob man eine allgemeine Impfpflicht braucht oder ob nicht die Impfpflicht ab einem gewissen Alter ausreicht, um die Überlastung des Gesundheitssystems zu vermeiden, mag die Politik unter Heranziehung epidemi ologischen Sachverständes klug beantworten*” — *Politicians can wisely answer the question of whether universal vaccination is necessary, or whether compulsory vaccination from a certain age is enough not to overwhelm the health care system, with the help of epidemiological expertise.*

In general, compared to other media, one can note the largest number of clichés representing the biopolitical programme of the government (vaccination) both in the propaganda and the education strategies.

Results

Table 4 summarizes the results of the propaganda and education strategies used by non-state German media to achieve biopolitical goals.

Table 4

Education and propaganda in the media discourse of non-state media

Technology	Strategy	Süddeutsche Zeitung	Die Zeit	Die Tageszeitung
Propaganda	Intimidation	Partly	No	Yes
	Official sources of information / politicization	Partly	Yes	Yes
Education	Statistics	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Pluralism of opinions	Yes	Yes	Partly

Research results reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic was used by the government as an opportunity for the dissemination of political propaganda via the media [24; 25]. On the one hand, the strategy of intimidation of the population was intensively used. For example, risk frames (transmission of the virus) created by the media encouraged people to comply with restrictive measures [26], and

the key topic of discussion was “the risk of infection” [8]. However, in our study, intimidation as one of propaganda tools was not dominant for non-state German media and was used only in the discourse of one publisher — Die Tageszeitung (Table 4).

Evidence also suggests that politicians were quoted more frequently in the media than academics and other public health experts [4; 5; 24], and, as a result, politics prevailed over science in the news [27]. The results of our study also confirm this fact. The most quoted personalities in the non-state German media were the country’s officials: Angela Merkel, Markus Söder, Jens Spahn and Olaf Scholz, as well as other professional communities broadcasting the biopolitical agenda. The representation of the official view in publications exceeds the scope of the alternative opinion.

Beyond intimidation and reliance on official information sources, propaganda strategies can encompass directing attention towards specific actions that can be interpreted as a call to action. Interestingly, no indications for the mandatory wearing of masks, observance of the lockdown, restriction of contacts, etc. were found among the most frequent phrases, while references to vaccination were identified in all three media, which could probably mean the employment of some ‘selective’ propaganda, consistent with the tasks of the editorial board.

On the other hand, the strategy of public education was also actively implemented in the discourse of the three publishers. The media tried to eliminate ambiguity in order to form a certain attitude (see, for example, [28—30]). The results of our study show that the non-state German media preferred to make judgments based on objective data throughout the waves of the pandemic. The leitmotifs of the discourse were the consequences of the pandemic for all spheres of life (economy, social sphere, etc.), as well as statistics on morbidity and mortality. Both leitmotifs are designed to convey the complexity (although, in most cases, non-catastrophic) of the current situation. It is worth pointing out that whether statistics should be regarded as an education strategy is a debatable issue, since the continuous publication of statistics on the number of infected, those in intensive care, the number of deaths, as well as economic losses, can be perceived as a propaganda strategy through intimidation. Regular broadcasting of quantitative data on losses can be regarded as encouraging citizens to comply with restrictive measures (especially at the first stage of a pandemic in a situation of uncertainty). Later, the use of statistics can be assessed as balanced, since along with negative trends, ‘positive’ statistical data were published on the number of recovered, uninfected, etc.

Despite the prevalence of official sources of information, the study’s findings reveal a pluralism of opinions presented. Given the prevalence of official sources of information, mass media serve as intermediaries, disseminating ‘ready-made’ information without explicitly expressing their own position, thus maintaining a sense of neutrality.

In general, it can be noted that the topics included in the agenda of the non-state media in Germany under scrutiny are identical. When new information is obtained or the need to carry out certain activities appears, clichés are introduced into the discourse, for example, the ones related to vaccination. However, despite the similar pool of topics, the applied strategies differ, which confirms the Herman-Chomsky filter hypothesis. The *Die Zeit* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* represent the interests of business that is the subject of biopolitics. At the same time, *Die Tageszeitung* can be seen as representing civil society, which is also a subject of biopolitics. The results of the study show similar strategies to support the government's biopolitical agenda for business and civil society — education and propaganda. However, business seemed to act for the benefit of society, solving biopolitical problems mainly without active propaganda of pro-government ideas, while civil society behaved a little more aggressively, propagating the state biopolitical programme through instilling fear. It can be concluded that all non-state media resorted to both strategies, maintaining a certain balance between propaganda and education.

A limitation of the study is that it only analyzed publications from the third and fourth waves in *Die Tageszeitung*. The results, which demonstrate the publisher's propensity to promote the state biopolitical agenda through propaganda, cannot be extrapolated to the first two waves of the pandemic.

Conclusion

1. The non-state media scrutinized in the study used various strategies to achieve common biopolitical goals by introducing certain clichés into the discourse (see the data provided in Table 4). *Die Tageszeitung* was the only publisher that explicitly resorted to the strategy of intimidation along with the most intensive presentation of pro-government opinions. *Die Zeit*, on the other hand, abandoned the strategy of intimidation, focusing on the presentation of up-to-date statistics, as well as pluralism of opinions (both official and alternative). *Süddeutsche Zeitung* appears to distance itself from the government's point of view by limiting the number of official opinions it publishes. However, it also resorted to the strategy of intimidation. In the discourse of all the studied media, a certain balance between propaganda and education was observed.

2. By choosing propaganda (*Die Tageszeitung*) or education (*Die Zeit* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) as the prevailing strategies, the media support the government's biopolitical programme aimed at preserving the life and health of the population, since in the context of the pandemic, both strategies are aimed at achieving the common goal. However, the support of the official strategy realized by the media is expressed explicitly in the form of propaganda or more restrained (implicitly) through education, depending on the tasks and interests of the subjects of biopolitics (business and civil society), which use media as tools for influence.

3. The identified propaganda clichés were based on repetition and partly on intimidation (due to the inclusion of an emotional component or objective data). The repeatability criterion was fully implemented, while the emotional component (intimidation) was not an integral part of the propaganda. In general, in the discourse of the German media, the impact is realized specifically through the publication of statistical data, which leads to an increase in the level of trust in society.

4. The proposed approach, based on the analysis of clichés to identify propaganda guidelines and intentions of patrons, proves to be effective. The application of the Herman-Chomsky model led to the conclusion that the sources of funding filter has the greatest impact on the degree of adherence of the media to one of the strategies: education or propaganda. In the case of the German non-state media, business does not explicitly show involvement in biopolitical propaganda, in contrast to civil society.

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