

Amplification, communities, platforms: Reclaiming space with Idil Galip and Julia Bee

Platforms & Society
Volume 3: 1–7
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DOI: 10.1177/29768624261455200
journals.sagepub.com/home/pns



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Abstract

Contemporary platform politics take shape within socio-technical amplification regimes that blur the line between mobilization and manipulation. Memetic ambience, algorithmic visibility, and affective uptake structure the conditions under which movements emerge, communities fracture, and political energies are redirected, diluted, or amplified. In this conversation, Julia Bee (Professor of Gender and Media Studies, University of Bochum) and Idil Galip (Lecturer in New Media and Digital Culture, University of Amsterdam) join Ambient Amplification theme issue editors Elena Pilipets and Marloes Geboers to explore the complexities of platform-mediated engagement through an activist lens. Julia draws on feminist traditions of care, diversity, and resistance to examine how platforms mediate visibility, exclusion, and collective action, while Idil bridges meme and platform studies to explore how affect, irony, and circulation oscillate between marketing logics and social movements. Together, they reflect on vibe shifts, counter-publics, and digital encounters as sites of tension and possibility, asking how crowds can reclaim space and cultivate solidarity despite extractive platform logics. While the issues under discussion resonate globally, the conversation deliberately foregrounds situated experiences and local political contexts, treating them not as limitations but as analytical lenses reflecting broader platform dynamics.

Keywords

Affective publics, counter-publics, humour as resistance, memetic ambience, ambivalent tactics

Elena: What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about amplification?

Julia: Well, at the moment, unfortunately, I don't have any positive associations off the top of my head. But given that we're just a week past Meta's decision to stop fact-checking for ultra-liberal free speech discourse, my mind goes straight to digital fascism and gender-based violence online that will profit from these decisions. Still, I try to think of amplification in the shape of collective solidarity, and more positive things, like educational antifascist initiatives that could benefit from it. I also believe that humour is essential for amplifying logics that play a significant role in the politicization of society.

Idil: I think about viral marketing methods. These days, everything feels like a viral marketing strategy, and it has created a sense of paranoia for me. Whenever I see content, I immediately question whether I'm part of a target audience expected to respond to a stimulus. And it's not just obvious ads, like scrolling TikTok and being pushed yet another useless Amazon product. It's more than that. I find myself questioning which trending topics, viral videos, and political narratives might, in fact, be carefully

orchestrated information campaigns designed to manipulate public opinion and consumption.

This brings me to the problem of memetic irony. The most effective amplification campaigns now use ironic packaging to shield their content from appearing overly propagandistic. Younger social media users, for instance, may see military recruitment content presented through 'e-girl' aesthetics that use memetic templates popular on TikTok (Yalçınkaya, 2023). This creates what is described as 'fandom governance' (Wong, 2022), where political messaging is wrapped in the participatory culture of fandom

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and memes. This makes semi-organic top-down campaigning feel like organic community building that syncs with the rules of playing the ‘vibeocracy’. In 2021, trend forecaster Sean Monahan’s viral Substack essay ‘Vibe Shift’ (2021) caused quite a stir in online discourse and in the world of digital marketing. While deliberately vague about what exactly a vibe shift was, he hinted towards a rightward move in mainstream popular culture. This essay heralded the full tilt towards conservatism in cultural expression and political rhetoric we find ourselves in. Conservative actors increasingly wage the so-called culture war through platforms’ amplification infrastructures, aligning with the ambient dynamics of memes and fandoms, while also leveraging new forms of monetization and financial mechanisms such as crypto. The elephant in the room is Elon Musk’s takeover of Twitter/X, which has resulted in the amplification of right-leaning content.

Here, we should also consider the practice of speculation and its relationship to politics. We may all be living through what Komporozos-Athanasiou (2022) calls the age of ‘speculative communities’ driven by the financialization of everyday life. In fact, amplification itself is a speculative practice where viral marketing tactics, political messaging, and financial schemes converge into new forms of coordinated manipulation. For instance, memecoins operate on the same principles I’ve observed in digital propaganda campaigns. They ‘succeed’ through coordinated amplification that creates attempts to simulate organic adoption. When Musk tweets about Dogecoin or posts cryptic references to some other token, we see the memetic warfare tactics intersecting with Komporozos-Athanasiou’s (2022) speculative turn.

This convergence of speculation and amplification culminates in a political and economic system governed less by traditional democratic mechanisms and more by the mostly digitally powered manipulation of collective feeling. In a vibeocracy, the distinction between organic and manufactured sentiment becomes irrelevant; what matters is the ability to control the amplification infrastructure that generates and sustains these collective feelings.

Marloes: Do you see viral marketing logic—vibeocracy—merging with activism in a meaningful way? Those rare moments when a leftist political movement breaks through and gains mass visibility?

Julia: In Germany, we saw a massive wave of protests following CORRECTIV’s early 2024 publication (Bensmann et al., 2024) of a secret meeting involving AfD members and others.¹ The meeting revealed discussions about so-called ‘re-migration’, a euphemism for deporting people they don’t consider racially pure—ideas disturbingly reminiscent of Nazi-era plans. After the revelation, millions took to the streets in protest. We are now experiencing up to 1.6 million people who protested against the normalization of right-wing agendas again.

At the same time, a social media movement emerged, particularly on TikTok, under the hashtag #ReclaimTikTok. It

started with the climate movement in Germany but quickly spread across left-leaning and pro-democracy circles. This movement followed TikTok’s logic of short, algorithm-driven content designed to push visibility in order to break the hegemony of right-wing and masculinist platform spheres. What is particularly interesting is how these online and offline movements amplified each other. Street protests needed digital backing, and TikTok activism extended their reach, creating a pro-democratic movement. Content creators like Susanne Siegert, Tara-Louise Wittwer, and Ole Liebl have gained significant outreach, especially in antifascist, queer feminist communities on TikTok. Their approach blends affect and education, making complex academic concepts accessible in short, engaging formats, often within two-minute videos. A lot of irony, but also education, very short inputs, soundbites. And I think they are really successful in using TikTok features and video education. This takes place at a time when knowledge is becoming platformized, and platforms intend to appear more useful to society and democracy than they really are. It is not that the left can’t meme; rather, platforms flatten content by amplifying certain formats, aesthetics, and modes of circulation over others, particularly within TikTok’s extended meme culture as Zulli and Zulli (2022) argue.

Idil: When leftist movements try to use viral marketing logic, they must sacrifice depth for shareability. This is a significant issue because leftist political discourse in its contemporary form has a tendency to prioritize theoretical density, long-form critique, and comprehensive, systematic explanations of political issues. Think of the classic ‘wall of text meme’ that captures the stereotype of the leftist long-winded explanation. There is, to a certain extent, a ‘depth versus virality’ dilemma here. The very qualities that make leftist politics intellectually robust work against the platform logics that reward short-form, punchy content with immediate emotional payoff. When movements are forced to compress structural critiques of capitalism into Instagram carousels or TikTok videos, something essential gets lost, and we end up with hollowed-out ‘infographic politics’ (Figure 1).

A simple label like ‘slacktivism’ or ‘clicktivism’ fails to adequately address this issue. Such critiques shift the moral responsibility onto those using social media for political education and activism rather than tackling the underlying power structures. Instead, it is the cynical architecture of platform capitalism that poses a significant challenge for building sustainable political action through social media content. A more optimistic view would suggest that memetic media ‘do not have to do it all’ and that they can serve as entry points into activism as an ongoing media practice. This holds especially true for activists who operate under significant constraints and rely on social media content for possibilities of connective action.

Julia: The issues of platform monopolies and current data-extractivist techniques are, of course, pertinent to the

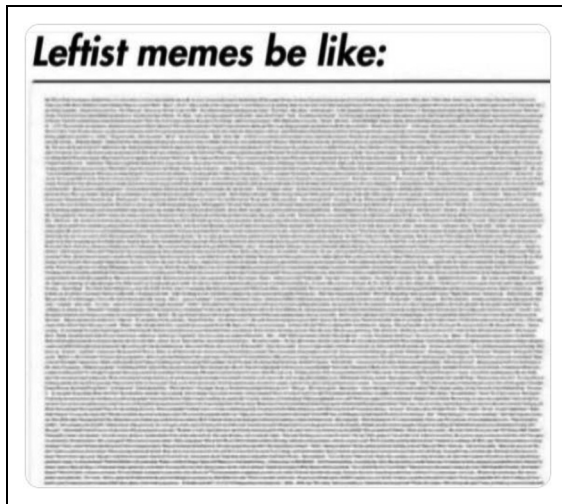


Figure 1. A screenshot of the “leftist wall of text” meme template.

Digital Services Act (DSA) in Europe, rendering platform curation and regulation even more contentious. But it remains unclear who is responsible for this curation. Furthermore, the fundamental commercial risks for democratic public spheres are not being eliminated, and there is no debate about platform policy that is oriented towards the common good (Fischer et al., 2024). Trusted flaggers have direct contact with platforms. However, it’s still an open question in media studies how platforms are not only regulated but also curated, and it is hard to have this discussion if the curation algorithm isn’t transparent.

Marloes: That also made me think of what Idil mentioned about the apparent lack of a common goal or the internal fragmentation within progressive movements. It seems like this dispersed focus affects how ideas gain traction—or don’t—within political and cultural spaces.

Elena: Absolutely. I’m wondering, ‘reclaiming space’ is inherently an ambient tactic, but it goes beyond just reshaping the format of that space. What key traits define politically charged spaces of platforms like Instagram and TikTok?

Idil: ‘Reclaiming space’ on platforms like TikTok isn’t just about being present; it is also about navigating the platform’s specific architecture. On TikTok, political content operates across certain mechanisms. For instance, algorithmic discovery bypasses traditional gatekeepers of knowledge creation and media, and short-form videos compress complex ideas into simplified viral moments that may lack in realism and nuance. Duets and stitches help create dialogical exchanges. So when we think about claiming or reclaiming ‘space’, we need to examine platform spaces and how they shape political communication.

The other thing is about the limits of doing politics on or through platforms. Activists may have mastered getting

messages to go viral on TikTok or Instagram, but does virality or reclaiming space translate into action at institutional levels? A hashtag, as indexing an ‘issue space’, may reach millions, but it is still ultimately subject to gatekeeping by state actors, political institutions, and global balances. Does online amplification achieve anything without an infrastructure in real life? What happens when there is a disconnection between the projected power of digital activism and the realities of the field? How can the internet be used to resist insurmountable odds? TikTok and Instagram provide opportunities for rapid-response messaging and amplifying counter-narratives, but whether it is an effective tool for resistance is highly debatable.

Julia: Yes, at the same time, the erosion of institutions, as Timothy Snyder argues in *On Tyranny* (2017), remains a central strategy of authoritarianism. The digital violence of gendered disinformation campaigns targets not only individuals, but also institutions these individuals are standing for – like the university. Social media campaigns play a decisive role in this. Through affective amplification, campaigns exploit the largely unregulated nature of online engagement. Even parts of the state employ these tactics, as is currently evident in the political efforts to restrict the freedom of research in the US context.

That said, politics isn’t just about state recognition. Part of an antifascist amplification strategy is defending colleagues who get attacked by digital violence against science and the humanities. The affective micro-politics of social media activism matters not just in shaping policy and voters’ decisions by disinformation campaigns, but in fostering solidarity, support, and resistance. Many people, especially FLINTA², people of colour, and people with disabilities, depend on social media communities to navigate increasingly hostile public spaces soaked in political violence.

Marloes: What is your take on the role of affect in platform politics?

Julia: The work of Simon Strick in Germany has explored how the right mobilizes affect on social media. His book highlights the need for a left affective politics, one that doesn’t rely on the same tactics but still engages people on an affective and relational level. Simon suggests strategies like ‘Counterfeeling’ (2021: 466). But that’s a challenge because the left doesn’t operate with the same assets as the right. Some would even regard this challenge as part and parcel of a left populist movement. I’d be cautious about framing this as such; while I understand the intent behind the idea, populism itself carries problematic implications. Maybe the focus should not only be on challenging digital fascism, but also on solidarity, resilience, democratic education, and everyday survival. Many of the initiatives I mentioned try to produce counter-content to the right-wing, and we have to question the context they are working in, given that digital violence rises drastically (Kompetenznetzwerk Hass im Netz, 2024). This also

includes the changing role of platform engagement and knowledge. That is why music is so important, as you, Marloes, suggest in ‘Malicious Earworms’ (Geboers and Bösch, 2025).

Amplification on social media can also be about humour, feminist satire, and collective coping strategies. Humour has a powerful collectivizing effect, offering a way to navigate political despair. Maybe it’s in these micro-level affective politics that we see some of the most significant forms of resistance today. It is not just about a few political content creators, as we see with the German party *Die Linke*, which has a firm presence on TikTok; we need *multiple* voices and strategies that build on and critique the features of the platform, resisting easy answers. We must also counter the far-right’s use of personalization by employing situated politics, much like Natalie Wynn does on her YouTube channel ‘ContraPoints’. We could be more attentive to communities like the queer and feminist parts of BookTok or other progressive forms of amplification that push for communitarian infrastructure and digital emancipation – not just digital sovereignty (Mejias and Couldry, 2024). Ulises Mejias and Nick Couldry propose to be resistant inside the system, against it, and outside it.

Elena: Could noise (itself an inherently ambient tactic) also function as a mode of resistance? Take fake news, for example. The main critique isn’t necessarily whether a piece of information is true or false, but that it creates noise, diverting attention from and disrupting access to context and solutions. But noise can be both a tool of distraction and a method of resistance. It can be used to spread disinformation but also to overwhelm and disrupt hegemonic narratives. This makes me curious about intersectional tactics of generating noise on social media.

Idil: A great example of using noise effectively is Naya De Souza, also known as Bundeskanzlerin on Instagram. She’s one of my favourite meme creators, but her work goes beyond that. She combines comedy, interdisciplinary art, stand-up, panel talks, and even cooking, creating a unique space for political critique and cultural commentary.

As a trans woman from Brazil living in Germany, she offers sharp insights into racial politics, transphobia, and intersectionality, not just from white heteronormative Germans but also within immigrant communities she interacts with. What makes her work stand out is her ability to articulate discomfort, not smoothing over difficult conversations but confronting them head-on.

I wouldn’t call what she does ‘noise’ in a dismissive sense, but rather part of a broader, confrontational chorus – a cacophony of voices challenging dominant narratives in real time. Serious issues deserve direct, sometimes uncomfortable engagement, rather than trying to cater to palatability. This is where intersectionality plays a crucial role. It’s not just about acknowledging multiple identities but also about recognizing how power works differently

across different spaces, including academia, workplaces, and activist communities. Even in so-called progressive spaces, people still struggle to see the world through each other’s eyes; it remains a big ask.

Maybe noisiness itself is part of the process – challenging, debating, and clashing in ways that push political conversations forward. It’s not always clean or unified, but if there is a shared commitment to progress, then noise might be one of the most productive tools we have.

Julia: I completely agree. Platforms play a huge role in documenting and breaking down everyday experiences, especially through memes and humour-driven content. Still, they also make micro-racism, microaggressions, and digital misogyny more visible in ways that feel immediate and relatable.

This makes me think of Tara-Louise Wittwer, who started with TikToxic, a format where she humorously responds to misogynistic content without directly engaging with it through stitches or duets. By avoiding platform-preferred channels, which would simultaneously amplify the perpetrators, she contests the normalization of digital misogyny. This kind of humour-based resistance against the manosphere isn’t just about countering digital fascists; it also exposes how deeply misogyny is embedded in everyday life (see Manne, 2019; Özkula and Prieto-Blanco, 2026). Take, for example, the ‘What Men Made Me Do’ trend. It opened up a space for women to share small, seemingly harmless moments of gendered control, things they might have otherwise ignored or felt ashamed of. This ties into Jenny Sundén and Susanna Paasonen’s book *Who’s Laughing Now? Feminist Tactics in Social Media* (2020), where they argue that humour can ‘de-shame’ by making people feel less isolated in their experiences. In Germany, many women are using a TikTok sound by German female rapper *Ikkimel* to share their experiences of sexual violence. This is just one example of how pop culture can engage with the platform’s features to give a voice to those affected. Around her songs and edits, women often create opportunities to express anger, which seems like the ultimate form of amplification. Another example is *Sveamaus*, a meme creator who satirizes German conservatism. Here, de-amplification operates through absurd humour, and collaging becomes a subversive tactic.

These formats, whether memes, counter-memes, or humour-driven responses, go beyond mere reactions. They flip everyday aggressions, disrupt power structures, and build collective solidarity in ways that traditional activism can’t. But the problem is that, ultimately, they feed into the platform application more generally.

Marloes: There’s an interesting link between shame, anger, and visibility. The manosphere, ‘at its best’, exploits this link by amplifying shame through visibility, making it a control tool. So if shame thrives on amplification, then de-shaming might require a different approach, maybe even a form of de-amplification?

Through tactics that rely on platform affordances but also go beyond platform constraints?

Julia: Yes, in the platform infrastructure, personification becomes almost unavoidable. The more visible someone is, the more they become a target, which is why solidarity and support are crucial to keeping people engaged. Studies confirm that women, queers, and people of colour are the most targeted in memes and online harassment (Machine Against the Rage, 2024; Kompetenznetzwerk Hass im Netz, 2024). And responses like Tara-Louise Wittwer's often rely on face-based, highly personalized content, which is hard to escape on social media. Whether activists use TikTok's built-in features or external tools, the individual remains front and centre, reinforcing the platform's logic.

A striking example is Susanne Siegert's channel @keine.erinnerungskultur, which uses archival material to counter Holocaust denial and offers historical political education. While her work is crucial for debunking and pre-bunking, TikTok's algorithmic visibility logic pushes her to include her face in every video using the green screen function for reach and visibility (Bedijs, 2023). This creates a contradiction – she's presenting historical evidence, but through a format that demands her personal presence, even alongside documentation of historic evidence and atrocities. To put it more positively, knowledge can be amplified by the situatedness of knowledge. It is not always personalization.

Idil shares: 'My face is the front of shop. My face is the real shop front'. Flashing content warning/photosensitive warning SOPHIE Faceshopping (Official video).

Julia: Right, that's basically the logic. It raises a bigger question: Does this face-driven visibility help the cause, or does it turn activism into another form of branding? Something is unsettling about having to put your face out there just to be believed, especially if it is directly associated with archival material. It's a powerful tool, but also a demanding and ambiguous one. I think Natalie Wynn's YouTube channel ContraPoints deconstructs this logic of personalization. In her pre-TikTok 'stitch'-like videos on YouTube, she stages dialogues with herself, performing different roles to interrogate the discourses and demands for authenticity that shape digital media cultures. Such educational content goes beyond activism and often invents new forms of digital political education (Bee, 2023).

Idil: There's this cult of authenticity on social media – the idea that something is only true if you put your face on it. It's part of the platform logic, where visibility equals legitimacy, and without it, you're not fully participating.

That's why I shared that SOPHIE song. *My face is the real shopfront* feels like the perfect metaphor for this. It effectively captures how social media turns identity into a product, and this applies beyond just online culture.

Teaching these issues has made me realize how much young people equate authenticity with visibility. When my students (mostly 18–19-year-olds) bring up

authenticity, they often mean something different than we might. Over time, we work toward a shared understanding, but it's clear that social media has shaped a new equation of truth: Authenticity = My Face = Me on the Platform.

It's a stark contrast from earlier internet culture. Millennials (without making it a generational debate) grew up with a text-based internet, where anonymity was a key priority. We were told never to share personal details online – no real names, no faces. Sociality was built through MSN, Tumblr, and forums, where identity was more fluid. Compare that to today, where the default is constant self-exposure.

It also reflects the shift in political engagement online. There was a time when people believed platforms like Facebook could change the world, even overthrow governments. Maybe that was true, but not in the way we expected. Now, there is a pressure to perform politics through personal branding, where, if you do not post, you're not participating.

That's what I keep coming back to: how these platforms create false equations between authenticity, truth, and visibility, and how that shapes the way people engage with politics today. Additionally, the pressure for constant visibility isn't just cultural; it's embedded in the platform monopolies themselves. As I've documented in a paper, BATX and GAMA have consolidated powers of governance and maintain extremely influential relationships with states and governments. These platforms have a vested interest in keeping users engaged through what I call 'incendiary online discourse' that keeps 'a balanced dose of conflict keeping users online' (Galip, 2023: 101). The equation of 'authenticity equals visibility' serves this economy perfectly, turning de-amplification into an almost impossible task within their systems.

Elena: That makes me think about authenticity as something shared, something that requires an audience to be performed. The question is, who is that audience? Before we wrap up, is there anything important we haven't covered that you'd like to add?

Idil: As Julia mentioned, amplification is an ambiguous concept, both political and reactionary, sometimes serving leftist movements and other times fuelling right-wing narratives. I've been working on the rise of right-wing online avant-gardism, sometimes called reactionary chic. While it's a US-centric phenomenon, I see its impact in places like Amsterdam or anywhere people engage with Anglophone online discourse. This movement, centred in New York City, merges anti-woke podcasters, streamers, and writers with figures like Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, Steve Bannon, and Donald Trump.

A popular example of this phenomenon is the *Red Scare* podcast, a cultural commentary project by Anna Khachiyan and Dasha Nekrasova, that evolved from its 'dirtbag leftist' origins into right-wing punditry with the hosts using ironic detachment as a rhetorical shield until broader cultural

realignment (see vibe shift) made overt reactionary stances more permissible in Anglophone spaces. We recently examined the podcast's thriving Reddit and Pinterest communities (the main sub-Reddit boasts over 130,000 members), showing how 'media play' and language games create affective podcast publics (Papacharissi, 2016) built on 'sonorous intimacies' (Birdsall, 2023) and reactionary contrarianism.

Our analysis revealed what we term the 'ludic logic of online contrarianism', where ironic detachment functions as both a political aesthetic and a protective mechanism. On Reddit, memetic templates serve as vehicles for identity play that blur the boundaries between sincere political engagement and trolling. Meanwhile, on Pinterest, young women engage in what we've identified as 'femcel aesthetic play', appropriating symbols of fragility, eating disorders, and 'coquette femininity' while maintaining a playful sense of detachment to the symbols in question. This creates what we call 'dark play' in spaces where contradictory realities exist, allowing users to simultaneously embody and critique political positions. The platforms become theatres of ideological experimentation where traditional political boundaries dissolve into performance, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish genuine belief from strategic provocation.

These dynamics illustrate what I see as a defining characteristic of contemporary right-wing cultural formation: it's a strange fusion—people socialized in the 4chan era of the 'Wild West' internet, now emerging as cultural influencers in academia, literature, and the arts. Their politics are purely reactionary, shaped by online discourse rather than traditional ideology. What happens when they align with right-wing tech feudalism, as we've seen in recent years?

Julia: That's a great point, and it ties into something that's been widely discussed in Germany – the intellectualization of the far-right movement, which partly helped their normalization. After years of using crude, populist meta-politics and meme-driven aesthetics (like Pepe the Frog and other online subcultures), there's now a shift toward universities, academic discourse, and literature. Conservative figures like Canadian self-help book author Jordan Peterson are being adopted and replicated in German-speaking contexts with varying success (Degeling and Haffke, 2025). Far-right meta-politics now operate not just through social media agitation, but also by embedding themselves within institutions like the university. At the same time, universities and researchers are also targets of online hate. This pertains to a greater shift in mobilizing micro-fascism using social media, where a battle for minds and education is unfolding, one that increasingly works to undermine the critical humanities and the sciences more broadly.

At the same time, these developments do not diminish the role of affect. If we follow Brian Massumi's affect theory of fascism, it is clear that affect is, first of all, a potential

that can be played out in different ways. Intellectualization has its own amplification politics and works with affects too. In fact, Massumi speaks of the body as 'amplifier' (2025: 127). What's amplified is not the emotion itself – hate, fear, joy, sorrow, hope – but the affective potential attached to it. Trump is an example of an affective regime based on post-ideological methods of exercising power. Amplification here stands for engaging 'potential' that goes beyond the binaries of interpretation and affect and helps us grasp the multiple strategies of fascistization at once.

Such strategies intersect with social media dynamics in unexpected ways through tutorials, 'alternative' right-wing education platforms, and counter-universities, giving rise to new knowledge economies. While the far-right rhetoric may appear distinct, it nonetheless depends on digital platforms for dissemination, legitimacy, and reach. This is what I referred to earlier as the emerging role of knowledge – and how it has become politically contested and strategically mobilized across platforms. Exploring how these dynamics evolve between online and institutional spaces is crucial to understanding their broader amplification effects.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. CORRECTIV is the first non-profit, independent investigative newsroom in Germany. Founded in 2014 and based in Essen and Berlin, it produces public-interest investigations that combat disinformation, often working collaboratively with activists and citizens through its CrowdNewsroom platform. Alternative for Germany (German: Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) is a far-right, populist, national conservative political party in Germany.
2. Acronym representing the German term for Frauen (Women), Lesben (Lesbians), Inter* (Intersex persons), Non-Binary* persons, Trans* persons, and Agender* persons.

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