

Article

# Free Press Under Pressure? Experiences and Consequences of Hateful Harassment on Journalists in Germany

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Submitted: 15 May 2023 | Accepted: 24 July 2023 | Published: 7 December 2023

## Abstract

The rise of populist movements all over the world and various global crises in recent years have led to a sharp increase in distrust in news and the media. Although this development is tangible globally, it seems pertinent to take a look at a Western liberal democracy with a comparatively good journalistic infrastructure such as Germany, where hateful harassment and attacks on journalists are on the rise. These issues have been widely discussed publicly in Germany. However, it would be useful to take into account the perspective of those affected by these phenomena. To contribute to the discourses on hate against journalists, the current contribution presents data from a survey of active journalists in Germany ( $n = 322$ ). The questionnaire comprised both standardized and open-ended questions, focusing specifically on hateful harassment and attacks experienced by journalists, including the ways through which they are transported and whether hate can be politically localized. The results reveal that hate and attacks are mainly attributed to right-wing individuals and groups. In addition to verbal hate, various responding journalists reported having been physically attacked or having received death threats. Given the frequency of experienced hateful harassment, most respondents fear that the freedom of press in Germany is in jeopardy (62%), and about half have considered self-censorship to avoid being the target of hate. The severity of experienced hate is illustrated by open-ended questions in the form of personal accounts that are analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The results are discussed in light of the role of a free press in modern democracies, as well as recent research on devaluing attitudes towards the free press in Germany.

## Keywords

far-right; Germany; hateful harassment; journalism; qualitative analysis

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “Trust, Social Cohesion, and Information Quality in Digital Journalism” edited by Thomas B. Ksiazek (Villanova University), Jacob L. Nelson (University of Utah), and Anita Varma (University of Texas at Austin).

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## 1. Introduction

While scholars consider free press, journalism, and media in general as important democratic institutions—e.g., by coining the term “fourth estate” to describe its importance in modern democracies (Schultz, 1998)—trust in news media and journalists has been declining for some time now (e.g., IPSOS, 2019). Recent developments on a global scale are contributing to what various institutions and scholars have termed a “crisis,” which is not only affecting overall trust in news reporting but also leading to a broader devaluation of journalists and the media. These developments include the

global rise of far-right actors and populist movements, which are disseminating narratives and promoting discourses with a strong anti-media message (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Panievsky, 2022). For some time now, open attacks on journalism and media outlets have become a feature of right-wing populists and far-right actors (Farhall et al., 2019). Most notably, the term “fake news” has become something of a battle cry for the far-right to undermine journalism and media outlets in the US, Europe, and beyond (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). While mistrust in reporting and the devaluation of journalists and the media are attitudinal phenomena, there is also a behavioral

side to the growing anti-media sentiment, with serious consequences: Journalists around the world are facing more and more obstacles in carrying out their work freely, as journalists increasingly become the target of harassment and hostility (Waisbord, 2019). While attacks and persecution of journalists and media workers have been a problem in autocratic regimes for years, hateful harassment and attacks on journalists have also increased sharply in democratic countries (International Federation of Journalists, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). This development is also noticeable in Germany. While the overall environment and infrastructure in Germany are comparatively good, Reporters Without Borders (2023) points out that in Germany “violence and verbal attacks are on the rise” and “journalists have been increasingly threatened, harassed and physically attacked.” In addition to hateful harassment and attacks, journalists in Germany face growing mistrust in their reporting (Jacob et al., 2019; Y. Rees & Papendick, 2021).

The public discourse on these issues in Germany is substantial and has been ongoing for some time. Hateful harassment and attacks on journalists have been the subject of numerous reports in all major news outlets (e.g., “Attacken auf Journalistinnen,” 2021; Holly, 2023), several nationwide political debates, and especially in the German parliament (Bundestag, 2021). However, empirical studies from the perspective of affected journalists and media workers in Germany are scarce. Nevertheless, some valuable studies provide insight into how journalists in Germany are affected by hateful harassment and attacks, and how they and the institutions with which they are associated deal with these phenomena (Post & Kepplinger, 2019; Preuß et al., 2017). This article aims to contribute to the existing research and the public debate in Germany, focusing on the following key research questions:

RQ1: What experiences of hateful harassment and attacks do German journalists, most of whom are members of journalists’ unions, report?

RQ2: Where do they politically localize hateful harassment and attacks?

RQ3: What are the personal and professional consequences of hateful harassment and attacks experienced by journalists in Germany?

This research is based on a survey of active journalists and media workers in Germany ( $N = 322$ ). The questionnaire focused on how those affected experienced and responded to hateful harassment and attacks. In addition to standardized questions, the questionnaire included several open-ended questions to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences in personal accounts that are the focus of the analysis. In the first step, we will take a closer look at the theoretical background and the German context (Section 2). After an introduction to data

and methods (Section 3), the empirical section (Section 4) focuses on the extent and nature of hateful harassment and attacks experienced by journalists and media workers in Germany online and offline, as well as the personal and professional consequences of these experiences. While the main focus of the analysis is on three open-ended questions about the experiences and consequences of hateful harassment and attacks on affected journalists and media workers, key quantitative descriptive findings of the study are also presented. Finally, the discussion section (Section 5) identifies the limitations of the current study and closes with a conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Context

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework

Journalism is generally considered to be an important part of a functioning democratic society. The ability of journalists to work freely, safely, and autonomously has therefore become an important feature of several indices of democracy (e.g., Freedom House). As hateful harassment of journalists has been globally on the rise for some time (Waisbord, 2019), the empirical focus of mainly studying the situation of autocracies or historically weak democracies (e.g., Chalaby, 2000; Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020; Tapsell, 2012) has shifted to research that also focuses on liberal democracies (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Miller, 2023; Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Preuß et al., 2017). In this regard, Nilsson and Örnebring’s (2016) study, which provides insight into the Swedish case, is highly relevant to the study of hateful harassment of journalists in a Western liberal democracy, both empirically and theoretically. In general, research has shown that harassment of journalists has to be understood as a democratic problem, as it potentially limits journalists’ freedom and professional autonomy (Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). Following Nerone (1994), Nilsson and Örnebring (2016) argue that harassment and attacks on journalists must be seen as external factors that limit journalistic autonomy. At the same time, hateful harassment of journalists can be seen as political in nature and its ultimate goal is to silence journalists altogether. Therefore, it seems pertinent to investigate the political background of the perpetrators. Conceptually, the phenomenon of hateful harassment of journalists is obviously directed at individual journalists, with the bulk of the harassment directed at groups that have been historically discriminated against, such as women and ethnic minorities (Stahel, 2023; Waisbord, 2020). Being the target of hateful harassment—whether online or offline—has been shown to affect both personal and professional well-being (Holton et al., 2023). However, while the individual consequences of hateful harassment are already severe, if hateful harassment of journalists is seen as an overarching democratic problem, then the institution of journalism is surely a target as well (Kim & Shin, 2022). Thus, hateful harassment

of journalists has serious negative consequences for the individual journalists involved as well as for the democratic institution of journalism. This is vividly illustrated by the “*Lügenpresse*” narrative popular in Germany, in which the “lying” press is constructed as an enemy of the people (Koliska & Assmann, 2021).

Following conceptualizations of the phenomena in other research examining harassment or audience hostility toward journalists (Kim & Shin, 2022; Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016), hateful harassment and attacks in the current study include all forms of hateful audience responses, ranging from verbal harassment in the form of insults, for example, to violence in the form of physical attacks. While harassment has both online and offline aspects, physical violence is understood as direct, face-to-face interaction.

## 2.2. The German Context

Anti-media sentiment has long been a pillar of right-wing populist and far-right agitation around the world. It comes as no surprise that this development is also widespread in Germany. Like no other term, *Lügenpresse* (lying press) stands for distrust, devaluation, and hatred of journalists and media workers on the one hand, and of the free press as a democratic institution on the other. While the term *Lügenpresse* as a political slogan or chant, as well as a narrative aimed at devaluing journalists and the free press, has a history of more than 100 years and was also used by the National Socialists (Seidler, 2016), it re-emerged in the 2010s and peaked during the 2015 refugee migration to Germany (Haller & Holt, 2019; Maurer et al., 2019). It was, and still is, a major feature of anti-media protests in Germany and has since become a key narrative of far-right actors and organizations across the country. Most notably, it has been continuously used by the far-right protest group PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) based in the German Federal State of Saxony, as well as its local offshoots in other regions, and has become a far-right “rallying cry” (Volk, 2020). The term specifically aims to discredit trust and devalue the press and its democratic role and has become a common slur at far-right demonstrations as well as in online attacks against journalists (Koliska & Assmann, 2021). However, *Lügenpresse* has not only become a buzzword for the far-right but has also spilled over into the broader political discourse. Subsequently, the underlying distrustful anti-media sentiment seems to be widely shared among the German general population, as several large-scale studies suggest (Jackob et al., 2019; Jakobs et al., 2021; Y. Rees & Papendick, 2021). For example, Jakobs et al. (2021) found that in 2019, 28% of Germans were somewhat or completely distrustful of the media in general, which was the highest level of media mistrust since this long-term study began in 2008. More recently, Y. Rees and Papendick (2021, p. 125) found, in a representative sample from 2021, that about 25% of the German pop-

ulation believed that “media and politics are in cahoots together.” These figures reveal a widespread anti-media sentiment that is particularly prevalent among populist and far-right segments of the German population. In a study, focusing specifically on responses to accusations of *Lügenpresse* by journalists and editors of several high-profile German news outlets, Koliska and Assmann (2021) found that the main responses are strategies to re-legitimize journalism on a professional level. However, whether these efforts are effective in countering anti-media sentiments and distrust remains unanswered.

While the phenomena of anti-media sentiment, distrust of the media, and devaluation of journalists and media workers are prominent at the attitudinal level, there is also a far-reaching behavioral side that needs to be considered. In recent years, hateful harassment and attacks specifically targeting journalists have increased around the world (Ewen & Shane, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). This includes both analog forms of violence and online hate speech—e.g., on social media or in direct messages. Both have a serious impact on the work of journalists around the world. This global trend can also be observed in Germany, where attacks on journalists have increased significantly since 2020. This development is illustrated by official statistics: In 2020, the German government registered 252 crimes against journalists (Federal Government, 2021). In 2021, the number rose to 276 (Federal Government, 2022) and peaked in 2022 with 320 registered crimes (Federal Government, 2023). However, journalist organizations in Germany estimate that the actual number of attacks targeting journalists could be much higher (European Center for Press & Media Freedom, 2022). While the majority of physical attacks take place during demonstrations and protests, forms of online hate and hate speech, including threats, abuse, and incitement to commit crimes experienced by journalists and media workers, are also on the rise (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). As noted above, while public discourse on these issues is ongoing in Germany, few empirical studies have considered the perspective of journalists affected in this country. For example, Preuß et al. (2017) found that of the journalists surveyed, 42% reported having been the target of verbal and/or physical attacks in the past. Approximately two-thirds reported that hateful harassment and attacks had increased in recent years. However, a deeper insight into the personal and direct consequences of the experienced hateful harassment and attacks is still needed. The aim of the current study is therefore to systematically explore the hatred and attacks that journalists in Germany experience, as well as the consequences and reactions to these experiences—both on a personal and professional level—through the eyes of those affected.

## 3. Data and Methods

This article draws on data gathered from a survey ( $N = 322$ ) of active journalists and media workers.

The main objective of the study was to systematically capture the experiences of journalists and media workers who have been subjected to hateful harassment and attacks. To this end, an online survey was conducted between October 2019 and January 2020. In order to reach the target group, the survey was first shared with the two main unions representing journalists and media workers in Germany, the German Union of Journalists and German Federation of Journalists, who were informed about the project in advance. In the second step, other journalist associations and organizations were also contacted. The online survey was distributed primarily through the organizations' internal mailing lists, newsletters, and other information channels. About half of the respondents were male (52%) and 39% were female. Since there are no official statistics on the number of journalists or media workers, it is not possible to compare the gender response with national figures. However, in its most recently published country report for Germany from 2016, the *World Journalism Study* found a share of 40.1% of female journalists in Germany (Hanitzsch et al., 2016). The average age of the respondents was 48. Approximately 11% of the respondents reported having an immigrant background. The survey took around 20 minutes to complete. The estimated response rate, based on people who received access to the survey link through outreach, was 14.8%. Professional experience was quite high, with an average of 20 years. Table 1 shows the professional background of the respondents.

**Table 1.** The professional background of the respondents.

Professional background	Share in %
Print newspaper	45.7
Online outlet	34.5
TV	34.2
Radio/broadcasting	31.7
Magazine	28.3
News agency	8.7
Advertising paper	4.3

A total of 322 respondents completed the entire questionnaire, which included closed standardized questions as well as open-ended questions focusing on the key issues of how hateful harassment and attacks are conveyed, the nature of the hateful harassment and attacks experienced, and the individual consequences and coping strategies of affected journalists and media workers. The open-ended questions were included to allow participants the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences in the form of personal accounts. While the standardized questions help show general trends, these personal accounts provide deeper insight and allow for qualitative analysis. Since no further instructions were given, the participants' responses varied in length and detail. While some responses were brief and only a few sentences long, others are lengthy and detailed.

The responses to three open-ended questions are the focus of this analysis:

Q1: We would like to ask you to describe a case in which you have experienced a personal and/or institutional handling of attacks, i.e., insults, hostility, or incitement to crime and/or violence. ( $N = 132$ )

Q2: Could you please describe the physical attack and its context? ( $N = 56$ )

Q3: Could you please describe the extent to which you feel mentally or physically burdened by attacks in your daily journalistic work? ( $N = 168$ )

While Q1 focuses on experienced hatred and hostility in a broader sense, Q2 focuses exclusively on physical attacks. Q3 asks about the personal and professional consequences of experiencing hateful harassment and attacks. A total of 356 open-ended responses were analyzed for this article. Previous methodological work has highlighted the value of open-ended questions in survey studies (e.g., Friberg & Rosenvinge, 2013; Singer & Couper, 2017; Züll, 2016). In particular, they can "encourage deeper cognitive processing" (Singer & Couper, 2017, p. 124) and are especially useful for mental health research (Friberg & Rosenvinge, 2013), a topic touched upon in the current study. Responses to the open-ended questions were uploaded into MAXQDA 2020 qualitative analysis software. The analysis was conducted according to qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004). This methodological approach was chosen because it is best suited to a structured research design such as the current study, as opposed to grounded theory, for example, which is particularly helpful in analyzing open-ended qualitative datasets such as narrative interviews. Furthermore, content analysis methods are most appropriate when analyzing open-ended questions (Popping, 2015). The coding process followed a semi-structured methodological approach, combining deductive codes derived from the three open-ended questions, such as "mode of attack," and inductive codes derived from the open-ended responses. Various codes and subcodes emerged from the material. Examples from the material are presented to illustrate key findings (Chenail, 1995). The examples given have been translated from German into English. While the open-ended questions are the focus of the analysis, some key descriptive quantitative findings of the study are also presented. The findings are presented thematically.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Extent, Channels, and Political Context of Hateful Harassment and Attacks

The respondents generally reported high rates of experiencing hateful harassment and attacks. Figure 1

illustrates the frequency and perceived increase of experienced hateful harassment and attacks. More than half said that attacks on journalists had generally increased throughout their careers. Approximately two-thirds reported that they perceived attacks on journalists to have increased over the past 12 months. These findings already indicate that overall, hateful harassment and attacks had increased over time in the perception of the responding journalists. In terms of the extent of attacks they had personally experienced, 60% of the respondents said that they had been attacked at least once, while 41% reported having been attacked on a regular basis. Those who experienced regular hateful harassment and attacks reported particularly severe personal and professional consequences.

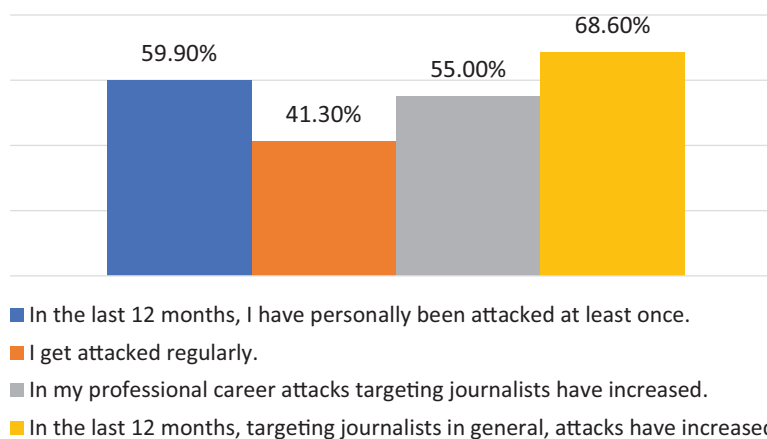
Of particular concern are death threats and physical violence against journalists and media workers. Of the responding journalists, 16.2% reported having been physically attacked on the job at least once, and another 15.8% had received death threats. Contrary to some studies (e.g., Miller & Lewis, 2022; Posetti et al., 2021), no clear pattern emerged in the quantitative data indicating that female journalists reported higher levels of hateful harassment. Of the 125 respondents who identified as female, 56.8% reported having been victims of hateful harassment (compared to 61.8% of men). This trend has also been found in other systematic studies of hateful harassment against journalists (Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016). Furthermore, among respondents with a migration background, 52.9% reported having been attacked in the past 12 months, compared to 59.7% of those without a migration background.

The personal accounts analyzed corroborate the quantitative findings on the extent and frequency of hateful harassment and attacks but also reveal various deeper insights from the affected journalists. In the personal accounts, responding journalists reported that being a regular target of hateful harassment and attacks was particularly exhausting for journalists and led to constant feelings of unease, as reflected in this passage:

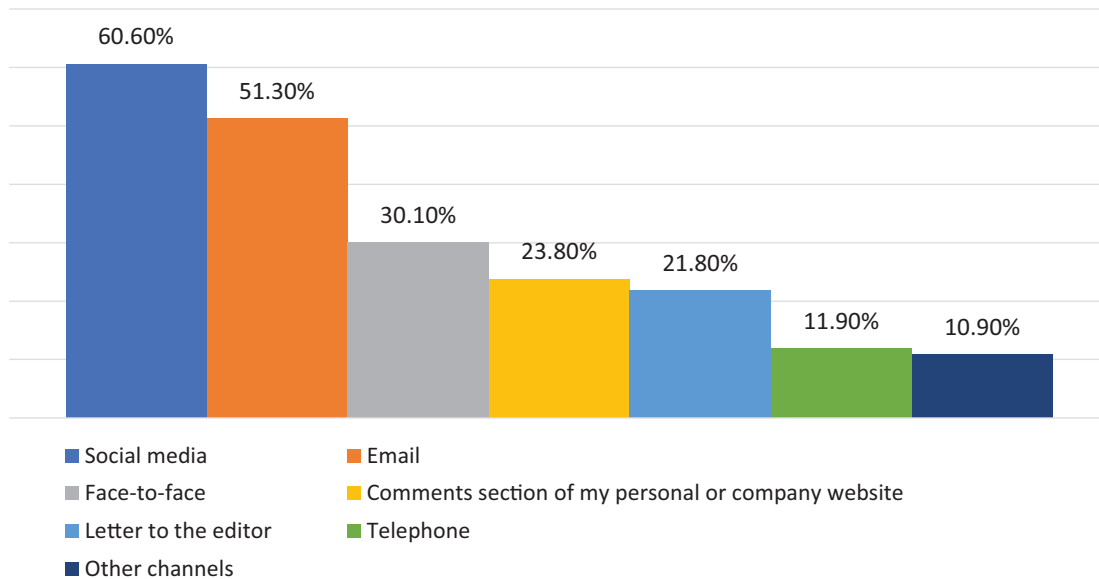
This [experiencing hateful harassment] leads to a permanently increased mental tension when doing the work, the fear of making mistakes is great, the feeling of isolation as well. In the long run, this condition does something to one, one's own worldview is deformed negatively. (Q3\_47)

In addition to the severe negative consequences (negative worldview) alluded to in Q3\_47, the quote also illustrates the fact that journalists who regularly face hateful harassment and attacks are particularly affected by negative consequences simply because of the sheer amount of hateful harassment they experience in their daily work. Looking more closely at the channels through which the responding journalists were attacked (Figure 2), the digital facet of hateful harassment and attacks becomes apparent. Most respondents reported being attacked either through social media (60.6%), email (51.3%), or the comments section of their personal or company website (23.8%). The high rate of hateful online harassment and attacks experienced by the responding journalists is consistent with other research that specifically highlights the critical role social media platforms play in the spread of hateful messages targeting journalists (e.g., Nelson, 2022). Other channels through which the respondents have experienced hateful harassment and attacks include face-to-face (30.1%), letters to the editor (21.8%), and phone calls (11.9%). The extent and regularity of hateful harassment and attacks experienced online are further reflected in the personal accounts of respondents whose daily work includes managing the social media presence of their respective outlets or news organizations. These two accounts serve as examples:

[Hateful harassment and attacks] mainly occur in the comment sections under our contributions on social media (Facebook, YouTube). There, the media company for which I work, or the journalists, are defamed and insulted across the board. The daily mass of verbal attacks alone leads to the impression that journalists are generally considered liars and



**Figure 1.** Extent and frequency of hateful harassment and attacks. Note: Only “yes” responses are shown.



**Figure 2.** Channels of hateful harassment and attacks. Note: Multiple answers were possible.

idiots by large sections of the audience, readers, and users, which in turn sometimes makes me personally doubt the meaningfulness and appreciation of my work. The constant confrontation with extremely negative comments and discussions without inhibitions among users is also personally stressful and affects my own mood at work. (Q3\_36)

For example, when you edit comments and read, approve, or disapprove racist remarks, attacks on the supposedly controlled media, etc. all day long, it's exhausting and frustrating. (Q3\_127)

These two exemplary accounts reveal a sense of regularity when it comes to the hateful harassment and devaluation of the professionalism experienced in their daily work. This is specifically indicated by expressions such as “across the board,” “daily mass,” or “constant” in Q3\_36 or “all day long” in Q3\_127. Both quotes emphasize the negative effects of being confronted with this hateful content on a regular basis, targeting journalists and the media in general (e.g., “stressful,” “exhausting,” and “frustrating”). The two quotes highlight a certain sense of normality of anti-media sentiment and far-right, in this case, “racist,” far-right narratives when being confronted with the social media comment sections of their respective outlets' articles. At the same time, the personal accounts also reflect upon the quantitative finding that most of the hateful harassment and attacks on journalists and media workers are transported via social media.

Other respondents emphasized that hateful harassment—especially online—also reaches them in their free time, creating a sense of both omnipresence of hate and “helplessness,” as the two brief quotes below illustrate: “Attacks on social media reach you in your free time. Mood depressed” (Q3\_139) and “Comments

in social media create a certain helplessness, you can't wind down in the evening” (Q3\_40).

While this online side of hateful harassment and attacks on journalists is the most prevalent, as confirmed by the quantitative findings on the channels used to communicate hateful harassment (Figure 2), it could be argued that personal, face-to-face attacks are even more severe in their consequences. Several of the personal accounts reveal that threatening and violent incidents are also a regular occurrence for some journalists. The following quote illustrates the extent and regularity of face-to-face attacks experienced:

As a reporter, you are almost always attacked at so-called street polls or demonstrations. You're mobbed, the microphone is knocked out of your hand or you're pushed away. In our editorial department, it's up to you whether you go there or not. It's my decision when I say no, I won't do it. (Q1\_60)

The respondent's perception in Q1\_60 that “you are almost always attacked” during street polls or demonstrations is also echoed by several studies that focus on violence against journalists worldwide, which is a particularly tangible phenomenon during protest events (e.g., Chinweobo-Onuoha et al., 2022; Miller & Kocan, 2022). Indeed, most of the personal accounts in the present study involving violent physical attacks took place in or around protest events.

Due to the ongoing public discourse in Germany, where hateful harassment and attacks on journalists are politically localized (e.g., “Angriffe auf Journalisten,” 2020), this topic was also included in the questionnaire. A clear picture emerged: Nine out of ten respondents (92.5%) believed that hateful harassment and attacks on journalists were politically motivated, with around 80%

of respondents placing the perpetrators in the far-right spectrum (Figure 3).

In personal accounts, responding journalists and media workers generally confirmed the notion that perpetrators of hateful harassment and attacks often have a far-right background. This is particularly evident in those accounts that report direct violent encounters. These encounters, especially with far-right protest groups and individuals participating in protest events, are most often described as violent in terms of their overall atmosphere and the protesters' behavior. The following quote serves as an example:

During demonstrations of the PEGIDA movement, my camera team was pushed or shoved several times. During riots in front of a refugee shelter in Heidenau, Saxony, my team was pelted with stones. During the riots in Chemnitz in September 2018, my team was attacked and I was pushed down a flight of stairs. (Q2\_12)

Q2\_12 illustrates both the severity and extent of physical attacks, as well as the political context of hateful harassment and attacks reported by responding journalists. As shown above, the majority of hateful harassment and attacks among responding journalists are attributed to far-right actors. The fact that Q2\_12 specifically mentions the PEGIDA movement is not surprising and is consistent with research showing that journalists and media workers have been regularly attacked directly and indirectly by the far-right group (Dostal, 2015). A specific prominent far-right protest event, the "Chemnitz riots," was also mentioned in Q2\_12. Here, thousands of far-right protesters violently marched through the Eastern German city of Chemnitz in 2018, leaving several people injured and making headlines in various news reports in Germany and beyond (Perrigo, 2018).

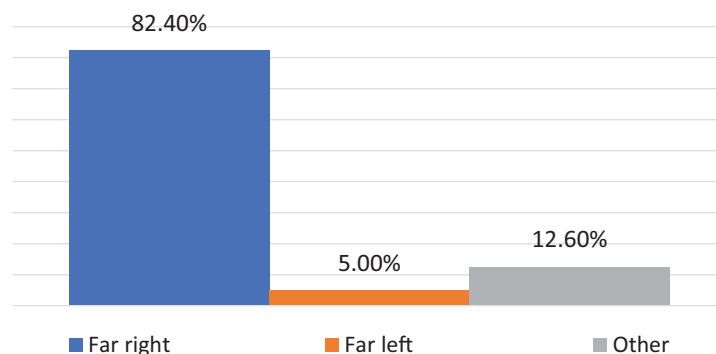
#### 4.2. Personal and Professional Consequences of Hateful Harassment and Attacks

Several studies have found that hateful harassment and attacks faced by journalists and media workers had seri-

ous personal and professional consequences (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Miller, 2023; Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Preuß et al., 2017). This was also reflected in the current data, with nearly two-thirds (63.3%) of responding journalists reporting that "the attacks have had a negative impact on my psychological well-being." The severity of the personal consequences was also discussed extensively in the personal accounts. The consequences of being the target of hateful harassment and attacks were described as multifaceted. In particular, respondents mentioned mental or emotional distress that affects both their professional and private lives. These include uncertainty, stress, fear, or frustration, leading to what most respondents described as exhaustion, generalized anxiety, or even panic. A key observation in the personal accounts is the fact that most respondents who reported mental or emotional distress also emphasized the difficulty of separating the personal and professional levels when it comes to the consequences of hateful harassment and attacks on the job. Most responding journalists attributed this to the fact that hateful harassment targets the individual personally as well as their professionalism and work ethic, as this example illustrates:

The regular and also very personally formulated attacks on me, my professionalism and work create a high stress level, which manifests itself in burn out and exhaustion symptoms, which of course also take on physical proportions. Continued humiliation also has an impact on my self-esteem—both personally and professionally. Sometimes I have to ask myself whether I even have the strength to write a certain text, to take a certain stance. Sometimes I decide against it. (Q3\_141)

The quote above highlights the severe personal and psychological consequences of hateful harassment and attacks in terms of "stress" and "symptoms of exhaustion." This is consistent with other studies in democratic countries indicating that journalists who are the targets of hateful harassment and attacks suffer severe emotional and psychological consequences (e.g., Holton et al., 2023; Kim & Shin, 2022). In addition to revealing



**Figure 3.** Political localization of hateful harassment and attacks. Note: "Where would you politically place the person(s) who attacked you?"

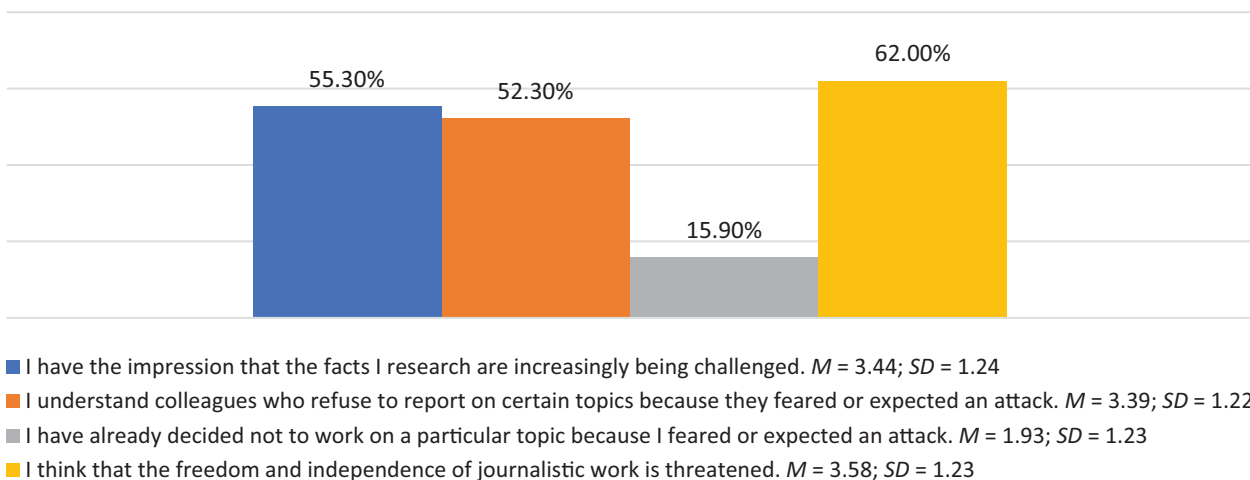
these personal consequences of hateful harassment, the quote also illustrates the fact that the consequences of hateful harassment and attacks manifest themselves on both a personal and professional level. Of particular note in this quote is the self-censorship mentioned for fear of hateful harassment and attacks as a result of reporting. As noted in Q3\_141, sometimes one simply does not have “the strength to write a certain text” and to deal with anticipated hateful harassment. This highlights the fact that the intentional avoidance of topics for fear of receiving hateful messages as a form of forced self-censorship may be a potential outcome of the hateful targeting of journalists in Germany. Some classic studies have already examined (unintentional) self-censorship by journalists as a means of avoiding general pressure (e.g., Gans, 1979). While recent empirical studies focusing on the issue of forced self-censorship for fear of hateful harassment, physical violence, and state repression have long focused on autocratic countries or historically weak democracies (e.g., Chalaby, 2000; Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020; Tapsell, 2012), several studies focusing on a number of Western liberal democracies (e.g., Sweden, Estonia, and Israel) have also examined forced self-censorship by journalists, either to avoid hateful harassment (Ivask, 2020; Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016) or as part of a strategic distortion (Panievsky, 2022) in response to populist attacks. As the current analysis shows, this issue also arises in the German context. Enforced self-censorship among responding journalists leads to what various respondents perceive as obstruction of journalistic freedom in a more general sense, as these two brief examples illustrate: “[One is] no longer free in the choice of topics—giving a lot of thought in order to not aggravate anyone” (Q3\_2) and “You contemplate more, you are no longer free and uninhibited in your reporting, you think about it even more for fear of reprisal” (Q3\_77).

The issues outlined above are also tangible on a quantitative level: Figure 4 shows the consequences of hateful harassment and attacks on a professional level. Consistent with other studies on mistrust in the news media (e.g., IPSOS, 2019), about 55% of the journalists surveyed reported that, in their view, the facts they research are increasingly being challenged. About 50% sympathized with colleagues who refused to report on certain topics because they feared or expected hateful harassment and attacks as a result of their reporting. Some respondents also reported that they had avoided a particular topic in the past. These figures show that forms of self-censorship for fear of hateful harassment and attacks are certainly an issue in the German context. Finally, there is a widespread perception among responding journalists (62%) that the freedom and independence of their work are threatened by hateful harassment and attacks.

In this context, respondents elaborate on their belief that free journalism is deeply hampered by hateful targeting and attacks. As the following quote shows, not only the choice of topics is affected by this forced self-censorship, but also the choice of words in reporting:

In the editorial department, the attacks and extreme media skepticism of the public, including inquiries from the AfD in the Broadcasting Council, sometimes result in a special caution in the choice of words, in the selection of topics. This endangers journalistic self-confidence. (Q3\_68)

Q3\_68’s quote underscores the fact that journalistic self-confidence, and thus journalistic authority, is at risk due to the hateful harassment and attacks they experienced and the prevailing anti-media atmosphere in a more general sense. Q3\_68’s allusion to media-skeptical and anti-press inquiries by AfD members to



**Figure 4.** Consequences of hateful harassment on professional work. Notes: “To what extent do you agree with the following statements?” Five-point Likert scale: *I strongly disagree*, *I disagree*, *neither/nor*, *I agree*, and *I strongly agree*; only approval (*I agree* and *I strongly agree*) is shown.



the Broadcasting Council, which serves as the supervisory board for public broadcasting in Germany, is consistent with research showing that public broadcasting and its members are specifically targeted by the far-right in Germany (Hien & Norman, 2023; Y. Rees & Papendick, 2021).

In their study of how journalists are under populist attack, Koliska and Assmann (2021) emphasize the importance of re-legitimizing journalistic work, its norms, and thus authority in combating anti-media narratives. This notion is also found in several of the personal accounts. However, as the example below illustrates, even when journalists do everything they can to avoid being a target for attacks, apply high work standards, and adhere to journalistic authority, they still face distrust, devaluation, and hateful harassment:

I chose the profession of journalism because I wanted to make my contribution to opinion-forming and information. I see our work as an important task in democracy. I studied journalism and have high standards for my work. I do extensive research, make sure that I always look at a topic from several sides, and always look for several interview partners, especially when it comes to controversial topics. Nevertheless, I am called the lying press, my work is questioned (happened several times during interviews with AfD members of parliament). It used to be that people looked with respect on a journalist from public radio, now often with contempt. (Q3\_66)

Q3\_66's quote also refers to the perception of a general decline in journalistic authority as a possible consequence of hateful harassment and attacks. Another aspect of the impact on a personal level is that it is often reflected in the accounts that hateful harassment and attacks affect journalists during work hours, but also long after work hours, e.g., in their private or free time. Some interviewees gave vivid examples of how they adapted to constant hate and attacks in order to reduce the "risk" during private activities, in this case, vacation:

Continuous insults and threats lead me to consider whether I should give my name and address to hotels or campsites or bicycle rentals, for example, when engaging in certain activities, including private travel. I need to realistically assess the risk of danger to my family. I have to develop strategies to block out the insults and threats so they don't bother me too much. I have started to exercise more to be able to defend myself if necessary. (Q3\_13)

In Q3\_13, the respondent also stated that they had started exercising "to be able to defend myself if necessary," again emphasizing the extent of hateful harassment and attacks, and their expected potential violent consequences. As noted in the quote above, the extent to which experiences of hateful targeting at work spill

over into the private sphere is a common theme in the personal accounts analyzed. This direct consequence of hateful harassment and attacks leads to difficulties in what various respondents call "switching off" from the intensity of their daily work, as highlighted in this example: "The inner state of tension is often so high that anxiety or panic states occur. The subsequent processing has become complicated in contrast to the past, switching off is hardly possible" (Q3\_76).

In addition to the inability to switch off, some personal accounts illustrate the severity of the consequences of hateful harassment and attacks, on the one hand, and the widespread prevalence of anti-media narratives, on the other hand, through the spillover into their personal social environments. Some even state that personal relationships have been affected by attacks:

If private personal relationships suffer because of these verbal attacks or the perception of the media, including one's own work, then that already burdens me. When relationships break down because the partner or friends are also of the opinion that I work for the lying press....When in some environments one no longer dares to name one's profession, then this does not pass without leaving a trace. You don't even need to be physically attacked. (Q3\_110)

Being confronted with attacks and anti-media narratives by members of one's social environment was described as particularly severe in Q3\_110. In the concluding remarks, it was even alluded that these particular and immediate consequences of hate and attacks are somewhat comparable to physical assaults.

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1. Discussion

This article sought to explore the extent, channels, and backgrounds, as well as the personal and professional consequences of hatred and attacks directed at journalists and media workers, most of whom are organized in journalists' unions in Germany. Both the quantitative descriptive and qualitative analyses show that hateful harassment and attacks on journalists are generally perceived by those affected as a serious obstacle to free and safe reporting. The free press seems to be under increasing pressure in Germany. While the quantitative descriptive findings serve to provide a general overview of the hateful harassment and attacks experienced by journalists, the personal accounts allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the severity and consequences of hateful targeting of journalists and media workers in Germany. The analysis shows that experiencing hateful harassment and attacks leads to several serious consequences for journalistic work. As research in other national contexts has also shown, these consequences include stress, fear, and frustration in the workplace;

these outcomes particularly affect those journalists who regularly face hateful targeting. However, the personal well-being of journalists is not only affected at work but also spills over into their private lives, making it difficult to “switch off.” The professional consequences of hateful harassment and attacks are just as severe as the personal ones. In their personal accounts, journalists reported that hatred and attacks had the effect of restricting the freedom of journalistic work, for example in the choice of topics. In particular, the perpetrators of hateful harassment and violent attacks on journalists in Germany are, in the eyes of the responding journalists, localized on the far-right spectrum. In Germany, far-right hate crimes have been on the rise for some time, as shown by official statistics (Ministry of the Interior, 2023). While historically disadvantaged social groups targeted by the far-right in Germany have faced the most hostility and violence, such as refugees (J. Rees et al., 2019), there is certainly reason to believe that journalists are increasingly being systematically constructed as an enemy group by far-right actors as well.

As the current study and many others focusing on different national contexts have shown, one potential consequence of hateful harassment and attacks on journalists in Germany is self-censorship by not reporting on certain topics for fear of hateful harassment as a result. Since silencing journalists appears to be the ultimate goal (Waisbord, 2020) of perpetrators, this notion is particularly troubling. Consistent with other research focusing on the harassment of journalists in Western liberal democracies (Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016), however, no significant gender differences in the experience of hateful harassment can be reported for the current study. This needs to be discussed, as a number of studies have found that female journalists face more and different forms of hateful harassment than men (cf. Chen et al., 2020; Posetti et al., 2021). One possible explanation could be that while hateful harassment is obviously directed at individual journalists, it could be argued that at its core it is directed at the free, perceived “liberal” press as a democratic institution (Dahlgren, 2018; Kim & Shin, 2022). At least in the German context, a link between anti-media sentiment and negative opinions about democracy and its institutions as a whole has already been examined (Y. Rees & Papendick, 2021). However, this link needs to be further explored and contextualized. Another facet related to this notion is the fact that the current sample is heavily composed of members of journalists’ unions. Empirical research suggests that union members tend to hold more liberal political beliefs, e.g., regarding democracy in general, support for the welfare state, or tolerance, and may even help shield their members from far-right beliefs (cf. Frymer & Grumbach, 2021). Unions themselves can be understood as “micro-democracies” (Frymer & Grumbach, 2021, p. 227). Union membership may therefore have an effect on the political beliefs of the respondents in this study, causing them to lean toward more liberal ide-

ologies, work for more liberal institutions, and consequently be more like to experience hateful harassment and attacks. However, this needs to be further investigated since this study is unable to control respondents’ personal political ideologies.

## 5.2. Limitations

The current study is certainly not without several limitations. First, the sample size of 322 responding journalists cannot be considered representative of either journalistic diversity or journalists’ experiences of hatred and attacks in Germany on a general level. It is possible that a response bias may distort the picture, for example, it may be that respondents in the study presented have been more directly affected by hateful harassment and attacks, or simply believe it to be a more important issue than others. As discussed above, one reason for this could be their union membership. Therefore, the present research is not conclusive but could serve as a starting point for a deeper and more systematic investigation of hateful harassment and attacks faced by journalists in the German context. Second, while there are several methodological advantages to analyzing personal accounts given in open-ended questions in an online questionnaire, such as the high number of responses that provide a rather rich dataset or “encourage deeper cognitive processing” (Singer & Couper, 2017), it could be argued that they are not as fruitful for qualitative analysis as, e.g., open-ended interviews. Certainly, more in-depth, qualitative interviews with affected journalists would provide a more nuanced dataset than what was analyzed for this article, as the social and psychological mechanisms of experiencing hateful harassment and attacks, as well as their personal and professional consequences, are more amenable to open qualitative methods. Personal interaction in an interview setting might help to better understand the phenomena at hand. Third, because the data were collected before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, this article cannot answer the question of how the dynamics associated with it, e.g., Covid-19 protests and the strong anti-media sentiment among the protesters, affect hatred and attacks on journalists. Research shows the importance of Covid protests for the far-right in general, but also for the spread of anti-media sentiment (Vieten, 2020).

## Acknowledgments

The project that collected the data for this article was conducted in cooperation with Mediendienst Integration and with support from the Freudenberg Foundation (project coordinator professor Dr. Andreas Zick).

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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