

# Televisual Inequalities and Gender Dynamics in German News: Health Experts During the Covid-19 Crisis

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## Abstract

This study explores gender representation among healthcare experts on German television during the first wave of Covid-19 reporting, addressing the broader issue of gender disparities in media coverage. Using Caldwell’s concept of televisuality and the audio-visual character analysis (ACIS) method for content analysis, we examined 174 corona-related news programmes that aired between 16 April and 30 April 2020. Of the 2,240 characters analyzed, 1,299 were experts, yet only 15% were women. Despite women’s strong presence in healthcare professions, men overwhelmingly dominated medical and political discussions during this period, while women were more frequently shown in supportive or emotional roles. These findings reveal a significant gender gap in the visibility and portrayal of experts during the pandemic’s early crisis communication, with men disproportionately occupying authoritative roles. This imbalance underscores how media coverage in public health emergencies continues to reinforce traditional gender norms, limiting female representation in leadership positions. The study highlights the need for more equitable media representation in crisis reporting to better reflect societal diversity and ensure inclusive communication.

## Keywords

Covid-19; gender representation; healthcare experts; televisuality; women in media

## 1. Introduction

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a profound global crisis, presenting significant health, economic, and social challenges across the world, including Germany. In hindsight, this crisis led to what Allmendinger calls an “appalling retraditionalisation” (Allmendinger, 2020, p. 1) of gender roles that has severely impacted women. This includes for example a higher burden of care work, a widened gender pay gap, and an increase

in domestic violence (Haupt et al., 2020; Institut für Höhere Studien – IHS, 2021; Kohlrausch & Zucco, 2020; Möhring et al., 2020). As a result, the female public sphere seemed to be crumbling, with women relegated to private, secluded spaces.

Despite the public healthcare sector, a primarily female-dominated area (German Medical Association, 2016; Radtke, 2021), receiving heightened media attention during the crisis, women were less visible in the televisual coverage, even given their central role and overrepresentation in systemically relevant professions (Koebe et al., 2020; Öz, 2020). Could this imbalance be a result of structural inequalities in institutional communication strategies, which may limit opportunities for female experts to engage in media appearances? Or does it reflect broader patterns of retraditionalisation that are also evident in other television programming? Various studies on gender representation in informational television (e.g., news TV) in Germany indicate that there are already fundamental subject-independent inequalities in character staging (Prommer & Linke, 2019; Prommer et al., 2021). We wanted to understand if these disparities were reproduced in the portrayal of healthcare professionals in the pandemic media coverage. We asked, to what extent did the gendered representation of medical experts in media coverage reflect broader societal inequalities? Did male-dominated media narratives reinforce systemic biases by undercutting the recognition of women's critical roles in public health? This study aims to clarify the extent to which the first wave of the pandemic, characterised by high information pressure and an extremely dynamic situation in terms of crisis communication, intensified gender-specific inequalities. Our focus is on informational television, which played a pivotal role as a reliable information source for over two-thirds of the population during the pandemic's initial phase (Appinio, 2020).

To undertake our analysis we adopt the work of Caldwell (1995), specifically his concept of “televisuality.” Caldwell describes this enduring influence of television on media users as the way in which television's visual and stylistic intensification not only shapes its imagery but also reflects the social and cultural contexts of media production (Caldwell, 2013). In times of crisis, television's heightened presence and significance make any unequal representation of women, particularly as healthcare experts, even more problematic.

In order to support our analysis with empirically reliable figures, the following question is investigated: How are experts from the healthcare sector represented in German news television and in the context of crisis-communicative televisuality during the Covid-19 pandemic? What are the gendered dimensions of this representation? We use Caldwell's concept of televisuality and ideas of visual grammar in news TV—with a special focus on gender portrayal and crisis communication—to answer these questions. To gain a holistic comprehension of gender representation in expert positions, not only but also for, the healthcare sector during the coronavirus crisis in Germany, we empirically translated our questions into the quantitative approach of audio-visual character analysis (ACIS), a specialized variation of content analysis tailored to audio-visual TV content (Prommer & Linke, 2019).

## **2. Crafting the Screen: Intersection of Televisuality in News Programmes, Character Portrayal, and Crisis Communication**

The first report on the coronavirus on German television, broadcast on 10 January 2020, described a “mysterious lung disease” in China and initially appeared unremarkable (Rosenthal, 2021). Little could we know, it would spark a media trend that dominated (informational) television in the months that followed, as

the virus itself became a “media star.” The German public broadcaster ARD/Das Erste, known for its high-quality journalism and broad audience reach, alone devoted over 20 hours of broadcasting time to coronavirus coverage from March to May 2020 (Goetz, 2022, p. 26).

It was not only the frequency of reporting, but also the televisual staging through strategies such as the selection and representations of experts that played a key role. The images and portrayals of people selected by journalists reflect and contribute to the construction of social realities (Döveling, 2019; Müller, 1997). Gender-inclusive representation in crisis communication for example promotes the idea that expertise is wide-ranging, reflecting diverse voices while exposing power dynamics and decision-making hierarchies. Caldwell’s conceptual framework of televisuality gives critical focus to staging strategies in television and examines how visual and auditory means create meaning and emotions. This opens up a deeper analytical perspective on the role of television in public perception, especially in times of crisis. In light of this study’s focus on experts during the pandemic, the concept of televisuality is examined with particular emphasis on news programmes and their key figures, followed by a brief insight into televisual crisis communication.

### ***2.1. Framing Reality: The Televisual Nature of News Programmes***

The concept of “televisuality” is a central theoretical model in media studies for analysing the particular aesthetics and production methods of television. Caldwell (1995) coined the term, describing a visual and stylistic intensification that sets television apart from other forms of media. However, this development is not just a question of aesthetics. Rather, Caldwell highlights that televisuality is a dynamic form of cultural representation that integrates diverse forms of expression and modes of representation. He emphasises: “Televisuality, as I have been using the term, is less a defining aesthetic than a kind of corporate behaviour and succession of guises” (Caldwell, 1995, p. 353). He thus underlines that televisuality is closely linked to the social and cultural contexts in which media production takes place. The news genre, characterised by staging modalities intended to convey seriousness, objectivity, and credibility, manifests televisuality in (a) the (moral) enhancement of the image, (b) the competitive media market, and (c) the dynamics of emotionalised information. Visuals are integral to content communication, as Caldwell (1995) explains: If an image lacks words, it’s discarded, and if a word lacks an image, one is created. This underscores the role of images in reinforcing narratives and conveying values that enhance the credibility of reporting (Ekström, 2000; Messaris, 1997). The reliance on visuals is tied to the competitive media landscape, in which television adapts by optimising its visual presentation to remain relevant, using dynamic graphics and infographics to convey objectivity and trustworthiness (Caldwell, 1995; Fiske, 1987).

Visual staging is also crucial in engaging viewers emotionally, improving audience retention and processing (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Gunter, 2015). Visual design is crucial not only for staging but also for character portrayals, and this is especially so in the representation of experts. How experts are visually presented influences their perceived authority and credibility, reinforcing their role in the narrative. Goffman (1979, p. 28) observes that camera angles and positioning often subtly reinforce authority. The next section expands Goffman’s observations and explores how expertise is established and emphasised through the televisuality of experts in news programmes.

## ***2.2. Bringing Expertise to the Fore: The Televisuality of Experts in News Programmes***

The televisual relevance of characters in news programmes is reflected in their deliberate staging, which goes beyond mere information delivery. Strategies like the “professional objective model” (Williams & Stroud, 2020), where journalists are expected to present unvarnished facts in a neutral manner to ensure objectivity, are used to gain and maintain viewer trust. The visual representation of different people (presenters, reporters, experts, etc.) is critical to reinforcing the genre’s commitment to objectivity and reliability. In particular, the presentation of experts in news programmes is a precisely orchestrated process that goes far beyond the mere presentation of information. Their staging is of central importance for emphasising the credibility and authority of the experts and at the same time gaining the trust of the audience.

The visual design in which experts are shown follows a series of aesthetic principles that aim to create an atmosphere of seriousness and competence. Studies show that the environment in which experts are presented has a direct influence on how they are perceived by the audience. For example, scientific or professionally designed environments convey the impression of specialist knowledge and in-depth expertise, which strengthens the credibility of the opinions expressed (Ekström & Kroon Lundell, 2011; Günther et al., 2011; Maier et al., 2010). Non-verbal communication also plays a decisive role, as experts with calm body language, focused eye contact, and controlled gestures are seen as more trustworthy and competent. These signals are used specifically to support verbal communication and make the information presented appear particularly reliable (Keppler, 2015). The choice of camera angles is also important: Experts are frequently shown in medium or long shots to emphasize their environment and, by extension, their professional authority. This is achieved not only through “alternating camera angles” (Ekström & Kroon Lundell, 2011, p. 665) but particularly in situations that use dialogue (Ekström & Kroon Lundell, 2011). All of this goes beyond a simple aesthetic approach, revealing the deeper cultural and social significance outlined in Caldwell’s reflections on televisuality (1995).

These findings emphasise the relevance of televisuality for the analysis of modern news reporting. It is not only the news content that counts, but also the way in which this content is presented. Expert presentations in news programmes are a highly complex and strategically planned process that aims to maximise the credibility of the information conveyed. The careful design of this staging (e.g., by the production team or crew), be it through the choice of background, camera angles, or non-verbal means of communication, is a central component of televisuality and makes a decisive contribution to how the audience perceives the information presented.

The importance of these staging mechanisms is particularly evident in crisis situations, where the credibility of the information conveyed and the emotional connection of the audience to the content presented are of the utmost importance. This is where televisual crisis communication unfolds its full effect by not only conveying facts, but also creating trust and emphasising the urgency of the situation through visual and performative elements. The following section takes a closer look at how these mechanisms are used in crisis communication on television and the specific challenges that arise for experts.

## ***2.3. Broadcasting Urgency: Crisis Communication and the Art of Televisual Experts***

Crises have a high news value for information programmes, as they have a profound impact on society and typically occur unexpectedly (Eilders, 2006; Zillich et al., 2011). These events require fast and precise reporting

that not only informs, but also reassures and guides. Crisis communication has an immediate, reactive, and time-limited as well as event-related character, and serves as a direct response to events that have occurred, with the aim of minimising damage (Drews, 2018; Günther et al., 2011; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Crisis-communicative structures are also evident in health contexts such as pandemics (Seeger et al., 2010). In these times of crisis, that occurred for instance during the Covid-19 pandemic, news presented in the media play a central role. Television, especially public broadcasting, was one of the most important sources of information for the German population during the pandemic (Arlt et al., 2023). The way in which crisis information was prepared and presented had a significant influence on the perception of the crisis and people's reactions to it. This demonstrates the power of televisuality in crisis communication: It is not only the content conveyed that is decisive, but also how and by whom it is presented. Gräf and Henning (2022) point out in the context of special corona broadcasts by public and private broadcasters in Germany that the "crisis-afflicted visual language" was sometimes exaggerated by deliberately choosing norm-breaking stylistic elements for news programmes (sepia-coloured, desaturated images, blurring), which underline the "nightmarish character" and "social powerlessness" (p. 8) and are combined with signalling words with negative connotations (e.g., "mutation stronghold"; p. 15). They point out that such images and narratives, in combination with other broadcast elements, coalesced to form a crisis rhetoric that was characterised by a narrow range of staging strategies.

The (continuous) presence of experts in news programmes is also essential and serves to stabilise the crisis narrative. The repeated presentation of particular experts can create a feeling of familiarity, which promotes acceptance and trust in the experts' statements. This familiarity is particularly important in long-lasting crises, as viewers seek reassurance and consistency in times of great uncertainty (Appinio, 2020; Dörner & Vogt, 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, numerous politicians and scientific experts became central figures in television news (Goetz, 2022). These experts acted not only as sources of information but also as symbolic stabilisers in a time of social upheaval (Kriesch, 2022).

In this context, it is important to scrutinise who is visible on screen in the crisis and in what function. The selection and representation of experts involves not only questions of gender equality but also intersectional factors like ethnicity and social background. Women, especially those from marginalized groups, are broadly underrepresented in the German media (Prommer et al., 2021). While the following analysis will primarily focus on gender, it is essential to acknowledge these intersectional dimensions to understand the full scope of visibility in Covid reporting (Thiele, 2019).

### **3. Empowering Few, Silencing Many: Inequality in Women's News Television Programme Roles**

The systematic investigation of women's representation on German television began with the Küchenhoff study (Küchenhoff & Bossmann, 1975), revealing the underrepresentation of women, often portrayed as passive or silent. Despite social progress, this depiction of women has changed slowly (Prommer et al., 2021). Women remain underrepresented in many areas of the media, especially in crisis reporting, where they appear less frequently as reporters and experts and often in passive roles (Sutcliffe et al., 2005). The media industry continues to practice gender-specific segregation across its programming, including in terms of how women are portrayed (Caldwell, 2013). Women are frequently depicted in stereotypical, less visible roles and within limited contexts (Eilders, 1997, 2006; Ekström, 2000).

This section provides insights into the presence of women in informational programmes on German television, focusing first on their televisual staging in roles, followed by an analysis of their representation in news media during the coronavirus crisis.

### **3.1. Women in German Television News Programmes**

Following the Küchenhoff study (Küchenhoff & Bossmann, 1975), German researcher Monika Weiderer extended the research in 1990, focussing on the presence and image of women on domestic television. She concluded that women appeared more often in news television, e.g., the number of women experts had increased from 0.9% in 1975 to 4.3% in 1990 (Klaus, 2005; Prommer & Linke, 2019). The topics associated with women also became more diverse (Weiderer, 1993). Nevertheless, she also found that women had less speaking time in informational programmes than men, sometimes less than half (women: 193s; men: 499s).

In 1997, the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research found that only 18% of experts in news programmes were women and they were more frequently present in “soft” news topics such as culture and society (Becker & Becker, 2001). An internal study by various European television stations, which analysed the German station ZDF, among others, for the German market in 1997/1998, found similar results (Eie, 1998). The study found that the proportion of women on air was 29% and showed topic-specific dependencies: The proportion of women, regardless of their position (expert, journalist, etc.), was higher when it came to human relationships, family, health, and social issues (Prommer & Linke, 2019).

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) not only tracks the proportion of women in the news but also examines whether women are thematically discussed. In 2010, women were featured in 28% of television news discussions (Journalistinnenbund, 2010). In 2015, however, the GMMP report showed little progress, even though the cut-off date of the 2015 study was marked by a shocking news event in Germany (25 March 2015): The crash of the German Wings plane in the French Alps. Additionally, the reporting on individual crash victims (two teachers and 14 schoolgirls) and public individuals (including Chancellor Angela Merkel, who issued an official statement on the tragedy) would have suggested an increase was to be expected (Journalistinnenbund, 2016).

In 2017, the MaLisa Foundation and the University of Rostock published their first report on audiovisual diversity in the German television landscape as part of a systematic and wide-ranging study of positions and topics in German television. They showed that women represented only 32% of people in informational programmes (Prommer & Linke, 2019). The only role in which there was parity was that of presenter, where young to middle-aged women tended to be more visible (47% in total). Women were selected to appear as experts only 21% of the time. In all other on-screen roles they were below parity. The follow-up study from 2021 reveals similar trends: The proportion of women in German informational programmes was 33%, while the proportion of women experts was 26% (Prommer et al., 2021).

It is particularly striking that women experts in the fields of health and nursing are already less prevalent than their male colleagues (2017: 28%; 2021: 26%; Prommer & Linke, 2019; Prommer et al., 2021). This paradox, given the predominantly female health sector and balanced gender ratio among doctors (e.g., German Medical Association, 2016), highlights how Prommer and colleagues’ foundational work provides a crucial framework for analyzing gender portrayal. Building on this, our study explores how health crises, such as

Covid-19, affect these already distorted realities, focusing on crisis communication as a unique context for gendered televisuality. How health crises (such as the Covid-19 pandemic) can affect already distorted realities in information programming will be examined and demonstrated in more detail below using existing findings on Covid-19 television reporting at an international level. These insights will prove useful for our own study.

### **3.2. Women In Corona Television Reporting**

Firstly, it is notable that experts became central figures in the media during the Covid-19 pandemic, serving as trustworthy sources of information and advice (Mihelj et al., 2022) during a period characterized alternatively by information scarcity and then overload. However, a look at the international studies on coronavirus reporting on television shows that there was a significant underrepresentation of women in the televisual portrayal of coronavirus experts worldwide as well as distorting moments in the portrayal of women as central figures in overcoming the pandemic. The GMMP report from 2021 found that despite an increase in the proportion of women in general reporting, their visibility in Covid-19-related television news decreased and they were portrayed in only 27% of the relevant reports (Macharia et al., 2021).

Studies by Al-Serhan et al. (2022) also confirm these results for Jordan, where men as experts were significantly more often and positively presented on television during the pandemic. In the UK, a study by the Expert Women Project found that in March 2020 there were almost three times as many men as women experts on leading TV and radio news programmes (2.7:1), the highest level in three years (Expert Women Project, 2020). In a comparative international study, Ioannidis et al. (2021) show women were present in only 12% to 24% of TV appearances of experts during the pandemic in the USA, Denmark, Greece, and Switzerland. In addition, Tezel et al. (2020) reveal that in the USA women made up just under a third of guests on primetime programmes and that conservative channels such as Fox News had a particularly low proportion of only 12% women speakers. Similar trends were also observed in Canada and Portugal (Araújo et al., 2022; Taboada, 2020). The underrepresentation of women in pandemic programming runs across different countries and media landscapes (Kassova, 2020).

Combining these findings with research on crisis communication shows that narrative structures on television often reinforce patriarchal structures during times of crisis (Dörner & Vogt, 2020; Journalistinnenbund, 2010, 2016; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). So, for example, during the pandemic, men were predominantly emphasised as rational and controlled, while women were portrayed as empathetic and supportive. This gendered narrative segregation reinforces stereotypical roles and reduces the visibility of women as decision-makers in crisis situations (Haupt et al., 2020; Lewis, 2021).

These insights from an international context show that women are definitely at risk of being marginalised and disappearing from the public stage in times of crisis, despite their significance in, not only but particularly, the health sector. However, in the context of corona reporting, there is currently still a deficit of analysis of the German television landscape. This research gap is addressed by this study, which focuses on the representation of experts from the German healthcare sector.

## 4. The Study: Hypotheses, Methods, and Sample

At the centre of this study is the question of how experts from the healthcare sector were portrayed on German news television during the Covid-19 pandemic and what role crisis-communicative televisuality played in this. The hypotheses, methodology, and central operationalization are presented below. Finally, the sample is described in order to gain a clear picture of gender-specific representation in crisis reporting.

### 4.1. Hypotheses

The development of the hypotheses is based on the theoretical foundations and previous research results on the gender-specific representation of experts on television, especially in the context of crisis-communicative televisuality during the Covid-19 pandemic:

H1: During the Covid-19 pandemic, men experts from the healthcare sector are shown on German news television significantly more often and at higher hierarchical levels as well as in more prominent professional positions than their female colleagues, despite the overrepresentation of women in the healthcare sector.

Studies show a systematic underrepresentation of women in expert roles in German news media (Prommer & Linke, 2019; Prommer et al., 2021). This tendency is reinforced by crisis communication and was also visible internationally during the Covid-19 pandemic (Al-Serhan et al., 2022; Ioannidis et al., 2021):

H2: During the Covid-19 pandemic, men experts from the healthcare sector appearing on German news television are more frequently invited to comment on rational, political subject areas, while women experts are significantly more frequently invited to comment on “soft” topics such as care and the social sector.

During the pandemic, the portrayal of men and women in the media was characterised by gender-specific stereotypes. Men tend to be shown in factual and rational contexts, while women are pushed into emotional and supportive roles, which contributes to the retraditionalisation of gender roles in times of crisis (Al-Serhan et al., 2022; Allmendinger, 2020; Caldwell, 1995; Ioannidis et al., 2021; Prommer & Linke, 2019).

While H1 focuses more on the frequency of representation and the hierarchical levels of the positions of men and women experts on television, H2 looks at the distribution of the subject areas (narratives) in which these experts appear and compares the frequency of this representation in specific subject areas. These descriptive hypotheses are suitable for exploratory research.

### 4.2. Methodology and Operationalisation

Caldwell's (1995) concept of televisuality, particularly televisual staging, is designed especially for individual analyses of the programmes provided. However, the aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive insight into television news programmes in Germany during the first coronavirus lockdown in Germany. Therefore, a particular challenge was to develop categories that address televisual aspects of the staging of persons without becoming too compartmentalised. In order to provide a comprehensive insight, the categories must



be designed to be applicable across different news formats and still capture the specific staging strategies used during the pandemic. This means that the categories need to be both specific enough to highlight differences and particularities in staging and general enough to allow for a coherent analysis across different programmes. The methodological approach we devised makes it possible to identify and analyse both individual differences and overarching trends in television news coverage during the lockdown.

#### 4.2.1. Method

The stored television data were systematically analysed using a standardised content analysis. We used the ACIS method for this purpose (Linke & Prommer, 2021). ACIS stands for audio-visual character analysis and is a method that has proven successful in audiovisual content analyses with different programme types and media offerings (Prommer & Linke, 2017; Prommer et al., 2021, 2022; Wegner & Stüwe, 2021; Wegner et al., 2022). The quintessence of this approach, which is based on the methodological principles of the content analysis found in communication science, is the adoption of an unbiased and thus uninformed viewer perspective. From this perspective, the corona-related contributions were systematically analysed and coded. Adopting this approach not only sets a good standard for the coding process itself in the recording of audiovisual products, but also ensures high intercoder reliability of the data due to the consistent application of a neutral perspective throughout the analysis. Aggregated values were used to calculate reliability, as individual reliability values for each coding category could not be determined due to insufficient data in formal and content-specific categories. For this study, our five coders, who were student assistants with special training in coding audio-visual material, had an overall Holsti consistently above 0.85 (85% agreement) between the coding categories.

#### 4.2.2. Characters and Experts

The selection of the characters is based on the televisual translation of their portrayal and functions for this study via their defined presence. They had to fulfil three staging conditions in order to be included in the analysis: (a) they had to be central and visible in the picture (e.g., medium long shot, full shot, close shot); (b) they had to speak audibly/loudly (e.g., as presenter or as expert in interview situations); and (c) their name had to be clearly visible/audible (e.g., via graphic caption or mentioned at least twice by reporters). For examples of characters used in the analysis, see Figures 1 and 2. This strict procedure allowed background figures to be deliberately faded out and televisual aspects to be consciously utilised in the expert staging.



**Figure 1.** Tagesschau (News show—ARD/Das Erste) | 17 April 2020 (8 pm).



**Figure 2.** Maischberger, Die Woche (Talk show—ARD/Das Erste) | 29 April 2020.

Since the study focuses on experts, these functions are described in more detail. Experts are defined as those characters who, at the first moment of perception, speak in the context of their professional role (e.g., representatives of the Robert Koch Institute, scientists, doctors). While titles (e.g., “Dr.”) were optional, institutional affiliations of any kind were mandatory to substantiate their expertise. Their role is thus defined less by their personal involvement and more by their professional expertise. Expert roles were coded based on their professional context rather than private identities.

#### 4.2.3. Categories

The determination of the gender of the people depicted is based on the studies using ACIS, which have already worked with information programmes (Prommer & Linke, 2017; Prommer et al., 2021). The “name gender” (Verhoeven, 2024) of the characters (e.g., Sandra Maischberger—woman; Lothar Wieler—man) is used to derive gender attributions for “man,” “woman,” and “diverse.” This is followed by a further categorisation and more detailed analysis of the figure’s professional fields and positions/hierarchies (e.g., profession), as well as the recording of the topics/narratives addressed by the experts.

#### 4.3. The Sample

For the present study, television informational broadcasts were recorded in situ during the period from 16 April 2020 to 30 April 2020. The recordings, which included the German television informational programmes ARD/Das Erste, ZDF, RTL, and Sat.1, took place between 6 pm and midnight. The content was captured in real-time as the programs were aired and stored on external hard drives for further analysis. The recordings contain (a) the first informative television reporting on corona from the first lockdown in Germany in the spring of 2020, (b) the most-watched channels in Germany (public and private-commercial), and (c) the most-watched television time of day (evening to night programme). Television informational programmes are those that are clearly journalistic, present up-to-date and researched information, and are presented in established formats. In the defined period of 15 days,  $N = 174$  TV information programmes were included in the analysis (Table 1). The focus was exclusively on content dealing explicitly with the coronavirus, which resulted in a total of 62 hours and 38 minutes of material.

**Table 1.** Sample of main broadcasters (N = 174).

ARD/Das Erste	ZDF	RTL	Sat.1
Tagesschau	heute	RTL aktuell	Sat.1. Nachrichten
Tagesthemen	heute journal	Stern TV	Bild Corona Spezial
ARD extra	ZDF spezial	Magazines	Magazines
Magazines	Magazines		
Reports	Reports		
Talk shows	Talk shows		
N = 54	N = 58	N = 35	N = 27

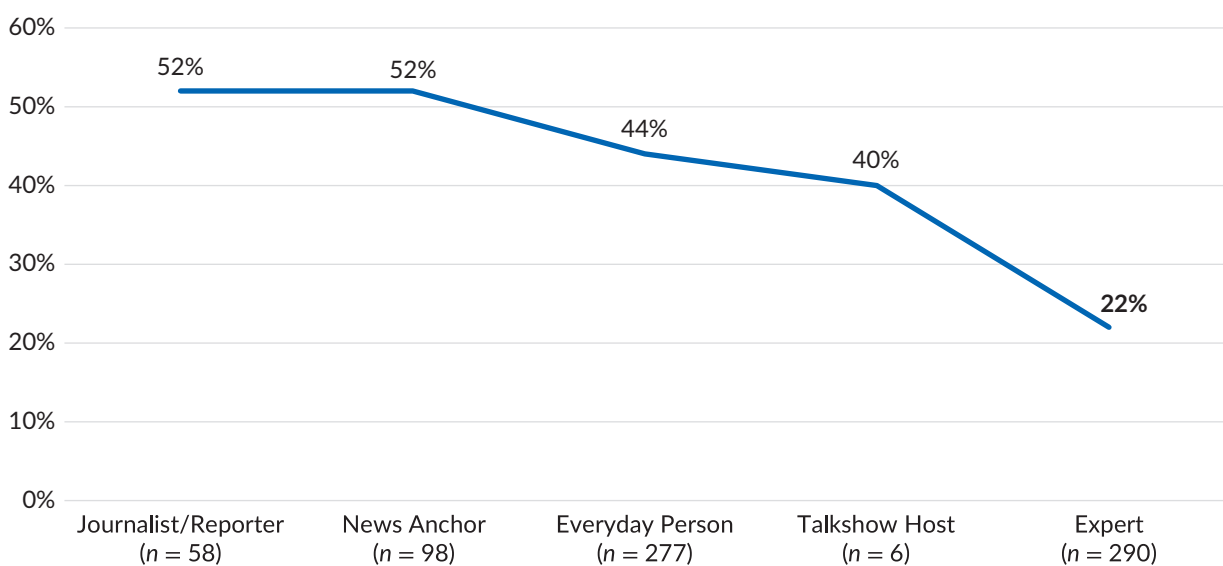
Please note as this is a complete survey for the time period, the following results are to be considered significant regardless of the test procedure. It should also be noted that only “women” and “men” were coded for the sample, meaning that only those gender categories are shown.

## 5. Results

In our sample of 2,240 characters across 174 recorded informational programmes, 1,299 characters (58%) were identified as experts related to the coronavirus, forming the largest group of all recorded individuals. Since the study focuses on their televisual role during Covid coverage, these results encompass all experts initially surveyed, before being further narrowed down to those specifically from the health sector.

### 5.1. Gender and Expertise in Pandemic Media: Representation Across Formats and Sectors

Of the 1,299 experts surveyed, 290 were coded as women (22%) and 1,009 as men (78%). This means that experts are the role with the lowest percentage of women in the sample (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Gender distribution (women) of experts by role.

During the period covered, the proportion of women experts remained constant at around 22–23%. Public broadcasters such as ARD/Das Erste (25%) and ZDF (23%) featured more women in this role than the private broadcasters RTL (19%) and Sat.1 (17%). Women appeared most frequently in magazines, reports, and documentaries (30%), as well as interview and talk programmes (28%). There is thus a significant correlation between the length of the programme and the likelihood of women appearing as experts: In the longer formats (from 31 min), the proportion was up to 31%. Men therefore appeared more frequently in prominent, short special programmes.

The analysis also takes into account the experts' professions. This makes clear which professional fields are represented televisually in front of the camera and who is authorised to talk about certain topics in terms of gender-specific assignment. The majority of experts come from politics (women: 23%), followed by healthcare (women: 15%), and sales & services (women: 32%). Gender-specific differences are clear: Women are more represented in "soft" topic areas like the fashion & lifestyle sector (60%) while men dominate the financial sector (92%). Let's take a closer look at the experts from the healthcare sector.

## **5.2. Overworked, but Underrepresented: The Televisual Gender Covid-19 Gap**

A total of 273 (21%) healthcare experts were identified for the period under review, including 41 women (15%) and 233 men (85%). These experts appeared most frequently in news programmes (68%,  $n = 185$ ), followed by magazines (14%,  $n = 39$ ), and special programmes (12%,  $n = 33$ ). The gender ratios show that men experts clearly dominate the news programmes: They accounted for 87% ( $n = 160$ ) of all appearances, while women made up only 14% ( $n = 25$ ) of the experts. In magazine programmes, the proportion of women was slightly higher at 20%, but with a relatively small number of cases ( $n = 8$ ).

Most women experts were shown on ARD/Das Erste (20%,  $n = 16$ ), followed by ZDF (18%,  $n = 17$ ). Private channels such as RTL and Sat.1 showed almost exclusively men experts with an average of 92% ( $n = 89$ ). Here, too, there is a significant correlation between the length of a programme and the appearance of women as experts: The longer the content, the more likely they are to appear. Women experts from the healthcare sector also tend to be younger. They are most common in the age group up to 49 years, where they account for 30% ( $n = 22$ ). In contrast, their male colleagues are significantly more frequently represented at an older age, e.g., in the 50+ category with a share of 91% ( $n = 181$ ). This age gap is remarkable.

Of the 273 experts in the healthcare sector, 56% ( $n = 154$ ) are in a management position, 18% ( $n = 48$ ) are in a mid-level professional position, and 26% ( $n = 72$ ) are in supporting or not clearly assignable positions. Overall, men were more frequently represented in management positions, with the proportion of men experts totalling 91% ( $n = 140$ ), while the proportion of women experts was only 9% ( $n = 14$ ). The discrepancy is less pronounced in middle professional positions, but still exists: Here, women make up 29% ( $n = 14$ ), while men make up 71% ( $n = 34$ ).

The most frequently featured experts were physicians, medical directors, and chief physicians, who made up 36% ( $n = 95$ ) of the appearances, followed by (senior) virologists, epidemiologists, and infection researchers with 20% ( $n = 54$ ). The proportion of nursing professionals represented was 2% ( $n = 6$ ). These figures can also be broken down by gender. A closer look at the distribution of roles reveals that men dominate as health experts on television, both as heads of renowned institutes and as doctors without management roles. Among

all general practitioners and hospital doctors, 90% of interviewees were men and only 10% were women, despite women making up almost half (47%) of all doctors in Germany (Destatis, 2018). In fields like virology, where 45% of professionals are women, they remain underrepresented on screen—only 18% of all recorded virologists and epidemiologists were women. In the area of nursing, the ratio was reversed, with five women nurses (80%) compared to one male nurse (20%; Table 2).

**Table 2.** Health areas of the experts by gender (selection).

	Women	%	Men	%	Total
Doctor Total	10	10	89	90	99
Medical Directorate/Chief Physicians	0	0	43	100	43
Doctor (various specialities, anaesthesia, hygiene/environmental medicine, etc.) at management level	4	15	22	85	26
Doctor (various specialities, anaesthesia, hygiene/environmental medicine, etc.) in mid-level professional position	6	20	24	80	30
Epidemiologists/Virologists Total	4	18	18	82	22
Epidemiologists/Virologists Chief	1	7	13	93	14
Epidemiologists/Virologists Normal	3	38	5	63	8
Psychologists Total	3	75	1	25	4
Psychologist at management level	1	100	0	0	1
Psychologist in mid-level professional position	2	67	1	33	3
Nursing Total	5	83	1	17	6
Nursing at management level	2	100	0	0	2
Nursing staff	—	—	—	—	—
(Vice) Praesidium of healthcare organisations and associations (Robert Koch Institute/Paul-Ehrlich, German Medical Association, Society for Pneumology, Hospital Association, etc.)	2	4	50	96	52

When analysing the individuals by name, an additional, clear imbalance is noticeable. The sample lists 149 men experts and 37 women experts. Among the men, Lothar Wieler, president of the Robert Koch Institute, appears most frequently (15 appearances), followed by Lars Schaade, his vice president (11 appearances), Georg Christian Zinn, laboratory director of a hygiene centre (8 appearances), Christian Drosten, senior virologist at Charité (6 appearances), and Alexander Kekulé, senior virologist at Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg (five appearances). Among the women, Melanie Brinkmann, virologist at the Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research, appears most frequently (three appearances), followed by Cornelia Betsch, psychologist at the University of Erfurt, and virologist Ulrike Protzer (two appearances each). The remaining women experts appear only once each in front of the camera. This shows that men are staged much more frequently and repeatedly as experts, while women appear in the media much less frequently and less continuously—often only once.

### 5.3. Prescription for Silence: Intersectional Imbalances in Televisual Covid-19 Narratives

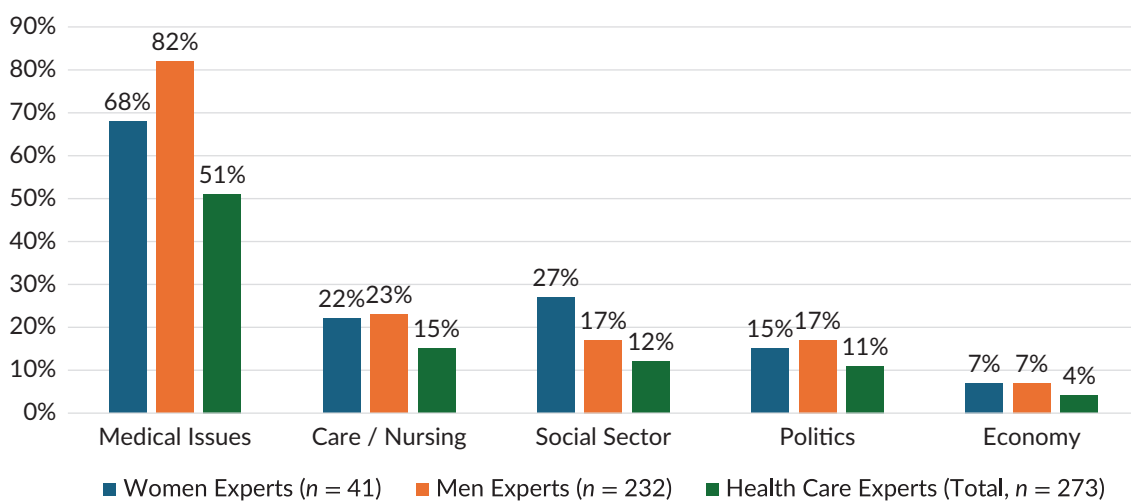
For all experts ( $N = 1,299$ ), the topics discussed on camera were recorded using a multiple coding process to comprehensively capture their televisual narratives. The top three topics overall were political topics (26%,

$n = 563$ ), business/finance (19%,  $n = 412$ ), and medical topics (18%,  $n = 387$ ). Among healthcare experts ( $n = 273$ ), medical topics dominated with 51% ( $n = 217$ ), followed by care/nursing (15%,  $n = 63$ ), and social services (12%,  $n = 51$ ). Overall, 56% of medical topics and 59% of nursing topics were presented by healthcare experts.

The focus of health experts' topics varied by genre. Medical topics led in news programmes (80%,  $n = 148$ ) and magazines/reports/documentaries (76%,  $n = 32$ ). Political topics were significant in special programmes (21%,  $n = 7$ ) and news (10%,  $n = 19$ ), while care/nursing and social issues were present across genres but played a lesser role in news (care/nursing: 15%,  $n = 27$ ; social issues: 15%,  $n = 28$ ) and special programmes (care/nursing: 36%,  $n = 12$ ; social issues: 12%,  $n = 4$ ). A gender-specific analysis shows that women experts from the healthcare sector spoke predominantly about medical topics, with 68% ( $n = 28$ ) of their contributions belonging to this area. In comparison, men experts addressed medical topics even more frequently, with a share of 82% ( $n = 189$ ). Care/nursing was a similar important topic for both genders. Furthermore, women experts were more strongly represented in the social area, with 27% ( $n = 11$ ) of their contributions dedicated to these topics. Political topics played a role for both genders, but the proportion was slightly higher for men at 17% ( $n = 39$ ) than for women at 15% ( $n = 6$ ; Figure 4).

Senior male healthcare experts dominate in “strong” topics, contributing 62% ( $n = 24$ ) in politics and 53% ( $n = 8$ ) in economics. Even in medical discussions, they lead with 63% ( $n = 119$ ) of contributions. In contrast, women in leadership roles are more focused on “weaker” topics, contributing only 29% ( $n = 8$ ) to medical issues and showing less presence in politics and economics. However, in mid-level positions, where more women are represented, they engage more with medical topics (36%,  $n = 10$ ) and social issues (36%,  $n = 4$ ), reinforcing a thematic division between men and women.

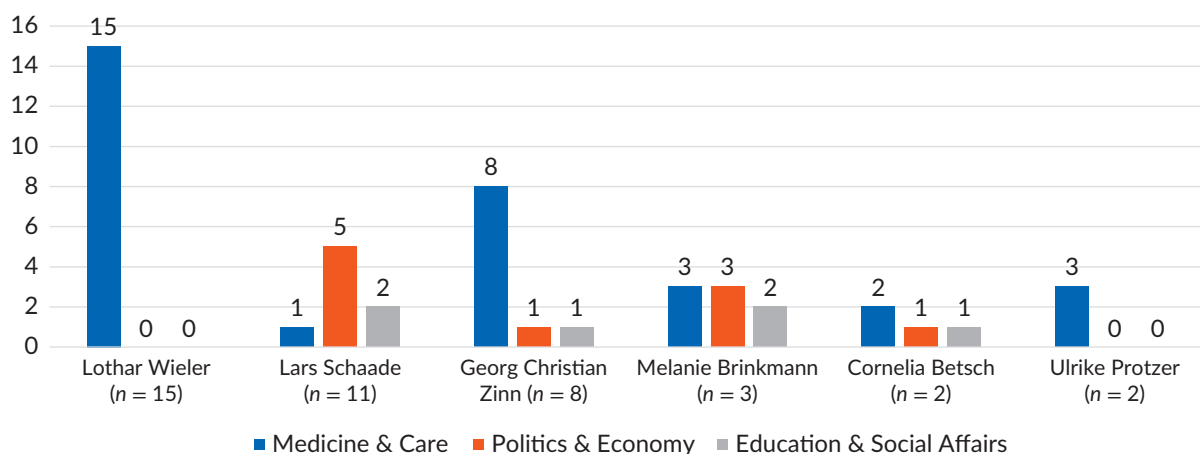
The most notable difference is that younger experts, especially women, focus more on social and care issues, while older men dominate discussions on politics and economics, and have a stronger presence in medical topics. Younger women contribute 14% to medical discussions and are visible in care/nursing (22%) and social topics (9%). In contrast, older experts (50+) dominate in politics (77%) and economics (73%), while also leading in medical discussions (78%), reinforcing their authority across critical areas.



**Figure 4.** Topics of the health experts by gender (selection).

This focus on specialized topics could lead to younger women's contributions being seen as less central, while the dominance of older men in politically and economically decisive areas strengthens their authority. This highlights how gender and age intersect to shape the Covid narrative and the televisual presence of health experts.

Finally, a brief overview of the range of topics covered by the most frequently featured health experts on television shows notable gender differences. The analysis reveals that Lothar Wieler, head of the Robert Koch Institute, focused exclusively on medical topics in all 15 of his appearances. In contrast, his deputy, Lars Schaade, showed a more diverse narrative, contributing to political and economic (five times) and social topics (two times). Georg Christian Zinn also focused on medical issues but engaged with other subject areas. Among women, Helmholtz virologist Melanie Brinkmann, though appearing only three times, demonstrated the most holistic approach. She addressed medical, political, economic, and social topics, while psychologist Cornelia Betsch also showed a broad narrative range in her two appearances. Virologist Ulrike Protzer, however, stayed within the medical field in her two appearances. This shows that men health experts on television during the Covid-19 pandemic tended to focus on a singular topic in the narrative, while women experts, despite fewer appearances, offered more diverse narratives (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Selected health experts and topics using specific examples.

## 6. Discussion

This study sought to address the research question: How were healthcare experts represented on German news television during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly within the framework of crisis-communicative televisuality? To explore this, the study incorporated Caldwell's (1995) concept of televisuality and analyzed the staging strategies of experts in news broadcasts, with a special focus on gender representation, especially in German informational programmes and prior studies on Covid reporting.

The theoretical principles outlined are now reflected on and categorized in connection with the study's findings. The following discussion is guided by the two key hypotheses presented in Section 4.1.

### 6.1. Gendered Hierarchies and Visibility: Experts Under the Corona Lens

H1 is clearly confirmed on the basis of the available data. The analysis of the televisually staged and portrayed experts in television information reporting during the first corona lockdown reveals their importance in crisis communication on the one hand, but also striking gender differences on the other. Fifty-eight percent of all recorded individuals were staged as experts, confirming their central role in the media (Mihelj et al., 2022). Of the 273 healthcare experts, only 15% were women, predominantly young and not in leading positions. In prominent short news formats with an average broadcast length of 15 minutes, the proportion of women even fell by one percentage point. This is in stark contrast to the actual situation in the healthcare sector, which—apart from management positions—is dominated by women (see German Medical Association, 2016; Prommer & Linke, 2019). A particularly revealing observation in this context is that even women in the highest positions do not automatically enjoy a higher media presence. For instance, German Chancellor Angela Merkel had 31 news appearances, while Markus Söder, a federal state leader (Bavaria), had nearly the same with 30 appearances. Despite their differing ranks, this near parity suggests that even women in high positions must compete for visibility, as their authority isn't automatically acknowledged. This highlights how traditional gender roles still shape media reporting, where a woman's hierarchical status holds less sway (Eilders, 2006; Prommer & Linke, 2019; Prommer et al., 2021).

Another striking difference can be seen in the frequency of appearances by the health(care) experts: Lothar Wieler, president of the Robert Koch Institute, appeared 15 times, while the most prominent woman expert, Melanie Brinkmann, only made three appearances. This imbalance underscores the media's preference for male voices and authorities in health communication (Arlt et al., 2023; Ekström & Kroon Lundell, 2011).

The repeated staging of (the same) male experts helps them become more familiar and trusted in a parasocial context for the audience, especially in crises when the public relies on expert guidance through television (see Appinio, 2020; Arlt et al., 2023; Dörner & Vogt, 2020). This dominant male presence fosters the narrative of the steady man guiding the public through uncertainty and overcoming the crisis, reinforcing the notion that men's opinions are considered more valid and trustworthy during a pandemic. This dynamic risks sidelining valuable insights and perspectives from women experts and diminishing the diversity and quality of crisis-related health communication (see Prommer et al., 2021).

The television portrayal of male health experts as the primary authorities during the pandemic therefore reinforces traditional gender roles. Women, if portrayed at all, often appear in supportive or non-leading roles, perpetuating the societal norm that men lead and women follow (Eilders, 1997; Prommer & Linke, 2019). This dynamic reduces the visibility of women in leadership positions and downplays their essential contributions, particularly in fields like healthcare, where women are the majority (Journalistinnenbund, 2016; Sutcliffe et al., 2005).

This gender imbalance in media representation has serious consequences for the healthcare sector. It devalues the significant role women play in a pandemic response, which could demoralize female professionals and worsen existing gender disparities in career progression and decision-making (Günther et al., 2011; Prommer et al., 2021). Moreover, the focus on male expertise may hinder the development of well-rounded health strategies by neglecting diverse perspectives.



## 6.2. Thematic Gender Bias in Expert Portrayals: Unmasking the Corona Divide

H2 can also be confirmed considering the results. Health experts ensured that medical, social, and care topics made up 51% of the total coverage. Their expertise played a key role in bringing these issues to the forefront of televised discussions. A closer look at the gender-specific distribution within these subject areas reveals significant gendered differences in the frequency of presentation. Men experts dominated in the presentation of medical topics, while women experts had a significantly stronger presence in social and care-related areas.

It is particularly striking that men experts in leading positions covered a wider range of topics, including political and economic issues. This is consistent with previous research findings, which suggest that men are often portrayed in the media as rational and objective, particularly in politically relevant contexts. Women in leadership positions, on the other hand, tended to be limited to more specific topics such as care and social issues, which is in line with existing stereotypes that locate women in more emotional or supportive roles (see Eilders, 2006; Ekström, 2000; Prommer & Linke, 2019; Prommer et al., 2021). The analysis also shows age-related differences in thematic orientation. Younger women experts focused more on social and care-related topics, while older men experts spoke on more politically and economically dominant topics. This observation is in line with the findings of Prommer et al. (2021), which show that younger women are often used in the media in less central or less prestigious subject areas.

Küchenhoff's 1975 observation, "Men act, women appear" (Küchenhoff & Bossmann, 1975), remains relevant in the portrayal of health experts during the first Covid-19 lockdown. Our intersectional analysis reveals that media coverage reinforced gender and age stereotypes. Older men are perceived as more dominant and authoritative voices in political and economic discussions while women and younger experts were sidelined and reduced to less valued central topics (Keppler, 2015). These findings suggest that the gendered and age-related distribution of topics on television may contribute to cementing existing power structures and role models in public perception. Research shows that the way in which experts are presented on television significantly influences how their expertise and authority are perceived by the audience (Günther et al., 2011). This televisual competence gap, shaped by age, gender, and profession, perpetuates power structures and societal roles, limiting the visibility and perceived authority of women and younger experts in key social discourses, contributing to the "retraditionalization" of roles (Allmendinger, 2020).

In addition, the detailed analysis of Covid-19 narratives uncovers clear differences in the portrayal of male and female health experts on television. While male experts like Lothar Wieler tend to focus narrowly on medical topics, women experts such as Melanie Brinkmann covered a much broader range of topics, despite being less present, by talking about medical as well as political, economic, and social issues.

The analysis thus reveals a holistic approach in the narratives of women, whereas men tend to be coded as mono-focused. This breadth of coverage can enhance the perceived versatility of women experts, but it may also dilute their authority in specific fields (Maier et al., 2010). In contrast, the mono-focused portrayal of men strengthens their role as specialized experts, reinforcing their televisual authority, albeit at the expense of a more comprehensive discussion of the topics. At the same time, however, this one-sided focus can lead to other important aspects of a topic being neglected. The extent to which the audience follow and evaluate these differences is subject to further research.

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis of Covid-19 television reporting in Germany reveals that structural factors within media production influence gender roles, particularly during crises. Caldwell's concept of televisuality elucidates how aesthetic and narrative techniques amplify gendered disparities. Repeated visual framing of male experts as authoritative figures, juxtaposed against women in supportive roles, underscores entrenched power dynamics. Camera strategies and unequal speaking time further exacerbate these inequalities, as evidenced by the disproportionate visibility of male healthcare leaders.

These findings highlight the potential erosion of public trust caused by unequal media representation. Perpetuating gender stereotypes risks alienating diverse audiences and undermining inclusive public discourse. Increasing the visibility of women would contribute to a more accurate societal portrayal, build public trust, and enhance crisis communication effectiveness.

Targeted action from various stakeholders is essential. Media teams should prioritize gender-balanced expert selection, while institutions and organizations can promote female spokespeople and provide media training. The higher visibility of women on public broadcasters would also benefit from diversity mandates or evolving audience expectations, reflecting societal shifts toward gender inclusivity. Policymakers could implement guidelines or incentives to ensure equitable representation in crisis communication and public discourse.

The study highlights how televisual elements, such as expert portrayal and narrative construction, can be quantified, shedding light on gender-specific differences in media representation and their impact on public perception. However, the study's methodological design limits its ability to capture all nuances of televisual aesthetics and stylistic staging. Future research, using anchor examples or case studies, could deepen the understanding of how gender roles are mediated in television reporting. While this study provides valuable insights into the visibility of female experts, it does not examine the underlying factors that drive their underrepresentation. Expert selection is influenced by multiple factors, including the availability of spokespeople and recruitment strategies, which were not explored here. Future research should investigate these mechanisms, taking into account institutional practices and media production dynamics. Combining quantitative data with qualitative methods, such as interviews with production staff, would address these gaps and offer a more comprehensive understanding of gender representation in crisis communication.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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