

Article

## Pitching Gender in a Racist Tune: The Affective Publics of the #120decibel Campaign

Shari Adlung<sup>1,\*</sup>, Margreth Lünenborg<sup>1</sup> and Christoph Raetzsch<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Journalism Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, 14195 Berlin, Germany;  
E-Mails: shari.adlung@fu-berlin.de (S.A.), margreth.luenenborg@fu-berlin.de (M.L.)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Media and Journalism Studies, Aarhus University, 8200 Aarhus, Denmark; E-Mail: craetzsch@cc.au.dk

\* Corresponding author

Submitted: 15 October 2021 | Accepted: 27 November 2021 | Published: 23 March 2021

### Abstract

This article analyses the changed structures, actors and modes of communication that characterise ‘dissonant public spheres.’ With the #120decibel campaign by the German Identitarian Movement in 2018, gender and migration were pitched in a racist tune, absorbing feminist concerns and positions into neo-nationalistic, misogynist and xenophobic propaganda. The article examines the case of #120decibel as an instance of ‘affective publics’ (Lünenborg, 2019a) where forms of feminist protest and emancipatory hashtag activism are absorbed by anti-migration campaigners. Employing the infrastructure and network logics of social media platforms, the campaign gained public exposure and sought political legitimacy through strategies of dissonance, in which a racial solidarity against the liberal state order was formed. Parallel structures of networking and echo-chamber amplification were established, where right-wing media articulate fringe positions in an attempt to protect the rights of white women to be safe in public spaces. #120decibel is analysed and discussed here as characteristic of the ambivalent role and dynamics of affective publics in societies challenged by an increasing number of actors forming an alliance on anti-migration issues based on questionable feminist positions.

### Keywords

#120decibel; affective publics; dissonant public spheres; feminism; Germany; hashjacking; migration; racism; right-wing activism; populism

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Gender and Media: Recent Trends in Theory, Methodology and Research Subjects” edited by Sofie Van Bauwel (Ghent University, Belgium) and Tonny Krijnen (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands).

© 2021 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

In the past decades, an increasing mobilisation of right-wing actors on social media has been observed by feminist scholars and political scientists (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Sauer, 2020; Sorce, 2018). Such actors seek to delegitimise feminist positions or rewrite them for their own agitation where women’s rights are turned into an argument against immigration. Fear of sexual violence is stirred up to support political demands for curbing migration flows and enhanced policing of public order. Quite often, such demands are voiced by a younger generation of primarily male lead figures who

seek broader legitimacy for their claims by teaming up with female figures. But gender is not only instrumentalised by the far right in the anti-migration issue, as Sauer emphasises: “The radical right actively engages in ongoing gender struggles, in transformations of gender relations, in order to transform liberal democracies and to push towards a new hegemonic project” (2020, p. 27). Angry dissonance and an offensive stance towards the liberal state order are characteristic of these movements and their interventions in feminist struggles. This article proposes a theoretical and methodological approach for analysing such affective modes of communication in ‘dissonant public spheres.’ Based on a case

study of the #120decibel campaign, which was launched in January 2018 by the German-Austrian Identitarian Movement (German: *Identitäre Bewegung*, also referred to as Generation Identity; see Richards, 2019), the analysis shows how emotions like fear and anger underwrite the political thrust of the campaign as a way of governing people (Sauer & Penz, 2017), relying on demarcations of inclusion and exclusion to produce social positions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Lünenborg, 2019b). The focus on the affective dynamics around and within the campaign further allows us to understand how emotionally expressive interventions by right-wing actors seek to instrumentalise feminist positions for propagandistic purposes.

The case of #120decibel serves as a representative example of strategies that rely on affective dynamics and the divisive potential of right-wing activism. Presented as a grassroots campaign of white, Western European women against the alleged violence of migrant men in Europe, the campaign poses as an empowerment strategy for women’s rights. However, it openly supports an anti-migration and racialised discourse on cultural uniformity and national identity. Geared primarily to social media, the campaign exploits a “technically and organisationally mediated ‘unmediatedness’” as Krämer has put it (2017, p. 1298). Followers get seemingly direct access to populist leaders through highly complex infrastructures of mediation and networking. The empirical data for this article is based on the video of the #120decibel campaign itself, comments and replies posted by users under the official campaign video (in German) on YouTube ( $n = 1,130$ , obtained through the YouTube Comment Scraper on July 4, 2019) and a collection of all tweets around the campaign containing the hashtag #120db on Twitter (January to June 2018). The data from Twitter is especially useful for retracing the network of actors and the structures of the #120decibel campaign, whereas the different affective modes of communication around the campaign become apparent in the video itself and the users’ comments. We combine these data sources to offer a comprehensive analysis of the affective publics emerging around the campaign.

The first part of our article discusses how populist actors are increasingly absorbing emancipatory strategies in the name of right-wing agitation. These strategies are pervaded by affective modes of communication targeting potential followers. They aim to create and spread dissonance in political debates, confusing (or destabilising) key terms to create legitimacy for actors’ causes. The second part presents the case study of #120decibel based on the central analytic categories of actors, structures and modes of dissonant publics. Here we retrace the specific dynamics of the circulation of online content, their main actors and structures, and especially their affective modes (solidarity among women, polarisation, amplification). In the concluding outlook section, we discuss implications for feminist media studies, highlighting long-term effects of such campaigns and the gradual incorporation into seemingly ‘alternative’ world

views which perpetuate a reactionary philosophy of feminism. We also address the methodological challenges of analysing the circulation of such content in a highly fluid online environment.

## 2. Populist Absorption of Emancipatory Strategies through Affective Communication

Emancipatory articulations and other inclusive forms of communication around feminist politics have long dominated the research agenda in feminist media studies. Prominent examples of feminist online activism include #SayHerName, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen and #GirlsLikeUs (Brown, Ray, Summers, & Fraistat, 2017; Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles, 2018; Kuo, 2018), where intersectional inequalities and power hierarchies within the feminist movement have also been exposed. In light of #MeToo or its German predecessor #Aufschrei (#Outcry; Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Maireder & Schlögl, 2014), social media have facilitated and shaped new spaces of emancipatory articulation, especially for actors misrepresented or ignored in journalistic discourse.

These emancipatory potentials, though, are becoming gradually absorbed by populist and right-wing actors on social media and the web, posing significant challenges for feminist media studies, both analytically and methodologically. Emancipatory objectives such as the protection of women’s rights are put at the service of reactionary nationalist propaganda spreading online. Social media and global networks of circulation are strategically used to spread misinformation, taking advantage of social media’s algorithmic logics of popularity to spread content widely (Faris et al., 2017; Guenther, Ruhrmann, Bischoff, Penzel, & Weber, 2020; Zerback, Töpfl, & Knöpfle, 2020). Such strategies by alt-right actors are characterised by the circumvention of institutionalised actors such as journalists or political parties to create publics for their causes. Campaigns are developed to recruit followers broadly disenfranchised from mainstream discourses, who are supplied with oppositional world views, news resources and images. As Krämer points out: “We may witness the development of distinctively right-wing populist elements in the lifestyle of distinct milieus (with their own symbols, language, and practices that transcend the political sphere in the narrow sense)” (2017, p. 1297). Such strategies are less bound to right-wing party politics but work laterally to influence the perception and framing of political issues through their own host of terminologies, platforms, actors and cultural tropes. Fielitz and Marcks (2019) argue that this form of “digital fascism” persists on established “myths of menace” (p. 2) from outside forces endangering the cultural integrity of a national (and often racial) community, seeking to establish “new orders of perception prone to fascism” (p. 8). One strategy on social media is to “blur the difference between abstract structures and concrete events” (p. 10), always taking individual incidents as representative of a larger systematic failure

in society and pitching their significance in a constant climate of fear. In the long run, individual events are used to perpetuate a gradual change in public discourses where “the mutual production and amplification of fear is the central transmission belt between the structural conditions of social media and the inherent logic of fascism” (p. 19).

Forms of ‘online misogyny’ (Ging & Siapera, 2018), ‘hashjacking’ (Darius & Stephany, 2019; Knüpfer, Hoffmann, & Voskresenskii, 2020) and racist propaganda in the name of human rights (Richards, 2019; Schneiker, 2019) are becoming more widespread strategies to directly enlist social media followers for reactionary politics and forge anti-elitist, nationalistic and radicalised discourses. In the case of #120decibel, a discourse on women’s safety in public spaces is constructed as a threat to the cultural norms of the German nation (and its population) and the apparent failure of its political system to ensure basic human rights. The primary aim of the campaign simply seems to only call attention to violence against women by giving voice to them as potential victims of male, migrant perpetrators. But by pitching gender in such a racist tune, the campaign employs a familiar obfuscation strategy of right-wing agitation: Nurturing a populist agenda through a simplistic notion of women’s emancipation. Speaking in defence of safety here creates a mandate for militant solidarity among white women against an ominous threat, a discursive move that can be considered to have created the threat in the first place.

Such cases illustrate a wider trend towards ‘dissonant public spheres’ that characteristically exhibit new actors, structures and modes of communication, especially in online contexts (Pfetsch, 2018). Arguments and political positions are bound up in an inextricable mix of information, opinions and emotional appeals circulated as affective communication with often incompatible viewpoints.

As political issues are continuously instrumentalised in affective publics, it becomes problematic to uphold a terminology of deliberation and rational discourse to explain them (Lünenborg, 2020). As Pfetsch, Löblich, and Eilders argue (2018, p. 482), the co-existence of many issue publics—their ruptures, contradictions and contentions—requires an understanding of ‘dissonant public spheres’ as including both the unrelated juxtaposition of various public contributions from personal, semi-public and public sources and explicit counter-talk to a perceived hegemonic perspective articulated in journalistic media (Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2018). Dissonant publics are shaped through affects and are remarkable for three aspects: *New actors* emerge as discursive authorities, often employing an anti-institutional and anti-hegemonic thrust in their communication. The *changed structures* of these public spheres often rely on the specific logics of online platforms and enable new kinds of transnational networking of actors, upholding thematic solidarity from issue to issue. Such structures enable *new modes of expressive affectivity*—anger,

shock, solidarity and empathy—whereby new actors are engaged and can possibly be enlisted in political campaigns. The temporal dynamics of network communication, linguistic informality (including irony) and direct feedback contribute to increasing dissonance and reveal the affective dynamics of online contention (Pfetsch et al., 2018, p. 485).

The notion of ‘affective publics’ (Lünenborg, 2020; Papacharissi, 2015) focuses on the specific tone and modality of communication in digitally networked contexts, or what Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) have identified as an “affective news stream” (p. 279). Although the affective intensity varies greatly, the relational and processual character of communication in digital environments evolves constantly in the interaction between many participants and media technologies, creating what Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit (2015) have called ‘networked affect.’ Affect becomes relevant for feminist research in networked and mediated communication, because it offers theoretical perspectives to go beyond dichotomist distinctions of us and them, brain and body, human and non-human, men and women (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018). Affect thus describes this dynamic, relational occurrence through which actors and objects are connected to one another. The analysis of affective dynamics aims at situational and relational events in their physical/bodily expression among actors. In a critical perspective, the effects of affect are organising inclusion and exclusion and are thus producing social positions such as ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Especially in the context of migration issues, right-wing actors exhibit blunt forms of racism that allow affective modes of public discourse to become dominant.

The #120decibel campaign exemplifies this dynamic of affective publics within a dissonant public sphere. The video absorbs feminist politics into a reactionary, propagandist campaign that appropriates concepts such as gender equality and feminist politics in the name of agitation and racist fear-mongering. The goal of this article is to demonstrate how the specific pitch of this campaign resonates with the structural logics of distribution and attention in social media, in which conditions of dissonance and affective communication emerge that oppose and seek to dismantle deliberative processes.

### 3. The Case of #120decibel: Absorbing Feminism into Pitched Online Circulation

The #120decibel campaign was launched January 30, 2018, and was featured on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These social media platforms were mainly used to distribute a protest video titled *German Women Rise Up!* (in German: *Frauen wehrt euch!*; 120decibel, 2019), e.g., on the social media accounts of the lead figure of Generation Identity, Martin Sellner. By invoking hashtags against sexual violence, e.g., #MeToo from 2017 or the campaign #Aufschrei (#Outcry) from 2013, the #120decibel activists present themselves as the “real

outcry.” The protagonists of this campaign purport to represent all (white, European) women left unprotected by a failing, pro-migrant liberal state and mobilise for a racially segregated affective alliance of women against an alleged invasion from outside Europe. On the now defunct website of the campaign, #120decibel was consciously positioned as a German, patriotic response to #MeToo:

Join in, stand up and let them hear your voice! 120 decibel is the sound volume of a pocket alarm, which now is carried by many women. 120 decibel is the name of our movement, which will sound the alarm and warn *against imported violence*. Join the movement and use the hashtag #120db to tell us your experience with violence, alienation, and sexual abuse. (120decibel, 2019; emphasis added)

In the almost four-minute video *German Woman Rise Up!* various young women speak directly into the camera, set in seemingly private surroundings and underlined by dramatic music: “My name is Mia. My name is Maria. My name is Ebba.” They speak on behalf of European victims of violence committed by refugees. A threatening scenario is laid out, in which a seemingly personal experience is used to give the impression that any and every woman could become the next victim by suggesting that “they could be me and I could be them.” The video makes the message tangible: “My name is Ebba. I was stabbed in Kandel,” citing a widely-known alt-right symbol of migrant violence against women that has been instrumentalised since 2017 to form a supposed women’s alliance against migration. The protagonists of the video emotionalise and personalise the experience of threat by migrant perpetrators, stirring up fear and representing themselves as activists who will counter this threat and “be loud.” The message is clear: “Because you refuse to secure our borders, because you refuse to control who is coming in, because you refuse to deport criminals,” women need to stand up and ensure their own safety. Drüeke and Klaus (2019, pp. 90–92) have analysed the content of the campaign and shown how the video is attributing sexualised violence and misogyny to a threatening ‘other.’ This strategy is based on absorbing feminist discourses of self-determination into a simplified solidarity of *feminine* identities, thereby marking migration as the core threat to self-determination of (white, Western European) women. The discursive strategy consciously invokes debates about New Year’s Eve in Cologne 2015/2016 (Dietze, 2016), where sexual violence against women was presented and negotiated as a cultural problem caused by failed integration into mainstream German society. In response to the racialised discourse on New Year’s Eve in Cologne and pinpointing its ‘ethno-sexist’ framing (Dietze, 2016), the hashtag #ausnahmslos (#noexception) initiated a public debate on sexualised violence in Germany against all women while exposing the close connection between racism

and anti-feminism (Hark & Villa, 2020). The #120decibel video was distributed on different channels, many of which have been deleted in the meantime. Multiple channels reached over 100,000 clicks with this video. The online campaign went hand in hand with direct action in the streets and public interventions (see Figure 1). On February 17, 2018, the *Frauenmarsch* (women’s march) took place in Berlin. This protest was organised by Leyla Bilge, a politician of the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany). *Frauenmarsch* called for the “protection of the German woman from imported violence” (in German: *Schutz der deutschen Frau vor importierter Gewalt*). On February 19, 2018, the #120decibel group disrupted a public #MeToo discussion during the Berlinale film festival with banners, flyers and noise. On March 23, 2018, during the protest action Dead Girls Don’t Lie (in German: *Tote Mädchen lügen nicht*), activists staged themselves as dead women in blood, memorialising the murder of a 17-year-old girl in Flensburg.

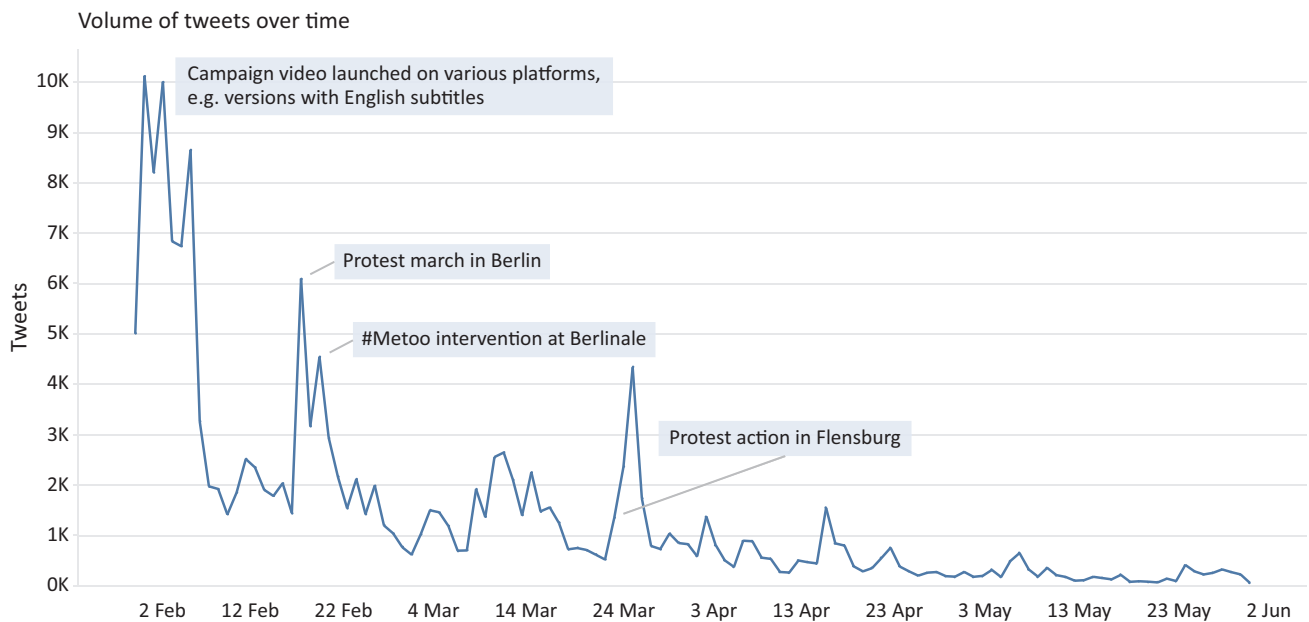
Interventions and events in public spaces sustain attention for the campaign and typically coincide with high circulation of online content and tweets. The data generated around the hashtag #120db on Twitter shows a clear hierarchy of a few highly-connected accounts. These accounts act as nodes to create connections (ties) by sharing images and links (Himmelboim, Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman, & Espina, 2017, pp. 2, 6), circulating the hashtag and content from affiliated accounts. The collection of all Twitter activity under the hashtag #120db between the campaign’s launch on January 30, and its phasing out towards May 31, 2018, includes 172,972 tweets from 44,834 unique user accounts.

For our analysis of actors, structures and modes of affective publics, we relied on a smaller sample from the same dataset, collecting all tweets ( $n = 24,115$ ) from the most ‘popular’ nodes ( $n = 60$ ). We used a basic measure of indegree to identify the most mentioned and retweeted users in the network. The outdegree leaders in this dataset act as diffusers of messages (Tyshchuk, Li, Ji, & Wallace, 2014, p. 12). While indegree leaders account for most of the original content being created, outdegree leaders support the diffusion of messages in the network, often as bots that artificially ‘game’ the metrics of Twitter to create popularity for the campaign.

In the following sections, we will present the central findings about actors, structures and modes of the #120decibel campaign.

### 3.1. Actors: Few Accounts Drive Circulation

The analysis of Twitter data shows that very few nodes in the networks of accounts are the main driving forces in the circulation of #120decibel and the content created around the campaign. The 30 most prominent in- and outdegree leaders in the dataset account for most of the network dynamics and the high visibility of the hashtag. An indegree leader (AmyMek) reaches a value



**Figure 1.** Activity on Twitter around the hashtag #120decibel, showing how offline events typically coincide with increased online activity, following the wide circulation of the hashtag at the start of the campaign on January 30, 2018.

of 11,940, whereas the 30th most prominent account (Samtpfote29) only reaches a value of 773. The outdegree leaders differ in a range from 4,557 (\_macmike) to 226 (angelneptustar).

The main content producers of #120decibel are represented among the 30 indegree leaders as so-called authorities or “crowdsourced elites” (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012, p. 274). These few accounts create a lot of content as well as being frequently retweeted and linked to specific actors. A key figure here is Martin Sellner. He hosted the campaign website, supported the distribution of the video on his YouTube channel, and he is an indegree leader on Twitter. Analysing the other accounts supports the assumption that Martin Sellner and Generation Identity in general are central to the online spread of the campaign (Sorce, 2018). Sellner is personally connected to many of the content producers, such as his wife Brittany Pettibone and their friend Nick Monroe (nickmon1112). Personal accounts of the German Generation Identity Movement are also among the indegree leaders as well as GenIdentLondon and GenIdentEngland. Our analysis shows that all of the identifiable indegree leaders are representatives of different alt-right movements working in concert with the anti-migration protest. In the run-up to the campaign, people from Generation Identity were also connected to the positions of #120decibel, introducing actors such as Berit Franziska (also known as Annika S.), who ran a right-wing, anti-feminist blog and appeared in long interviews together with Martin Sellner (most videos deleted now). This kind of ‘authentic’ content by the campaign’s protagonists is later referenced during the campaign and strategically positioned to validate their messages and long-term engagement.

Right-wing media and websites also play a central role here. Examples are jouwatch, DefendEvropa or allegedly crowd-sourced journalistic offers such as RefugeeCrimeMap. Such sites become discursive authorities in the dissonant public sphere of #120decibel by reporting positively about the campaign or substantiating the #120decibel agenda with additional content. Right-wing media take over journalistic functions for their audiences by offering ‘alternative viewpoints’ and presenting their content in a professional style across different platforms and outlets. This parallel journalistic coverage sustains and legitimises the alleged protest movement in approving tones. A few commenters on YouTube explicitly make argumentative reference to sources such as politikversagen.net, unzensuriert.de or journalistenwatch.com, outlets which have a clear agenda against the political status quo and legacy media. Numerous specific resources are also mentioned that purport to map the increased violence against women, such as rapefugees.net (although the site distances itself from right-wing propaganda) or ehrenmord.de. While the scope of actors on YouTube is broader, the use of established journalistic resources is widely limited to documenting and proving the increase of attacks against women. In a single instance, a user lists 25 links to journalistic media and alt-right outlets covering alleged rape cases in his YouTube comment; most other commenters do not link to anything.

The 30 outdegree leaders in the Twitter dataset act as diffusers, and are responsible for the reach of #120decibel. Many accounts are anonymous and have meanwhile been blocked (as of November 2020). Only four of the 30 accounts can be identified. Many of the anonymous ones have conspicuous characteristics, which

suggests a goal-oriented use of the accounts known from social bots: Automated follow-back and retweeting artificially increase the reach of the hashtag within the network logics of Twitter. With three basic tests, we identified several accounts as social bots in the group of outdegree leaders, knowing fully well that a clear reliable identification method is still not available. Based on previous studies, however, we classified accounts as social bots when they a) generate more than 50 tweets on average per day, b) have a ratio of less than 1.3 between followers and follow backs and c) have 3,000 followers or more (see Keller & Klinger, 2019, p. 177). In our sample, the outdegree of social bots is about three times higher than the outdegree of inconspicuous users. Among these social bots are accounts such as IsidorMeyer1, which produces 522 tweets on average per day and follows approximately 7,000 accounts, but is also followed back about as often. Another account is identified as \_macmike, who is the outdegree leader. This account alone produces a quarter of all tweets in the sample, posting an average of 183 tweets per day and following 4,800 other accounts (as of July 2018). The analysis of the outdegree leaders shows that they are often metrics-based, automated accounts which appropriate and ‘game’ the logics of social media infrastructure (Petre, Duffy, & Hund, 2019) to imitate mass circulation and thereby sustain the relevance and urgency of the campaign.

### *3.2. Structures: Using Social Media Infrastructure to Fake an Outcry*

The actors use the infrastructure of social media in order to create urgency through circulation within very short time frames. Their use differs decisively from the use of social media in digital activism through the purposive employment of automated accounts that disseminate messages, links and hashtags. But the extensive use of the hashtag does not correlate with the high number of women actually giving witness, as in #Outcry or #MeToo. For example, the account gab.ai/myerikd marks police reports or newspaper articles (mostly from obscure online sources) with #120decibel, in which the victim is a woman and the perpetrator seems to be a migrant. The infrastructure of social media enables low-cost ‘astroturfing,’ creating with just a few users “an impression of widespread public concern about an issue where little or no genuine public concern may exist” (Harcup, 2014, p. 22). The specific dynamics of online circulation here suggest a front of solidarity among women against migrant violence, while actors in this network exploit network structures and their logics deliberately to absorb women’s rights into anti-migration propaganda and thereby enlist more followers to their cause. The #120decibel campaign is staged with human actors, those acting as indegree leaders and as the ‘faces’ of the video, while the relevance and urgency of the cause is sustained by social bots to generate reach. Using the infrastructure of Twitter and YouTube, a transna-

tional network is formed, linking mainly actors from the USA, Great Britain, Germany and Austria (see Knüpfner et al., 2020). This network creates a topic-related solidarity against migration under the #120decibel hashtag and propagates associated events and content created around it to underline the legitimacy of its cause.

### *3.3. Modes: From Solidarity to Polarisation—Affective Intensities*

The analysed actors appropriate the infrastructure of social media platforms in very specific ways to drive affective flows and user engagement with the controversial topic of the campaign. These modes of affective communication are most visible in the staging of the video and the bodily performance of the main actors in it, the affective flow of responses to the video on Twitter and YouTube as well as the increasing polarisation of the debate. These modes can be analysed by a method that Berg, von Scheve, Ural, and Walter-Jochum (2019, p. 47) call “reading for affect.” Relying on Reddy (2001), ‘emotives’ become specific forms of speech acts that do not simply have emotions as referents, but are performatives that ‘do things to the world’: “Emotives are themselves instruments for directly changing, building, hiding, intensifying emotions” (Reddy, 2001, p. 105). Affect in language can thus be identified by three elements: Attribution of emotion words to specific actors, linguistic collectivisation and the materiality of discourse itself. Different actors in and around the campaign use emotives as performative speech acts to create affective intensities that account for the relevance of the theme of the campaign. These affective intensities coalesce around three core themes: solidarity among women, polarisation and amplification.

#### *3.3.1. Solidarity among Women*

The video itself stages a type of witnessing through bodily representation by women: The campaign emulates strategies of a grassroots movement to give voice to marginalised actors: “My name is Anna, my name is Mia, I was stabbed in Kandel, I was raped in Malmö, I was tortured in Rotherham.” Emulating the voice and posture of a personal witness, the bodies of these white, middle-class women demarcate a Western, European identity and cultural affinity to viewers from similar backgrounds. Using the performative pattern of feminist protests, the statements here offer a choreography of performed accusations. Through the dissonance between a political outrage and the apparent familiarity of their home surroundings, the women in the video contrast sharply with the alleged threat of a hostile world invaded by migrant perpetrators. Their visual presence introduces them as young white women, made up with care, and placed in neat middle-class living rooms that feature candles and bookshelves. The voices of the actors, the light used and the spatial surroundings

create a stereotypical female/feminine (not feminist!) notion of collectivity. The cosy atmosphere produces a space of belonging for those familiar with such a lifestyle, offering an imagined community of German/Austrian ‘us’ as opposed to ‘the others/them’ threatening this very safety. As these women vehemently demand to be safe, they also urge women to take safety (and pocket alarms) into their own hands, raising their voices on a marginalised issue, seemingly in self-defence and in an attempt to garner support. This affective intensity and collectivisation is mirrored on YouTube, where comments of approval and admiration for the protagonists’ ‘courage’ are overwhelmingly represented.

### 3.3.2. Polarisation

The strategy of polarisation can be traced throughout the video and in YouTube comments. For example, there is a cut in the video at minute 2:20: The music stops, a black screen separates the introductory ‘testimonial part’ from a direct acclamatory address of the protagonists to the viewer: “It can’t go on like this,” says the lead figure in the video (Paula Winterfeldt, a protagonist of Generation Identity Germany), “going jogging at night has become the most dangerous kind of sport *for us*,” says another (Franziska), changing the register to a direct form of address: “We fight back.” Ariane says: “#120decibel is the name of our resistance initiative—by women for women.” The affective mode of soft female conviviality is harshly interrupted. The ‘other,’ the ‘foreign’ migrant has invaded the cosy home and is threatening the community of white, Western women. Leaving the soft sound of togetherness, the performing women articulate “the real outcry,” announcing to bring the perpetrators to justice and encouraging women “to be loud.” They ask their viewers to share their experiences “as women” on social media, using a discursive framing of *Entfremdung* (alienation, estrangement), *Belästigung* (molestation) and *Gewalt* (violence). The polarisation spills over into a direct call for action and the sustained need for collective solidarity of women: “I want YOU to become active....Become part of our movement.” With the establishment of a clear division between victims and perpetrators, the video legitimises self-defence and connects it to a larger opposition to the political system itself. This polarised climate is mirrored in a number of comments on YouTube: Either the German government (as a system of party and business interests or simply as “Merkel”) is seen as the reason for failure, attracting perpetrators from “archaic societies,” or the creators of the video and their followers are attacked for their divisive politics.

### 3.3.3. Amplification

The affective intensities around the video tend towards a greater amplification of polarised viewpoints and opinions. In the majority of comments on YouTube, users react overtly with positive and supportive responses.

One user writes: “Yes, ‘they’ are lurking everywhere, but really. Uuuunbeliiiiivable [clown smiley]” (anonymised reference, translation and approximation of typography in German by authors for this and all following citations). Here, the materiality of discourse itself produces affective intensity. Another user voices a more general tone of comments: “Well done start of the campaign, at the right time, in the right tone.” Yet another user writes: “I am so happy that there is now this community.” The most liked comment here reads: “Thank you for showing face and sticking out your head. Because the greatest fear is still that someone discovers right[-wing] ideas. The fear of being raped or stabbed comes later.” But it also has to be noted that many comments openly expose the right-wing rhetoric of the video and oppose the alleged threat: “All this stupid gossip about foreigners. I can’t hear this crap anymore....Nazis should be forbidden!” While these opposing perspectives are mostly isolated, there are also few occasions where patterns of an exchange between users appear in comments and replies to each other. Yet, these exchanges are equally charged with dissonant rhetoric and seemingly incompatible political world views. References to legacy media or alternative, right-wing media are few: Most of the links to these outlets in the dataset are posted by only one user in a single, very long comment. The affective structure of discourse is marked by antagonist positions, not producing any kind of direct interaction or dialogue.

These confrontational arguments do not aim at deliberation, but at the loudest possible dissonance. This pattern is further amplified by the use of emojis and capitalisation of core messages along with repeated exclamation marks, openly hostile insults and the use of derogatory language. These ‘emotives’ (Reddy) performatively produce affective recharging. The line of confrontation runs between the various system critics united in anti-migration protest and the government which is perceived as pro-migrant. This ‘illegitimate’ system also includes institutions that support it, e.g., established media outlets. Both occasional and intense users of YouTube and Twitter are implicated in an anti-migrant “neo-community” that unites around the rejection of liberal state orders and modern individualism, even if their individual motivations are incompatible. As an ‘affective community’ (Zink, 2019), the notion of belonging is established by the revival of essentialism, threatened cultural traditions and the re-biologisation of political categories (Koppetsch, 2019, p. 163). Its affective structure is based on a defence against outsiders and critics and the amplification within various parallel structures of communication (e.g., personal messengers, private social media accounts).

## 4. Outlook: Implications for Feminist Scholarship with Digital Methods on Digital Media

With #120decibel we observe a strategic transnational alliance of anti-migration protesters. They represent

common fears and offer simple solutions to complex problems of migration, social justice or cultural identity. The movement relies on a few strongly networked actors to create the sense of a grassroots action from below. Part of the dissemination strategy is driven through metric-based actors, increasing reach through retweeting on a massive scale by use of semi-automation. This form of ‘astroturfing’ imitates an ad hoc public but conceals the purposeful actions geared at ‘gaming the algorithm’ of Twitter or YouTube. Yet, there is a great difference between waves of solidarity that are technically initiated and the actual support by only a few actors when it comes to action on the street or interventions in offline public fora. By imitating feminist protest practices as well as hashjacking #MeToo or #Aufschrei (Knüpfer et al., 2020), attempts are made to overturn and instrumentalise feminist debates. This strategic action is not aimed at deliberation but at creating dissonance and disorientation around the terms being used by actors in public debates. Loud and affective dissonance with regard to the allegedly pro-migrant liberal state order becomes an end in itself. This dissonance aims at the delegitimisation of the existing political system and at the same time affirms the legitimacy of the ‘neo-community’ of migration critics. Parallel structures fulfil journalistic functions for this community and strengthen actors by establishing self-referential networks where women’s rights are instrumentalised against migration. Such a dissonant, affective formation must be understood as an elementary strategy of these actors, which endangers the democratic consensus and communicative foundation of society (Schatto-Eckrodt, Boberg, Wintterlin, Frischlich, & Quandt, 2019).

It is the specific quality of these ‘networked affects’ (Hillis et al., 2015) on which extreme right-wing actors are relying heavily when producing racist and anti-feminist sentiments. Affective dynamics in social media are characterised by high intensities as an outcome of polarisation, provocation, irony and personal affection. While a vast amount of research has looked at the positive effects of solidarity and empowerment through affective strategies (Nikunen, 2018; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012), our research shows a similar capacity for exclusionary discourse to delimit forms of national and cultural belonging. Radical right-wing actors strategically use a discourse on women’s rights to affectively exclude migrants from an imagined, biologicistic national community. By celebrating white women’s bodies and ‘female conviviality’ in need of defence, an affective community is produced against the embodied threats of the ‘other.’ What we find is a deliberately agitational campaign for reactionary politics in the name of women’s safety which, as Krämer points out, requires “an optimum between vagueness and clarity” (2017, p. 1300) to appeal to many different users of social media. The subject of violence against women here merely serves as a highly conflictual perspective on how the state and society are presented as failing in general, motivating feelings of resis-

tance and making it legitimate to take law into one’s own hands.

The case study also shows practical research challenges for gender media studies. The instability and fluidity of the web make certain research practices difficult that rely on the stability and findability of sources. Discourses must be viewed and archived immediately and on various platforms, since actors often switch between accounts or are forced to use different platforms due to legal and terms of service violations (e.g., hate speech). Research on such fluid networks is further limited by the long-time span between data collection, analysis, writing and publishing. A lot of primary material may already have become inaccessible to the reader once an article is published as concerns several sources used in this article. Standard academic citation practices here cannot ensure the findability of content as much as they may contribute inadvertently to a further increase of attention and circulation of such material. Here, the characteristics of the web are exploited by right-wing actors, who change platforms and channels frequently, mirror content across sites and delete offensive material after receiving complaints. This quick pace of relocating content can often be interpreted as a deliberate obfuscation strategy. Over time, exposure to such material is more difficult to retrace from a research interest, but its long-term effects are a slow incorporation in a right-wing world view over seemingly inconspicuous and even positive political causes. The reinterpretation of feminist politics used in such campaigns underlines that scholars need to pay more attention to the latent, gradual absorption of key terms into reactionary propaganda. By employing the advocacy for social causes in the language of the afflicted, this kind of propaganda consciously rests on mobilising affective publics through seemingly bottom-up modes of address that gain public attention through the inherent logics of social media networks. Dissonance becomes a mode of public communication, is intensified and made acceptable over time, by rejecting established modes of deliberation and representation.

### Acknowledgments

We thank Curd Knüpfer, Matthias Hoffmann and Vadim Voskresenskii for providing us with the smaller sample from their dataset, obtained via the George Washington University’s Social Feed Manager. We also thank our student assistants Laura Laugwitz and Ann-Kristin Grobe for their support.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### References

120decibel. (2019, July 26). *Archived website of the 120decibel campaign* [Video file]. Retrieved from



- <https://web.archive.org/web/20190726191136/https://www.120-db.info/en>
- Berg, A. L., von Scheve, C., Ural, N. Y., & Walter-Jochum, R. (2019). Reading for affect: A methodological proposal for analyzing affective dynamics in discourse. In A. Kahl. (Ed.), *Analyzing affective societies: Methods and methodologies* (1st ed., pp. 45–62). London: Routledge.
- Brown, M., Ray, R., Summers, E., & Fraistat, N. (2017). #SayHerName: A case study of intersectional social media activism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(11), 1831–1846.
- Darius, P., & Stephany, F. (2019). “Hashjacking” the debate: Polarisation strategies of Germany’s political far-right on Twitter. In I. Weber, K. M. Darwish, C. Wagner, E. Zagheni, L. Nelson, S. Aref, & F. Flöck (Eds.), *Social informatics: Proceedings of the 11th international conference, SocInfo 2019* (pp. 298–308). Cham: Springer.
- Dietze, G. (2016). Ethnosexismus: Sex-Mob-Narrative um die Kölner Silvesternacht [Ethnosexismus: Sex mob narratives around Cologne New Year’s Eve]. *Movements: Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies*, 2(1). <http://movements-journal.org/issues/03.rassismus/10.dietze--ethnos>
- Drüeke, R., & Klaus, E. (2019). Die Instrumentalisierung von Frauen\*rechten in rechten Diskursen am Beispiel der Kampagne #120db [The instrumentalisation of women’s rights in right-wing discourses using the example of campaign #120db]. *existus.htmlGENDER: Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft*, 3, 84–99.
- Drüeke, R., & Zobl, E. (2016). Online feminist protest against sexism: The German-language hashtag #aufschrei. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16(1), 35–54.
- Faris, R. M., Roberts, H., Etling, B., Bourassa, N., Zuckerman, E., & Benkler, Y. (2017). *Partisanship, propaganda, and disinformation: Online media and the 2016 U.S. presidential election*. Cambridge, MA: Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society. Retrieved from <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/33759251>
- Fielitz, M., & Marcks, H. (2019). *Digital fascism: Challenges for the open society in times of social media*. Berkeley, CA: Center for Right-Wing Studies. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/87w5c5gp>
- Ging, D., & Siapera, E. (2018). Introduction: Special issue on online misogyny. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 515–524.
- Guenther, L., Ruhrmann, G., Bischoff, J., Penzel, T., & Weber, A. (2020). Strategic framing and social media engagement: Analyzing memes posted by the German Identitarian Movement on Facebook. *Social Media + Society*, 6(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119898777>
- Harcup, T. (2014). *A dictionary of journalism* (1st ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hark, S., & Villa, P. (2020). *The future of difference: Beyond the toxic entanglement of racism, sexism and feminism*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Hillis, K., Paasonen, S., & Petit, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Networked affect* (1st ed.). Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press.
- Himmelboim, I., Smith, M. A., Rainie, L., Shneiderman, B., & Espina, C. (2017). Classifying Twitter topic-networks using social network analysis. *Social Media + Society*, 3(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117691545>
- Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Foucault Welles, B. (2018). #GirlsLikeUs: Trans advocacy and community building online. *New Media & Society*, 20(5), 1868–1888.
- Keller, T. R., & Klinger, U. (2019). Social bots in election campaigns: Theoretical, empirical, and methodological implications. *Political Communication*, 36(1), 171–189.
- Knüpfer, C., Hoffmann, M., & Voskresenskii, V. (2020). Hijacking: Transnational dynamics and networked frame contestation on the far right in the case of the ‘120 decibels’ campaign. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1822904>
- Koppetsch, C. (2019). *Die Gesellschaft des Zorns: Rechtspopulismus im globalen Zeitalter* [The society of wrath: Right-wing populism in the global age] (2nd ed.). Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Krämer, B. (2017). Populist online practices: The function of the Internet in right-wing populism. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(9), 1293–1309.
- Kuo, R. (2018). Racial justice activist hashtags: Counterpublics and discourse circulation. *New Media & Society*, 20(2), 495–514.
- Lünenborg, M. (2019a). Affective publics. In J. Slaby & C. von Scheve (Eds.), *Affective societies: Key concepts* (1st ed., pp. 319–329). London and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lünenborg, M. (2019b). Representing migration: Building national identity: Pictures of difference and enmity in German media. In A. Grüne, K. Hafez, S. Priyadharma, & S. Schmidt (Eds.), *Media and transformation in Germany and Indonesia* (1st ed., pp. 161–186). Berlin: Frank & Timme.
- Lünenborg, M. (2020). Affective publics: Understanding the dynamic formation of public articulations beyond the public sphere. In A. Fleig, & C. von Scheve (Ed.), *Public spheres of resonance: Constellations of affect and language* (1st ed., pp. 30–48). London and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lünenborg, M., & Maier, T. (2018). Editorial: The turn to affect and emotion in media studies. *Media and Communication*, 6(3), 1–4. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i3.1732>
- Lünenborg, M., & Raetzsch, C. (2018). From public sphere to performative publics: Developing media practice as an analytic model. In S. Foellmer, M. Lünenborg, & C. Raetzsch (Eds.), *Media practices, social movements, and performativity: Transdisci-*

- plinary approaches* (1st ed., pp. 13–35). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Maireder, A., & Schlögl, S. (2014). 24 hours of an #outcry: The networked publics of a socio-political debate. *European Journal of Communication*, 29(6), 687–702.
- Nikunen, K. (2018). From irony to solidarity: Affective practice and social media activism. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 2(19), 10–21.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics* (1st ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Papacharissi, Z., & de Fatima Oliveira, M. (2012). Affective news and networked publics: The rhythms of news storytelling on #Egypt. *Journal of Communication*, 62(2), 266–282.
- Petre, C., Duffy, B. E., & Hund, E. (2019). “Gaming the system”: Platform paternalism and the politics of algorithmic visibility. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119879995>
- Pfetsch, B. (2018). Dissonant and disconnected public spheres as challenge for political communication research. *Javnost: The Public*, 25(1/2), 59–65.
- Pfetsch, B., Löblich, M., & Eilders, C. (2018). Dissonante Öffentlichkeiten als Perspektive kommunikationswissenschaftlicher Theoriebildung [Dissonant publics as a perspective for theory development in communication studies]. *Publizistik*, 63(4), 477–495.
- Reddy, W. M. (2001). *The navigation of feeling: A framework for the history of emotions* (1st ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, I. (2019). A philosophical and historical analysis of “Generation Identity”: Fascism, online media, and the European New Right. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1662403>
- Sauer, B. (2020). Authoritarian right-wing populism as masculinist identity politics. The role of affects. In G. Dietze & J. Roth (Eds.), *Right-wing populism and gender: European perspectives and beyond* (1st ed., pp. 23–40). Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Sauer, B., & Penz, O. (2017). Affective governmentality: A feminist perspective. In C. M. Hudson, M. Rönblom, & K. Teghtsoonian (Eds.), *Gender, governance and feminist analysis: Missing in action?* (1st ed., pp. 39–58). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Schatto-Eckrodt, T., Boberg, S., Wintterlin, F., Frischlich, L., & Quandt, T. (2019). Bedrohte Deliberation: Information Warfare und Desinformation als Bedrohung digitaler Öffentlichkeiten [Deliberation under siege: Information warfare and disinformation as a threat to digital public spheres]. *Communicatio Socialis*, 52(2), 147–158.
- Schneiker, A. (2019). The new defenders of human rights? How radical right-wing TNGOs are using the human rights discourse to promote their ideas. *Global Society*, 33(2), 149–162.
- Sorce, G. (2018). Sounding the alarm for right-wing #MeToo: “120 Dezibel” in Germany. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(6), 1123–1126.
- Tyshchuk, Y., Li, H., Ji, H., & Wallace, W. A. (2014). The emergence of communities and their leaders on Twitter following an extreme event. In R. Missaoui & I. Sarr (Eds.), *Social network analysis: Community detection and evolution* (1st ed., pp. 1–26). Cham: Springer.
- Zerback, T., Töpfl, F., & Knöpfle, M. (2020). The disconcerting potential of online disinformation: Persuasive effects of astroturfing comments and three strategies for inoculation against them. *New Media & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820908530>
- Zink, V. (2019). Affective communities. In J. Slaby & C. von Scheve (Eds.), *Affective societies: Key concepts* (1st ed., pp. 289–299). London: Routledge.

## About the Authors



**Shari Adlung** is a PhD Student and Research Associate at the Department of Journalism Studies at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. Her work focuses on representations of marginalized social groups where she pays attention to gender aspects and other intersectional entanglements such as age and disability. In her teaching she also deals with the communication strategies of the far-right.



**Margreth Lünenborg** is Professor of Journalism Studies at the Institute for Media and Communication studies at Freie Universität Berlin. Her work focuses on gender media studies and journalism studies, especially interested in its entanglements. Currently she is Head of a research project on ‘Journalism and its order of emotions’ and another on ‘Performative Publics’ challenging journalism. Additionally she is engaged in the European Training Network G\*iversity.



**Christoph Raetzsch** is Associate Professor at the Department of Media and Journalism Studies of Aarhus University. He works in journalism studies with an emphasis on digital media and methods. His recent research concerns the interfaces and infrastructures of publics besides journalism and the emergent potential of quotidian media practices for civic innovation. He is a regular contributor to journals such as *Digital Journalism* and teaches in the Erasmus Mundus Journalism Programme.