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Practices of contradicting in networked publics

A proposal for understanding social conflictual dynamics

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Abstract This article proposes a research heuristic to analyse practices of contradicting in networked publics. This heuristic is based on the thesis of the polarization of society, as witnessed in the media discourse, and the approach of a political sociology of conflict. Such an approach requires developing theories in communication and media studies to document social conflict dynamics in changing public dynamics, explain dominant communicative practices, and to interpret subsequent developments. The research heuristic presented here prefers an approach rooted in praxeology and as such makes it possible to analyse practices of contradiction in networked publics, leading to observations informed by theories of public sphere. This approach is particularly relevant in ongoing debates on gender relations, sexualized

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harassment, and violence, all of which have once again become ‘trigger points’ that are challenging individuals and institutions of modern societies on different levels. The debate about the accusations against Till Lindemann as the lead singer of the internationally renowned German band Rammstein, a debate that has garnered attention beyond the German-speaking contexts, illustrates how this proposed research heuristic can become a tool for an informed analysis.

Keywords Media practices · Contradiction studies · Public sphere · Practice theory · Inequality · Sexual violence

Praktiken des Widersprechens in vernetzen Öffentlichkeiten

Ein kommunikationswissenschaftlicher Vorschlag zum Verständnis gesellschaftlicher Konfliktdynamiken

Zusammenfassung Der Beitrag schlägt eine Forschungsheuristik zur Analyse von Praktiken des Widersprechens in vernetzten Öffentlichkeiten vor. Ausgehend von der These einer gesellschaftlichen Polarisierung, die im Mediendiskurs sichtbar wird und Ausgangspunkt für eine politische Konfliktsoziologie ist, entwirft die Heuristik einen medien- und kommunikationswissenschaftlichen Theorierahmen. Auf diese Weise lassen sich gesellschaftliche Konfliktdynamiken im Wandel von Öffentlichkeiten dokumentieren, dominante kommunikative Praktiken sichtbar machen und deren Folgen interpretieren. Die hier vorgestellte Forschungsheuristik basiert auf praxeologischen Grundlagen und ermöglicht daher, Praktiken des Widersprechens in vernetzten Öffentlichkeiten zu analysieren und dabei zeitgenössische Theorie von Öffentlichkeit kritisch zu prüfen und weiterzuentwickeln. Fallanalytisch untersucht der Beitrag anschließend den medienöffentlichen Diskurs um den Sänger und *Rammstein*-Frontmann Till Lindemann, dem massive Formen sexualisierter Gewalt vorgeworfen wurden. Die vorgestellte Heuristik wird verwandt, um die vielschichtigen Formen des medialen Widersprechens in dieser Mediendebatte zu systematisieren. Debatten über Geschlechterverhältnisse, sexualisierte Belästigung und Gewalt sind zu „Triggerpunkten“ geworden, die aktuell Individuen und Institutionen moderner Gesellschaften auf unterschiedlichen Ebenen herausfordern. Es wird exemplarisch dargestellt, wie die vorgeschlagene Forschungsheuristik zum Werkzeug für eine fundierte Analyse werden kann.

Schlüsselwörter Medienpraktiken · Contradiction Studies · Öffentlichkeit · Praxistheorie · Ungleichheit · Sexualisierte Gewalt

1 Introduction

With the thesis of social “division and polarization in newspaper discourse” (Mau et al. 2023, p. 9, our transl.), in which social media in particular have been identified as “drivers of affective polarization” (ibid., p. 321), conversations have centred conflict as a ‘normal mode’ of contemporary communication, promoting social an-

tagonisms. However, sociological analysis provides evidence that German society is less polarized than assumed. As a result, Mau et al. (2023) have developed a political sociology of conflict that provides insights into who argues with whom in which "arenas of inequality", for example about conflicts over distribution, equality, belonging, and recognition as well as about ecological conflicts. This lens on conflict allows for a more nuanced understanding of why and at what points dissent manifests itself and conflicts become emotionally charged. In our view, this also calls for the development of theories in the fields of communication and media studies, which can put social conflict dynamics into perspective as communicative practices and contribute to their analytical breakdown.

Using an approach rooted in praxeology, we propose to focus our analysis on *practices of contradicting* and conflict dynamics in networked public spheres as dynamic, fluid and contingent phenomena. We deliberately are labelling this as practices of "contradicting" instead of practices of "contradiction" to emphasize our interest in the processes and dynamics of engaging in contradicting dominant discourses that practice theory is interested in. The next section of the article presents and connects with considerations and discussions that characterize polarization processes in the context of digitalization. It becomes clear that approaches to theorize public sphere attempt to explain and document changing conflict dynamics via conceptualizations such as counter publics (Fraser 1990; Wimmer 2014; Schwaiger 2022; Kempf and Sevignani 2023; Jackson and Kreiss 2023), or the concept of the "dissonant public sphere" (Pfetsch 2018). We build on these theoretical approaches, but argue that a focus on the practices of contradicting in networked publics can provide useful insights into contemporary conflict dynamics.

Subsequently, in the third section, we present a theoretical and methodological conceptualization that allows us to systematically describe and understand contemporary dynamics of contradicting in public discourses. The central assumption here is that practices of contradicting must be understood praxeologically (Couldry 2004; Bräuchler and Postill 2010; Shove et al. 2012) and related to space (Reckwitz 2003) as well as its affective dimension (Reckwitz 2016). A heuristic is presented that should make it possible to analyse practices of contradicting with regard to the respective public and social theoretical situation, specific environments, modes of contradicting, and the agency of individual and collective actors who publicly articulate contradiction.

In the fourth section of this article, we use examples to illustrate how our analytical tools can be used and applied to other contexts. As the sociological conflict analysis cited at the beginning (Mau et al. 2023) shows, debates about gender, gender relations, and sexualized violence continue being 'trigger points' and can set in motion and reinforce polarization processes. Drawing on the debates about the accusations against Till Lindemann as the lead singer of the internationally renowned band Rammstein, which also reaches non-German-speaking audiences, we illustrate how the introduced heuristic can be used as a tool for analysis. The insights into the dynamics of contradicting among fans and critics (4.1), the demonstration of the largely absent public reactions to objections from feminist media professionals (4.2), and insights into the negotiations for interpretative sovereignty between journalistic

and legal actors (4.3) show the potential of the research heuristic for which we advocate here.

In the last section, we conclude that findings from the empirical investigation of practices of contradicting can contribute to a broader understanding of fundamental conditions and dynamics of contemporary publics and democracy. The prerequisite for this is to establish a framework of communication theory that contributes to an understanding of social conflict dynamics. This article aims to provide a key foundation for such a framework.

2 Conflict dynamics in networked publics

As the public sphere plays a key role in establishing and securing a vibrant democracy, communication studies is called upon to address the widespread thesis of social polarization. Ever since the establishment of the Internet and the spread of social media usage, discussions about how these transformations of the public sphere contribute to an intensification of conflict dynamics have emerged.

In communication studies and beyond, the term 'filter bubbles', which was introduced by Eli Pariser (2011), and the resulting 'echo chambers', which can be traced back to Nicholas Negroponte's vision of a personalized compilation of news as a *'daily me'*, formulated as early as 1995, have gained great popularity. The terms are still present in academic and public discourse today, although criticism of the theorem has grown in a number of studies (Stark et al. 2021), and a 'filter bubble' is increasingly referred to as a metaphor, cipher, or myth (Kettemann and Dreyer 2019). In view of the worrisome democratic success of neo-reactionary politics and the increase in hate speech on digital communication platforms, it is repeatedly claimed—misleadingly, according to Bruns (2019a, p. 2)—that echo chambers and filter bubbles are mainly responsible for the emergence of communities that represent contrary and counterfactual perspectives and ideologies. A synopsis of the findings of a wide range of studies with different methodological approaches casts doubt on the empirical resilience and explanatory power of diversity reduction and social polarization. "It is not technology, stupid" concludes Bruns (2019b) with regard to the thesis on the causes of increasing consolidation and polarization of political positions in the civilian population. It is important to ask:

> "[...] why do they do so? What is it that has so entrenched and cemented their beliefs that they are no longer open to contestation? This is the debate we need to have: not a proxy argument about the impact of platforms and algorithms, but a meaningful discussion about the complex and compound causes of political and societal polarization. The 'echo chamber' and 'filter bubble' concepts have seriously distracted us from that debate, and must now be put to rest" (Bruns 2019b, p. 10).

Based on our discussion so far, it should become clear that looking solely at the technological constitution of networks and communication does not clarify why and at what points dissent becomes manifest and conflicts become emotionally charged. These questions are becoming more urgent: contemporary diagnostic buzzwords

such as "disenchantment with politics, post-politics, post-democracy, post-factuality, right-wing populism, conspiracy theories, fake news, hate speech, fragmented public spheres, filter bubbles, echo chambers" (Schenk 2024, p. 7, our transl.) suggest that "democracy as a real political project is not in good shape". The problems that are being described with these keywords point towards significant transformations of the public sphere; the "democratic public sphere seems […] to be the goal, medium and venue of the tendencies perceived as endangering democracy" (Schenk 2024, p. 8, our transl.). Brunkhorst et al. (2024, p. 3) state that: "All these aspects and dimensions that can be rightfully identified as playing essential parts within the current tragedy of democracy do share a common reference point: the public sphere".

In line with this assessment, there has been an increase in pleas and studies that seek to capture social conflict dynamics by analysing current structures and processes in networked publics. With regard to changes in the accessibility of digital communication, the expansion of the actors involved (these include not only individuals, but also automated communication), and changing modes of communication (e.g. in terms of their affective intensities), authors of more recent approaches to public sphere theory are suggesting to investigate the different levels of interaction of conflict, competition, and cooperation on the Internet (Neuberger 2014). Following Chantal Mouffe's radical theory of democracy, they propose capturing digital communication with the "interpretative framework of dissonance" (Pfetsch 2018) or updating the concept of the counter-public sphere with reference to Oskar Negt and Kluge (1972) (e.g. Wimmer 2014; Seeliger and Sevignani 2022; Schwaiger 2022). This approach illustrates the now widely shared consensus on dealing with the social reality of partial publics and the need to address different dynamics of conflict. Furthermore, feminist theories of the public sphere, which called early on for a network of heterogeneous (partial) publics (e.g. Fraser 1990; Klaus 2017) and that have dealt extensively with subaltern counter publics for emancipatory social movements, offer further directions: According to Nancy Fraser (1990, pp. 67–68), counter-publics function as forums for "discursive contestations" (p. 67), whereby they represent spaces of empowerment as well as retreat for those involved. In pre-digital times the media public sphere was particularly elitist and exclusive, and leading media outlets and institutions were seen as yielding a lot of power (Donges and Imhof 2001; Klaus and Drüeke 2017). Now, the focus is on the media practices of actors who are not integrated into media organisations and institutions and operate at different levels of the public sphere. This multiplication of voices and speaker positions allows to speak of a *polyvocal public sphere*. With their high degree of freedom and lack of oversight, partial publics are deliberative and integrative, while at the same time, the power of those speaking up in these subpublics is regularly questioned and critiqued, their speakers and participants fight for the sovereignty of interpretation and opinion. Traditional institutionalized forms such as the classical journalism of traditional mass media are losing their power of interpretation; new voices, formats, speakers, and modes of dissent are emerging in networked, but also highly volatile publics. As a result, the authority positions of the established media public sphere are shifting. What can be observed is an "expansion of the 'what-can-be said-out-loud' zone, the testing of taboo-breaking, the discrimination or delegitimization of groups and the influenceability of topics through algorithmic

agenda setting" (Nassehi 2023, p. 310, our transl.). Confrontational opinion-making, polarization, hate speech, and shitstorms are frequently observable, discrediting, excluding, and silencing other speakers (e.g. Lovink 2022; Stegbauer 2018; Eickelmann 2017).

Consequently, we argue in favour of focusing attention on media practices of contradicting: In a society that is regularly assumed—despite isolated contradictions—to be polarized into irreconcilable social 'camps', theorizing and empirical research in communication studies on practices of contradicting and the discursive handling of such practices can make a significant contribution to understanding "consensus and conflict in contemporary society" (Mau et al. 2023). The aim is to productively connect to research on practices of contradicting from various disciplines, which will be connected to insights from communication studies on media practices on the one hand, and public sphere theory considerations on the other, in order to develop a heuristic for conducting empirical studies.

3 Research heuristic on practices of contradicting

Febel et al. (2023, p. 2) have outlined the field of Contradiction Studies by describing: "Contradiction is not only a philosophical concept, but also a form of argumentation, of structuring thoughts and framing ideas. It may be a practice of contesting, a counter-narrative or a strategy of undermining powerful positions and arguments in discourse." They distinguish emotional and aesthetic purposes, and observe forms of contradictions as "performed in speech or in rituals and social practices" (ibid.). Philosophically, they refer to the Law of Non-Contradiction (LNC) as an essential precondition for truth claims, but in contemporary societies they question its undisputed character. Referring to Foucault's (1976) understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge as well as to postcolonial criticism of dominant Western ontologies (Chakrabarty 2007), Febel et al. argue in favour of contradiction "as a figure of reflexion" (2023, p. 18).

Our research interest starts exactly there. We are less interested in the philosophical dimension of contradiction as such, but in *practices of contradicting*. Contradicting as a communicative "practice of opposing" (Warnke and Acke 2018, p. 325) is an essential prerequisite for the negotiation of authority, interpretative sovereignty, and influence. In democratic societies, the ability to express dissent without sanctions is an indispensable basis for continuously testing the legitimacy of speakers and the validity of their statements. As part of everyday communication in private, professional, or institutionalized relationships (e.g. school, church or political parties), practices of contradicting allow dominant knowledge to be questioned, disturbed, and irritated. As a deliberate speech act or ritualized practice, this includes practices of contradicting, or the articulation of the previously unsaid, concealed or rejected (Schuster 2022, pp. 101–102). Epistemologically, contradicting creates a basis for discursively challenging ontological assertions of truth. Thus, practices of contradicting can be understood as *relational and processual events*—they *react* to communicative actions and at the same time want to *generate* forms of follow-up communication itself.

A praxeological framework is particularly suitable for capturing this dynamic and process-oriented character. It goes beyond the dichotomy of actor versus structure and focuses on *action in execution* as routinized practices that are produced in the interaction of the (embodied) competences of actors, materiality, and meaning (Shove et al. 2012; Hui et al. 2017). The agency of the actors is greatly shaped and limited by the materiality of media technologies and infrastructures. At the same time, the praxeological approach allows the technical infrastructures not to be understood as *determining* actions. The analytical focus is particularly on subversive forms of appropriation as well as contingent, paradoxical, and non-intentional dynamics of communication.

For communication studies research, practices of contradicting become particularly interesting when they have an impact beyond the space of face-to-face communication and solely private conversations and bear upon public spaces. These practices can form the starting point for the formation of protest and counter-publics, but can also provoke such strong counter-reactions that the effect is silencing, or they are simply "ignored" (Bassel 2017; Thomas and Virchow 2024) because they are not seen as relevant and legitimate in the hegemonic discourse. This phenomenon can be described as *paradoxes of contradicting* (Thomas et al. 2024).

Because of digital communication infrastructures, private and public spaces can no longer be clearly distinguished. Due to the "collapse of context" (boyd 2011), personal statements can reach a wide variety of audiences and create interconnected structures of contradicting. In this way, such dynamics on social media can initiate, fuel or even escalate public disputes. However, we do not see practices of contradicting as a historically new phenomenon but as gaining in importance in terms of scale and scope, dynamics and intensity, polarization, and volume in digitally networked publics. Positioning oneself critically against dominant knowledge, doubting the accuracy and legitimacy of a statement or simply opposing it with insults, aggression, and abuse—these are all forms of contradicting, which appear in social media as "shared media space" on an equal footing; they are having a lasting impact on the formation of public discourses. It therefore seems particularly urgent to conceptualize the dynamics and modes of practices of contradicting in networked publics and to make them more accessible for empirical analysis.

To date, only a few studies have been published in the field of communication studies to tackle these complex issues; a few focus on journalists as professional media actors and their contradictions vis-à-vis official sources. Coddington and Molyneux (2023) examine "the epistemological functions of contradiction in news texts" and come to the sobering conclusion that "contradictions are uncommonly presented in news stories" (p. 1329). Journalists therefore rarely contradict authorized sources; in the case of contradicting source statements, they usually follow the "balance norm" (he said/she said journalism) (Coddington and Molyneux 2023, p. 1329). Rarely do journalists contradict official sources where necessary. Reich's and Barnoy's (2021) study provides contrary findings regarding journalists' willingness to contradict. The authors are interested in "disagreements as a form of knowledge" and use reconstructive interviews and content analysis to investigate how journalists deal with contradictory statements from sources: "According to our findings, disagreements trigger [journalists] professionally and epistemically

to try and learn the actual state of affairs behind them" (Reich and Barnoy 2021, p. 896). However, the scarcity of time and professional resources in particular limits the extent of such epistemic interventions. The authors conclude: "[I]t is safer to expect reporters to offer a balanced and transparent account of the disagreement, rather than try and adjudicate it anyway" (Reich and Barnoy 2021, p. 896). These findings provide valid indications of the increasingly controversial epistemological value of journalistic statements for society. In digitally networked publics, journalistic statements compete with those of other speakers who do not follow the same epistemological practices—whether by (semi)professionals or ordinary citizens. We understand these findings to be the background against which the role and authority of journalism as an institution will be critically examined in chapter 3.

Schmidt (2023) provides a brief overview of "contradicting in and with social media". He conceptualizes social media as "spaces of contradiction" (Schmidt 2023, p. 59, our transl.). Due to low access thresholds and network-like structures, attention is particularly focused on those expressions of dissent that articulate outrage, criticism or disgust towards individual actors. He distinguishes short-term and fleeting interventions, which can escalate into *shitstorms*, from longer-term and more stable formations, which, as "connective action" (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, pp. 60–61), can make dissent permanent and thus have a lasting impact on the formation of social movements.

By considering these dynamics that practices of contradicting have attained in digital media environments, we can identify some formal characteristics and modes. We want to summarize these under the term *communication modes*, whereby in the context of media contradiction, affectivity, temporality, and performativity as well as collaborativity can gain relevance and produce contingent, sometimes paradoxical dynamics in the process of (mutual) contradicting.

In particular, the *affective dimension* of contradicting, which was exemplified above in the *shitstorm*, is receiving increased interdisciplinary attention. Pointing to trolling, cyber bullying, and shitstorms, Eickelmann (2017) distinguishes between affectively charged "discursive disruptive configurations" ("diskursive Störfigur" p. 149, our transl.), which can also be understood as practices of contradicting. Even though the mostly destructive character of these types of interventions makes it impossible to appreciate their communicative quality, recent research on emotion and affect rejects a simple juxtaposition of emotion and argumentation. Brun and Doguoglu (2008) discuss the epistemological quality of emotions. Instead of contrasting emotions with factual statements, they argue that all evaluations are accompanied by emotional attributions. Zahn and Lünenborg (2024) show how in public debate on trans gender rights, affective alliances between conservative feminists and alt right actors are built successfully on Twitter. The epistemic quality of statements—and thus of forms of contradicting—is always *also* affectively grounded. In particular, an analysis of the affective quality—the generation of outrage or anger as well as empathy or solidarity—is indispensable to understand the mobilizing potential of forms of contradicting. Affectivity thus refers both to intensified emotional content of individual utterances und to the intensity of communicative dynamics (as an overview Lünenborg 2021).

The dynamics of these phenomena or discursive disruptive configurations, to borrow Eickelmann's term again, described above also clarify that it is essential to analyse their *temporality and performativity* in order to understand media practices of contradicting. As highly dynamic, volatile phenomena, they are characterized by the "instantaneity of digital communication" (Papacharissi and Oliveira 2012). In praxeological research, this temporality is taken into account analytically by examining practices as *actions in progress.* In the relational interaction of different actors and network infrastructures, forms of contradicting are jointly produced. With Couldry's (2004) understanding of "media as practice", the discursive production and appropriation of forms of contradicting as a *relational event* becomes the focus of the analysis.

The prerequisite for the emergence of powerful forms of contradicting in networked publics is their *collaborative character*. Singular statements become strategic collaborations or even unplanned *playful interactions.* The collaborative character of tools and media modalities promotes and generates independent forms that can be understood as a continuation of the struggle over meaning. Memes can be described as an example of a media form that enables individual variation, updating, de- and re-contextualization of existing media material (Shifman 2014). On this basis, sharp and pointed criticism emerges as a form of contradicting as well as playful imitation, ironisation, or persiflage. Memes 'circulate' through different discourse arenas and become increasingly indeterminate in character.

Contingency and *paradox* ultimately characterize current forms of contradicting in a particular way. The contingent character expresses the fact that contradicting is by no means carried out exclusively as an intentional, directed action, but rather—especially due in particular to the affordances of digital platforms—that unintended, dysfunctional, or indeterminate effects arise, which are to be understood as emergent phenomena. Often in the interaction among the aforementioned aspects—temporality, affectivity and collaborativity—formations arise that elude the targeted control of individuals. Such incalculability of the scope, volume, and directionality of forms of dissent represent a considerable challenge for the formation of publics. This challenge becomes *paradoxical* when the emancipatory articulation of dissent through massive, often uncivil reactions does not result in a broadening of the argumentative basis and the multitude of voices taken into account, but on the contrary in exclusion and silencing (see for further details Thomas et al. 2024).

Based on these central characteristics of contemporary forms of contradicting in networked publics, the heuristic developed here for researching media practices of contradicting allows the following central questions to be addressed:

- Which actors use which media practices of contradicting?
- Which voices of a polyvocal public are heard? Which ones fall silent or are silenced?
- To which actors is authority attributed in the discourse?
- Which modes of contradicting are particularly relevant?
- What inequality and power relations underlie the media's practices of contradicting and to what extent are they addressed?

In the following section, we apply the research heuristics described above in a case study. In an explorative analysis of the media discourse surrounding Till Lindemann, frontman and singer of the band *Rammstein*, and accusations of sexualized violence, we examine various media practices of contradicting. Following von Rimscha and Sommer (2014), we use the form of a case study for the exploratory analysis of a discursive setting consisting of different, closely related media texts to illustrate the analytical value of our heuristic. To this end, journalistic articles from national print and online media (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung, taz, Zeit, Der Spiegel*) as well as posts on YouTube, X/Twitter, and Instagram about the event were reviewed. Relying primarily on traditional media content (mostly print journalism) may seem counterintuitive in terms of its networked nature, as this is usually linked to online content, especially social media content. However, it is precisely the networked nature of traditional journalistic media that becomes particularly apparent when analysing the material. Given the scope of the material, our focus was on key events between the first public statement, the publication of Shelby Lynn's video accusing Lindemann of sexualized violence, and the discontinuation of the legal proceedings against Till Lindemann in the period from May 25 to August 29, 2023, as well as re-updates of the public debate in March 2024. Based on this material, statements by relevant actors in other media (e.g. the German feminist magazine EMMA) were also taken into account, to which reference was in turn made, making the networked nature of the media discourse visible. Although we have chosen the selected material according to content criteria, our investigation does not aim at a systematic content analysis of the complex case. Rather, we examine the reciprocal nature of the selected material and how the different materials reference each other, thus providing an example for practices of contradicting to demonstrate the analytical value of our proposed heuristic.

4 Analysis: practices of contradicting in the context of sexualized violence

Due to the hybridization of publics, practices of contradicting are taking place under completely new conditions, in different forms, and as new, even emergent modes. The "hashtag publics" (Rambukkana 2015) in particular, which have emerged in the wake of the #outcry and #metoo campaigns, illustrate how the spectrum of political communication has expanded and the extent to which political participation has developed new forms of expression. In social science research, there is little doubt as to the effectiveness and sustainability of hashtag publics, especially when it comes to the protest of women primarily affected by and speaking out against sexual harassment and violence (e.g. Gilmore 2023; Gnau-Franké and Wyss 2022; Drüeke and Zobl 2016). The #metoo movement in particular, with its multifaceted protest activities, was able to send a clear and loud message to the wider public that sexualized harassment and violence are massive violations of boundaries. It also garnered a lot of attention among established media outlets and was widely discussed and grappled with in many news reports and talk shows. However, responses to the movement did not only appear as verbal support and solidarity, but in fierce resistance

and anti-feminist agitation, especially in the form of hate speech online (e.g. Gnau-Franké and Wyss 2022; Kuck 2023 Martini 2020). In this context, hate speech is directed specifically at women who have spoken out and wanted to or have made their victimization public. Massively attacking them verbally can be seen as "an instrument of power" that "attempts to disqualify the messages under the hashtag and prevent the #MeToo tweeting women from participating" (Kuck 2023 p. 309, our transl.). The historically established practice of oppression is thus reproduced with the aim of maintaining hegemonic masculinity and existing inequalities (e.g. Kuck 2023; Budde and Rieske 2022).

Nevertheless, despite all resistance, society has become increasingly aware of (everyday) sexism, and since then, the attitudes of and behaviours associated with toxic masculinity have been questioned more frequently and penalized in public discourses and settings. Yet, it must be acknowledged here that sensitivity to (everyday) sexism (Leidinger and Thomas 2020) and toxic masculinity varies in different areas of society and social milieus.

In the following, we examine the practices of contradicting in networked publics in the spring of 2023, using the case of Till Lindemann, the lead singer of the internationally successful band Rammstein, which was being discussed primarily in Germany. Rammstein was founded in Berlin in 1994. The band is characterized by a brute musical style that oscillates between hard rock and alternative metal, but also includes techno elements, and became known as "Neue Deutsche Härte" (NDH), translated as "New German toughness". The band has always been provocative and polarizing with its lyrics and is particularly controversial in Germany due to its visually violent excesses and scandalous taboo-breaking on stage (e.g. Wilhelms et al. 2022; Wicke 2019; Littlejohn and Putnam 2013). Allegations made by Shelby Lynn from Northern Ireland recently attracted increased attention. In May 2023, after attending a Rammstein concert in Vilnius, Lithuania, she was the first woman to speak out about Lindemann's 'recruitment system', the purpose of Row Zero, and the so-called 'Suck Room' under the stage, where young women were 'supplied' to the singer. Lynn initially documented her concert experience with short videos and posts via *Twitter* (called *X* since July 2023). On her account, she later also showed how she regained consciousness with injuries (bruises) in a hotel in Vilnius after a temporary loss of consciousness. She assumed that she was drugged, but was able to remember her frightening encounter with Lindemann in the room below the stage and that she fought off his sexual advances, which made him very angry. A criminal complaint filed with the police in Vilnius could not be pursued further due to a lack of sufficient evidence from the authorities' point of view. While various cases of sexualized violence have been dealt with prominently within the film industry in recent years, the music business tends to keep a low profile when it comes to sexual harassment and violence against female fans as well as coercion and abuse of power by stars. The journalist and cultural scientist Sonja Eismann (2023) has reported about a few cases from the past that dealt with sexual harassment and violence against fans, but in her opinion, none of the examples caused as much of a stir as the Lindemann case.

In the remaining section, we will examine examples of media practices of contradicting that relate to three different aspects of public negotiations of voice and social

values in connection with the accusation of sexualized violence against Lindemann. This will shed light on the potential of analysing media practices of contradicting. The heuristic presented will be used to show, *firstly,* to what extent contradicting can provide insights into the negotiation of guilt, co-responsibility and personal responsibility. In this specific case, the question arises as to how fans and critics of the frontman and the band have positioned themselves regarding the specific accusations against Till Lindemann and sexualized violence in the genre of NDH, which allows to draw conclusions about the normalization of sexual violence (4.1). *Secondly,* considering the publication of violent fantasies in the form of poems and pornographic productions in Lindemann's stage shows, the debate about artistic freedom and the lyrical ego will be examined. It elucidates how analyses of practices of contradicting by feminist media experts can provide information on the question of who is heard in various media channels and outlets with respect to addressing various forms of sexualized violence and their normalization, and who is granted interpretative power (4.2). *Thirdly,* it is shown how analyses of contradicting in journalistic discourse can provide insights into which actors are authorized and claim authority to pass judgement (4.3). Even though the Lindemann case has been closed in court, "no veil of ignorance falls over us just because the judiciary is letting it go", as Kira Kramer (2023, our transl. also for all the following media quotes) stated in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on September 9, 2023. Indeed, at the time this article was written, discussions were still ongoing. On March 21, 2024, just under a year after Shelby Lynn's allegations, which has subsequently been widely shared on *Instagram*, *X* (NDRrecherche 2024), and *TikTok*, the political magazine *Panorama* (NDR panorama stories 2024) published an article entitled "Rammstein—viel Aufregung um nichts?" (transl. "Rammstein—much ado about nothing?"). The reopening of the case, i.e. the reconstruction of the consequences of the events and the renewed reflection on Lindemann's controversial treatment of female fans, generated widespread criticism.[1] Among other things, there were complaints about the low news value because hardly any new information was added to the case. The follow-up communication on social media in April 2024 was correspondingly moderate, with users basically only repeating attitudes and arguments that had already been exchanged in similar ways during the course of the scandal.

4.1 Contradicting as a negotiation of blame and loyalties

In spring 2023, when the scandal became public in the media, the Lindemann case was an immense challenge for *Rammstein* fans, even though long-time fans of the band—as described above—are quite used to dealing with provocations and scandals, or rather have to come to terms with them. Conflict-laden situations and overexcitement are part and parcel of being a fan of this band and this music genre. Challenges to the 'establishment', crossing moral boundaries, and unexpected excesses of all kinds are what makes this particular music genre so fascinating. Its

[1] A sample *Facebook* comment from a male user on March 26, 2024: "To put it bluntly, the media campaign was completely insubstantial. The fact that rock stars attract willing and fame-hungry girls means that the public broadcaster is "really" on to something big.".

ideology contains "notions of warrior masculinity" (Hill 2016, p. 108) and sometimes deals with taboo subjects such as "death, decay, mourning, pain, necrophilia, longing for death, suicide or suicide fantasies and metaphysical phenomena" (Platz 2008, p. 284). Scripts of masculinity often go hand in hand with aggression, toughness, and violence, whereby patriarchal and heteronormative stagings of masculinity dominate. As a result, female fans in particular have to justify their passion for hard rock and metal music far more often than male fans (Hill 2016). Various studies show that female fans of hard rock and metal often find it difficult to describe their fascination for their preference in music and also their favourite bands in a differentiated way (Hill 2016.). The archaic and martial nature of the musicians and the music is perceived as particularly gripping, powerful, and authentic (Hill 2016, p. 111ff.).

The many fans of Rammstein are a heterogeneous community and can therefore hardly be classified in terms of social structure. What unites them is the desire to "live out loud" and express enthusiasm, ecstasy, and their "anti-mainstream" attitudes, especially at mega-events such as concerts with tens of thousands of visitors in large stadiums (Schellhardt 2023). This kind of "living out loud" has continued unabated even after Lynn's accusations. The concerts remain sold out, and the masses of fans are largely unimpressed. They position themselves not only on social media, but also at the concert venues, even though the instant, distanceless, 'non-synthetic' confrontation between fans and critics creates other dynamics. After Lynn's accusations, protests at various Rammstein concert venues cropped up, but concertgoers remained in the majority at the concert venues and only a few reacted to the protesters. The protestors had obviously expected more expressions of solidarity, insights into the problem, and distancing from Till Lindemann from the 'loyal' fans. In Munich in June 2023, around 60 protestors gathered and protested against Rammstein's performance in Munich's Olympic Park. Among other things, they chanted: "No show for perpetrators!" and were verbally abused by concertgoers. A young protester told the *Berliner Morgenpost* (Dittrich 2023): "The hostility we've heard from some people here is really insane. Sayings like 'only because you're not getting fucked' or 'too ugly to be a groupie'. I was definitely expecting hostility, but not quite to this extent. It's really crazy how the crowd reacted to this protest." The protestors had obviously expected the fans to feel guilty or remorseful, but this largely failed to materialize. Instead, they were confronted with misogynistic insults and required police protection (Dittrich 2023). Hundreds of demonstrators also gathered in front of the Olympic Stadium on the fringes of the concerts in Berlin in July 2023, expressing their incomprehension towards the concertgoers and demanding solidarity with the alleged victims. Protest signs read: "No stage for perpetrators!", "Victims are never to blame", "Stop Rape Culture", "YOU DIDN'T ASK and she didn't say YES" (FAZ 2023). Concertgoers on the other hand, repeatedly pointed out the presumption of innocence, demonstrating their wait-and-see attitude with regard to a legal clarification of the case (ibid.). As long as there is no conviction of Lindemann, they do not want to miss their Rammstein concert. Staying away from the spectacle in order to "show respect and compassion for and with those who have undoubtedly suffered and are suffering, who have been injured" (Waibel 2023) is far from their minds. Similarly, some concertgoers interviewed on camera deny to

share responsibility by attending a concert. The women concerned are accused by fans of wanting to have sexual relations with Till Lindemann and that they could have said no at any time.

One protester expressed solidarity with the women who have spoken up and complained about the unequal balance of power in the conflict. She criticized the fact that the band members refuse to speak out and have handed over communication to lawyers (nd 2023). Some protestors from the campaign alliance "No Rammstein in Berlin!" reported that they had received hate mail and threats of rape prior to their protest in Berlin (nd 2023). This can be interpreted as a strategic attempt to silence activists. Established journalism entered into debates about the female 'groupies' who want to be part of the backstage action and close to their star—who is known as a "stage brute" and "brutal lyricist" (Hertreiter 2023)—as well as about what ideas and expectations they may have had of a meeting with him. In the Süddeutsche Zeitung (06.06.2023), Joachim Hentschel states that the "belaboured question" on female 'naivety' or freedom of choice and self-responsibility naturally stirs up emotions in letters to the editor and comment columns, at family celebrations and at conference tables, "sometimes interested, sometimes contemptuous, sometimes worried, sometimes mocking" (Hentschel 2023, our transl.). In his opinion, however, the resulting accusations and victim blaming are unworthy and unhelpful. Victim blaming and victim defamation, which are familiar from other contexts, imply that the victims of sexual violence are always responsible for their own safety. However, it is hardly ever mentioned that the women who accepted a backstage invitation at Rammstein concerts sometimes did so on the assumption that they would be safe at a concert where five hundred people were working and that any transgressions or violence would not go unnoticed.

The public accusations of a (initially) single person on the one hand and the presumption of innocence on the other, to which the many fans refer, do not allow the parties involved to come together. The majority of fans do not see themselves as jointly responsible, but act as supporters of the defendant, who is keeping a low profile in public and is not taking any position. Thus, he puts the fans to the test, implicitly demands loyalty, and lets them speak for him.

4.2 Disagreeing, being heard, and the power of interpretation

Three years before the accusation of sexualized violence against Lindemann was published, criticisms emerged when the established KiWi publishing house released a collection of poems by the musician. Criticism was directed in particular at the poem "Während du schläfst", which describes a rape fantasy. The objection to the poetry volume—voiced by relatively well-known individuals in Germany—did not attract much attention. The feminist author and columnist Margarete Stokowski commented in the political magazine *Der Spiegel in* 2020: "Art may deal with violence, it may put itself in the shoes of perpetrators, describe cruel things—but it must also accept discussions about boundaries regarding these expressions." (Stokowski 2020) Where there is art, there is also art criticism, she argues, thus describing a task of journalistic observation of society through critical contradicting. Her objection to the author's lyrical fantasies is sparked by the cult of the male genius, which she

describes as follows: "Provocation as a value in itself is an interesting phenomenon when you consider who it is granted to. (...) If an ageing rock musician fantasizes about crawling over a powerless woman, then there must be something higher to it that feminists simply don't understand." (Stokowski 2020).

A certain irritation about Till Lindemann's poetry book was also occasionally visible in other areas of public discourse, but it did not produce an extensive debate. In March 2021, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazin* published a "men's magazine", featuring an interview with one of the most prominent feminist voices in Germany, Alice Schwarzer, since 1977 founder of the feminist magazine *Emma* and still active editor-in-chief. Schwarzer is asked about Till Lindemann's book of poetry, especially as her own books are also published by KiWi. In her reply, she mentions her good relationship with the publishing director Helge Malchow, but whom she also found to be pugnacious at times. She speaks, albeit cautiously, of propaganda and pornography with regard to Till Lindemann's book (Schwarzer 2021, p. 26). However, the interviewer didn't ask her to elaborate on those statements in the rather extensive interview. In 2023, Schwarzer commented more extensively on the *Emma* online portal: "Surprise. Not only do the 'poems' of Rammstein leader Till Lindemann demonstrate contempt and destructive attitudes towards women, but his actions apparently demonstrate that too". Schwarzer emphasizes that she has been fighting against "the misogyny celebrated as 'art' in the feuilletons" for decades. Nevertheless, she echoes the debate about the lyrical ego when she states this with regard to Lindemann's poems: "The rather helpless rhymes of Rammstein leader Till Lindemann are not poetry." In this way, however, she affirms the mass media's dominant perspective on the separation of author and work instead of emphasising a perspective on "teutonic hypermasculinity" (Wilhelms et al. 2022, p. 101) or on the dealing with sexualized violence.

Journalist and columnist Isabella Caldart recalls the not well-publicized debate about the normalization of sexualized violence in Lindemann's poems in *Die Tageszeitung in* 2023: "When the '100 poems' were published, there were some users on Twitter (including me) who criticized the publisher. Many then jumped to Lindemann's side, arguing that it was his lyrical self. [...] and Helge Malchow, Editor-at-Large at KiWi, also complained about the 'moral outrage' and 'defamation of the author'. Even if it is 'only' Lindemann's lyrical self: Is it necessary to publish rape fantasies?" (Caldart 2023). In fact, Helge Malchow admitted on Twitter on April 3, 2020, that the actions described in the poem "Während du schläfst" were deeply reprehensible from a moral point of view. However, he had rejected all criticism with the argument that this was based on the "confusion of the fictional speaker, the so-called lyrical ego, with the author Lindemann". Without this distinction, "world literature" becomes impossible and "the freedom of art becomes invalid" (Kiwi Verlag 2020). Caldart thanked the newspaper on *Twitter* (today *X*) for printing her renewed objection to the staging of sexualized violence and its normalization. She publicly addressed the editors with the following lines: "Many thanks, by the way, to the colleagues at taz who published the text. I sent them a replacement column in case the topic was too sensitive, but they decided against it". Her statement makes clear that she fully expected the rejection of the publication of her recollection and repetition of her contradiction.

On June 7, 2023, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published an article by Andrea Geier (2023), professor of literary studies, thus entering this debate with the authority that educational title bestowed upon her. She comments on Lindeman's poem, in which one person dreams of drugging and raping another person with Rohypnol, by pointing out that literary theory is just as misunderstood as artistic freedom—if artistic freedom is used to defend violence. She explicitly contradicts Malchow, because his intervention suggests that it has been conclusively clarified how the poem is to be interpreted. In addition to a clarification of literary terminology, Geier's intervention also shifts attention from the debate about the lyrical ego and the author's ego to the representational quality and its effects. Geier calls for artistic freedom and value orientation to be considered together and asks "whether such a demonstrative celebration of sexualized violence can normalize it and contribute to rape culture" (Geier 2023). Geier, who is also chair of the German Society for Gender Studies, formulates a critique of the normalization of sexualized violence, whether in art or beyond. However, her comments remain unheard by the publisher. However, shortly afterwards, KiWi publisher Kerstin Gleba (2023) announced the end of the collaboration with Till Lindemann due to the emergence a porn video, already published in 2020. In the video, the poetry book is used as a film prop and is shown several times. In a podcast by public broadcaster SWR Kultur Aktuell, host Katharina Borchardt describes some scenes from the video, which the publisher apparently was either unaware of or ignored for years. Borchardt quotes publisher Gleba from the 2023 press release, who justifies the move as follows: "The targeted use of our book in a pornographic context has made a mockery of the separation between the 'lyrical ego' and the author/artist, which we so staunchly defend." The impulse formulated in feminist criticism to examine sexism in its various forms, including sexualized violence, in its anchoring in political and social structures of social order is thus once again set aside in favour of a focus on the individual author. As the insights into these practices of contradicting show, feminist actors—even when they are media professionals—are still hardly able to change the public discourses on sexism. We will demonstrate in the next section that journalism as an institution (Reese 2021) uses various forms of contradicting. In this constellation, social media voices, the judiciary, and journalism struggle for the power of interpretation.

4.3 Contradicting as a struggle for interpretative sovereignty: journalism as a contested authority

The Twitter post by Northern Irish Shelby Lynn "I'm the girl that was spiked at Rammstein" on 25 May 2023 shifted the discussion around Lindemann's poem from art criticism to social issues of power, abuse, and sexualized violence. The Lindemann/Rammstein case gave rise to a polarization in the discourse, and bears similarities to the beginnings of the #MeToo movement (Martini 2020; Siemon et al. 2023; Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020).

As part of investigative research into the Lindemann case, journalists have meticulously collected statements to illuminate a "system that gives the singer whatever he wants" (Biazza et al. 2023). Beginning with research on the Weinstein case,

journalists have established professional routines as practices of contradicting that exclusively research and scandalize the abuse of power and the use of sexualized violence in the case of celebrities and persons of public interest (Becker and Backes 2024). Here, journalism *reacts* to the individual statements of those affected who have made their accusations public on various social media channels. As an institution, journalism picks up on this, examines and evaluates the credibility and legitimacy of the statements, and expands them to include new testimonies. It is only through investigative research that Lynn's description of a personal experience becomes a #MeToo case in the music industry.

The emotionally charged and affective nature of the public debate regarding the #MeToo movement is also critically discussed in journalism. For example, Jürgen Kaube (2023) complains in the *FAZ*: "Moral contempt establishes a substitute judiciary. We can't do anything, but we can be outraged." The Lindemann/Rammstein case undoubtedly shows the extent to which publicly articulated outrage is a key driver of scandal reporting (Burkhardt 2015; Pörksen 2018), but the journalistic contribution is by no means limited to this. Instead, a process begins that relies on established patterns of research, on convincing witnesses and informants and assuring their anonymity, as well as on highly impactful reporting. Journalistic research turns the one voice that has spoken out on Twitter and Instagram into a larger number of affected women. Via the dynamics of contradicting, the experiences of different people are (anonymously) made heard. The sworn statements are made under the promise of anonymity, which journalists guarantee as source protection by means of the right to refuse to testify. Even lawyers give priority to public objections raised by journalists over public prosecutors' investigations. In the legal magazine *Legal Tribune Online,* Max Kolter (2023) argues:

> "One of the potentials of suspicion-based reporting is precisely to get the ball rolling on solving sexual offenses in the case of suspected repeat offenders: If a person concerned 'only' goes to the police, the investigation initially remains a secret in order to protect the accused's right to privacy. If the suspicion is not substantiated, the state's attorney will not disclose the name of the suspect or the fact that an investigation is being conducted. However, if the witness herself is quoted in a newspaper with coverage, this can signal to potential other victims of the same perpetrator that 'you are not alone'." (Kolter 2023).

In the Lindemann case this is taken even further—journalistic research has an advantage over police investigative work precisely *because* a promise of confidentiality can be made and media reports can thus set official investigations in motion. At the same time, however, reporting impairs the potential suitability of witnesses: "Distortion and influence effects [lead] to a press article being published before the interrogation, thus reducing the credibility of the testimony. Journalism and criminal prosecution—it's not a perfect match." (Kolter 2023).

The Lindemann case has actually expanded the patterns of journalistic #MeToo reporting that have emerged during the investigations into Harvey Weinstein by adding a number of aesthetic and narrative dimensions. The musician's self-staging on stage as a figure of hypervirile, potent masculinity seems like an involuntary illustration of what critiques of sexual violence have long pointed out. Here, someone

is staging himself as a stage character in a way that not only ignores the criticism of #MeToo about the polarization of power and powerlessness, older men and young women, fame and sex, but almost defiantly seeks to surpass it: "Hypersexualized lyrics, German-mania or Teutomania, and repeated provocations" is how Biazza et al. (2023, p. 16) describe Till Lindemann's "territory" in their extensive research of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Such a staging of content and aesthetics can be understood as a practice of contradicting the social expectation of equal gender relations.

It is precisely this stage character that allows journalism to report details that would otherwise fall into the realm of privacy and intimacy worthy of protection, and thus do cater to the attention economy of scandal reporting and intensification of affective involvement (Lünenborg 2020). Accordingly, the courts ruled in favour of the editorial offices. The Hamburg Regional Court, for example, ruled that Lindemann's privacy had not been violated by the reporting, as he had made his sexual practices a matter of public record in a video shown at a solo concert. The video shows Lindemann having sex with female visitors to a Rammstein concert in a room ('suck room') under the stage (Biazza 2023, p. 19). As a public figure, Lindemann thus embodies a celebrity status that legitimizes public interest in his private life. In an interview, NDR journalist Anja Reschke notes, however, the limitations of journalistic research in celebrity cases and adds: "As a journalist, you have to think carefully about what feelings are involved. It's often about shame, but certainly also about revenge. You have to be careful not to be used." (Becker and Backes 2024) This shows the extent to which emotions constitute public discourse. Emotions do not only play a role as the movement of (supposedly) affected parties, but are also generated and managed in journalistic reporting (Lünenborg and Medeiros 2020).

The few journalistic voices that critically contradict the witness statements in the Lindemann case as well as the #MeToo research fall back on stereotypical gender concepts despite supposedly gender-neutral wording. For example, the former judge at the Federal Court of Justice Thomas Fischer wrote in *Der Spiegel* in June (2023): "Women (or men) between twenty and thirty who allow themselves to be invited to parade in skimpy clothing around a charismatic performer (in German "Rampensau", roughly translated as "stage hog") are at the mercy of no power but that of their own fantasies." Add to that Jasper von Altenbockums (2023, p. 8) criticism of the "force and self-assurance of the media campaign" in the *FAZ* after the public prosecutor's investigation was closed in August 2023. He concludes: "The monster is innocent. (...) It proves true again and again that moralizing activists do more harm than good."

However, when analysing the various modes of contradicting in the Lindemann/Rammstein case, such a conclusive assessment does not seem very convincing. Legally, initial statements and responses have led to a stalemate. The investigations against Lindemann were discontinued due to a lack of testimony that could be used in court. On the other hand, Lindemann's attempt to have Shelby Lynn's statements prosecuted as defamation also failed. However, this by no means has ended the public debate on the subject of abuse of power in popular culture and the music industry. In its reasoning for the verdict from the trial between Lindemann and the Süddeutsche Zeitung, the Frankfurt Regional Court explained that there was an "overriding public interest in information about the plaintiff's casting system. (...) The presumption of innocence does not preclude (...) that suspicious acts are

being described and evaluated." (Judgment cited in Duhm and Löffler 2023). Even if the investigation proceedings are discontinued, reporting is still permitted.

5 Conclusion: understanding media practices of contradicting

The Lindemann case shows how publics are formed through diverse practices of contradicting around accusations of abuse of power in the music industry. Sexualized violence by prominent men, which is "anchored in structural power inequalities" and "supported by symbolic and discursive violence" (Geiger 2015, p. 290, our transl.), is certainly addressed in these publics. The fact that the communicative negotiation of sexualized violence online and offline is still shaped by the "psychology of powerful men (...) or biologistic male libido and drive control" and less by the reference to "structural inequalities, patriarchal gender norms, sexism and a culture of impunity", as Geiger (2015, p. 296, our transl.) pointed out a few years ago, continues to be repeated in 2023 and 2024.

It is by no means possible to identify isolated echo chambers in these debates around sexualized violence; rather, a structure of more or less networked references can be traced: This dynamic communicative processes among fans of Rammstein on the one hand and critics of sexualized violence on the other, however, is primarily about narratives of accusation and justification as well as loyalty. It is connected with ignorance expressed as a visceral refusal of the fans to deal with the accusations against the lead singer. Communication is densely networked, but actual communication with each other still seems difficult to achieve. Along ethical-normative expectations, liberalist thinkers trivialize sexualized violence with beliefs about the "freedom of art" and with the repetition of sexist attributions of responsibility in the logic of a long-known 'it's your own fault'. At the same time, affected and sympathetic women and male critics are confronted with a cacophony of voices of loyal fans. It also became clear that early objections from feminist media professionals who articulated their criticism of Lindemann's poems and the display and glorification of sexualized violence against women were rarely heard. Although these professionals have used political magazines, journals, online portals, and social media to articulate their views, their objections have largely been overlooked and disregarded—which can be read as an indication of the everyday nature of sexism, which is only problematized and becomes the subject of debate in cases of massive physical violence.

Focusing on journalists and journalistic formats as actors of contradicting shows clearly how the institutions of justice and journalism each struggle to be seen as *the authority* to interpret a relevant topic. It became apparent how journalism and the judiciary can take on different tasks in the communicative network. With journalistic research, anonymized witness statements could be contrasted with missing witness statements in preliminary proceedings. At the same time, legal maneuvers can be used strategically to prevent the contradicting of those affected or journalists. While the judiciary negotiated questions of personal rights and criminal offences, public television journalism, for example, claimed to provide an impetus for ethical negotiations and social responsibility in dealing with sexualized violence.

Polyvocal publics produce contradictory, contingent statements—as these insights have shown—but also demonstrate critical imbalances in terms of power dynamics. The instances we highlighted in our analysis illustrate the extent to which the emotional charge of individual statements, but also the affective dynamics of the relational events between different speaker positions, platforms, and media (institutions) characterize the process of public communication. The temporality of these events—concentrated on the (early) summer of 2023, but embedded in a reference structure that refers to earlier disputes about works by Lindemann, as well as earlier #MeToo cases—creates an intensification of public communication in which moments of pause seem impossible.

In view of these insights, it does not seem helpful to make a categorical distinction between the public and counter-public for a conflict analysis based on communication studies, to which our work intends to contribute. Rather, dominant voices and arguments that support the status quo can be found in different media arenas (institutionalized journalism as well as social media, for example) where*, at the same time,* critically intervening voices emerge. This clarifies that the *agency* of the actors involved is structured by the various communication arenas, their technical structures and levels of accessibility, but is by no means determined by them. For example, feminist voices do not receive greater interpretative power just because they appear as voices in institutionalized journalism. The volume and strength through which fans express their loyalty to their idol is particularly evident on digital platforms. At sold-out concerts, online articulation becomes a physical expression that meets protestors face-to-face, who in turn circulate their protest publicly with the help of digital media. This creates a contingent formation of discourse that—as described above—is not understood to be complete. Repetitions of events causing conflicts take place continuously, since no socially satisfactory, final assessment of the conflict has taken place.

An analytical understanding of media practices of contradicting can contribute to the objective outlined in the introduction to recognize more precisely who is arguing with whom in which arena, for example over conflicts of distribution, affiliation, or recognition. On this basis, it is important to better understand why and where dissent manifests and conflicts become affectively charged. Our focus on the media practices of contradicting sexualized violence have focused analytical attention on affective dynamics, on forced collaboration and ignorance in fan communication, among other things, on temporality and contingency in the consideration of feminist contradiction, and on the institutional authority of actors in their struggle for interpretative power. This brings the discrepancy between legal vs. morally legitimate judgments to light, which are publicly negotiated side by side and intertwined in media discourse. The reconstruction of the communication process allows insights into its contingent and in part paradoxical character: critical voices, which were initially heard, were confronted with massive counter-reactions and hostility in the course of the public debate. While the critical voices were not completely silenced, this made further public interventions more difficult. At the same time, a discursive space evolved in which it became possible to sanction violations of norms—even if they eluded final legal judgment.

Only by reconstructing the specific modalities and dynamics of contradicting in media is it possible to identify potential practices that make dissent visible and differences explicit in polyvocal publics. Voices that previously tended to be ignored are now given space and attention. This democratic gain produces antagonists—but it is nevertheless indispensable. At the same time, such an analysis also enables to identify the connections and points of contact that establish the relational character of the debate instead of conceptualise it as polarisation. This can create an analytical basis that turns 'trigger points' into areas for discursive negotiation. The prerequisite for this is the social willingness and ability to accept the contingency and paradox nature of contradicting—to understand it as an indispensable component of contemporary conflict negotiation.

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