After the storm
Translating the US Capitol storming in Germany’s right-wing digital media ecosystem
Doerr, Nicole; Gardner, Beth Gharrity

Published in:
Translation in Society

DOI:
10.1075/tris.21008.doe

Publication date:
2022

Document version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
After the Storm: Translating the US Capitol Storming in Germany’s Right-Wing Digital Media Ecosystem

**Final draft version. Please do not cite or quote.**


Nicole Doerr, Associate Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen, nd@soc.ku.dk

Beth Gharrity Gardner, postdoctoral researcher, Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen

**Abstract**
This study investigates the translational practices of far-right activists in Germany in their storytelling about the January 6 storming of the US Capitol, studied through content analysis across influential German alternative news websites. While scholars have begun to study translational practices in left-wing, progressive social movements, this study applies the lens of translation to far-right media and activists. Our critical focus on translation and ideology extends existing, for the most part monolingual approaches to political storytelling, highlighting the storyteller behind far-right conspiracy narratives. Findings reveal how far-right commentators used their intermediary position to re-narrate, translate, and convert ‘mainstream’ accounts of an exceptionally contentious event into stories supporting far-right-wing and extremist identities. Re-narrations of January 6 events characterized protesters as victim-heroes and contrasted them with the true villains responsible for the chaos and violence, which included a broad spectrum of political actors on the ideological left writ large.

**Keywords**
Translation, social movements, ideology, narratives, far right, digital media, mobilization

**Acknowledgements**
For their constructive comments we thank the editors of Translation in Society, two anonymous reviewers, the University of Copenhagen Social Science Data lab, Snorre Sylvester Frid-Nielsen, Stephane Baele, Maik Fielitz, Helena Flam, Annett Heft, Julia Rone, Chris Höhne, and Mathis Lohaus. We are grateful to feedback provided by our colleagues at the Department of Sociology, and colleagues at the GCR21 Centre for Global Cooperation Research/KHK. This research was facilitated by the European Union’s NORFACE Democratic Governance in a Turbulent Age research program funding.
There is little doubt that the internet plays a pivotal role in amplifying the transnationalization of political movements and their messages. Yet relatively little is known about how far-right media and activists strategically narrate globally striking protest events for online audiences. This article consistently uses the terms ‘far-right’ and ‘right-wing’ interchangeably. While this follows an inclusive understanding of ‘rightist’ actors as conservative or right-wing movements, political parties, or subcultures, ongoing definitional debates as well as alternative labels along a left-right continuum should be noted (c.f. Blee and Creasap 2010). Translation theorists and social scientists working on processes of collective identification and meaning making in political mobilization have become increasingly interested in alternative or activist storytelling, both online and offline (see Baker 2014, 2016; Boëri 2008; Fernández 2021; Polletta and Gardner 2015a, 2015b; Polletta and Callahan 2019).

However, there is still a great deal of room to synthesize insights from these overlapping lines of inquiry (Baker 2016, 11). For instance, although scholars of media activism recognize that today’s media landscape is enabling new dynamics in political uses of storytelling, few are examining these processes through the lens of translation. Similarly, although the “translation turn” in social movement studies has inspired new research on the “politics of translation” within culturally diverse, left-wing movements and coalition building across geographic scales (for a review, see Doerr 2021a), research on conservative and far-right activists’ transnational, online translational practices is scarce.

To begin addressing these gaps, this study investigates how political commentators in Germany’s right-wing, ‘alternative’ digital media ecosystem culturally (and linguistically) translated the storming of the United States Capitol building to their online audiences. We use the term translation as a way of articulating how practices of cultural translation are used by political actors or groups for re-narrating political events to convey certain political ideas or ideologies. We are aware of the problem that our broad definition of cultural translation as a political practice may overlap with conceptions or practices elsewhere defined as (re)narration, mediation, or intermediation. Yet we think that our conceptualization of translation deepens knowledge of the political semantic positioning of activists behind storytelling and related discursive forms, including visual aesthetic translation practices (Doerr 2017a), and character work in movements (Jasper et al. 2018).

Although we have analyzed accounts published on German-language right-wing websites, we do not focus on the interlingual dimension of translation per se (that is, from English into German). Instead, we situate our work in interdisciplinary scholarship on the translation of political culture and ideology in media activist websites re-narrating internationally salient political events (see Baker 2016, 2018; Bánhegyi 2017; Spiessens and Van Poucke 2016; Van Doorslaer 2018). Moreover, we emphasize the political-ideological dimensions of translational practices as re-narration. Connecting Baker’s (2018, 139–143) narrative approach to translation with work on political storytelling and character work in political contention (Fine 2006; Jasper et al. 2018, 2020; Polletta 2015), we explore far-right media activists’ ideological positioning and translational practices by examining their re-narrations of the critical moments (plot) and actors (characters) involved in an internationally salient protest event.

Empirically, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of articles about the January 6 storming of the US Capitol building that were published on prominent alternative right-wing news websites in Germany in the weeks that followed. As an exceptionally contentious event of global import, the storming of the US Capitol building is well suited for studying the ideological dimension of translational practices. In line with William Sewell’s (1996) work on transformative events and subsequent scholarship on protests as ‘eventful’ in transforming the movements that carry them out, we expect that the events of January 6 served as a signifying opportunity for transnational far-right communities. Without equating the storming of the US Capitol building with that of the Bastille, the former bears a resemblance to transformative events or ones producing an “unsettled time” when meanings are likely to be destabilized and
community boundaries re-drawn or rearticulated (Swidler 1986). These are events that, as Sewell (1996, 861) puts it, “introduce new conceptions of what really exists (the violent crowd as the people’s will in action), of what is good (the people in ecstatic union), and of what is possible (revolution, a new kind of regeneration of the state and the nation).” Moreover, marked as the Capitol events were by violence and ideologically right-leaning protesters at an iconic site of American democracy, examining the signifying practices involved in German right-wing commentators’ political storytelling about what occurred can shed light on the dynamics of identity, reputation and character work in activist storytelling (e.g., Fine 2006; Jasper et al. 2018, 2020; Polletta 2015). Put differently, this case is ideal for better understanding how far-right media activists might draw on standard plot lines and characters along with social group stereotypes to re-narrate a contentious international protest event in ways that keep it familiar and empowering for their right-wing audiences.

Our results broadly show that the translational practices of right-wing political commentators in Germany were anchored in an overarching (and transnational) background story of moderate right-wing communities facing constant persecution by extremist left-wing elites. To instruct audiences about the politically motivated bias and villainy of these adversaries toward ideologically right-leaning people, media activists routinely re-narrated certain events, actions, and players connected to the Capitol storming through a one-sided conversation with the ostensibly biased and pervasive ‘mainstream’ media accounts of what happened. Thus, voices across the right-wing sites we studied positioned themselves as ideological translators in mediating between a valid right-wing ideational regime and a transnational community of traditional politics and media that is united in marginalizing and attacking right-wing communities (see Bánhegyi 2017). Additionally, we show how the violence, motivations, and character portrayals of January 6 protesters were re-narrated, largely through stories purporting to discredit other actors and accounts. Protesters were re-narrated as non-violent (aside from a few pawns or fools), morally righteous actors (victim-heroes or martyrs) who were demonstrating against the ongoing oppression and vilification of the political right (such as election fraud, reverse discrimination, and the ‘real’ violence of the police and left-wing movement actors).

In examining activists’ translational practices within far-right media contexts, this study responds to Baker’s (2016, 11) call to expand theories on translation and activism to all fields of social movement studies, including increasingly transnational and digitally networked right-wing movements. Additionally, unpacking translational practices involved in re-narrating an internationally visible protest event on alternative news websites contributes to further bridging research on political storytelling in shifting media landscapes (e.g., Jasper et al. 2020; Polletta and Gardner 2015a, 2015b; Polletta and Callahan 2019), with translation scholarship on political-cultural or ideological bias in online re-narrations of political news and alternative storytelling practices in social movements (e.g., Baker 2016; Doerr 2018; Fernández 2021; Lovett 2019). In sum, we offer an approach to translational practices within social movements that can accommodate multiple types of actors, ideologies, and features of storytelling.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, we review work at the intersection of translation, storytelling, and digital media and activism that informs our conceptualization of translation and our analytical approach. Next, we present the study design and methods. The third section introduces the results of the analysis of the translational practices deployed by German far-right media activists in their coverage of the US Capitol storming. Our conclusion discusses the implications of the findings and directions for future research.

Politics of Translation in Digitally Mediated Information Environments

Translation in Mobilization Processes

The ‘translation turn’ in the humanities has influenced research on social movements in
various ways, ranging from work examining activist groups of translators and interpreters (Boëri 2008; Baker 2013) to studies of grassroots democracy in progressive movement coalitions and multilingual citizen assemblies in Europe and the US (Doerr 2018). The work we draw from can be situated in the interdisciplinary area of theorizing and research on narrative and cultural diffusion (e.g., Baker 2016, 2018; Doerr 2017; Fernandez 2021). These perspectives tend to understand translation in political contests as a socially structured and relational set of practices or techniques for communicating meaning and forging community membership across multiple lines of difference. Shifts in meaning that occur as information is translated from one language to another frequently underlie understandings of translation, leaving the interlingual dimension of translation underemphasized. Moving beyond any lingering assumption that translations (and/or translators) are neutral or unproblematic, we build on scholarly insights about the political-cultural and/or ideological dimensions of translational practices and translators in the movement of ideas, beliefs, or stories transnationally.

Our specific focus is on the construction of ideological communities (and/or antagonisms) in the translational practices and self-positioning of far-right media activists in digitally networked right-wing movements. Combining insights from emerging literature on translation in social movements, characters in political storytelling, and digitally networked right-wing media and activism, we examine how right-wing political commentators (or media activists) active on influential online alternative news and commentary sites in Germany ideologically position themselves and external audiences through their accounts of the storming of the US Capitol. We consider how the mobilization of language is patterned not only to make positions or viewpoints accessible and persuasive, but also to signal groups’ identity and legitimacy (see Baker 2014; Fine 2006; Jasper et al. 2020; Polletta 2015). Accordingly, we examine how political actors translate certain political ideas or ideologies through storytelling practices, including by re-narrating political occurrences, actors and issues in ways that they expect to resonate with their intended audiences. We treat ideological positionings in translational practices as practices of re-narrating political events in ways that allow commentators to establish their own standing as credible intermediaries between competing political stances, actors, ideologies, or ideational regimes.

Other scholars have used concepts such as framing or discourse to anchor investigations into activists’ ideological work. Translation scholars Spiessens and Van Poucke (2016), for example, use framing and discourse analysis to study ideological bias in Russian websites’ re-framing of Western news reporting of the 2014 Crimean crisis. Others, such as Lovett (2019), focus on cultural translation or mediation. Bánhegyi (2017) traces translation as a political tool that can be misused ideologically in bilingual contexts with the interest of gaining power. We argue that taking up narrative approaches to translation can contribute to deepening knowledge on the political-semantic positioning of activists behind websites spreading far right ideologies, including cultural and ideological translation practices in social movements, an underexplored line of empirical inquiry. To this end, Baker (2013, 24) underscores the political agency of activists who use narratives on webpages for “giving voice, of extending narrative space” and as “part of their political agenda.” In research on democracy on social movements, Doerr has discussed the “critical third position” and the inclusionary potential of activists who assume positions as “political translators” enabling deliberation and conflict resolution across intersecting and linguistic differences and inequalities (Doerr 2018, 2019).

In line with this work, several sociological studies have highlighted the agency and ideological inflection of left-wing translational practices in the context of particular social movements (Boëri 2016; Fernández 2018; Doerr 2018). However, the bulk of scholarship in this emerging literature examines translational practices among left-wing actors, groups, or websites (for an exception, see Doerr 2017). Thus, the open question in this literature is to understand the ideological positioning and translational practices of social movement actors.
who do not identify as progressive or left-wing, and who are not interested in fostering inclusion and solidarity across ethnic or racial differences.

We explore far-right translational practices as part of extending as well as bridging translational approaches in the humanities with sociological approaches to transnational social movement activism as political and/or inter-cultural translation (Baker 2016; Doerr 2018; Fernández 2021). In doing so we recognize that the political actors we study—as opposed to the groups of left-wing or progressive ones more commonly studied (e.g., Baker 2016, Boéri 2008, Doerr 2008; Fernández 2021)—are more likely to communicate anti-pluralism, excluding any number of social categories as negative ‘others’ (beyond ‘the elite’) in constructing their stories and community boundaries.

Our research will empirically investigate how far-right activists are distinct in their self-positioning and their use of ideology in translating and re-narrating political events online. By critically analyzing translational practices on websites that do not aim to foster diversity, inclusion and understanding across national and linguistic differences, but rather seek to further other, less altruistic causes (Baker 2018, 139), our empirical study adds a critical case to the literature on translational practices in social movements.

Far Right Translations: Contesting the ‘Mainstream’ Media

Theories of translation offer an interesting angle to study how far-right political commentators interact with official media narratives on political ‘crisis’ (cf. Fernández 2021; Rosendo 2021), becoming alternative storytellers in fragmented and transnational digital media and movement contexts (Baker 2016). To begin to understand how right-wing digital media and activist subcultures engage in a politics of translation, we must first situate them within research and theorizing on relationships between digital and legacy media in contemporary political communication. With the proliferation of digital communication technologies such as social media, far-right and right-wing populist parties and movements have become particularly adept at leveraging to their advantage the segmentation and polarization that mark contemporary political communication environments (for a recent review, see Freelon, Marwick, and Kreiss 2020). In the digital age, right-wing, alternative media sites and ‘hyperpartisan media’ voices have become an increasingly prevalent part of media environments in the United States and Europe (cf. Fielitz and Thurston 2019; Heft et al. 2021; Baele et al. 2021). On the one hand, this speaks to arguments about the fragmentation and polarization of publics in contemporary, high-choice, hybrid media systems (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Chadwick 2017; Van Aelst et al. 2017). On the other, as the decentralized digital media landscape has contributed to the blurring of boundaries between journalistically driven, movement-driven, and opinion-driven forms of communication, distinctions between movement activists and alternative media pundits are often a matter of degree (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Berry and Sobieraj 2014; Holt et al. 2019; Marwick and Lewis 2017).

Our focus on the far right fits well with Baker’s (2018) focus on narratives translating political events or conflict in such a way as to produce hegemonic understandings about reality by omitting, selecting and re-writing political events to fit their ideology. Work on far-right activists’ tactical manipulation of the journalistic practices of traditional news organizations—such as ‘news values,’ objectivity protocols, and mounting constraints on fact-checking—shows dependency at another level (Chadwick 2017; Marwick and Lewis 2017). Far-right activists, outlets, and personalities are all part of a densely connected online network which relies on constant internal cross-referencing to spread messages and boost reputations (Baele et al. 2021; Benkler et al. 2018; Faris et al. 2017; Lewis 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2017). However, their potential to reach audiences outside of the digital publics in which they operate still heavily depends on traditional news outlets and media institutions.

Practices for de- and re-contextualizing media stories in order to advance a starkly

---

1 Mona Baker (2013, 2016), who has studied progressive movement groups in Egypt, Latin America and internationally, identifies these groups as being dedicated to diversity, inclusiveness, and pluralism.
oppositional, alternative version of political reality are varied. For instance, in their analysis of the rise of outrage-based political opinion media in the US, Berry and Sobieraj (2014) show that conservative commentators use story oversimplification, misrepresentations, and ideologically extremizing rhetoric to vilify the progressive media. In multilingual, transnational networks connecting the German and US far right online, stories from established media are translated into German and re-told in order to teach audiences how to interpret mainstream news (Heft et al. 2021). Activists’ implicit ideological positioning in translational practices can be particularly influential because they cultivate feelings of belonging to a like-minded community as well as resistance to contrary information encountered elsewhere (Berry and Sobieraj 2014, 197; Polletta and Callahan 2019). Moreover, a narrative framework is conducive to understanding how characters, as condensed symbols for storytelling, are communicated in ways that facilitate activists’ translational practices.

**Storytelling in Social Movements and Character ‘Polysemy’**

Narratives are particularly well-suited to harnessing the participatory possibilities of the internet. Narratives differ from many other forms of communication in that they are accessible, non-threatening, and allusive or open to interpretation (e.g., Polletta 2006). These characteristics also seem to make narratives resonant or shareable in online contexts, where media consumption is highly socialized and where ideologically discordant views are often avoided or algorithmically filtered out (see Chadwick 2017; Messing and Westwood 2012; Turcotte et al. 2015). As digital objects that are easily transported, molded, and recalibrated to different contexts, narratives may also more readily propagate across the linguistic, geographic, and ideological barriers faced by networked social movements (see Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Caiani and Parenti 2016; Fielitz and Turston 2019; Miller-Idriss 2017).

Following Klapp’s (1962) classic typology of fundamental characters for eliciting praise, condemnation, and ridicule—heroes, villains, and fools—, scholars have begun examining and retheorizing the power of characters in political storytelling. Jasper and colleagues’ (2018, 2020) character theory defines each of these character types according to the dimensions of power (strong or weak) and moral quality (benevolent or malevolent). For example, heroes are strong and benevolent while villains are strong and malevolent. This can also make some characters, such as victims, more complicated for activists to employ in mobilizing stories than others. Emerging lines of inquiry into characters in political storytelling suggest that characters can play a fundamental role in standardizing narratives and condensing symbols of collective identities.

**Methods and Data: Unpacking Translational Practices**

In this study, we draw theoretical and methodological insights from multidisciplinary approaches to translation and narrative, and character work in political storytelling (Baker 2014, 2018; Doerr 2017; Jasper et al. 2018, 2020; Polletta 2006, 2015; Polletta and Gardner 2015a, 2015b). In short, our analytic approach hones in on interlinked patterns in storytelling and discursive practices, mainly (implicit) causalities (argumentation and the arrangement of events) and characterizations (nomination, predication) within textual communications as a way of revealing the techniques and themes that played a defining role in how right-wing political commentators in Germany told the story of the Capitol events. More specifically, we address the narrative features of translators’ ideological positionality (Doerr 2018) and their selective representation of relevant others (see Spiessens and Van Poucke 2016), including themselves and the audience addressed (Baker 2016, 2018). Thus, we focus on identifying the content of typical stories and the practices of using characterizations to persuasively demarcate *us* from *them*. Broken down into two overlapping components, we examine: (1) the content of typical or prevalent storylines or counter-narratives and (2) the common casting of relevant actors through their selective connections or causal emplotment in these
accounts. Both are angles for assessing how political commentators position themselves (and their anticipated audiences) through narratively emplotting and characterizing allies, adversaries, and third parties as heroes/martyrs, villains, victims, and minions/pawns for multiple audiences (Jasper et al. 2018, 2020; Polletta 2015).

The data we analyze comes from the online discourse surrounding the events that took place at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 produced by a sample of theoretically relevant websites in the German far-right digital media ecosystem from January 6 to January 31. To arrive at a selection of websites that would include an important cross-section of opinion leaders in right-wing news and political commentary, we relied on relevant literature and discussions with experts in the field of German far-right alternative online media and activism. We ended up with a sample of three prominent influencer channels and nine influential German-speaking right-wing outlets, the latter of which we refer to as “established outlets.” This sample was constructed to include a diverse and pluralist selection of websites reflecting an ideological variety of multi-faceted far-right and right-wing online mobilization (Caiani and Parenti 2016). We include some of the most prominent alternative news sources in Germany, such as Politically Incorrect News, Compact Magazine, and Journalistenwatch, as well as sites affiliated with specific movement groups (Identitarian-affiliated Sezession, for example) or right-wing parties (the National Democratic Party press outlet Deutsche Stimme, for example). We exclude the official websites of formalized far-right and right-wing populist political parties, as these fall outside the scope of our focus (see Heft et al. 2021; Lewis 2018).

The sites we selected are central information sources for multiple right-wing subgroups, such as right-wing populist parties, organized extremist groups and movements, and looser, digitally networked movements. They are therefore critical for understanding digitally networked mobilization and the internationalization of right-wing ideologies (Caiani and Parenti 2016; Fielitz and Thurston 2019; Heft et al. 2021; Miller-Idriss 2017; Doerr 2021b). The sites were scraped for all articles that appeared between January 6 and January 31, 2021. We then filtered this population of articles (approximately 1,800 in total) using a combination of search terms and human coding to identify articles substantively about the events at the Capitol on January 6 (approximately 200 valid cases in total). Half of these were systematically sampled for qualitative content analysis. As the texts come from German-speaking digital media outlets. The individual quotes we present have been translated from German to English by the authors. Our translation protocols are not detailed because we do not focus on interlingual translation dynamics in this study. We are aware that our choice not to provide the original German quotes limits the knowledge gained from our analysis, given our assumption that translations (and we as translators) are not neutral. In addition, data protection restrictions, copyright, ethical constraints, and other concerns prevent specific attribution in presenting the materials analyzed.

Findings

The findings are presented in three parts. In the first part, we discuss the underlying ideological self-positioning of far-right political commentaries in their monolingual (German-speaking) translations re-narrating English speaking news reporting on the January 6 storming of the US Capitol. Second, we identify converging narrative tropes used to ideologically translate the events in Washington and US actors involved within a background story of right-wing marginalization and demonization by the political mainstream. Third, to detail how specific stories about the Capitol storming forged a loose ideological consensus justifying unrest, we present the three typical characterizations of protesters that re-narrate right-wing protesters as benevolent, non-violent figures.

Ideological Positionings in Far-Right Translations: Omitting, Selecting, and Re-writing Political Events

In this section we identify a variety of far-right ideological positionings, including historically
revisionist or racist re-narrations of Capitol events highlighting Germany’s police or the
German people as superior to US politicians and US police officers. For example, an openly
eextremist Telegram influencer channel posted days after the events at the Capitol: “The
American patriots now feel like Germans in 1918! Trump has […] turned away from their
protest and plunged the dagger […] into their backs.” The quoted Telegram post is a typical
illustration of how far-right influencers in their monolingual, German-only channels combined
metaphor, metonymy, and exaggeration to re-narrate political events in Washington through a
far-right revisionist ideology: the quoted influencer refers to Capitol protesters positively, and
metonymously associates them with “American patriots” as well as with “Germans in 1918.”
The audience needs to be well-versed in German history and far-right conspiracy narratives to
decode this ambivalent statement. Moreover, the post implicitly associates Trump negatively
to the perceived “backstabbing” of the German Empire, referring to neo-fascist myths re-
narrating the end of World War I which blamed Germany’s defeat on its leaders’
unwillingness to continue fighting. By affirming that Trump “plunged the dagger into their
backs,” this post produces a hateful revisionist statement—typical for a particular openly
extremist influencer style.

Other influencers made their self-censoring explicit to prevent their channels from being
classified as extremist and at the same time used cultural translations into German as a subtle
way to downplay the violence in Washington. One such influencer, whose account had
previously been taken down due to extremist statements, described pro-Trump protests on the
steps of the Capitol as a peaceful “Volksfest.” This linguistic translation into German used an
ambivalent popular cultural trope (Volksfest) to connect two latent meanings: a traditional
‘people’s street party,’ and abuse of popular street parties by Nationalist Socialists and fascists
for political mobilization (Wodak 2013).

We also found more ‘moderate’ far-right nationalist ideologies of translation. For
example, the most widely circulated websites avoided explicit references to Germany’s
historical past in their commentaries, focusing instead on comparing present-day German
politics in opposition to US politics. For example, in order to affirm in a positive sense that
German police officers would have done a better job than the Washington police, a commentary
published on a far-right platform writes:

With three Reichstag police officers perhaps the storming of the Capitol could have
been avoided […]. The fact that the shooting of Trump supporter Ashli Babbitt […] was
only worth a side note [in media reporting about the events] was potentially caused by
her ethnic distance to George Floyd. (Case 1, ex. 2, January, 2021)

The commentary quoted above constructs a hypothetical, counter-factual argument
suggesting that the hero characters of “three [German] Reichstag police officers” would have
prevented the storming of the US Capitol—in contrast to the US police, who ‘failed’ in their
policing of the protest. This nationalist argument is a selective re-telling and mixing of
political events in two countries that exaggerates the perceived ‘successful’ policing of
protests at the German Reichstag in 2020, where far-right activists and protesters
demonstrating against Covid-19 measures entered the Reichstag building, causing an
international media uproar. This selective translation also omits facts by criticizing
 mainstream media voices for not sufficiently reporting about the shooting of Ashli Babbitt,
when in reality the event was widely covered. It furthermore attributes this perceived lack of
coverage to reverse discrimination, thus adding an implicitly racist commentary to the re-
narration of Babbitt’s death.

Self-Positioning as Alternative Media Experts
Political commentators re-narrated the events and actors of January 6 in ways that affirmed their self-assigned roles as correctives to traditional news and providers of alternative information and opinions, as a service to right-wing publics. The website format used by established outlets not only provides the time and space to de- and re-contextualize stories, it also disguises extremist rhetoric by presenting it visually and stylistically as traditional news outlets do, including by presenting coverage of the January 6 events as ‘breaking news’ and opinions as pundit-like political commentary. Our content analysis of political commentators’ posts on established far-right digital media outlets shows that racist, prejudicial or discriminatory messages and hateful (racist, sexist and anti-Semitic) speech directed at particular social or status categories are concealed through irony, sarcasm, or rhetorical questions, and commonly appear to construct arguments of reverse discrimination (see Wodak 2013). Moreover, we find the most vitriolic speech is attributed to mainstream leftist characters. With few exceptions, the lion’s share of outrage is directed at the extremism of traditional media and politics (read as left-wing).

Rhetorical techniques for calling up and reinforcing an underlying or background narrative of antagonism with the mainstream are evident in the earliest posts. In one such commentary, the author starts out describing the escalation of violence at the Capitol in a neutral tone, only to launch into what “a ready-made feast” this scenario provides “for Trump-haters, especially in the German media”:

[Journalists] excelled in coup interpretations and presented it as if Trump’s demonstrators were remote-controlled robots—and as if everyone who harbors reasonable doubts about election manipulation and demonstrates in favor of it is a subversive and a putschist. Every critic is a criminal extremist and an enemy of democracy. (Case 7, example 1)

In this excerpt, the author illustrates the misleading exaggeration of journalists’ interpretations by re-coding the motives and actions of protesters as “reasonable” (not “extremist”), “active” (not passive “robots”), and democratic (not “criminal” or “enemies of democracy”). By translating the language used by journalists along the flip side of symbolic oppositions—as a ‘discourse of repression’—the author positions “the media” as the primary antagonist (see Alexander and Smith 1993). In addition, the rhetoric both implies and assumes the audience’s familiarity with the background story (that is, that “we already know” journalists “excel” at these kinds of interpretations and “feast” on these kinds of events). We found similar versions of this antiestablishment narrative of repression on multiple outlets and in multiple posts.

The stock of phrases for referring to German and American media and politics (all largely interchangeable) also suggest that translating mainstream antagonism toward ‘the political right’ along such lines is expected to resonate with the intended audiences. Very rarely named specifically or quoted, catch-all terms included “the mass media,” “the leftist press,” “the lying press,” “the political-media establishment,” “official politics,” “one-sided left-wing politics and press,” and “Trump haters.”

This negative presentation of the out-group was occasionally scaled up to national and global levels of conspiracy (“the left-globalist camarilla of Big Tech, Deep State supporters and US democratic elites,” or carriers of “the globalist agenda”). In either case, the perceived political mainstream is constantly linked to the egregious distortion of events and characterizations of right-wing actors.

Another way established outlets reinforce their positionality as credible, trustworthy alternative news providers and cultural translators is by sourcing extreme speech to extremist

---

3 Note that all sources and authors are anonymized according to the research ethics of the University of Copenhagen where data has been stored. Case 4, ex. 5–16, 28; Case 5, ex. 1, 6, 8, 9, 12, 19, 21, 25; Case 6, ex. 1, 5, 6, 8, 11–13, 18, 19; Case 7, ex. 1, 4, 5, 9, 14, 21, 34, 39, 40, 43, 44, 47, 49; Case 8, ex. 1, 16, 26, 32; Case 9, ex. 6; Case 10, ex. 3; Case 11 ex. 4–7, 10, 11.

4 Case 9, ex. 2; and among influencers, Case 2, ex. 1, 7.
influencers on social media. Inviting commentaries from influencers is strategic to gain greater attention and signal alignment with ‘grassroots’ far-right subcultures. In the following excerpt, sourcing arguments from an influencer provides an entry point for affirming that violence at the Capitol is rooted in the “Left” and violence against “Whites”:

The fact that so many left-wingers interpret Trump’s words as inciting violence explains the weekly antifa and Black Lives Matter unrest. And just a thought: Perhaps this never-ceasing debasement of Whites as “white trash,” denying them their identity, their history and their pride, was much more of an incitement to a storm of the Capitol accompanied by agents provocateurs than Trump’s harmless tweets? (Case 5, example 7; “white trash” is also mentioned in Case 8, examples 19, 23).

Within the long-standing White nationalist victimization narrative alluded to in this post (Adams and Roscigno 2005, Atton 2006), violence at the Capitol is justified or neutralized as an act of self-liberation. Violence was not incited by Trump, but sprung from reverse discrimination, shaming, and disdain directed at Whites. The reference to “agents provocateurs” also normalizes a complementary story in which it is posited that the violence was incited or initiated by third parties (antifa or Black Lives Matter protesters in most versions, and a larger left-wing conspiracy in others).

These findings show that, in mediating between the abhorrent mainstream news ideology and that of far-right audiences, voices across these right-wing outlets demonstrate their ideological position as authentic translators on behalf of an imaginary German people. While we find a variety of elaborate rhetorical techniques for correcting specific mainstream accounts of the events and characters on January 6, featuring the politically motivated (left-wing) bias of traditional media interpretations serves as a narrative backbone or infrastructure of sorts upon which commentators position themselves as ‘trustworthy’ experts in politics. This involves discrediting popular accounts other than their own and instructing readers on how to counter-interpret the events and actors involved.

Thus, by a selective re-telling of events in diverse stories, commentators constructed their own voice as ‘democratic’ by aligning the left-wing mainstream of media and politics as antagonistic to a right-thinking, right-wing understanding of political reality. They position themselves as speaking for a community unified in its marginalization by (and anger against) traditional bases of public information such as democratic institutions and traditional news media. But ascribing grossly misrepresented stories of the political right to the mainstream media also laid a foundation for underscoring a key causal implication of the Capitol events: that the manipulation of the event’s meanings served as a further “pretext for the systematic persecution of the political right through a public-private chimera” (Case 8, example 17; Case 11, examples 2, 11). Moreover, stories presenting right-wing protester violence at the Capitol as counter-democratic—as entirely unjustifiable—were almost entirely lacking. Thus, commentators rarely demonstrated moral or political superiority/authority by distancing themselves from the right-wing actors connected to the events on January 6. We flesh this out further in the following section, where we deepen our analysis of character tropes in translational practices.

Re-Narrating Political Events through Victim-Heroes and Martyr Character Tropes
We find that the particular stories told about the conflict at the Capitol all allude to the larger story in which the problems faced by the political right are the fault of the political mainstream and its extreme left machinations. Compared to these malevolent powerholders (the true villains) and their minions, mainly identified as the police and left-wing “agent provocateurs” and social movements, the Capitol protesters are presented as largely blameless for the conflict and the violence that ensued from it. Using contrasting meanings and sarcasm, a typical commentary scoffs at media depictions of right-wing protesters and
“the so-called ‘storming’ of the Capitol.” Thus, a relational configuration of actor characterizations, drawing on the full range of character tropes, positively positions protesters as victim-heroes and martyrs.

Commentary minimizing the violence was frequent and frequently contrasted with ‘official’ media accounts. For example, a commentary describes the protest at the Capitol as a “mostly peaceful [...] happening” with “peaceful demonstrators,” where “the number of people actually involved in the violence was very small.” Many stories use stark contrasts as part of highlighting mainstream media distortions of an event that “would have been celebrated by media as a heroic popular uprising [here, the German original used the Nationalist Socialist notion of Volkssturm], a storming of the Bastille and as an American Maidan had it been left-wingers and BLM protesters standing up against despot Trump.”

The efforts of right-wing commentators to characterize protesters as victim-heroes is also evident in their appropriation of Ashli Babbitt, the Capitol protester who died during the events. As part of contesting the reputations of Capitol protesters, Babbitt is frequently presented as a victim heroine in storytelling about the events. Shot by police while entering the Capitol building, she appears as a key symbol and heroic character for translating the respective villainy of liberal media, left-wing “elites” and progressive movements, in contrast to the innocence of Trump, his voters, and right-wing protesters. Moreover, her death serves to validate claims that the violence originated with police or with antifa or BLM protesters (“violence came exclusively from the police and National Guard,” or “BLM activist incited crowd to storm the Capitol”).

Featuring Babbitt’s status as a military veteran, as an unarmed woman, and as a White protester were key rhetorical devices for underscoring the egregiousness of excluding her martyrdom from narratives of the Capitol events. With respect to the first of these qualities, texts routinely reference Babbitt’s military service to mark her as a heroic American patriot. Similarly, in other stories Babbitt is cast as a martyr through arguments that media evade her “killing” because of her skin color and/or right-wing political views. By tracing the translational dynamics and narrative plots in posts like those quoted, our analysis suggests that Babbitt as an individual remains ambivalent or open-ended enough to be re-characterized or re-personalized in ways that build her into a unifying symbol. In contrast to the perceived mainstream media preference for vilifying and disparaging characterizations of Capitol protesters, Babbitt normalizes or humanizes them and neutralizes their relationship to the violence. From a character perspective, these characterizations of protesters’ benevolence and relative weakness comes closest to a victim type (Jasper et al. 2020). However, read against the backdrop of the larger story, their act of protest was mainly heroic. Within the online commentary we analyzed, far-right translational practices navigated between these character tropes, portraying protesters as victim-heroes.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This study connects emerging theories of translation in social movements with work on political storytelling and on the disruption of orders of communicative power in contemporary digital media ecosystems. Complementing previous research on translational practices in left-leaning, progressive social movements, our central contribution is to provide a critical, narrative account of far-right activists and their ideological work as translators bridging multilingual audiences to appeal to German-speaking far right activist communities. Moreover, we contribute to extending thinking about activist translation in political contexts or in times of crisis to digitally networked right-wing media and/or movements.

---

5 Case 4, ex. 27, Case 5, ex. 1; Case 6, ex. 5, 6; Case 8, ex. 5; Case 3 ex. 9; or “mostly peaceful” Case 10, ex. 4; Case 11, ex. 1; Case 2, ex. 13.
6 Case 5, ex. 7; similarly, Case 8, ex. 17; Case 11, ex. 2, 5. Case 7, ex. 30; also Case 6, ex. 2.
Our conceptual focus on translation and ideology allowed us to extend existing, mainly monolingual approaches to storytelling in social movements, and through this, to highlight the storyteller behind far-right conspiracy narratives as they are translated across linguistic and cultural differences. Our critique is that much work on social movements implicitly assumes a monolingual, English-speaking global digital media space—without noting the ideological positionality of the translators behind online media. Extending this perspective, our critical focus on narrative and ideological positioning in translation allowed us to show empirically how linguistic tropes taken from German language popular culture and history enabled far-right activists to avoid racist terminology while at the same time spreading racist, revisionist and extremist statements. We show how these practices serve to affirm the positionality of right-wing influencers and activists, who translate between the prevailing official media narratives and far-right communities both at home and abroad.

We interpret our findings in critical relation to research on political storytelling and translational practices in progressive, liberal, left-wing digital media. Left-wing multilingual activist translators on alternative media sites routinely vilify the police and government actors using sarcastic re-narrations of political events—often also criticizing their own movements in a self-ironic manner (Doerr 2017). Yet our data showed that far-right protesters primarily painted a somewhat paradoxical victimizing yet also heroic self-image of Capitol protesters, while directing simplifying stereotypes, explicit racist statements or implicitly hateful statements and sarcasm toward their “enemies.” Using incomplete and inconsistent narratives of the Capitol events, far-right activists projected violence and chaos in Washington as the responsibility of their enemies, including a broad spectrum of political actors in media, government, public institutions, the left, and especially, Black Lives Matter protest heroes such as George Floyd.

We broadly find right-wing media activists ideologically positioning themselves as aligned against a putative, hegemonic liberal left “mainstream” (comprised of “the media” and establishment politics)—and aligned with the right-wing communities marginalized or denigrated by that transnational mainstream. Consistent with some previous research on far-right online discourses (Atton 2006, for instance), we also find established outlets, especially Compact, Politically Incorrect News, and Sezession, translating the mainstream by inverting the discursive tropes of equality, democracy and inclusion that we would expect to find coming from progressive media and activists. In research on progressive movements, Baker (2013), Boéri (2008) and Doerr (2018, 2019) have highlighted the inclusionary, figurative and democratizing potential of activists who provide translations across intersecting and linguistic differences and inequalities. However, what specifically characterizes far-right translation styles from progressive digital media translation is the mobilization of hatred and self-pity through re-narration. Our findings show that beyond ideological differences, there is agreement across outlets that left Democrats, liberal leftists, and Black Lives Matter activists all share responsibility for the violence at the US Capitol.

Future research could develop a critical comparative perspective on translation and social movements that takes the multilingual nature of far-right movements and digital media and influencer channels seriously. Previous work on far-right movements has used framing and discursive perspectives to show how transnational protest movements “bridge” national differences by working with “brokers.” However, by adopting a mainly monolingual perspective on transnational political communication in movements, previous studies neglect in our view the cultural, intermediary politics of translation, and the hidden power wielded by hosts of webpages and influencer channels. Part of this rests on approaching translation as a set of practices for communicating and constructing the boundaries of ideological communities—practices employed (wittingly or not) by activist translators to advance particular visions of political reality while also positioning themselves as appropriate arbiters of political conflicts.
Bibliography


Fiellitz, Maik, and Nick Thurston, eds. 2019. Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right. Online Activism and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.


Doerr, Nicole. 2017. “How Right-Wing versus Cosmopolitan Political Actors Mobilize and


