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Not Censored, But Silenced: Evidence from Local Journalists in German Far-Right Strongholds

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ABSTRACT

Where the far right comes to power, press freedom typically declines. Yet threats to journalism also emerge in democratic systems where far-right actors are not nationally in government but exert growing influence at the local level. This article examines how local journalists in Eastern German regions marked by strong far-right mobilization experience hostility and intimidation, and how such local dynamics affect professional autonomy. Drawing on fifteen semi-structured interviews with reporters from Saxony and Thuringia, the study highlights the local sphere as an arena in which the far right seeks to delegitimize the press and normalize antagonism. Findings reveal that hostility extends beyond extremist fringes into parts of the societal mainstream, manifesting in verbal abuse, anonymous threats, intimidation at demonstrations, and occasional physical violence. While respondents stress resilience and commitment to independent reporting, several describe anticipatory caution, topic avoidance, and other subtle constraints reinforced by structural pressures in shrinking newsrooms. The study argues that press freedom can be curtailed not only through formal censorship but also via diffuse, locally embedded forms of silencing, with significant implications for the democratic role of local journalism.

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Introduction

Recent press-freedom rankings show a decline in press freedom in Germany (RSF 2025). Although the country continues to score highly in international comparison – especially with regard to its legal framework and economic conditions – the security dimension reveals a troubling trend in recent years: journalists in Germany are increasingly facing threats to their psychological and physical safety (RSF 2025). Attacks on democracy and on one of its cornerstone institutions, press freedom, are usually associated with regimes in which authoritarian actors have already come to power and are actively undermining media independence through legal restrictions, economic control (commonly referred to as media capture) (Coşkun 2020; Enikolopov and Petrova 2015; Schiffrin 2018), or even outright violence (Brambila and Hughes 2019; Mazzaro 2023; Waisbord

2002). However, attempts to delegitimize the press often begin long before such actors attain formal political power. Far-right parties and movements engage in (meta)political campaigns (Garsztecki, Laux, and Nebelin 2024; Schilk 2025) that seek, among other things, to erode public trust in journalism, portray reporting as partisan or deceitful (Krämer 2018), and foster an antagonistic climate in which professional media are cast as “enemies of the people” (Garsztecki, Laux, and Nebelin 2024, 20–23). These strategies precede institutional repression and seek to shift the cultural and political boundaries of legitimacy. Often with tangible effects on the work of journalists long before any formal restrictions are enacted (Waisbord 2020) – a development that can be observed in Germany too (Peltz and Lamm 2025).

This article contributes to the existing literature by examining a specific segment of the journalistic profession in a distinct political context: local journalists working in areas where far-right influence is particularly pronounced. The current study is guided by the following research questions:

How do far-right delegitimization efforts manifest in the everyday interactions and working environments of local journalists in regions where far-right influence is pronounced?

How do these experiences affect their perceived safety, coping strategies, and professional autonomy?

As this is among the first studies to address this specific topic, the research design is explorative in nature. Semi-structured interviews with local journalists working in far-right strongholds in Saxony and Thuringia were conducted to generate initial insights that may serve as a basis for future research. The findings indicate that far-right delegitimization efforts can contribute to weakening journalists’ epistemic authority and eroding their professional autonomy within the local sphere, even in the absence of far-right actors holding executive power at the state or national level.

Theoretical Background and Context

Far-Right Influence, Media Freedom and the Local Sphere as a Strategic Arena

The relationship between the media and the far right is an inherently ambivalent one. As Mudde (2019, 81) notes, the media “are both friend and foe of the far right.” The media – understood as a heterogeneous field with diverse professional norms, goals, and ideological orientations – contribute in significant ways to the normalization of far-right actors (De Jonge and Gaufman 2022; Ekström, Patrona, and Thornborrow 2022; Wodak 2022). Yet critical journalism is perceived by far-right actors as fundamentally adversarial, precisely because its watchdog function entails scrutinizing and constraining their political claims and activities (Holtz-Bacha 2021). Therefore, far-right actors employ delegitimizing criticism in the form of hostile rhetoric and derogatory portrayals of the free press. This criticism is especially pronounced in what has been conceptualized as “post-truth politics” (Conrad et al. 2023; Suiter 2016) where epistemic authority – such as that of legacy media – is increasingly contested and public communication shifts toward emotionally charged narratives that prioritize identity affirmation over factual accuracy. Strategically, this approach pursues two complementary aims. First, it seeks to erode journalistic authority and journalism as democratic institutions (e.g., Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Fawzi 2019;

Krämer and Holtz-Bacha 2020; Panievsky 2022; Waisbord 2020). Secondly, it contributes to a climate in which journalists face targeted harassment and an increasingly constrained sense of professional autonomy, despite the fact that they also exercise agency through various coping and adaptive practices (e.g., Blanco-Herrero, Splendore, and Alonso 2023; Hiltunen 2017; 2019; Hiltunen, Suuronen, and Pöyhtäri 2024; Holt and Haller 2017; Holton et al. 2023; Kim and Shin 2025; Larsen, Fadnes, and Krøvel 2020; Miller and Kocan 2024; Rees 2023).

The article argues that by cultivating an atmosphere of hostility, far-right actors can erode press freedom without holding executive power. These dynamics do not unfold uniformly across space, as the far-right mobilization exhibits spatial patterns (Arzheimer and Bernemann 2024). Far-right influence manifests unevenly and becomes particularly potent where actors are locally embedded and socially visible. Yet much of the scholarship still theorizes – explicitly or implicitly – from the vantage point of the national level, and empirical analyses often focus on national dynamics (e.g., Mudde 2019; Valentin 2024). However, far-right influence also materializes in formally democratic states where these actors are not (yet) in power nationally but are already shaping political culture, particularly on subnational (Grumbach 2022) and local levels (Mullis and Miggelbrink 2022; Rees et al. 2022). In such contexts, the local sphere frequently emerges as a strategic battleground where far-right actors seek to normalize anti-democratic values (Mullis and Miggelbrink 2022), including hostility toward the press and informal pressure on journalists.

In this article, the local sphere is conceptualized as a spatial-political level, a sociocultural environment of everyday interaction, and a form of public sphere characterized by proximity, visibility, and embeddedness. While some of these features can also appear in the broader public sphere, they are far more pronounced locally, where journalists' professional role and private life intersect and anonymity is substantially lower, as Griebau (2023, 233) notes. The local sphere encompasses local governance structures, everyday interactions, and relational contexts in which journalists, citizens, and political actors meet directly. As a result, challenges to autonomy can materialize more frequently and more personally, often in encounters within shared social spaces where far-right actors are strongly embedded and exert significant local influence. To understand the consequences of these localized pressures, it is essential to examine how they materialize as threats to journalistic safety and how they affect journalists' lives and professional roles.

Conceptualizing Threats to Journalistic Safety and Their Impact

Drawing on the framework of journalistic safety developed by Slavtcheva-Petkova and colleagues (2023) – who describe how power-based antagonistic pressures (e.g., political, ideological, legislative, economic, and public pressures) create risk for journalists – we conceptualize the pressures amplified by far-right actors in this study as such risk factors. In their framework, these pressures define the room for action within which journalists are expected to perform their work. “If and when journalists maneuver to maximize performance and (intentionally or unintentionally) transgress this space beyond a threshold acceptable to antagonists, they become subject to threats and thereby expose themselves to risk,” the authors note (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. 2023, 1218). Thus, when reporting on the far right or topics politicized by them, journalists often

cross this perceived threshold, increasing the likelihood of threats as a reaction and thereby their risk. Threats unfold along four dimensions of safety: (1) a physical dimension that affects journalists' bodily integrity (e.g., violent attacks such as beatings); (2) a psychological dimension that affects mental and emotional wellbeing (e.g., verbal aggression, hate speech, intimidation); (3) a digital dimension that affects journalists' digital autonomy and security (e.g., breaches of privacy, digital surveillance, hacking); and (4) a financial dimension that affects journalists' professional survival and their ability to carry out core reporting practices (e.g., threats to job stability or to sourcing, verification, and production routines).

Yet, the ability to carry out their work without fear for their psychological or physical well-being is essential (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. 2023). Threats affect not only journalists' personal safety and well-being but also the quality and independence of reporting. As the likelihood of threats increases, risk levels rise. Journalists may experience work-related stress because they anticipate possible attacks, and in some cases, threats are enacted and cause direct harm. Coping responses to such pressures, following Slavtcheva-Petkova and colleagues, fall into adaptive or maladaptive forms. Adaptive strategies focus on problem-solving and include active planning or seeking social support. Maladaptive strategies rely on avoidance. These approaches can lead to resilience, compliance, or avoidance, producing outcomes that range from resistance to submission or even exit. In this study, resilience refers to journalists' ability to withstand far-right pressure in the local sphere without engaging in self-censorship, restricting their reporting, or limiting interactions. Compliance involves adopting some of these constraining practices, while avoidance entails doing so to a much greater extent. In severe cases, avoidance may result in journalists no longer enacting their professional roles, which can ultimately lead to leaving the profession.

The German (Local) Context

Germany offers an empirical setting in which these dynamics become observable. Journalists operate in a political environment marked by developments that have increased the prominence and visibility of far-right political ideologies (Golder 2016; Weisskircher 2020). The continuous radicalization of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) has been accompanied by rising electoral support, enabling the party to consolidate its presence across all political levels and achieve record results in the 2024 European, state, and municipal elections, followed by further gains in the 2025 federal election. Parallel to this institutional expansion, extra-parliamentary far-right actors and movements have gained momentum, often maintaining fluid connections to the AfD (Peltz, Haynert, and Dutz 2024, 3.2). Against this backdrop, right-wing populist critiques of democratic institutions – including the media – have intensified. The term *Lügenpresse* ("lying press") has become central to the discursive repertoire of the AfD and its supporters (Koliska and Assmann 2021). Correspondingly, grey literature and research indicates a marked rise in hatred and hostility directed at journalists, with those affected attributing most of these attacks to far-right actors (Papendick et al. 2020; Preuß, Tetzlaff, and Zick 2017; Rees 2023). Since 2020 in particular, the number of physical attacks on journalists has risen sharply (Hoffmann, Pohl, and Dutz 2023; Peltz and Haynert 2025; Peltz and Lamm 2025; Reporter ohne Grenzen 2024). These incidents originate not only from established

far-right groups but also from ideologically diverse protest movements where conspiracy-oriented milieus intersect with far-right networks (Betsche and Hoffmann 2021; Hoffmann, Pohl, and Dutz 2023; Peltz, Haynert, and Dutz 2024; Vieten 2020).

Zooming in on the local sphere, the far right has traditionally been particularly effective at entrenching itself in rural regions of eastern Germany and building influence there through extra-parliamentary activities and, increasingly, via the AfD at the parliamentary level, especially at the local level before gaining substantial vote shares at higher political levels (Weisskircher 2020). This is particularly evident in parts of Saxony (Bürk 2012; Hanneforth and Nattke 2020; Helal 2022; Hummel et al. 2023) and Thuringia (Duwe et al. 2024; Quent and Schulz 2016; Salheiser and Quent 2022), but it applies more broadly to the territory of the former socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR). Actors who oppose this expansion have increasingly become targets of threats and attacks (Beck, Jakob, and Kuhn 2023; Erhardt 2020; Imbusch and Steg 2025; Litschko 2024). This extends to civil society actors, local politicians, and local journalists.

Methods and Data

Research Design and Data Collection

Building on the prominence of far-right influence in Saxony and Thuringia outlined above, this qualitative, exploratory study investigates how local journalists in these regions experience everyday interactions and how potential pressures arising from them shape their professional roles. The regional focus reflects the strong local embeddedness of far-right actors and the heightened visibility of journalists in small-scale social environments, making these contexts particularly suitable for examining localized forms of hostility. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow journalists to articulate subjective meanings, contextual nuances, and situational dynamics that cannot be fully captured through survey instruments or incident databases. The interview guide was developed to reflect the conceptual dimensions outlined in the theoretical framework.

Fifteen interviews were conducted between November and December 2024 via video call or telephone. Participants work in local newsrooms of two privately owned regional daily newspapers with wide circulation in Saxony and Thuringia, media organizations that cover extensive rural areas where far-right actors are organizationally entrenched and socially visible. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and include six women and nine men with diverse professional backgrounds, ranging from early-career reporters to senior editorial staff with over thirty years of experience. While not statistically representative, the sample offers broad insight into the working conditions and threat experiences shaping local journalism in these regions. Given the qualitative design, the relatively small and self-selecting sample, and the focus on two eastern German states, the findings are not generalizable. Prior work indicates that qualitative interview studies typically reach thematic stability after the first dozen interviews, with limited new information thereafter (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006), suggesting that a sample of fifteen interviews is sufficient for a focused qualitative study. Consistent with this, data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, until the conceptual categories had become sufficiently dense and no longer generated

new properties, insights, or meaningful variation (Morse 2015). Given the sensitivity of the topic, all participants provided informed consent. Interviews were anonymized at transcription and identifying details – such as names or locations – were removed. Participation was voluntary, and interviewees were informed that they could withdraw at any point. The study followed institutional ethical guidelines and ensured data protection throughout the research process.

Analytical Strategy

All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis, following the approach outlined by Mayring (2010). Qualitative content analysis was chosen because it provides a transparent and rule-guided procedure that allows for a structured combination of deductive and inductive coding. In contrast to thematic analysis, which emphasizes researcher subjectivity and flexible theme generation (Braun and Clarke 2006), Mayring's approach aligns with the study's aim to connect sensitizing concepts from the theoretical framework – such as delegitimization, threat formation, and coping – with unanticipated themes emerging from the interviews. Initial coding categories were developed deductively, drawing on the theoretical background presented above. These categories were subsequently refined and expanded inductively through close, iterative engagement with the transcripts. Coding was carried out using MAXQDA software. As the analysis progressed, codes were aggregated into thematic clusters to identify recurring patterns and to develop analytical categories capturing (1) perceived public attitudes towards journalists, including how far-right narratives shape everyday interactions in journalists' reporting areas; (2) manifestations of threats and harassment – ranging from verbal aggression and intimidation to anonymous threats and physical attacks; and (3) consequences for perceived safety, emotional experience, and journalistic autonomy. Selected verbatim quotes (translated into English) are used in the results section to illustrate key themes and ensure transparency of interpretation (Chenail 1995).

Results

This section presents the results the interviews conducted with local journalists in Saxony and Thuringia and discusses them in the context of the growing climate of hostility toward media in far-right-dominated local contexts.

From Skepticism to Normalized Hostility

Interviewees described a heterogeneous but increasingly negative public attitude toward journalism in their reporting regions. In line with the dynamics outlined in theoretical background, many perceived that delegitimizing narratives circulating locally – often linked to far-right rhetoric – shape how people talk to and interact with them. While reactions varied widely, several journalists noted that the atmosphere of skepticism and devaluation in which they work has increased in recent year and is now part of the everyday local climate. This can transition to latent or overt hostility, as illustrated by the following quotation from an experienced local journalist:

I repeatedly encounter a great deal of skepticism toward the media. Many people believe that the media are somehow controlled or unable to report neutrally and independently. But that varies a lot. [...] I've never heard anything like that from a mayor, but I have from other people I meet in everyday life. (senior reporter, female journalist in Saxony)

Respondents emphasized that this skepticism is typically not directed at them personally but at “the media” as a generalized institution. Several linked this to the broader spread of narratives portraying journalism as politically biased “state-controlled”. A recurring theme in the interviews was that such reactions do not only arise around controversial issues. Even unpolitical, routine reporting assignments can become unexpectedly charged, as one journalist from Thuringia described:

[E]ven when you research a topic that is completely harmless in itself, not even political, it very quickly happens that people immediately bring up something political or clearly express their skepticism towards the state or the media. It often comes with these subtle digs, like ‘Well, you’re not even allowed to write that, are you?’ or ‘Why don’t you write something about crime committed by migrants?’ – comments that insinuate, implicitly, an accusation of being dependent on the state or otherwise not fully independent. (junior reporter, female journalist in Saxony)

Contested Topics as Focal Points of Hostility

At the same time, journalists noted that rejection and hostility occur particularly in relation to issues that unfold along broader societal conflict lines, particularly those mobilized by far-right actors – migration, environmental and climate policy, and coverage of far-right parties or conspiracy-driven groups. Nearly all respondents reported that such topics provoke elevated levels of rejection, both online and in direct encounters. But even more general, according to several respondents, one must always be prepared – regardless of the topic – for conversations with members of the public to suddenly turn into open rejection or overt hostility. The account of a local journalist from Saxony in a leadership position illustrates this perception in a particularly illustrative way:

[T]here has always been a certain level of rejection. [...] But we’ve definitely noticed that it has increased. Especially since 2015, at the height of the refugee crisis, it increased massively. Since then, as a reporter, you really have to brace yourself for all sorts of comments when trying to do a street poll. [T]here’s always someone who rants about the press. (senior editor, male journalist in Saxony)

Normalization of Hostility in the Local Sphere

Long-serving journalists emphasized that these experiences reflect a broader normalization of hostility within their communities. What had long been perceived as fringe sentiment – confined to small, clearly identifiable far-right milieus – now surfaces across different social groups in everyday local interactions. Several interviewees pointed to two key moments when this shift became particularly visible: the period around 2015, marked by the so-called refugee crisis and the rise of PEGIDA in Saxony, and the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020. Both were described as turning points that accelerated the diffusion of delegitimizing narratives and made open resentment toward the press more socially acceptable. As one senior journalist recalled:

[W]e've been familiar with the 'lying press' narratives for quite some time. Certain small segments of the population [...] subscribed to those ideas even before PEGIDA [...]. But the extent, the breadth, the depth within society, and the spread – cutting across all levels of education and social strata – that only developed over time. [...] And it has increased. (senior editor, male journalist in Saxony)

Experiences of Threats, Harassment and Physical Violence

Interviewees described a wide range of hostile practices that align with the forms of threat outlined in the journalistic safety framework. These include psychological aggression, physical violence and acts of intimidation that create sustained emotional and professional strain. While many incidents involve private individuals or unidentified perpetrators, several respondents reported an increase in encounters with far-right elected officials, especially those from the AfD party.

Encounters with AfD Representatives in Local Institutional Settings

Journalists covering municipal politics described everyday encounters with AfD representatives that often carry an undercurrent of tension or hostility. Although the party had already been a prominent actor following recent municipal and state elections, its further consolidation – particularly through stronger institutional anchoring within the regional parliaments – has rendered such interactions an increasingly routine component of journalistic reporting. Respondents also referred to other far-right actors such as the *Freie Sachsen* or *Der Dritte Weg*. These groups play a smaller role in formal institutions but appear frequently in local public life, especially in regions with high levels of mobilization. Journalists encounter them at assemblies, public meetings and local events, although not as consistently as AfD officeholders. Interviewees described a spectrum of encounters with AfD representatives that ranged from subtle signals of intimidation to explicit verbal threats. Several journalists emphasized a constant background tension that shapes routine interactions in council settings. One account illustrates how this takes the form of quiet but deliberate attempts to unsettle or obstruct reporting:

[I]t's already a latent state of tension. I'd say it's not unusual for an AfD parliamentary group leader to stroll past the press table, make a remark, or try to intimidate someone or prevent them from reporting. (senior editor, male journalist in Saxony)

Other journalists recounted far more direct hostility. In one case, an AfD functionary issued an overt threat during a public meeting, demonstrating how quickly these encounters can escalate:

A colleague and I were sitting among all the participants. And the man marched back and forth and then said: 'When we come into power, the first thing we'll do is purge the ministries and newsrooms,' and he stood right in front of us. So, you're constantly exposed to that kind of pressure. (regional editor-in-chief, female journalist in Saxony)

Several interviewees emphasized that not all AfD representatives in local political bodies display overtly radical behavior. Some are perceived as coming from more traditional conservative backgrounds, including former CDU members, and adopt a less confrontational tone than actors associated with the AfD's radical *Flügel* faction.¹ According to one journalist from Thuringia, the party often displays "two faces" at the local level: while some

actors engage in hostility and verbal abuse, others attempt to convey a sense of professionalism or even peacefulness. Respondents also described attempts at co-optation. A journalist from Saxony interpreted these contrasting roles as part of a broader strategic pattern in his reporting area. He explained that more radical functionaries agitate at the grassroots level and use extreme rhetoric to mobilize resentment against “the media,” “the state” and “politics,” whereas interactions with the press are delegated to “more fact-oriented” and “media-trained” individuals.

Demonstrations as Sites of Targeted Intimidation and Public Marking

Demonstrations are described by the interviewees as the most consequential sites of direct threat within the local sphere. They bring journalists into close physical proximity with far-right actors and with citizens who have adopted delegitimizing narratives. This proximity increases the likelihood that journalists are recognized and confronted. In recent years, journalists described, this risk has increased as illustrated by the following quote:

It's not like it used to be, where such demonstrations were safe per se. [...] You have to withdraw in good time or act from a distance. (senior reporter, male journalist in Thuringia)

Respondents highlighted demonstrations against refugee shelters, pandemic-related gatherings and local protests over rising living costs. Journalists said that they behave inconspicuously at such events and hope not to be recognized:

You don't just go there as a matter of course and say: 'Hello, this is the official press. And what do you think about that?' You can't do that anymore. Nowadays, you would be taking a risk that you don't want to take. (senior reporter, male journalist in Thuringia)

Interviewees described these demonstrations as spaces where multiple ideological milieus converge. Actors such as the AfD, *Freie Sachsen* and *Der Dritte Weg* frequently appear alongside right-leaning citizens' initiatives and conspiracy-oriented groups. Journalists noted that harassment during such events is not limited to organized extremists. Journalists are targeted by individuals from the broader protest environment as well. While these individuals are not affiliated with extremist groups, they are receptive to authoritarian attitudes and often come from the perceived “concerned” middle-class milieu, as the following quote illustrates:

This is evident across the board, across all educational and social classes here in Saxony. I hear this from dentists, for example. Or engineers. (senior editor, male journalist in Saxony)

The intimidation of local journalists – who are often easily recognized as public figures – follows a clear logic, as one senior local journalist described:

And I'd say, the smaller the town, the more difficult it gets, because in small places, colleagues are more likely to be recognized. If you're standing at a demonstration in Zwickau with 1,000 people, I'd say the chances of being 'greeted' from the stage are about fifty-fifty. You're not recognized every time. But if you are, it's obviously an uncomfortable situation for any reporter. When a speaker 'greets' you from the stage and everyone turns around, it's clearly a method of intimidation that has been heavily used by the far right for several years now. (senior editor, male journalist in Saxony)

Such incidents exemplify a broader pattern of targeted hostility toward journalists in public settings. Several interviewees reported that, once they had been publicly singled

out, demonstrators often followed them, filmed them, or shouted at them in ways clearly intended to intimidate or force them away from the scene. These acts of public marking serve not only to delegitimize reporters but also to expose them to potential harassment or violence, as members of the crowd may feel encouraged or legitimized to act on the hostility signaled from the stage.

Physical Confrontations in the Private Local Sphere

This lowering of inhibitions does not remain confined to demonstrations. Some journalists reported that it spills over into ordinary community settings, where professional and private roles overlap. Physical confrontations occurred both at demonstrations, where passersby struck cameras or shoved reporters, and in informal local contexts where journalists were recognized as public figures. One journalist from Thuringia described two separate incidents at community events:

At a village festival, a few guys – two or three – tried to attack me. I approached the security staff, who escorted me to a vehicle that took me home. [...] In a second case – another one of those [...] dance events – I was there with my fellow firefighters. Again, two guys tried to attack me, but that failed miserably because my fellow firefighters stood in front of me and quickly resolved the situation. (senior reporter, male journalist in Thuringia)

Even if these incidents are not frequent, they illustrate how easily antagonism can spill into everyday interactions.

Protest Tactics Targeting Journalists' Personal Spaces

Hostility in the local sphere does not remain confined to public demonstrations or events. Several interviewees explained that protest activities sometimes reach directly into their personal environments. This reflects the high visibility of local journalists and the limited anonymity that characterizes small communities. Demonstrations organized by far-right and conspiracy-oriented actors regularly passed not only by newsrooms but also, in some cases, by private residences. One journalist from Thuringia reported that a group marched past his home twice a week for more than two years and repeatedly chanted "*Lügenpresse*." Another journalist described how a colleague became the target of a direct threat after reporting on a farmers' protest where a placard with a gallows-like construction had been displayed:

[A] colleague mentioned that there was a placard with a gallows-like construction, with the traffic light coalition [German government coalition] hanging from it – this is how he described it [in an article]. Then someone posted in a forum, tagging him by name: 'Dear hashtag so-and-so,' and our local editor-in-chief was also tagged by name. 'We will then set up our gallows-like construction in front of the newsroom on Monday so that you can see exactly what it looks like. (senior reporter, female journalist in Saxony)

Anonymous Threats

Journalists also described anonymous threats that unfolded primarily on a psychological level. Such incidents create a diffuse sense of danger precisely because the sender remains unknown. In the local context – where everyday life and professional visibility intersect – this uncertainty carries particular weight. It was explained that journalists

cannot easily separate their work from their private lives. Many assume that the perpetrator lives nearby or knows where they live. The following quote illustrates the nature of such threats. One journalist found human feces at her doorstep, and the words “[Surname]Scum” and “9 mm” were written in chalk on the door:

Our name and a 9 millimeter caliber. Once we understood that, of course we reported it immediately. There was no email or letter that might have provided any clearer indication of the source. It was just obvious that it was directed at us. We don't have any personal disputes, so we're certain it's job-related, but we can't trace it. (senior reporter, female journalist in Saxony)

Others also reported sabotage directed at their vehicles. In one case, a screw was found lodged in a tire. In another, all lug nuts on a wheel had been loosened. These acts carried the potential for serious physical harm and intensified the psychological sense of vulnerability described by several journalists. What makes anonymous threats especially burdensome, as interviewees emphasized, is the absence of closure:

I felt somewhat helpless because the police also indicated that they had limited resources and could not continuously patrol the area. (senior reporter, female journalist in Saxony)

Investigations often remain inconclusive, and the severity of such incidents is not always recognized by law enforcement. In one case, the initial investigation focused solely on property damage and did not acknowledge the threatening reference to a firearm caliber. According to the journalist, the case was reclassified only after editorial intervention.

Impact on Safety, Coping and Professional Autonomy

The interviews indicate that experiences with threats can markedly influence how local journalists evaluate their personal safety and conduct their reporting. Respondents were asked whether they feel free in their professional work, whether past incidents shape their selection of topics, and how they navigate situations in which hostility extends into their private lives. Their accounts reveal a range of strategies for coping with these pressures, spanning from resilience to compliance and, in some cases, avoidance.

Perceived Safety in the Local Sphere

Despite recurring experiences of different types of threats, most interviewees described their overall sense of safety as largely intact. Many emphasized personal resilience as a central factor, while noting that feelings of safety and assessments of risk differ considerably across individuals:

That's of course also a matter of personal courage and individual disposition. I think I still report quite freely, even knowing that my articles might provoke reactions directed against me. But that also depends on inner attitude and having a thick skin. I've been in the business a while and worked in other regions, so I'm still relatively unafraid. (senior reporter, male journalist in Thuringia)

Although most respondents assessed the likelihood of physical attacks as low, they identified certain assignments as riskier, such as demonstrations involving far-right movements, pandemic-related protests or contentious municipal council meetings. Several interviewees explained that feeling “less safe” did not necessarily mean fear. Instead, they described reactions that reflect adaptive ways of managing risk, such as increased

alertness, advance planning, or preparing exits at events. These responses allowed them to continue reporting while navigating a tense environment.

Journalists who had experienced direct threats described more persistent effects on their sense of safety, as the following account illustrates:

Overall, I feel safe. But there are moments when I've felt uneasy. We live in a very remote area and have taken steps to secure our property. After that incident, I began to question how safe we really are. On Mondays, for example, I was sometimes alone in the office while the 'Querdenker' scene held vigils outside. Or during the farmers' protests, when the AfD joined in and repeatedly placed a stylized gallows in front of our office. That definitely gives you a sick feeling in your stomach. (regional editor-in-chief, female journalist in Saxony)

Some journalists who had not been personally threatened reported that incidents affecting colleagues nonetheless shaped their own sense of vulnerability, particularly once such cases became known within the newsroom. As they explained, learning about threats directed at colleagues made the possibility of escalation feel more immediate, creating a background awareness that hostility could also reach them:

And it's not like the fear is vague, like you could just say, 'Come on, nothing's really going to happen.' No – as I said, I see what's happening, and it's real. (junior reporter, female journalist in Saxony)

While these dynamics have not yet led to a complete change in reporting behavior, they mark the point at which threats begin to affect journalists' perceived safety and the conditions under which professional decisions are made, as the next section shows.

Anticipating Backlash: Effects on Editorial Decisions

When asked whether hostility affected their reporting, most interviewees initially denied any changes. As conversations unfolded, however, several described becoming more careful in how they approach certain topics or formulate their reporting. One journalist explained that she continued to cover all relevant issues but now worked with a constant awareness that her reporting might provoke reactions:

I wouldn't say that I no longer cover certain topics, but of course it's always in the back of my mind. I'm probably even more alert now and think about how I might make myself vulnerable. (senior reporter, female journalist in Saxony)

As she elaborated, this awareness had gradually become part of her everyday routine:

Since then, I don't think I've written differently or avoided topics. But probably more than before, there's this voice in the back of my mind: How will people respond to this? I think that applies to all of us – that sometimes we're too focused on the question: Are we making ourselves vulnerable? Are we taking too clear a stance? (senior reporter, female journalist in Saxony)

Her account illustrates how anticipatory reasoning emerges in environments where hostility is diffuse yet persistent. Although she stressed a commitment to independent reporting, she also described the strain of maintaining this stance under constant scrutiny:

Of course I'd always say: we keep going, we don't let ourselves be intimidated. But whether you can really maintain that every single day, every single minute – that's another question. (senior reporter, female journalist in Saxony)

Other journalists described moments where anticipatory concerns progressed further. One interviewee explicitly characterized her reaction as self-censorship, even though she had never been personally threatened:

As unpleasant as it is, I do think that, in one way or another, I sometimes engage in self-censorship because I don't dare to approach certain topics. And I don't think that's good. But I just can't bring myself to do it. I'm too afraid. It's a strong word, but I think it really is fear. (junior reporter, female journalist in Saxony)

She added that the experiences of colleagues and her impression that police protection was limited contributed to this hesitation and had led her to consider leaving journalism.

Across interviews, similar patterns appeared. Journalists described thinking more carefully about how particular stories might be received, which elements could trigger complaints, or whether certain assignments might generate unnecessary strain. Their accounts show that concerns about threats – whether based on incidents they had experienced themselves or on threats that could plausibly occur – enter into everyday reporting decisions. Self-censorship in the strict sense of no longer covering certain topics was mentioned only mentioned by one journalist. Most interviewees emphasized that they continued to report on politically sensitive issues.

Avoidance Driven by Workload and Pressure

For some interviewees, the potential avoidance of contentious topics reflected not only individual concerns about potential threats but also the broader working conditions in increasingly strained local newsrooms, where limited staff and high workloads made the repercussions of contentious reporting harder to manage. One senior editor described the situation as follows:

We're experiencing a massive drain in our local newsrooms – in terms of staffing. [...] That means you're sitting alone in the newsroom on about 50 days a year. And every reporter is expected to somehow fill the paper every day – if not completely, then at least with one major story. So if I know that the story I write today will lead to a full day – or even a week – of angry phone calls and complaints [...], then that creates an immense workload over the following days. I'm absolutely certain that, in such cases, colleagues tend to go for the simpler story – one that won't cause major trouble all week. [...] But it's obvious that many of them, partly out of uncertainty about how to handle the situation, avoid the complicated topics. It's a huge problem. I've been observing this for years. (senior editor, male journalist in Saxony)

Across interviews, journalists explained that certain issues – especially those strongly politicized by far-right actors and frequently debated within their communities – tended to generate reactions that they experienced as demanding or threatening. Complaints, confrontational calls, and extended disputes followed publication. In understaffed newsrooms, this prospect introduced an additional layer of strain.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings presented suggest that far-right delegitimization efforts, which involve hostile rhetoric and derogatory portrayals of the free press, contribute to the weakening of journalists' epistemic authority and the erosion of their professional autonomy. This study contributes to debates on press freedom by illustrating how local intimidation

reshapes journalistic autonomy in democratic settings. Building on previous research in this area (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Fawzi 2019; Krämer and Holtz-Bacha 2020; Panievsky 2022; Peltz and Lamm 2025; Rees 2023; Waisbord 2020), these results demonstrate how these dynamics manifest in far-right strongholds in Saxony and Thuringia. In line with previous research (Grumbach 2022; Mullis and Miggelbrink 2022), these results emphasize the importance of analyzing subnational and local levels when studying democratic erosion caused by the far right, rather than focusing solely on the national level. The interviews with local journalists indicate that narratives portraying journalism as biased, controlled, or “against the people” have spread well beyond extremist circles and influence the everyday social interactions in which local journalists engage. Taken together, these patterns are consistent with research on the far right’s metapolitical strategies aimed at reshaping cultural and political discursive frameworks (Garsztecki, Laux, and Nebelin 2024; Schilk 2025). At the same time, studies indicate that authoritarian attitudes in Germany have not markedly increased in recent years (Decker et al. 2024; Zick, Küpper, and Mokros 2023); rather, the far-right actors like AfD have successfully politicized and mobilized pre-existing predispositions of wide parts of the general public. This suggests a weakening of the social stigma attached to far-right preferences (Mense 2024; Valentim 2024), which now extend into traditionally middle-class milieus (Mullis 2024), including the denigration of traditional media.

In accordance with the framework proposed by Slavtcheva-Petkova and colleagues (2023), the interviews document threats primarily within the psychological dimension of safety, including verbal aggression and intimidation perpetrated by far-right actors, private individuals, and anonymous sources. These incidents occurred both online and offline. The physical harm to journalists has been linked to attacks by private individuals in public spaces. This occurs primarily at protest events, particularly those led by far-right actors (Miller and Kocan 2024; Peltz and Lamm 2025). There it becomes salient how the early delegitimization and marking of journalists set the stage for their professional autonomy to be undermined as the event unfolds which increases the likelihood of them becoming targets of harassment, including physical assaults. This dynamic, along with accounts of journalists feeling especially targeted when reporting on specific topics such as migration, climate issues, or extremist actors, contribute to recent findings, revealing that certain elements and practices of journalism make practitioners significantly more liable to encounter harassment and intimidation (Hiltunen, Suuronen, and Pöyhtäri 2024). In the context of this study, the combination of reporting on demonstrations that revolve around contested issues and are mobilized by extremist actors – most notably those on the far right – creates a high-risk environment. This risk is amplified when journalists are well-known locally, as their visibility and recognizability reduce anonymity and make them easier targets.

The interviews also demonstrate how threats translate into adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. Most journalists express strong professional resilience. Yet, the accounts reveal a more complex picture when placed within the safety framework (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. 2023): adaptive strategies such as increased vigilance coexist with more constraining tendencies, including anticipatory caution, self-imposed restraint, and selective avoidance. Important here is the distinction between conscious topic avoidance and the more subtle, internalized forms of anticipation described by several respondents. These mechanisms resonate with earlier research on psychological suffering and internal chilling effects following anti-press violence (Kim and Shin 2025).

These pressures are compounded by structural developments within (local) journalism. As research has shown, the consolidation of newsrooms and resource constraints reduce capacity for in-depth reporting (Hanitzsch 2025; Karlsson and Rowe 2019; Schmidt et al. 2022). Several interviewees described how the practical demands of managing high workloads, staff shortages, and reputational risks discourage coverage of contested topics, particularly those provoking backlash from far-right actors or sympathizers. These dynamics resonate with recent scholarship on the increasing precarity of journalism (Rick 2025; Rick and Hanitzsch 2024; Springer and Rick 2025) by showing how limited resources and political pressure interact, undermining journalistic autonomy from multiple directions.

In conclusion, the evidence presented in this article suggest journalistic autonomy is increasingly compromised in far-right strongholds in Germany. Not through formal state repression, but through the cumulative effects of hostility, informal pressure, and structural constraints. While Germany still ranks high on press freedom indicators and, so far, has no far-right government on the national or state level, the findings indicate that democratic erosion does not only occur through the dismantling of institutions from a position of executive power. It can also unfold through persistent erosion of normative practices, such as journalistic autonomy, especially in contested local arenas. These dynamics are amplified by widespread post-truth discourse – which is embedded on a wider societal scale but specifically also in the local sphere – further contributing to undermining media authority. The case of local journalism in far-right strongholds in Germany illustrates how threats to press freedom manifest long before authoritarian actors hold national power and thus might serve as a starting point for studies in other national or sub-national contexts in formally high-ranking democracies.

Note

1. The *Flügel* (“Wing”) referred to the informal völkisch-nationalist and far-right faction within the AfD, which coalesced primarily around Björn Höcke as a central figure who leads AfD in Thuringia (Bernhard 2019). Although the group officially disbanded in an attempt to avoid surveillance by the domestic intelligence service, large parts of its personnel – and with them, the associated ideology – remain active and continue to play a significant role in shaping the direction of the party (Bernhard 2020).

Author contributions

CRediT: **Patrick Peltz:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Yann P. M. Rees:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology.

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Ethical Considerations

This study did not require formal ethics committee approval under the policies of the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF). All interviews were conducted in line with internationally recognized ethical standards (Declaration of Helsinki; Belmont Report), and informed consent was obtained from all participants; all data were anonymized.

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