

Research Paper

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Climate skepticism in »alternative media«?

Strategies and patterns in climate reporting in right-wing anti-public discourse

Abstract: On social media platforms, »alternative media« are considered key players in spreading climate skepticism. This content ranges from one-sided opinion pieces to climate-related disinformation. This article analyzes specific strategies used by German-language right-wing alternative media on the topics of climate protection and the energy transition. The analysis is based on assessments by reputable fact-checking formats (n=38). Overall, four patterns in the reporting were identified that presumably contribute to climate skepticism among the public: (1) attacks against the scientific consensus on climate change; (2) dubious sources and »experts«; (3) misleading reporting; (4) discrediting of political opponents.

Keywords: alternative media, climate skepticism, energy transition, disinformation, right-wing populism, climate reporting

A recent report by the German research project »NOTORIOUS« identifies key actors and narratives in climate-related disinformation on social media platforms. In the entire data set¹, several »alternative media« outlets are among the top 10 domains that feature suspicious posts (cf. Börgmann et al., 2025, p. 9). This suggests a separate »ecosystem« for spreading climate skepticism and narratives of delay, which uses the content of alternative media for this purpose (cf. Börgmann et al., p. 10). The research report confirms the thesis that right-wing alternative blogs have become an important vehicle for mobilizing opposition to

1 3.3 million German-language posts on X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Telegram, and Instagram that deal with climate-related topics and were published between 2019 and 2023.

climate action, linking the political milieus of conservatism, economic liberalism, and market fundamentalism with radical libertarian and right-wing populist groups (cf. Quent et al., 2022, p. 174).

For several years now, climate reporting in right-wing alternative media has impacted politics. For instance, since 2018 social media accounts of the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) gradually adopted climate-specific terms that had initially appeared on right-wing populist news sites (cf. Knüpfer & Hoffmann, 2024). In the run-up to the 2021 German federal election, there was already a significant increase in climate-skeptical posts, with the accounts responsible primarily sharing content from right-wing outlets such as *Tichys Einblick* or *Deutschland-Kurier* (cf. Matlach & Janulewicz, 2021, p. 16). Nevertheless, the role of right-wing alternative media in climate-related disinformation is largely only mentioned in passing. Therefore, this article analyzes specific cases and strategies for spreading climate skepticism through German-language »alternative media.« It is based on selected assessments by established fact-checking formats, which are now also regarded as reliable sources in journalism research (cf. Zwins, 2025, p. 65ff.).

First, a targeted search was conducted for relevant media projects and terms such as »climate« and »energy transition« on German-language fact-checking websites (including *AFP Faktencheck*, *Correctiv*, and *Mimikama*). The identified sources (n=38), which expose climate-related misinformation in articles published by right-wing media projects, were evaluated using a structured content analysis (cf. Mayring, 2022, p. 96ff.): step by step, four (superior) categories were formed, derived from the sources themselves, and considered by climate researchers as methods for spreading anti-ecological positions (deductive-inductive approach, see Chapter 3). To avoid generalizing attributions in the research section, the media projects examined in these fact checks are always identified by name.

1. »Alternative media« and climate skepticism

The term »alternative media« emerged in the second half of the 20th century and was originally used for left-leaning publications within the context of social movements. It was not until the era of digitalization that an increasing number of right-wing actors claimed the term for themselves (cf. Hooffacker, 2020). Currently, communication research advocates for an inclusive and – in contrast to the »mainstream media« – multi-*relational* definition of alternative media; the decisive factors here are self-image as well as the evaluation by competitors and the audience (cf. Holt et al., 2019). However, since it is now often a

self-designation for PR purposes, the use of the term has been met with criticism and is therefore placed in quotation marks in this article.

The spectrum of right-wing »alternative media« is broad, ranging from right-wing conservative and libertarian outlets to those promoting conspiracy theories and far-right publications. However, they are all united by their rejection of supposed liberal elites and a common narrative of Europe's path to ruin (cf. Paulitsch, 2025a, p. 73f.). With the rise of the climate movement and the ongoing energy transition, the topic of »climate« has also come into the focus of relevant publications in recent years. Since then, so-called climate skepticism^[2] occupies a remarkably large amount of space in German-language »alternative media,« as evidenced by front pages, dedicated sections, or special editions (cf. Lamberty & Nocun, 2023, p. 65f.). Furthermore, the current network of right-wing alternative media in climate reporting enables them to form their own »citation cartels« (Brunnengräber, 2018, p. 287) as they cross-reference one another or draw on the same anti-ecological actors (cf. Haupt, 2020, p. 180). This coordinated collaboration is likely to contribute to the fact that climate-skeptical terms and opponents of the energy transition repeatedly find their way into established media (cf. Brunnengräber, 2018, p. 286f.).

2. Connections to anti-ecological actors?

This raises the following question: What motivates right-wing »alternative media« to campaign against climate protection? One plausible explanation lies in their *symbiotic relationship* with right-wing populist parties, which are often skeptical or even hostile towards science-based climate protection measures, such as the AfD in Germany or the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) in Austria (cf. Haller, 2018; Paulitsch, 2025b). Furthermore, a significant portion of the »alternative media« maintains more or less overt connections to lobby organizations and think tanks which now play an important role in spreading anti-ecological positions in Europe (cf. Almiron et al., 2020).

The European Institute for Climate & Energy (EIKE) is considered a key player in Germany in this regard. Contrary to its self-description, EIKE is not a research institution, but rather a registered association founded in 2007 and based in Jena, Germany, which cooperates with influential climate denial organizations abroad (e.g., the Heartland Institute in the US; cf. Moreno et al., 2022). As a lobbying organization, EIKE is composed only partly of natural scientists, with some members maintaining close ties to political actors.^[3] On its website,

2 A distinction must be made between climate science skepticism (or climate denial), climate policy and instrument skepticism, and rejection of the energy transition (classification according to Brunnengräber, 2018).

3 For details on EIKE's political connections, see: *Lobbypedia*, »European Institute for Climate and Energy.«

EIKE frequently publishes articles from right-wing »alternative media« outlets, including *Tichys Einblick*, *Achse des Guten*, and *eigentümlich frei*. Conversely, Axel Robert Göhring, an employee of EIKE, has published in several such outlets in the past, such as *eigentümlich frei*, *Compact*, and the Swiss *Weltwoche* (cf. Draeger & Tusche, 2025). In 2024, right-wing alternative publications such as *Tichys Einblick* and *Der Sandwirt* invited people to a »Bürger Gipfel« [citizens' summit] in Stuttgart, at which EIKE appeared as a partner alongside other relevant media outlets.

There are also personnel overlaps with neoliberal and market-radical groups, some of whose members also appear in the anti-ecological milieu. For example, several (guest) authors of the right-wing libertarian magazine *eigentümlich frei* are also active in think tanks such as the Ludwig von Mises Institute Germany^[4] or the Friedrich A. von Hayek Society^[5]. The editor of *Tichys Einblick* was or is also a member of the Friedrich A. von Hayek Society and the Mont Pèlerin Society (cf. Quent et al., 2022, p. 171ff.). Several authors at *Tichys Einblick* have also spoken in the past at Vernunftkraft, an umbrella organization of anti-wind power initiatives.^[6] The main sponsor of the German right-wing populist publication *NIUS* and its Austrian subsidiary *eXXpress* is the honorary chairman of a regional association of the CDU Economic Council/CDU-Wirtschaftsrat, which repeatedly stands out as a »vigorous opponent of climate protection« (Deckwirth, 2024).

The motivations behind such connections are unclear and may be driven purely by ideological considerations. In light of the climate policy positions of organizations such as EIKE, it is not surprising that many right-wing »alternative media« outlets primarily rail against the energy transition. Additionally, it should be noted that approximately half of the twenty leading German-language »alternative media« outlets maintain economic, personal, and/or media connections to the Kremlin or Russia (cf. Beseler & Töpfl, 2024). This raises the question of whether foreign (economic) interests may also play a role in the media's agitation against climate protection (cf. Vrba, 2023).

3. Strategies in climate reporting

The anti-ecological narratives in »alternative media« are diverse and are regularly adapted to align with social trends. In addition, the ideologically diverse orientation of right-wing »alternative media« contributes to the fact that their content priorities in climate reporting can diverge. Nevertheless, based on fact-checking

4 E.g., Jörg Guido Hülsmann, senior fellow at the Mises Institute and member of the editorial board of *eigentümlich frei*.

5 E.g., Gerd Habermann, initiator and co-founder of the Friedrich A. von Hayek Society, or André F. Lichtschlag, editor of *eigentümlich frei* and member of the Friedrich A. von Hayek Society.

6 For information on individual persons, see: *Lobbypedia*, »Roland Tichy.«

analyses, four strategies – which cannot be strictly separated from one another – can be observed that currently contribute (or are intended to contribute) to climate skepticism among the population. Essentially, these consist of the classic, decades-old repertoire of international climate change denial (cf. Coan et al., 2021; Quent et al., 2022, p. 182ff.).

3.1 *Attacks against the scientific consensus on climate change*

One initial strategy is to attack the scientific consensus on climate change⁷, specifically that global warming is caused by human activities and greenhouse gas emissions. On the one hand, some media projects continue to suggest that there is no established scientific evidence or a serious controversy within climate research. To this end, the causes of climate change are called into question, e.g. claiming that the influence of CO₂ emissions is negligible (cf. Lehn, 2024b regarding *Epoch Times*; Ollig 2025 [Report24]), that volcanoes emit significantly more CO₂, or that actually solar cycles are responsible for global warming (cf. Gindl, 2024 [Report24]). For such long-disproved claims, right-wing »alternative media« either resort to absolute minority positions or fail to cite any serious evidence at all. On the other hand, studies on the broad climate science consensus or accepted climate models can also be portrayed as manipulative or prone to error (cf. Thom, 2023; Zwins, 2023 [AUF1]).

Conspiracy-minded »alternative media« outlets in particular often present key findings on the climate crisis as a construct of global elites. According to them, the main responsible persons are alleged »globalists,« such as members of the World Economic Forum (WEF), who supposedly use climate protection measures to make money or work towards establishing an authoritarian »climate dictatorship« (cf. Zwins, 2023 [AUF1]; Gindl, 2024 [Report24]). The aim is to create the impression among the public that science-based climate policy is directed against the needs of the population and is in reality driven by the interests of lobbyists. Consequently, far-right media outlets like AUF1 and *Compact* frequently use terms such as »climate hoax,« »climate lies,« or »allegedly man-made climate change« (cf. Lamberty & Nocun, 2023, p. 64f.). Besides established science, a popular target here – unsurprisingly – is the mainstream media, which is also accused of having an agenda in its climate reporting (cf. e.g. Hollingsworth, 2025).

However, most »alternative media« are no longer primarily concerned with denying climate change or the human contribution to it. Rather, the current climate reporting of right-wing alternative portals aims to discredit climate protection measures and their proponents. At the core is the accusation that

7 According to several studies, the consensus on human-made climate change is at least 99 percent among climate researchers.

evidence-based solutions for greater climate protection are ineffective, restrict individual freedom, and/or pose a massive threat to the domestic economy (cf. Sommer et al., 2022, p. 62ff.; Nicolosi et al., 2025); opposing positions and advocates of the energy transition are regularly discredited with terms such as »climate madness,« »climate hysterics,« or »climate apocalypticism« (Quent et al., 2022, p. 174f.). It is not uncommon for these portals to use misleading methods while claiming that the energy transition will lead to a decline in prosperity and widespread power outages (see 3.3.).

3.2 *Dubious sources and ›experts‹*

Time and again, »alternative media« use seemingly reputable evidence to support their own climate-skeptical narrative. As a rule, these are sources that, from a journalistic perspective, would at least require critical assessment. This includes statements by well-known climate deniers (cf. Thom, 2023 [AUF1]) as well as judgements by established institutions, e.g., government agencies, which have already been publicly debunked from a climate science perspective (cf. Lehn, 2024 b [Epoch Times]). Right-wing alternative outlets are particularly fond of reporting on joint statements and open letters from (supposed) experts who contradict the climate emergency or the causes of global warming. However, reports on these petitions often fail to mention that only a few climate researchers are among the signatories, many of them have denied the dangers of climate change in the past and/or have connections to the fossil fuel industry and climate-skeptical organizations (cf. Nelkner, 2019 [Epoch Times]; Echtermann & Eckert, 2019 [including *Tichys Einblick*; *Epoch Times*]; Zwins, 2023 [AUF1]).

In addition, most »alternative media« also feature alleged climate experts who either have little standing in the field of climate science or lack relevant expertise. Although these interviewees mostly do not fundamentally question climate change itself, they argue against proposed climate policy solutions such as a CO₂ tax or the expansion of renewable energies (cf. Haupt, 2020, p. 178f.). This includes, among others, the chemist, former manager, and former politician of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) Fritz Vahrenholt, arguably one of Germany's most prominent climate science skeptics (cf. Brunnengräber et al., 2024, p. 154). Vahrenholt is currently mobilizing public opinion against wind power in particular and has ample opportunity to speak on right-wing portals (cf. e.g. Reveland/Siggelkow, 2023 [NIUS]). While recognized climate researchers are often disparaged in the reporting of right-wing alternative media, their own »experts« are portrayed as trustworthy and truly independent (cf. Hafner, 2024, p. 104f.).

3.3. Misleading reporting

Many far-right alternative media outlets deliberately use misleading methods by distorting or selectively presenting sources and information (cf. Paulitsch, 2024, p. 32). This strategy is also used in climate reporting, especially on the topic of energy policy. One popular example of this is the claim – repeatedly refuted in fact checks – that the expansion of wind farms leads to even more droughts or dry spells, for example because it weakens jet streams (cf. Todtmann, 2022 [*Epoch Times*]; Zwins, 2024 [*Deutschland-Kurier*]).^[8] Such misleading reports are either based on misrepresented studies (see Kornatz, 2023 [including *AUF1*]), invented quotes (see Thom, 2024 [*Deutschland-Kurier*]), or pure speculation: Immediately after a blackout on the Iberian Peninsula in spring 2025, right-wing alternative portals gave the impression that the likely cause was an overproduction of solar power or photovoltaic systems, which later proved to be false (cf. Laschyk, 2025 [*Apollo News*; *Tichys Einblick*]). Images can also be used manipulatively to sow distrust of the energy transition, e.g. through inauthentic video footage of allegedly burning solar plants as a result of a heat wave (cf. Bernhard, 2025 [*InfraRotMedien*]). Such reports in the »alternative media« sometimes contribute to delaying the expansion of renewable energy sources locally (cf. e.g. Kapeller, 2024).

There are also repeated instances of distorted reporting on climate policy developments at the international level. For example, numerous right-wing alternative media outlets spread the claim that around 100 cities would ban the consumption of meat, dairy products, or the possession of private cars starting in 2030. In reality, the document in question^[9] merely analyzed consumption-based emissions and offered cities suggestions for reducing them (see Funke, 2023 [including *tkp*, *Reitschuster*, *Weltwoche*]). The same applies to climate policy measures taken by other countries, which right-wing »alternative media« outlets report incorrectly or in misleading ways, such as a decision on energy targets by Sweden's government (cf. Lehn, 2023 [including *Unzensuriert*, *tkp*, *Tichys Einblick*])^[10] or a court ruling on wind farm permits in France (cf. Lehn, 2024 a; Nicolaus 2024 [*Deutschland-Kurier*, *Tichys Einblick*]).^[11] False news about climate protection measures abroad is likely to be particularly effective since it is less easily verifiable for the domestic audience.

8 Interestingly, arguments against wind turbines here are based on nature conservation and environmental protection. However, this perspective is usually ignored when it comes to coal mining or nuclear power.

9 Specifically, a report published in 2019 by the »C40 Network,« an association of around 100 mayors worldwide who want to take joint action against climate change.

10 Here: That Sweden is leaving the EU's »Green Deal« even though it had merely adjusted its energy production targets for 2040 (no longer 100 percent from renewables, but »fossil-free«).

11 Here: That wind turbines are now illegal in France, even though the administrative court ruling only referred to a formal error in noise protection conditions and did not affect existing wind farms.

Another misleading method used by »alternative media« is to selectively quote individual passages or details from reputable climate research findings in order to sow climate skepticism; this form of decontextualization is commonly referred to as *cherry-picking* (cf. Quent et al., 2022, p. 185f.). On the one hand, it can serve to cast doubt on the urgency of the climate crisis or to give the all-clear, e.g. in the case of specific weather phenomena such as above-average snowfall in the northern hemisphere (cf. Orsini 2022 [Unzensuriert]). In the summer of 2025, *Report24* reported that Australia's Great Barrier Reef was thriving because, according to official data, no coral bleaching had been observed in June – the fact that it was winter in Australia at this time and therefore no additional bleaching is usual was not mentioned in the article (cf. Nass, 2025; Ollig 2025; see also Thom, 2023 [AUF1]).

On the other hand, cherry-picking is used to take individual theses from climate researchers out of context in order to ridicule climate science in general. In the case of individual weather events, previous statements by experts can be quoted in a mocking manner, e.g. that there will hardly be any snowfall in the future, without these predictions being put in a journalistic context (cf. Crestani, 2023 [eXXpress]). Similarly, individual details are sometimes picked out from current studies in order to portray them as dubious or unreliable, as this was recently the case with the Austrian Assessment Report on Climate Change (cf. Gutschi, 2025 [eXXpress]).

3.4 Attacks on political opponents

With the rise of the international climate movement, attacks by right-wing alternative media on political opponents have also intensified in recent years. This initially affected the relatively young movement Fridays for Future, initiated by school strikes by the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg (see Dave et al., 2020). Since 2019, right-wing »alternative news sites« increasingly used terms such as »Greta disciples,« »Greta youth,« and »climate cult« to portray the activists as quasi-religious and thus irrational (cf. Knüpfer & Hoffmann, 2024). As a result of the protests by the climate-protection movement Last Generation since 2022, the framing of the climate movement as terrorists has increased in German-language »alternative media« (cf. Bundtzen, 2023). In addition to the accusation of »terrorism« against Last Generation, there have also been repeatedly misleading reports, for instance that a traffic blockade caused the death of a woman or that these protest groups were receiving government funding (cf. Gindl, 2024 [Report24]). Furthermore, climate activists are often accused of left-wing extremism, while right-wing extremist incidents tend to be downplayed (cf. Eckert, 2024 [eXXpress]).

In the wake of the energy crisis beginning in 2022, Green parties in German-speaking countries have also become a central target in climate reporting

by right-wing »alternative media« (cf. Bundtzen & Matlach, 2023, p. 10f.). Admittedly, »alternative media« had already been agitating against the Greens before, for example in the wake of environmental disasters (cf. Echtermann, 2020 [*Epoch Times*]) or during the 2021 German federal election campaign (cf. Röttger et al., 2021 [including *Info-DIREKT*, *Report24*]). However, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Greens came under even greater scrutiny from right-wing portals, which portrayed climate policy by the Greens as primarily responsible for the looming energy shortage. A vivid example for this is the YouTube channel »Achtung, Reichelt!« between April 2022 and January 2023, which primarily polemicized against the Greens and Robert Habeck, while Vladimir Putin, as the actual cause of the energy crisis, was hardly mentioned (see in: ZAPP, 2023). A common tactic among right-wing »alternative media« is to portray politicians of the Green Party as ideologically driven and therefore authoritarian, for example by using shortened or even false quotes (cf. Helberg, 2019 [*PI-News*]; Seegers, 2024 [*Apollo News*]).

4. Concluding remarks

The spread of climate skepticism is not limited solely to the spectrum of right-wing »alternative media« (cf. Rahmstorf, 2024, p. 185f.). Most recently, for example, coverage on the planned law on energy for buildings by the so-called »Ampel« [traffic light] coalition has shown that even established (tabloid) media outlets work with misleading oversimplifications (cf. Jost & Mack, 2024). However, right-wing »alternative media« are currently likely to disregard journalistic standards for reporting on climate issues far more deliberately, since most of them also reject the rules of professional self-regulation (cf. Paulitsch, 2024, p. 35f.). In addition, there are connections to climate-skeptical organizations that are rarely discussed in the German-language mainstream media. Professional journalism will thus face an even greater challenge in the future to expose methods of climate-related disinformation and investigate the intentions of right-wing alternative portals. In conclusion, it would be desirable to pursue *investigative climate journalism*, as advocated by media scientist Bernhard Pörksen (2024).

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