

Migration Reporting in Germany: Perspectives from quality and fringe Media

A comparative Content Analysis of selected
German Media

**Erich Brost Institut
for International
Journalism:**

Merle van Berkum

Juliane Niepert

Susanne Fengler

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Migration Reporting in Germany

Research Status: Migration in selected German media – topics, trends and perspectives

Migration has been a central social issue in Germany for decades. Especially since the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015, immigration has been a prominent topic in political, media, and public discourse.

The media's portrayal of migration plays a crucial role in public perception and opinion formation. Newspapers such as Die Welt, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), and the Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ) are among Germany's leading quality media outlets. Their reporting not only influences their readership but can also shape political discourse.

The following analysis focuses on the years 2015 to 2018 and 2020 to 2025, which were particularly dynamic in terms of migration policy, society, and the media. The COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 federal election with the change of government to the traffic light coalition, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022 with a massive influx of refugees to Germany, and the renewed political upheaval following the federal election in February 2025 mark key milestones of this period. 2025 markieren zentrale Wegmarken dieses Zeitraums.

Against this backdrop, the analysis of migration reporting highlights how media coverage in Germany has developed within the context of political crises, societal debates, and changing migration policy frameworks. The inclusion of taz and JF broadens the spectrum of media examined to include perspectives from the left and right fringes.

The media portrayal of migration in Germany has been the subject of numerous studies, particularly since the surge in immigration beginning in 2015. Heidenreich et al. (2019) analyzed the dynamics of media coverage during the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015 in various European countries, including Germany. Their study shows that initial coverage in German media was humanitarian in nature, focusing on compassion and aid for refugees. However, as the 'crisis' unfolded, the focus increasingly shifted to security, economic, and social risks. This shift in media framing coincided with a rise in public opinion critical of migration.

Eberl and Galyga (2021) examined media coverage of migration in over 850,000 articles from several European countries over a 14-year period. With regard to Germany, they found that the political orientation of the media has a significant influence on reporting. For example, more conservative newspapers like Die Welt tend to address migration from security and economic perspectives, while more left-liberal media outlets like the Süddeutsche Zeitung emphasize humanitarian and moral arguments. This polarization is also reflected in the societal debate on migration, particularly in the context of the increasing influence of the Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017) examined the use of linguistic imagery and narratives in media coverage of refugees in Europe. For Germany, they found that terms like "flood" or "wave" were used to portray migration as a threatening phenomenon. The events of New Year's Eve 2015/2016 in Cologne further reinforced the construction of migration as a security problem and led to a further shift in public perception, also linked to the rise of the AfD.

Bleich, Bloemraad and de Graauw (2015) analyzed media coverage of migration in European and North American countries and showed that German media increasingly used polarized narratives – particularly during the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. While more liberal newspapers such as the SZ treated migration as a moral and humanitarian issue, the coverage in more conservative media focused more on issues of control, integration and cultural identity.

This dichotomous portrayal is reflected in political debates and decision-making processes, where humanitarian arguments are often pitted against concerns of national security and cultural identity. The authors write that this type of polarized reporting has, among other things, contributed to the ongoing political debates about migration in Germany.

Eberl et al. (2018) conducted a comprehensive literature review on migration reporting in Europe. They found that migrants tend to be underrepresented in media coverage and often appear in problematic contexts, such as in connection with crime or social tensions. Although quality newspapers offer nuanced portrayals, the depiction of people fleeing to Germany often remains abstract and detached. The study highlights that such media representations can contribute to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes and may promote support for anti-immigration parties.

The study „Fünf Jahre Medienberichterstattung über Flucht und Migration“ by Maurer et al. (n.d.) uses quantitative content analysis to examine the reporting in six leading German media outlets (FAZ, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Bild, ARD Tagesschau, ZDF heute, RTL Aktuell) between February 2016 and December 2020. A key finding is that “the media [...] tended to report less and less frequently on refugees over the course of the study period,” while at the same time the reporting was “strongly influenced by current events” (ibid. 3). It is striking that political decisions and institutions shaped the reporting more than the refugees themselves. Furthermore, “more than one in ten articles [...] addressed terrorism and refugee crime” (ibid.), with Bild in particular frequently covering these topics and significantly overrepresenting violent and sexual offenses compared to crime statistics. Moreover, a predominantly negative portrayal of refugees was evident in all the media outlets examined – “and thus considerably more negative than during the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015/16” (ibid.). At the same time, the reporting remained contradictory: On the one hand, refugees were “characterized as people in need who must be taken in for humanitarian reasons,” while on the other hand, they were described as a “security risk to the German population” (ibid.). Differences between the media outlets could primarily be attributed to their editorial lines, with the Süddeutsche Zeitung reporting less negatively overall than the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Bild.

In the context of research on media-mediated discrimination, Ruhrmann (2016) argues that technological and commercial developments in the media promote discriminatory representations, and that digital platforms serve as a space for right-wing groups in particular to disseminate racist and exclusionary ideologies. Formats such as memes are deliberately used to radicalize younger target groups and to reinforce an ethnopluralistically based image of “cultural racism.” The author emphasizes the importance of long-term, methodologically diverse studies on polarizing topics such as migration or COVID-19, as well as for preventive strategies and discrimination-sensitive journalistic practice.

The study by Nordheim et al. (2019) examined the reporting on the 2015/16 “refugee crisis” in the right-wing weekly newspaper Junge Freiheit in comparison to three major German media outlets (Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt, and Handelsblatt). Clear differences emerged: While the mainstream media predominantly viewed the migration crisis from a European-humanitarian perspective, Junge Freiheit focused on a decidedly national viewpoint, largely ignoring the complex international, and especially European, context. Its reporting narrowed the portrayal of the migration crisis to selected aspects and framed migration primarily as a threat to German identity and culture. Cultural and religious differences—particularly with regard to Islam—were strongly emphasized. Furthermore, a clear affinity for the AfD (Alternative for Germany) and open support for criticism of Angela Merkel's political decisions during the 2015 migration crisis were evident.

Czymara and Bauer (2023) also analyzed articles from Junge Freiheit to examine the development of a potentially right-wing media discourse in Germany. The results show that the right-wing discourse shifted significantly during the period under investigation. While in the late 1990s the political left was considered the main target of the newspaper's reporting, today the focus is increasingly on topics such as migration and integration. Particularly during the 2015/2016 refugee crisis, the proportion of articles on migration tripled. The portrayal is predominantly negative, emphasizing both the perceived cultural threat and a clear rejection of Islam.

Research design and methodological approach

To provide the most comprehensive picture possible of migration reporting in Germany, this report, as part of the “We-ID” project, is based, among other things, on two datasets from existing studies, both of which were collected at the Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism.

In addition, data from taz and Junge Freiheit were collected and analyzed specifically for “WeID”.

The study focuses exclusively on print and online media, as these are significantly more accessible for scientific purposes than film or sound recordings.

In the German context, it can be stated that print and online media – especially leading publications such as the FAZ, Süddeutsche Zeitung, and Die Welt – already provide a meaningful picture of migration reporting due to their wide reach, their influence on the political agenda, and their function as reference media. Furthermore, television reporting frequently refers to these leading media outlets or adopts their frameworks, so that the central discourses can already be traced in the analysis of print and online media.

To ensure comparability, all datasets included articles from the online editions. This allows for the representation of both the agenda-setting discourse of quality media and the reporting of fringe media on both sides of the political spectrum. A specific combination of search terms was used to select the articles; articles from FAZ, Die Welt, taz, and Süddeutsche Zeitung were collected via the Factiva platform. Articles from Junge Freiheit were researched manually via their website. Only articles containing at least two relevant migration-related keywords were included in the analysis. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to identify combinations of keywords. This ensures that the texts engage substantively with the topic of migration.

The sample comprises the following news media and time periods:

Table 1. Media analyzed, sorted by time period and data set. Source: Author.

Medium	Period	Basis/Dataset	Item Count	Political Orientation
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	2015-2018	Otto Brenner Stiftung	100	center-right
Die Welt	2023-2024	AMAZE Studie	100	center-right
Süddeutsche	2015-2018	Otto Brenner Stiftung	100	center-left

Zeitung	2023-2024	AMAZE Studie	100	
taz	2020-2024	WeID	100	left
Junge Freiheit	2020-2025	WeID	100	right
Total			600	

The methodological approach and structure of the codebook are based on the comparative study by Fengler et al. (2020). Coding was carried out using a combination of deductively and inductively developed categories in the areas of formal, content-related, and evaluative characteristics. The focus is on the choice of topics, geographical references, representation of actors, the evaluation of migration, as well as the format and journalistic style of the articles.

Results of the content analysis

The analysis of media coverage of migration shows that all the newspapers examined focus primarily on political and national dimensions. Social, economic, or cultural aspects play only a subordinate role, although there are differences between the media outlets: taz offers a more pluralistic and transnational perspective, while Junge Freiheit focuses almost exclusively on state actors and hardly considers migrant self-representation. SZ, FAZ, and Die Welt also dominate political actors, but occasionally integrate civil society and international perspectives. The tone and framing of the reporting vary considerably across the political spectrum, which shapes public perception and the societal discourse on belonging, responsibility, and identity.

SZ, FAZ, Die Welt

A comparison of the quality media outlets FAZ, Süddeutsche Zeitung, and Die Welt reveals a clear continuity in the political framing of migration. Even in the reporting between 2015 and 2018 (SZ and FAZ), national perspectives and institutional actors dominated, while transnational or humanitarian contexts played a rather subordinate role (Fengler & Kreutler, 2019). Migration was frequently presented in the context of political debates or security issues, while personal stories of refugees were rare. For example, during this period, the FAZ primarily focused on political measures and legal frameworks, while the SZ addressed humanitarian aspects only occasionally, such as the living conditions of refugees in shelters or their integration into communities.

This focus continued in 2023 and 2024, although reporting increasingly shifted from humanitarian discourse to interpretations in terms of security and integration policy. Migration appears here less as a social or cultural phenomenon and more as a political and administrative challenge requiring state action and control. In roughly two-thirds of the articles, Die Welt and the Süddeutsche Zeitung addressed migration within a political context, with subtopics such as European and international politics dominating. The Süddeutsche Zeitung tends to maintain an integration-oriented perspective: it reports neutrally to slightly positively on integration measures, humanitarian initiatives, and NGOs, and occasionally also addresses social tensions in a nuanced way. Die Welt clearly frames migration in a political and security-oriented manner, discussing, for example, push and pull factors, border

security, and potential conflicts, but also occasionally highlighting economic perspectives—such as labor market integration or discussions about skilled workers.

Overall, subtle but consistent differences emerge between the individual media outlets: The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* more frequently frames migration in a neutral to slightly positive light, while at least occasionally highlighting humanitarian aspects. The FAZ, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on institutional and economic dimensions and its tone remains predominantly neutral to slightly negative. *Die Welt*, in turn, clearly reflects the increasing politicization of the topic in recent years: It more closely links migration policy issues with security and socio-political narratives. Overall, all three media outlets present migration more strongly as part of domestic political conflicts, with an increase in opinion pieces and thus a more intensive discursive debate.

Opposing poles on the spectrum: taz and Junge Freiheit

In comparison to these leading media outlets, *taz* and *Junge Freiheit* position themselves as opposing poles in the media discourse spectrum.

The *taz* newspaper adopts a pluralistic, human rights-oriented perspective, addresses structural causes and global inequalities, and presents a broader range of countries of origin for migrants and refugees, including African states like Rwanda. Humanitarian contexts are emphasized; civil society voices, NGOs, and legal assessments are frequently included. Negative framing in the *taz* is usually an expression of political criticism, for example, of grievances, developments that raise human rights concerns, or structural inequalities, not of migrants themselves.

Individual articles that go beyond the national level highlight, for example, the catastrophic escape routes and living conditions. Both NGOs and the asylum seekers themselves have their say.

A key difference from the other media outlets examined lies particularly in the emphasis on the humanitarian context. While the reporting in 2015/16 (FAZ and SZ) still had a predominantly humanitarian focus, this increasingly gave way to a (national) politicization of the topic in the following years (2023–2024) in the media outlets SZ and *Die Welt*.

In contrast to the *taz* newspaper, *Junge Freiheit* primarily reports on migration as a national or state-driven problem, with a clear focus on authorities and politics, but without including migrant or civil society voices. This results in depersonalized reporting on migration; refugees and migrants appear more as objects of political measures than as active subjects.

Junge Freiheit relies on fast-paced, emotionally charged short news items and focuses almost exclusively on state actors; migrant self-representation is virtually nonexistent. Migration is predominantly portrayed negatively – as a burden or cultural threat to Germany. Reporting is frequently depersonalized: migrants appear as objects of political measures. A particular focus is on North African countries and states in the Middle East, such as Syria or Afghanistan, often with problematic religious connotations.

This is particularly evident in the choice of words, which frequently employs alarmist terms and formulations: Migration is described, for example, as an “explosive conglomerate” (JF, 22.06.22), “municipalities [are] at their limit” (JF, 26.09.22), refugees enjoy “permanent residence thanks to ‘climate passport’” (JF, 9.05.23), while at the same time they appear as “looters” who are “tearing apart the welfare state” and see the “hard-working” being exploited by “non-performers” (JF, 18.11.23).

Positive framing occurs only sporadically in *Junge Freiheit*, for example when church figures call for a more liberal migration policy or when empathy for German victims of the Second World War is mobilized. The selection of guest authors also follows a deliberate logic, particularly when dealing with

sensitive topics such as criticism of religion; the positioning of Laila Mirzo, a Syrian-born author, conveys authenticity and more easily deflects accusations of discrimination against her critique.

Elsewhere, the newspaper deliberately employs positive framing to, for example, mobilize empathy for German victims of the Second World War. It achieves this by interviewing eyewitnesses and demanding recognition of their suffering, which is portrayed as ignored or repressed in current culture of remembrance. Similarly, the Sudeten Germans are depicted as innocent victims of expulsion, particularly by the Czechs. This form of reporting aims to establish a counter-narrative that also positions Germans as victims of history and simultaneously serves as a critique of the existing culture of remembrance.

Overall, the reporting on migration in Junge Freiheit demonstrates that the newspaper functions as a platform for right-wing populist to neo-right ideologies. It aims to shift the boundaries of acceptable discourse by normalizing right-wing thought patterns – thereby confirming its claim to be perceived as part of a right-wing counter-public sphere. This is also reflected in the selection of guest authors. In most cases, this selection is not random, but follows a specific logic.

Especially when dealing with sensitive topics like religious criticism – and in particular criticism of Islam – the author Laila Mirzo's stance plays a crucial role. Born and raised in Syria, she comes from the same cultural and biographical context she criticizes, which also alters the interpretation of her critique: The criticism appears more authentic, less influenced by external factors, and can more easily be shielded from accusations of discrimination than if it were presented by someone without any direct connection to that culture or religion.

Summary

The results of the analysis demonstrate that media coverage of migration in Germany between 2015 and 2018, and again between 2020 and 2024, was heavily influenced by political bias. Leading media outlets such as the Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, and Die Welt focused on political debates, security issues, and institutional perspectives, while social, humanitarian, and cultural aspects were largely ignored. The taz offered a more pluralistic and transnational perspective, examining structural causes, human rights issues, and global contexts, while Junge Freiheit presented migration almost exclusively as a national and political challenge, rarely giving migrants a voice.

Political actors also dominate the coverage in the Süddeutsche Zeitung and Die Welt, although they do integrate civil society and international perspectives to a limited extent. Overall, it is evident that the media's portrayal of migration is shaped by political and ideological positions, which influences both public perception and the societal discourse on belonging, responsibility, and identity.

A comparison between mainstream media and alternative publications highlights ideological differences: Junge Freiheit primarily portrays migration as a threat and remains nationally focused, while taz reports nationally but critically examines government actions. Mainstream media outlets like the Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, and Die Welt move between these poles: They remain formally balanced and fact-oriented, but more strongly follow political agendas, which means that transnational, humanitarian, or everyday perspectives are sometimes overlooked.

The increasingly negative tone in reporting can be interpreted as an indication of growing societal polarization and a political shift to the right. The increase in opinion pieces also illustrates that migration is increasingly perceived as a politically contentious issue. A broader perspective, for example by including international causes of migration, colonial continuities, or global inequality structures, is largely absent from the articles examined.

The present analysis shows how media shape the discourse – be it through empathy-promoting narratives, such as those found in the taz newspaper, or through security-related and national alarmism, such as that found particularly in Junge Freiheit.

Furthermore, migration remains a central issue due to its demographic and labor market relevance. Germany is an immigration country where migration, including politically motivated migration, plays a crucial role in shaping the future of society. The increasing fragmentation of the media landscape reinforces the trend toward so-called "echo chambers" (Iyengar & Hahn 2009): readers often choose media outlets that confirm their existing beliefs. The topic of migration, in particular, demonstrates how, in times of social polarization, these echo chambers can narrow further and shift the boundaries of public discourse.

Finally, it should be noted that this analysis only reflects media coverage within a specific timeframe and based on selected print and online media. Therefore, conclusions about long-term developments or other journalistic formats, such as online comments, social media, or audiovisual contributions, can only be drawn to a limited extent.

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