

United by Anger—Divided by Humor?

Staging Strategies of YouTube Creators in Negotiating whether the COVID-19 Pandemic is a Medical or Political Crisis

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Introduction

Not only did the COVID-19 pandemic affect almost everyone's everyday life, it was also an epistemic crisis. Although state and global disaster control like the WHO are trained for pandemics and have programs to prevent maximum damage, the hitherto unknown threat of the coronavirus constituted an unprecedented experience, and the response of these institutions revealed how they coped with this challenge—and especially how they communicated their learning process along with it. Since there was hardly any experience in dealing with a global pandemic and the expertise available to these institutions was repeatedly in conflict with unforeseen events, public discourse, and political decisions, the communication strategies of state and scientific institutions during this highly uncertain situation were crucial. Communication based on experience, evaluation, and expertise was supposed to help establish an informed definition of the crisis in the public discourse. However, in the slipstream of the information communicated by state disaster control, other participants in public discourse also debated how to define the crisis in light of the uncertain situation. This essay focuses on the crisis negotiation at the beginning of the pandemic and divides it into two competing interpretations: political crisis and medical crisis.

Due to the contact restrictions at the beginning of the pandemic, everyday practices of information procurement, plausibility checking, and validation—such as water cooler talk at work, locker room talk, or discussions at the regulars' table—were not possible. Consequently, it can be assumed that

specific media formats such as YouTube videos were used to obtain, validate, and check the plausibility of information. This paper will focus on the two German YouTube creators MaiLab and Oliver Janich and their respective channels, because they represent the two distinct positions on crisis negotiation. Both channels were part of the public discourse on YouTube when the COVID-19 pandemic started. MaiLab and Oliver Janich contributed several videos to the discourse. On the one hand, the channels stand as typical examples of the two standpoints on the debate, about whether COVID-19 is a political or a medical crisis, concerning the legitimization and validation of their content. On the other hand, they are very popular in their respective fields, which, for MaiLab, is the field of science communication and for Janich, who sees himself as an investigative journalist, the self-proclaimed 'alternative media scene'¹. Popularity is being measured by YouTube's metrics like clicks, likes, followers, etc. Thirdly, they both utilize emotions in order to draw attention and stage their content.

All of this takes place against the backdrop of the question of what constitutes valid knowledge, how it is created, and how it is communicated in the first place. The analysis presented in this contribution is grounded in a pragmatic concept of knowledge (Pfadenhauer 296). According to this perspective, the epistemic truth of a claim is less significant than its recognition as true within a particular social context. A society's body of knowledge encompasses not only scientifically validated knowledge but also opinions, beliefs, and worldviews that hold meaning and acceptance in its social framework. Since the creators' focus seems to be the communication of such valid knowledge, the questions in this contribution are therefore: How do MaiLab and Oliver Janich stage the

1 The terms "alternative media" and "mainstream media" have been in constant flux since the 1960s. They are usually used to refer to hegemonic discourses, incompatible interpretations of objectivity and experimental, often political practices of journalism. Lisa Schwaiger provides a current, but pre COVID-19 inventory of terms and theories concerning alternative media landscape in German language countries. She also develops a typology of alternative news media. The four types are: I "Exposing mainstream lies" II "Conspiracy and spirituality" III "Civil society uprising" IV "The serious alternative" (Schwaiger 144). Schwaigers typology shows that the current self and external description of "alternative media" is heterogenous, but specially Type I and II contain a right-wing, identitarian and politicized spectrum. From this right-wing point mainstream media stands for democratic, pluralistic values and a hegemonic discourse and is often used as a point of demarcation. The terms are used accordingly by the creators who are presented here and whose videos are analyzed.

content in their videos as valid knowledge and which role do emotions play in their staging strategies, especially regarding this validation of knowledge?

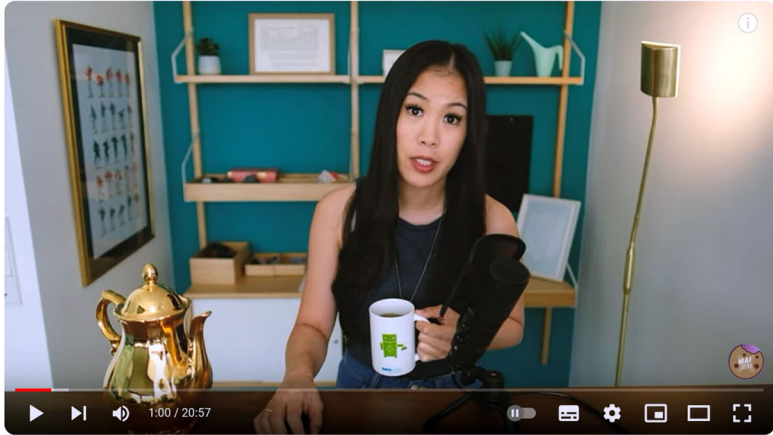
In the context of these questions, the sentimental as coined by Heike Paul could play a central role in emotional communication and the validation of knowledge (Paul 165). It is introduced as an analytical concept and understood as a special form of emotional communication. Due to its genealogy, it is very well suited to dealing with and overcoming crises.

Short Introduction to MaiLab and Oliver Janich

Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim is the host of the YouTube channel MaiLab (figure 1). She started the channel with Melanie Gath in 2016 under the name *schönschlau*. In her first videos, she reported as an insider on the process of doing her PhD in chemistry and the difficulties associated with this. The channel's name was changed to MaiLab in 2018 and a cooperation with the public broadcast network *funk* was established. The channel produced short informational videos about everyday objects like coconut oil or activated carbon as a beauty product, their chemical composition, and their usage. In 2019 and 2020, the scientists Lars Dittrich and Jens Foell started working as editors for the channel. Both of them hold PhDs, Lars Dittrich in biology and Jens Foell in psychology (FUNK Presse). With this new cooperation and editorial board, the videos became longer and the content more complex. Ever since, the channel has focused on science communication, which is reflected in the content of the videos. For example, one playlist called “scientifically proven” (translation V. S.) deals with investigating various heterogeneous trending topics, such as the debate on sex and gender, as well as Cannabis and the practices surrounding the use of turmeric as a health-enhancing substance (MAITHINK X n.d.).

The most clicked YouTube video in Germany in 2020 was a video by the channel MaiLab containing information on the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic (ZDF Presseportal). The channel has received several awards, such as the Georg-von-Holtzbrinck-Preis for science journalism 2020 and the Grimme-Preis 2021 for journalistic work (ibid; FUNK Presse). The channel was discontinued in April 2023, relaunched under the new name MAITHINK X in March 2024 and now belongs to the public broadcast ZDFneo (MAITHINK X 2023; 2024).

Figure 1: Screenshot of MaiLab's video "Corona geht gerade erst los" (MAITHINK X 2020a)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zognXgK8Do>

Oliver Janich is a freelance journalist who worked for various prestigious media outlets like *Focus* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in Germany before 2016 (figure 2). He has written several books like *New World Order Exposed* (2017) or *The Order of Freedom* (2020), in which he rolls out his anti-elitist narratives, fuels resentment, and explains his libertarian agenda. The overarching narrative of his videos combines anti-democratic and libertarian ideas with diffuse content from conspiracy narratives such as the Q-Anon conspiracy and the 9/11 truther activist scene.² Oliver Janich has repeatedly positioned himself as a crucial part of the truther scene in Germany.

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- 2 The Q-Anon conspiracy originated on the website 4chan.com, where an alleged U.S. government employee has been spreading information under the pseudonym Q. Among other things, Q claimed that there was a globally operating elite that kidnapped children in order to torture them and extract a substance called adrenochrome. According to Q, this substance has a rejuvenating effect on its consumers. In early 2020, the well-known German pop musician Xavier Naidoo produced a video in which he can be seen crying and in which he talks about this conspiracy narrative. Oliver Janich refers directly to this video in several of his own videos and claims that he made Naidoo aware of the Q-Anon conspiracy and also helped him produce the video. The 9/11 truther activist scene believes that there is a secret hidden truth behind the information disseminated by the media and politicians and that 9/11 was an inside job.

Figure 2: Screenshot of Oliver Janich (Janich 2020)



<https://odysee.com/@oliverjanich:b/insider-bundesregierung-bereitet-sich:2>

In 2016, he emigrated to the Philippines. Meanwhile, he was wanted in Germany by the Munich Public Prosecutor's Office via arrest warrant because he had called for the murder of some prominent and politically active people on his telegram channel during the COVID-19 pandemic. He was arrested in the Philippines in August 2022 and released at the end of 2022 (Hoppenstedt/Wiedmann-Schmidt). In German-speaking countries, he is regarded as the main proponent of the Q-Anon conspiracy. He is associated with the German right-wing party AFD. After all, the party even issued a formal, governmental request concerning his arrest, asking the German government and ministry for foreign affairs for clarification (AFD Bundestagsfraktion).

In this article, one video from each channel is analyzed concerning staging strategies and specifically the use of emotions in staging content as valid knowledge. When contact restrictions were imposed and other measures taken at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany in March 2020, the question of whether the pandemic constituted a political or a medical crisis was discussed in public discourse and in several videos on YouTube. MaiLab and Oliver Janich are exemplary for the spectrum of discussion: MaiLab argues for COVID-19 being a medical crisis, while for Oliver Janich it is a political crisis.

Investigating the role of emotions in the staging strategies in the selected videos, the emotion staged most prominently here is anger. Furthermore, a special focus lies on humor as a communicative strategy and on the sentimental as a particular mode of emotional communication. Before analyzing those strategies, three topics need to be discussed in more detail: the media-theoretical background with regard to YouTube, the role of emotions generally, and the sentimental specifically.

Staging Strategies

Attention Control, Emotions, and the Sentimental

As far as the media theoretical background is concerned, I adopt McLuhan's idea and assume that the form in which information is conveyed is more important for its reception than the content itself (McLuhan 17). This means that digitally streamed and disseminated videos are different from videos shown on television. On video platforms such as YouTube, which is the main focus here, there are more communicative offers than on linear television, i.e., comments from other users or other videos. As a consequence, the selection of videos on a platform is diverse and anything but trivial. Since the relevance of video content is highly subjective and depends on the individual's living environment, the sheer endless supply of videos has not made it any easier to select one. This makes the form of the videos much more important and raises the following questions: How are videos on platforms shaped in order for them to be clicked and what are the implications for creators?

Georg Franck's approach to the economy of attention provides an indication of how videos need to be shaped form-wise. In his approach, Franck states that attention is a scarce resource, and he combines attention with information processing (Franck 193). Accordingly, videos on platforms must generate and retain attention if they are to be viewed. Attention can be worked on in numerous ways: via viewing habits and the expectations linked to them, concretized in genres. According to Geimer, genre functions as a heuristic that provides orientation. With regard to media socialization and genre schematism, he explains that there are specific expectations regarding the videos' narration, dramaturgy, and cinematic style of showing and telling which you should use if you want to attract attention (Geimer 1419).

Attention can also be captured via general aesthetics like colors or music. Reckwitz describes the aestheticization of everyday life, according to which in-

dividuals are more attracted to products they find aesthetically appealing than to products that have not undergone a particular degree of aestheticization due to aesthetical subjectivation (Reckwitz 216). A third and very important way of working on attention is via emotional appeals. Picking up on Lünenborg's ideas, genre (narrative conventions, presentation styles) and aesthetics (language, images, sounds) are also used to arouse emotions (Lünenborg 238).

The concept of emotion used in this text is linked to the framework of Slaby and von Scheve who conceptualize “emotions as situational and episodic” (Slaby/Scheve 44). Taking this further, Lünenborg describes emotions in contrast to affects as “culturally formed and elaborated concepts of social relationality” (Lünenborg 237). In this way, emotions are explicit and refer to culturally distinguished concepts which contain expectations and rules for expressing, dealing, and coping with every emotion. Consequently, emotions are structural concepts and able to connect on both a collective and an individual level. Creators make use of this connectivity when they stage emotions in their videos.

In the context of YouTube videos and the staging of content as valid knowledge, I argue that emotions have three functions: First, they bind attention. Second, following cognitive emotion theory, emotions function as factors in the appraisal of information (Lünenborg et al. 19). Third, emotions can function as mobilizing and stabilizing factors for groups like affective communities by making use of their connectivity (Zink 3). Especially when dividing the negotiation of the crisis into two groups (medical, political), the appraisal and community-building functions of emotions become very important. Outlining the staged emotions and staging strategies in the videos can enhance our understanding of the dynamics of the public discourse at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it was influenced by YouTube videos.

Within those functions of emotions, taking into consideration the sentimental as a communicative code of “highly emotional appeal” (Gerund/Paul 19) can enrich the analysis of staged emotions. Overcoming the historical critique of literary sentimentalism, Gerund and Paul describe the sentimental code as functioning to “generate compassion” through a “fantasy of experiential equivalence” (ibid.). Typical sentimental motifs are gain or loss of love, death, or loss in general. The sentimental can also emotionally address the unavailability of something desired (Hollstein/Rosa 26f.; Rosa 124f.). Building up on “its strong claim to moral truth and authenticity,” the sentimental can have a politicizing effect when it is used narratively bottom-up (Gerund/Paul 19). Finally, the use

of sentimental codes goes hand in hand with uncertain circumstances as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sentimental codes help in analyzing where MaiLab and Janich differ in their staging strategy. Therefore, from a methodological point of view, I use the sentimental as a “sensitizing concept” in the sense of Herbert Blumer (7). Such concepts have “the function of tentatively generating questions and research perspectives,” as Strübing states (29). I also utilize the sentimental as a category for comparison when analyzing who is arguing in favor of a political crisis, since the sentimental can be used as politically activating.

Staged Emotions

The emotion most prominently staged in the videos analyzed here is anger. Moreover, humor as a communicative tool also plays a role in the staging strategies of MaiLab and Oliver Janich. The overarching question is how MaiLab and Oliver Janich stage their content as valid knowledge. The framework of the analysis is the question of whether COVID-19 is a medical or a political crisis. In order to get a more nuanced understanding of how (the communication of) anger and humor has been dealt with, a brief overview of different approaches will be useful.

Martha Nussbaum draws on Aristotle's five-step definition of anger and states that anger is a useful emotion for recruiting from an oppressed standpoint but not very useful or even counterproductive for securing political goals in the long run (Nussbaum 42). In discussing Nussbaum's ‘attack’ on anger, Silva reformulates a feminist perspective on the efficacy of anger (Silva 27). Going further in the direction of anger as a politically activating emotion, Kleres and Wettergren investigate fear, hope, anger, and guilt in the context of climate activism. Differentiating between activists from the global north and south, they find that ascribing guilt followed by anger is a way of politicization, at least for activists from the global south (Kleres/Wettergren 508). Research on (European) left- and right-wing populism also shows that it is especially right-wing populism that “transforms fear and insecurity into anger, resentment, and hatred against perceived ‘enemies’” (Salmela/Scheve 434). Focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic, von Scheve emphasizes the meaning of resent-

ment (and resentment)³ for protests during COVID-19, drawing parallels between the influence of resentment from right-wing populism to COVID-19 protests (Scheve 140). Like the sentimental, anger seems to be an activating emotion in terms of politicizing and mobilizing. Parallel to the sentimental, it seems to work best from a position of perceived disempowerment. This perceived disempowerment and anger—especially in the case of right-wing populism—can fuel resentment. Although the literature on the sentimental does not assume that anger aligns with the sentimental, there seems to be a certain overlap.

Humor as a phenomenon and communicative tool is related to comedy on a more abstract level and laughter on a more practical level. Humor is primarily understood as a characteristic of someone (Kindt 7) although in evolutionary psychology, it is referred to as a feeling (Lange/Schwab/Euler 78). Constructivist approaches emphasize humor as a socially constructed practice that reflects cultural and historical norms. In this context, Berger, in his book *Redeeming Laughter* (1997), presents forms of humor in everyday life, illuminates cultural and historical differences in dealing with humor and laughter, and draws on sociological theories to describe the experience of humor and laughter (cf. Senge 70). Berger follows Schütz's lifeworld theory and the view that laughter arises from the incongruence of two worlds. Berger's approach complements Plessner's phenomenological explanations of *Lachen und Weinen* ([1941] 2003), as both describe laughter as an "encounter with transcendence" (Senge 73).

Humor and laughter act as tools to lighten up the communication situation, while their use can also reveal something about the hierarchy within the communication setting. Lynch writes on the subject of humor, hierarchy, and situation: "Humor has no boundaries—it permeates every social context" (Lynch 423). From a practical perspective on communication, Lynch delineates three major humor theories: superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. The superiority theory describes the humorous devaluation of people, not necessarily of other people but also of oneself. The relief theory includes the psychoanalytical view of humor and aims to process tensions, fears, and frustrations in humor and thereby resolve them. The incongruity theory—as already discussed—sees humor as a fun way of playing with the incongruity of different lifeworlds and the resulting expectations that are violated.

3 Christian von Scheve discusses the often-blurred distinctions between "resentment" and "ressentiment" within the realm of populism research (140–41).

Humor appears in various communicative forms and genres: As comedy, as a joke, as parody, in the form of satire or sarcasm (cf. Wirth). These forms and genres each have their own internal communicative structure and can be used in heterogenic communicative contexts in various ways: Comedy, for example, has a rich genre history, dating back to ancient Greece (Greiner 30), while satire, with its focus on power relations, maintains a fixed communicative framework (Zymner 21).

Particularly with regard to the negotiation of whether COVID-19 is a medical or political crisis, satirical forms could conceivably be used to criticize political measures. It can also be expected that creators use humor as a line of demarcation to indicate belonging. Ultimately, Plessner and Berger's phenomenological explanations of laughter as an encounter and way of dealing with transcendence also align with the experience of crisis on the one hand, and with the sentimental on the other—after all, the sentimental is also a mode of coping with crisis and transcendence. Empirically analyzing the staged emotions and humorous communicative forms in the videos, I use an approach informed by Grounded Theory Methodology and, in particular, by the situation analysis following Adele Clarke. Clarke's interpretative situational analysis focuses primarily on discourses, objects, and power relations and how these shape a situation in terms of enabling action as being seen or being heard (Clarke 76). This fits the already outlined dynamics of anger and the sentimental.⁴

Case #1: Oliver Janich—the Tragic Hero

Oliver Janich's video titled "Insider: German government prepares for uprisings | Bilderbergers & COVID-19 pandemic" can no longer be found on YouTube, because, according to the platform, the channel has repeatedly violated the platform's content guidelines and has made false statements. The video was retrieved from the website odysee.com and is the same video that was originally uploaded on April 4, 2020 (Janich). Besides a short interlude at the beginning of the video, where you can see and hear Bill Gates talking about vaccination, the video is a monologue by Janich, explaining why he thinks

4 The videos and channels chosen for this analysis are part of a corpus of videos that are all linked by the fact that they contribute to the discussion as to whether COVID-19 is a political or a medical crisis. So far, the corpus includes four different channels and over 30 videos.

COVID-19 is a political crisis, gathering and showing evidence to support his opinion.

Figure 3: Oliver Janich's Tantrum



<https://odysee.com/@oliverjanich:b/insider-bundesregierung-bereitet-sich:2> (at 00:11:18)

The video contains various information combining the COVID-19 pandemic and the Bilderberg Conference in 2019, using repeated overlays and references to other media products and sources. The Bilderberg Conference is a regular meeting of top Western representatives from politics, economy, and the media (cf. BILDERBERG MEETINGS). For anti-elitists and conspiracy theorists, it often serves as a projection surface for their resentments (Allweiss/Hatting). The video covers three topics that trigger angry outbursts. Janich discusses them, providing contextual information about the situations and explaining why they affect him so deeply. Most of the time, he is in front of the camera, speaking. Sometimes, overlays are used to display information about what Janich is discussing at the same time. The most interesting episodes for the analysis of staged emotions are those where he stages anger. The three outbursts of rage are directed at different recipients. First, the rage is caused by the mainstream media's disregard for his findings as an investigative journalist. Second, it is caused by the disregard for his performance within the truther scene, and third, it is caused by an attack on his authority from within

the scene by other truthers. The first sequence of anger runs from around 10:10 to 12:10. This sequence is not sentimental itself, but Janich's outburst of anger is followed by a report on the death of a 12-year-old girl.

Janich mentions that "mainstream TV" said that the coronavirus was the ideal topic for conspiracy theorists. In his self-image as an investigative journalist, it is an issue "when the civil rights of all humanity are curtailed," Janich says (11:18). With a face contorted with rage, he adds: "you idiots" (figure 3). Janich seems to be overcome by anger here and gives in to affect. The "you idiots"-remark in particular, along with his gestures and facial expressions, are brimming with rage. However, the affect subsides immediately afterwards when he makes a reflective comment and states: "talking myself in a tantrum again." An internal reference follows, when Janich calmly says that he will probably have a tantrum later, when he talks about "alternative media" and what they said about him (11:28).

This reflective comment and the internal reference are an irritatingly brisk transition to the next topic, the guest list for the Bilderberg Conference 2019 and a reference to a Dutch media director whose newspaper *De Tijd* printed a report on the death of a 12-year-old girl. Janich criticizes the report without explicitly accusing the newspaper of utilizing the girl's death. He makes the sober comment: "There are also children who die of illnesses, and then they were tested, as is done with the elderly" (12:15). Janich thus criticizes the testing procedure and, in a further step, questions the origin of the death figures. He says nothing about the fact that the death of a 12-year-old is tragic regardless of a crisis situation and that mourning would be justified. These two sequences occur in quick succession: First, Janich stages anger through a brief, intense outburst. Immediately afterward, he deliberately withholds grief in response to the death of a 12-year-old girl. Through his measured comment on the tragedy and the associated testing, he demonstrates, on the one hand, his ability to control his emotions and, on the other hand, subtly accuses the newspaper of exploiting the girl's death to justify further measurements.

The angry sequence is introduced by an external media reference when he says that there are "hit pieces" against him in "mainstream media." The trigger for Janich's tantrum is his feeling of disregard for the fact that "the civil rights of all mankind are curtailed," as he states. The sequence picks up the negotiation of COVID-19 being a medical or political crisis, after Janich makes clear that he interprets COVID-19 measurements as a grave civil rights intervention. The sequence ends in a fully embodied staging of anger (voice, facial expressions, gestures) with an insult ("You idiots"). Immediately afterwards,

Janich shows contempt for the testing procedure which functions as a legitimization for COVID-19 being a medical crisis. He also implicitly accuses the “mainstream media” of framing COVID-19 as a medical crisis by sentimentalizing the death of the 12-year-old girl.

Janich provides numerous starting points from which follow-up communication is possible. His staging allows his viewers to see how he feels and how he deals with accusations from “mainstream TV” when it denies the legitimacy of his content and his emotions regarding the political dimensions of the contact restrictions. At the same time, he reacts calmly to what appears to be a deliberately emotional message, revealing it as an attempt to utilize emotions and showing that he is capable of controlling his own emotions. In this episode, Janich draws a line by showing what affects him and what does not.

The video goes on with Janich’s perception of the truther scene, which he thinks ought to be homogeneous concerning the negotiation of COVID-19. Janich derogatorily mentions one creator who is warning his followers in his videos that COVID-19 is a medical crisis. He references videos of other colleagues from the truther scene (Heiko Schrang, Eva Herrmann) with whom Janich sees considerable overlap, while other colleagues in turn enrage him. Guided by the various outbursts of rage, a clear picture of his interpretation of the truther scene ultimately emerges, and it gets clearer where Janich locates himself within it. His outbursts are driven by others’ disregard for the gravity of the situation, by disregard for his standing within the scene, and, thereby, disregard for his authority. That people from his own community turn against him makes him furious because unity is important in times of political crisis.

Some of his outbursts of anger can be interpreted sentimentally. After all, they are clearly about disregard and loss: First, “mainstream media” disregards his findings as an investigative journalist and questions his credibility and self-concept as an investigative journalist by framing people who root for COVID-19 being a political crisis as conspiracy theorists. Second, he suffers the loss of authority within the truther scene he himself worked to build, to which he feels he belongs, and where he has a lot of symbolic and social capital regarding his achievements. In addition to the loss of authority and credibility, the staging of vulnerability, third, is also a sentimental trope, and this is also a framework for interpreting the anger in the video: Loss of credibility, disregard for his authority and for all he has done for the truther scene. The sometimes violently staged reaction indicates that Janich has something to lose and, contrary to his claim to authority and masculinity, he apparently feels deeply hurt by the various accusations. This is why Janich repeatedly gives in to anger and draws

a line through this anger. Within his community, his feeling rules are valid. One step further in his community, his (emotional) procedure and legitimization of information apply, as exemplified by the episode concerning the death of the 12-year-old girl. This form of subtle self-sentimentalization is taken up again at a later point and prepares the role of the tragic hero, which Janich can then claim for himself in reference to merit, loss, and vulnerability. Overcoming these staged and narrated losses and injuries certainly also helps him with his self-sentimentalization as a tragic hero.

The analysis of the sentimental helps to gain a better understanding of the legitimization of and mobilization for COVID-19 being a political crisis. After all, Janich is not only staging anger, he is also staging himself in a sentimental way and combines this staging with a clearly populist resentment. It is him (and the homogeneous truther scene) against a superior power, materialized on the guest list of the Bilderberg Conference, which is shown and commented on in the video. He is engaged in a seemingly futile fight against what he perceives as civil rights infringements by the powers that be, as evidenced by Janich's tantrum. Using the sentimental code, Janich conjures a moral truth and tries to politicize it.

To shed light on the other side of the negotiation of whether COVID-19 is a medical or political crisis, what follows is the analysis of the emotional sequences from the MaiLab video.

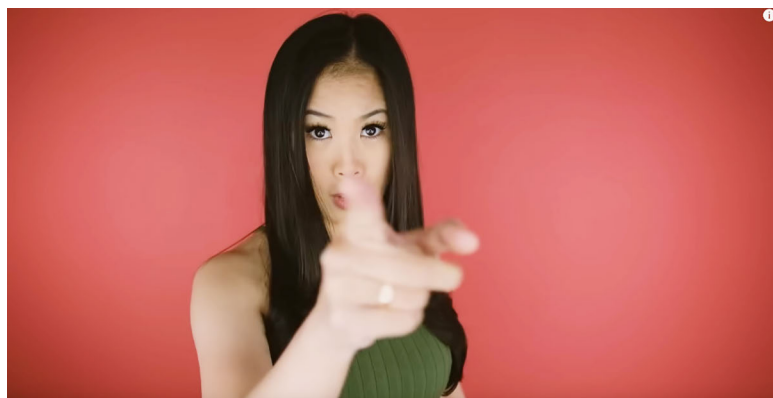
Case #2: MaiLab—the Humorous and Shaming Teacher

The video titled “Scientists be mistaken” is 20:57 minutes long and dates from the beginning of the pandemic on June 25, 2020 (MAITHINK X 2020b). Two angrily staged viewpoints on science are the first sequences in the video. They are embedded in an introductory episode which explains the aim of the video: to shed light on the science-driven way of creating valid knowledge from an informed perspective. After the intro, the creator explains the difficulties of the scientific approach (science theory, statistics, correlation/causality), the problems within the scientific system (publish or perish, HARKing, p-hacking), and shows how changes in the scientific system and good science communication could help to overcome the doubts and bring the scientific approach closer to outsiders. All of the mentioned points are presented in short sequences which are introduced with an interlude in the style of a PowerPoint slide stating the topic of the following sequence.

In the explanations of the scientific system, many references are made to earlier videos of the channel, in which the channel had mainly reported on the speaker's dissertation process in chemistry in an earlier version. In the end, MaiLab is still convinced that the scientific way is the best, although she leaves some space for discussion. It is no coincidence that one of the last sentences in the video is “How do you feel after this video? Do you have more or less trust in science?” (20:22).

At the beginning of the video, two “rage sequences” introduce the two standpoints of the current debate about the scientific approach. The sequences are staged differently: The first sequence shows the creator Mai Thi gesticulating to the camera in front of a monochrome, red background. She asks suggestive questions in a penetrating voice: “Are you also annoyed by the fact that scientists are constantly wrong? Are you also fed up because they keep changing their minds? Then we have the solution for you: Screw science!” (00:03) (figure 4).

Figure 4: Screenshot of MaiThi's Tantrum (MAITHINK X 2020b)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHyRaUeHcGY> (at 00:00:04)

This point is contrasted immediately afterwards with an interlude, an external media reference to a YouTube video in which Mai Thi plays a scientist and another creator (Carolyn Kebekus) stages a tantrum (00:22–00:42) (figure 5). In this episode, Carolyn Kebekus angrily states that “only complete idiots commit themselves to one opinion.” She goes on to say that opinions can change and

that you can see this in the fact that people no longer believe that the earth is flat. She ends her outburst of anger with the incredulous and apologetic sentence, “some of you idiots still believe that.”

The twofold staging of anger helps to clarify the initial situation: On the one hand, there are laypeople and angry science-phobes. On the other hand, there are people who understand and trust the scientific approach and who are angry at the laypeople who do not. In the second rage sequence, the scientist is staged as a quiet, unemotional observer, sitting in the background (figure 5).

Figure 5: Screenshot of Carolin Kebekus' Tantrum in MaiLab (MAITHINK X 2020b)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHyRaUeHcGY> (at 00:00:34)

Also, humor is repeatedly used to stage content. These humorous sequences are marked by exaggerated metaphors, oblique comparisons, and irony. The references to the other videos reveal that humorous exaggeration seems to be a brand essence of the channel. However, this humor is only understood by those who identify with a scientific approach. Thus, the humor draws a line between those who understand it and those who do not, reinforcing the division (science vs. laypeople) that was exemplified by the anger in the initial sequences.

MaiLab, like Oliver Janich, combines the staging of anger with another strategy of division, namely humor. While Janich drives the division further by stirring up resentment, MaiLab employs humor to illustrate the division. The humorous appeals also simplify the establishment of a hierarchy in the

video. Ultimately, the dissemination of scientific content in this video can be understood as a form of instruction, whereby the creator is identified as the teacher and the audience as the instructed. Recognizing the creator's authority is easier when humorous appeals loosen up the instructive sequences of the video. Personal authenticity tailored to the video through subtle, ironic humor is helpful here, too.

Further, the staging of emotions has a divisive effect, as the tenor of the video is clear: to “screw science,” as boldly demanded in the first rage sequence, is not an option. The staging of anger and the humorous communication afterwards produces a clear way of how to feel about doubt when it comes to the question of whether COVID-19 is a medical or political crisis. After people who are in doubt are likened to people who disregard scientifically proven knowledge such as the earth being a sphere, it seems to be shameful not to be on the side of those who argue in favor of COVID-19 being a medical crisis, disregarding the difference between knowledge and opinion.

The staged rage and the humorous communication can have a top-down disciplinary effect here, similar to the sentimental, since no one wants to be on the side of those who do not understand what is being taught in this video in the first place. Secondly, no one wants to be on the non-scientific side, since it is that side that causes the staged anger, that is being yelled at and frequently made fun of in the video. Both—being yelled at and being made fun of—are shameful experiences.

Although not using explicit resentments like Janich does with his libertarian right-wing populism, MaiLab also uses emotional appeals and humorous communication to draw lines and make people evaluate the content, i.e. the question of credibility of a scientific approach from the perspective of avoiding shame by believing what is being taught in the video.

Staged Emotions and Aesthetics in Comparison

As the analysis has shown, Oliver Janich and MaiLab stage anger differently, but they both use the appraisal and connectivity that emotions can transport. Although using humor and irony to shame the people who disregard scientifically proven knowledge, MaiLab tries to show how science works in her video and why scientists can be trusted, even if they are sometimes wrong. As a professional science communicator, MaiLab tries to create transparency and traceability, which is also reflected in the aesthetics of the video: The colors are not too shiny or distracting, and there is an overview of the content and

line of argumentation of the video after the intro. Many overlays concerning the narrative structure of the video try to create coherence and consequently improve the comprehensibility of what is being said. Many references to other videos show her expertise on this topic and that she had been thinking about science and science communication for a long time before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the end, MaiLab relativizes her efforts for transparency and leaves room for doubt, feelings, and ambivalence when she asks the not-so-rhetorical question: “How do you feel after this video? Do you have more or less trust in science?” (20:22).

Oliver Janich uses staged anger to stir the anti-elite, right-wing resentment he also invokes in his books and other videos. He establishes authority of interpretation, first, by referencing sequences of triumph in his intro, where he shows himself in an interview with a renowned German journalist from public broadcast.

Figure 6: Screenshot of Oliver Janich's Intro



<https://odysee.com/@oliverjanich:b/insider-bundesregierung-bereitet-sich:2> (at 00:01:24)

In the staged sequence, he provocatively asks the question: “Are you deliberately lying or haven't you done your research properly?” (01:20). After the question, depictions of a cap, a joint, sunglasses, and the words ‘Thug Life’ appear

on the screen and a crowd can be heard cheering in surprise (figure 6). Those ciphers are common in internet culture and represent a moment when someone verbally strikes back with an exposing counterattack during a rhetorical battle. Janich uses those ciphers to indicate that he won the rhetorical battle in the interview situation. He rejects the interviewer and what she stands for since she is working for public broadcast, thus trying to raise himself above her.

Simultaneously, he tries to stage himself as a tragic hero who is vulnerable and suffers from general contempt and the loss of merit. Using his seemingly inferior position—him against a superior force (the Bilderberg Conference) and an enemy from within (other truthers)—he legitimizes his position that COVID-19 is a political crisis. The sentimental helps us understand how his staging of himself as a tragic hero works: He plays on the audience's empathy and on his moral high ground, emphasized by his inferior position. Finally, he conjures an unavailable but desirable way out of the political crisis, when he advertises his books in the outro of his videos.

His outro consists of stock photos and sentences depicted on a dark background combined with epic music. The pretentious sentences summarize his political utopia, an anti-state attitude which mostly contains the claim for minimum governmental interference, fading into cheesy stock photos like a chessboard, a graveyard, laughing children, hands breaking handcuffs, a statue of *Justitia*, a family dancing on a beach during sunset. At the end of the outro, he advertises one of his books, *Sicher ohne Staat*. The outro clarifies that Janich is not only the observer, investigator, and information broker, but he also envisions a political utopia and himself as the heroic leader who knows a way out of the crisis he diagnosed earlier in the video. The unavailability of his political utopia aligns with the sentimental portrayal of himself as a tragic hero, echoing Berlant's assertion that the "politico-sentimental [...] exists paradoxically" (Berlant 21). This paradox arises from the notion that an unattainable political ideal is imagined as normatively superior, making it a desirable future goal. This unattainability, in turn, bolsters political legitimacy in the present by appealing to moral superiority. Consequently, the sentimental can be staged from a position of inferiority while elevating the individual above others—an approach Janich exemplifies in his intro featuring the public broadcast journalist. From this moral high ground, the sentimental can function as a top-down disciplinary force within a collective.

Conclusion

The analysis of Oliver Janich's and MaiLab's videos concerning staged anger and humorous communication in the negotiation of COVID-19 as a political or medical crisis has led to the following conclusions: Both creators utilize emotions to stage their content in such a way that it is being appraised properly from their respective angle. MaiLab uses anger to describe the situation the video focuses on. She then converts humorous appeals into shameful experiences for those who are not following the scientific approach to the creation of valid knowledge. At the end of the video, she relativizes her emotional staging by posing the question of whether the audience has more or less trust in science after watching the video. By binding together science and the emotion of trust, she again allows for the possibility of ambivalence and doubt and, consequently, the video comes to a somewhat conciliatory ending. Nevertheless, a further examination of the feeling of shame could also be fruitful for understanding the dynamics at work at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Scherke applied Scheff's shame-rage spiral to the (right-wing) populist milieu, discussing its utilization of emotions against gender studies and gender equality policies (Scherke 275). Thus, a shame-focused analysis of how the definition of the crisis is negotiated may also bring new insights: MaiLab's humorous appeals, which are informed by her knowledge of the scientific system and the scientific approach, leave the sceptics who cannot follow those humorous appeals with a feeling of shame. This shameful situation also shows the "feeling rules" within 'rational' public discourse (Hochschild 551) and the hegemonial perception of the scientific approach as the only proper way to reach a conviction on what is going on at the beginning of COVID-19. According to Scheff's concept, the typical response to the shameful episode is anger over the loss of integrity and status. This anger is then used by creators like Oliver Janich, who fuels the anger of the shamed part of the audience. It is not a coincidence that Janich states in his intro: "They despise you, they mock you, they laugh at you" (01:15).

Oliver Janich on the other hand exhibits what other researchers already identified in reference to right-wing populism: He uses the uncertain situation by staging anger and resentment, mobilizing the audience for his political utopia, leaving no room for doubt and ambivalence. Sentimental codes simplify his staging of himself as a tragic hero who reveals the truth regardless of his own vulnerability and losses. Sentimental codes also enhance his attempt at bottom-up politicizing when he stages and spreads the anger of being dis-

regarded. The analysis of shame and anger sheds light on the dynamics of collectivization at the beginning of COVID-19 from an emotional point of view. Shame and anger pave the way for resentment being installed, communicated by sentimental codes. As von Scheve states, the use of resentment at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was successful concerning the collectivization of different groups like right-wing populists, esoteric believers, libertarians, and homeopathy supporters (Scheve 136). The analysis of Janich's staging strategy supports von Scheve's findings and emphasizes the role of the sentimental on different levels, such as the appraisal of information and the construction of a moral high ground by implementing a political utopia. In the way Janich uses sentimental codes and typifications like the tragic hero, he creates his own kind of sentimentalism, which may have a similar function to that of religion or religious feelings in differentiated societies (cf. Luhmann 116). It unifies the lifeworld by dealing with transcendent encounters and thereby handles (and eliminates) contingency. Subsequently, the use of sentimental codes also indicates a major difference between Oliver Janich and MaiLab: Oliver Janich in his self-perception owns and shares some kind of inescapable, sentimental truth. MaiLab is following a (hegemonial) way of creating valid knowledge, which, despite all (informal) regulations like feeling rules and their use as a line of demarcation, allows contingency and ultimately even thrives on it.

With regard to the information procurement practices discussed at the beginning of this article, the two creators therefore make very different offers: Janich's is a form of quasi-religious empathy towards an unambiguous truth that the creator proclaims as a tragic hero. MaiLab represents a learning environment, an experience of being taught. Both practices, in turn, generate different forms of follow-up communication that match these different forms of knowledge. With Janich, it is to be expected that the focus is on him as a person, whereas with MaiLab, discussions of the content are more likely to be expected. The place for such follow-up communication is the comment section on the respective video platforms or, in the case of Oliver Janich, his Telegram group.

In order to place these interim results on a more sustainable theoretical basis and to develop more precise empirical analytical tools, it is worthwhile to elaborate more precisely on the social roles that can be staged in the sense of the sentimental. Alfred Schütz's process of typification that makes authenticity and authority communicable and stageable via institutionalized patterns of expectation associated with specific social roles can provide an appropriate theoretical background here (Schütz 196f.). Janich staging himself senti-

mentally as a tragic hero is one example of such a social role being enacted. In view of the quasi-religious knowledge that Janich shares, it is appropriate to examine whether he adopts the role of the prophet elsewhere in his videos. For this, more detailed analyses are needed concerning the question of whether the prophet type is compatible with the sentimental. What unites the two at first glance is their connection to uncertain times: Both sentimental narratives and prophetic figures are booming during times of crisis, as they each deal with the transcendence of the crisis in their own way.

Also, the heterogeneous emotional community formed during the COVID-19 political protests (in Germany called '*Querdenker*'-*Bewegung*) needs to be analyzed with a focus on sentimental codes used to legitimize their political agenda. Frei et al. started in 2021 with explorative research concerning the "political sociology of COVID-19 protest," which can be used as a starting point for further research with a sentimental focus (Frei/Schäfer/Nachtwey 249). Amlinger and Nachtwey have already coined the term "libertarian-authoritarian character" as a new social type emerging from the analysis of COVID-19 protests and resentment (152f.), which could also be read through the lens of the sentimental. With regard to the COVID-19 protests, it is worth considering von Scheve's concept of resentment (140) with a view to the sentimental.

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