

## CHAPTER 6

# Trump Plays the Devil – the Devil Plays Trump

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### Introduction

The concept of a devil as a sort of ultimate antipode has a long-standing tradition not only in various religions but also in the arts. ‘Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint’ – ‘I am the spirit of perpetual negation’ – states Goethe’s (2007 [1808], l. 1338) Mephistopheles as he introduces himself when he first appears in front of Faust to accompany him through all realms of life. A similarly negative attitude has recently appeared on the stage of politics in the form of Donald Trump’s presidency in the US.<sup>1</sup> ‘Everything he’s doing goes against the book’, stated the vehemently conservative Rush Limbaugh in his radio show as early as January 2016 and explained why Trump’s presidential campaign and electoral victory shocked the political establishment in the US: ‘Trump is so far outside the formula that has been established for American politics that people who are inside the formula can’t comprehend it.’

As president of the US, pursuing a rhetoric style and policy agenda that were strongly divergent from the traditional norm, Trump not only shook the

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foundations of the US political establishment but he also impacted (Western) Europe and Germany in particular, as these states have been close allies of the US ever since the end of the Second World War (Heideking 2003). This led to him being constantly displayed in German media, thus framing him as highly inadequate on both the political and the moral level (Haller, Michael, and Seeber 2017).

Analysing Trump's presidential campaign, Paul Joosse (2018) proposed a synthetic model combining Stanley Cohen's (2002 [1972]) contribution on folk devils with Max Weber's (1922) insights on charismatic entrepreneurs, thus proposing a first theoretical evaluation of Trump's discourse. This general framework is applied to media coverage on Trump's significance for Germany around the midterm elections as a potential turning point in his presidency in order to assess whether he indeed is continuously portrayed as a modern Mephistopheles, a modern folk devil in the traditions of Cohen (1972), and Joosse (2018) tests the traditional political order and values by negating both. To the best of this author's knowledge, this is the first study applying a folk devil framework to the media reporting on Trump's presidency.

This contribution briefly outlines the theoretical basis of the assumed analysis, thus applying Cohen's insight into the cultural creation of folk devils to Trump as a modern and perhaps twisted manifestation thereof. Subsequent comments concern the chosen methodology and the associated corpus. The characterization of the phenomenon 'Trump' becomes apparent through the presentation of the analysis results. The final section discusses and critically assesses the significance of the phenomenon 'Trump' for media reporting.

### A Charismatic Folk Devil Recalibrates the Moral Compass

In 1972, that is, in the context of social movements being omnipresent in both the streets and the reporting media, Cohen published the first edition of his seminal book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002). In line with paradigm-shifting sociological approaches such as Peter L. Berger's and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1968), Cohen drew attention to the importance of interpretation in assessing our environment. Whereas the latter pointed to knowledge and conceptions becoming institutionalized through reciprocal interactions and thus mankind actively constructing reality (Berger and Luckmann 1968), the first chose a more empirical approach as he explained how the media response to two conflicting British youth subcultures, the mods and the rockers, constructed these subcultures as truly violent gangs (Cohen 2002 [1972]). Cohen thereby highlighted that these media-constructed folk devils, as he called them, were treated as posing a threat to the societal reality by virtue of deviating from the supposed societal norm. To confine the threat and reintegrate the deviant into the endorsed reality, the youth groups were given the role of the devil, who, by being the antipode to normality, was compatible with the established norms and procedures in the role of the outsider (ibid.).

This reconstruction of societal consensus can be viewed as a powerful coping mechanism in that the societal order is re-established and the moral panic is confined. A prerequisite for such a victorious coping is, however, that the ambivalence of interpretations, which '[a]t times of moral panic, [make] societies ... more open than usual to appeals to this consensus' (Cohen 2002 [1972], 78), is minimized. This goal can be achieved through a rather one-dimensional reporting style that clearly denounces the source of the moral disturbance as an unscrupulous individual and his or her primitive victims, while the historical context in which the moral question is embedded, as well as any criticism of the societal norm itself, is ignored (*ibid.*). Cohen (2002 [1972], 11) points to the crucial role of the media as an educational tool that in informing its audience about what is right and what is wrong re-enacts and thus attempts to maintain the desired societal reality.

Cohen's considerations regarding folk devils and moral panics were further developed by Joosse (2018). For this purpose, Joosse complemented Cohen's body of thought with Weber's (1922) contributions on charismatic leaders and illustrated his theoretical model by referring to Donald Trump's (re)presentation in the 2015/16 US presidential primaries. Joosse (2018) explained that, by virtue of the ability of charismatic leaders to also surpass traditional leaders regarding the traditional moral compass and their ability to turn this moral compass upside down altogether, charismatic individuals can impact societal moralities by simultaneously ridiculing conventional folk devils and dilapidating traditional power structures.

### Media Coverage on Trump and Associated Corpus

In the following, Joosse's (2018) model is applied to the media coverage of the 2018 midterm elections in the US, once again focusing on the media portrayal of Donald Trump. In the context of Europe's modern folk devils, however, it is the German media coverage that is of interest, especially as Germany showed a high affinity to Trump's predecessor in office, with Barack Obama reaching confidence ratings among Germans of up to 93 per cent, while the country was sceptical of the populist nature of Trump's campaign and presidency from the start, such that only 10 per cent of Germany expressed their confidence in Trump in 2018 (Pew Research Center 2018).

Media of interest to the present analysis are three progressive left-wing and fact-oriented outlets (FAZIT Communication 2012, 2013) as their political positioning is expected to show the starkest contrast to that of President Trump: *Die Zeit online* (online newspaper edition, hereafter *ZEIT*), *Die Tageszeitung* (print media, hereafter *TAZ*), and *Deutschlandfunk* (radio channel, hereafter *DLF*). The assessed time frame comprises the week prior to and the week after the midterm elections of 6 November 2018, thus resulting in the period from 30 October to 13 November 2018. These media contributions were assessed regarding their portrayal of Donald Trump in the German and/or European

context, with the latter being equated with the political and economic entity of the European Union.

A keyword search for 'Trump' in the given time period identified 59 articles on *ZEIT* and 75 articles from *TAZ*. For the same period, *DLF* listed 76 audio files.<sup>2</sup> Contributions on Trump were included in the analysis if they referred to Europe and/or Germany, respectively. The resulting corpus comprised 22 articles from *ZEIT*, 43 articles from *TAZ*, and 33 contributions from *DLF*. In the tradition of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Strauss and Corbin 1996), the identified media contributions were subjected to open and theoretical coding, which led to the development of different categories to describe the representation of Trump in German media.

The presented study thus relies on the analysis of all contributions of stated media outlets, which fall into the relevant period and fulfil the inclusion criteria of reporting on both Trump and Europe or Germany. The combination of different outlets and media types allows obtaining a comprehensive overview of contributions on the topic. A potential challenge to the representativity of the results despite them resembling full census data is the short time period of interest. However, the selected media outlets, especially the online newspaper, publish on up-to-the-minute issues. Therefore, even a short time frame is expected to allow for valuable insight into the time of the midterm elections of 2018.<sup>3</sup>

Looking at the 'demographics' of the media contributions, that is, at the distribution of publications per medium and date, the individual outlets differ in their frequency of publishing on Trump and Germany and/or Europe: while in *ZEIT* the publication of articles is almost evenly distributed with nine posts prior to and 11 after the election day of 6 November, *TAZ* shows a focus on the time leading up to the election, with 24 and 17 articles, respectively, and *DLF* lays its emphasis on post-electoral publications, with 13 and 18 contributions, respectively. If all articles are taken into consideration independently of their reference to Germany/Europe, however, the distribution of pre- and post-electoral reporting on Trump is almost even across all three outlets. Nevertheless, the descriptive figures of the media contributions published by the individual outlets (Table 6.1) hint at general differences between *ZEIT*, *TAZ* and *DLF*: while the average article length on *ZEIT* exceeds that of *TAZ*, *DLF* ranks between the other two outlets, though the number of words expressed per minute differs between the different types of contributions and individual speakers.<sup>4</sup> Of particular interest for this chapter on Trump is the ratio of included contributions which indicates that *TAZ* shows the strongest focus on Trump with regard to Germany/Europe, while articles on *ZEIT* suggest a more remote geographical focus and *DLF*, while again ranking between the other two, also emphasizes the non-German/non-European significance of Trump over his importance for the German/European context.

**Table 6.1:** Descriptive figures of media contributions.

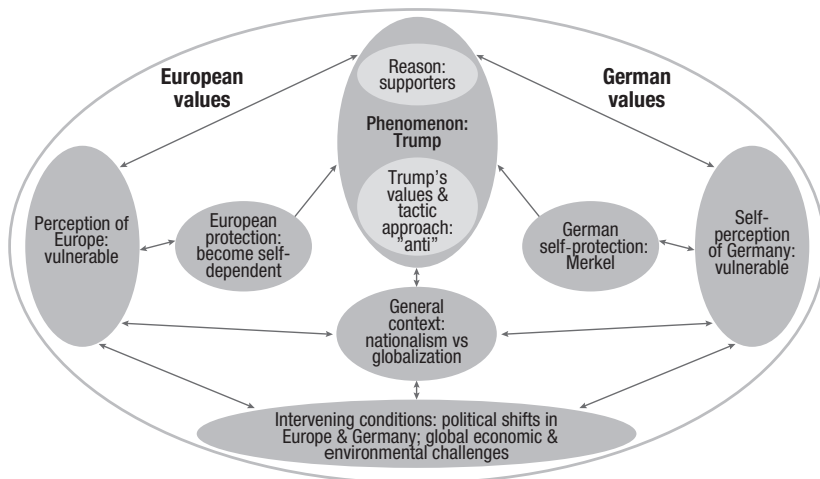
	<i>ZEIT</i> word count	<i>TAZ</i> word count	<i>DLF</i> duration (min)
Min	205	22	00:43
Max	2,560	2,956	14:56
<i>M</i>	1,249	765	7:02
Ratio of contributions	37.29%	57.33%	43.42%

**Source:** Author.

### The Phenomenon ‘Trump’ in German Media

Whereas there are slight differences in the figures describing the media contributions included in analysis and their focus on a national or regional level at a given point in time, all three outlets reported similarly on current events of public interest and thereby were rather consistent in the connotation of their reporting on Trump. Identified categories of analysis were the three actors ‘Trump’, ‘Germany’ and ‘Europe’ (Figure 6.1). Trump’s representation in the media distinguished between the values embodied by him and his tactical approach, including mediums associated with him, and the identification of his supporters as the reason for his presidency. Together, these components led to an assessment of the role he was ascribed by the analysed contributions, that is, to a socially shared representation of the phenomenon ‘Trump’. Similarly, data on Germany with regard to Trump focused on German values as the general national lens through which Germany’s role in the light of both longer-term influences (general context) and more recent events (intervening conditions) was assessed, as well as Germany’s attitude towards the US, specifically towards the phenomenon ‘Trump’. Media contributions thereby suggested an extra category dedicated to the role of German chancellor Angela Merkel in particular. Media contributions on Europe also addressed values as regional definers, through which both the general context and more recent intervening conditions were appraised, as well as Europe’s current role in the Trump era and the attitude of the region towards the US under Trump. Moreover, Europe was described in terms of its political and social potential and the challenges it is confronted with. To integrate the results of analysis, Figure 6.1 displays the phenomenal structure of the media representation of ‘Trump’, with the individual concepts being further explained in the following.

The phenomenon ‘Trump’ is described not just by the power vested by Trump’s position as US president but rather by the charisma attributed to his self-presentation (Denison 2018). The analysed media contributions portray Trump as a show-oriented businessman who is egoistically focused on his self-presentation, thus following only his own (situational) likes and dislikes



**Figure 6.1:** Phenomenal structure of the media representation of ‘Trump’.

**Source:** Author.

(Cichosch 2018; Maier 2018). This self-centredness is reflected on the international level as Trump promoted his ‘America First’ mantra, seemingly regardless of the consequences (Balmer 2018), and thus was strongly in favour of nationalist, isolationist and protectionist policies (Thumann 2018). Media contributions describe him as the symbol of various ‘anti’ attitudes: anti-multilateralist, anti-development, anti-poverty reduction, and anti-climate protection as he backed out of international agreements and boycotted multilateral meetings (Annen 2018; Balmer 2018); anti-migration and anti-refugees as he opposed the UN migration pact (*Die Tageszeitung* 2018a); anti-socialist as he hardly regarded vulnerable groups such as youth, women and minorities (Aydemir 2018) and showed little interest in establishing any ‘common good’ but instead fought civil society engagement (Assheuer 2018a). Martin Kaul (2018) summarizes the general disillusionment:

Legs apart, wide stance, making proclamations: Everywhere in the world this is successful. Just recently in Brazil: Bolsonaro. In Italy: Salvini. In the USA: Trump. In Austria: Kurz. In Hungary: Orbán. Turkey, Russia, Saudi Arabia. What all these gentlemen have in common is their arrogant masculinity, which dismisses in a completely unimpressed style the achievements of civilization, perspectives of equality and the protection of minorities.<sup>5</sup>

Trump’s values are complemented by his tactical approach: he is described as confrontational, conflict-seeking and breaking existing agreements (Pfaff

2018), marking him as an unreliable partner in the present time as well as for all future policy-building (Pötter 2018). This lack of reliability is paired with frequent changes in staff and the appointing of staff of questionable qualifications, thus making his mode of governance seem chaotic and incomprehensible when its claims are inconsistent with information from other sources (Peitz 2018) or incorporate presidential changes of opinion ranging, for instance from the claim that climate change was not happening to the acknowledgement of this phenomenon paired with the mindset that international policies combating it are ineffective and thus not worth pursuing (Haberkorn 2018). A perhaps even more illustrative example of Trump's fickle nature of government mentioned by a *ZEIT* article on North Korea recalled how Trump had first expressed ultimate threats up to the total annihilation of the country and then, after the meeting with Marshal Kim Jong-un, had claimed to have fallen in love with his North Korean counterpart (Sommer 2018a).

Despite these seeming inconsistencies in style, Trump was known to follow through on his campaign promises (Assheuer 2018b) regardless of any casualties his behaviour might bring about. Here, casualties range from groundless accusations, for example blaming Germany for national problems in the US (Naß 2018), to manipulative smear campaigns sowing hatred and reinforcing divisions in society and the general focus on enemy images and scapegoats that may actually have contributed to massacres like the shooting in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh on 27 October 2018 (Pfeiffer-Poensgen 2018). This killed 11 congregation members and was registered as the most severe anti-Semitic crime in the US, as a *DLF* contribution explains, referencing Holocaust researcher Deborah Lipstadt (2018): 'Even though Trump himself is probably not an anti-Semite ... he has given anti-Semites, racists and white nationalists a kind of presidential license to hate.'<sup>6</sup>

As pointed out by another *ZEIT* article on the commemoration of the end of the First World War, Trump had not learned from history (Sommer 2018b). Instead, Trump used historic achievements for his own purposes, as a *DLF* contribution on the threatening failure of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, signed by the US and the Soviet Union back in 1987, points out (Küstner 2018). What once was the achievement of years of arduous negotiations (Schulze 2018) may be annulled by little more than a post on Twitter, which was Trump's favoured social media outlet (Peitz 2018), with this medium matching his often abrupt and explanation-lacking mode of governance. His decisions and statements were not evidence-based but they themselves gave credence to his lack of interest in facts or even to his preference for simply stating what was most convenient to his interests, as the following two quotes illustrate: 'Yes, this tweet of Mr. Trump is as far off as many of his tweets, which he sends out into the world'<sup>7</sup> (Goldammer 2018). 'First claim something and then, when the lie is discovered, explain that it was all a misunderstanding: this tactical relationship to the truth is reminiscent of US President Donald Trump'<sup>8</sup> (Kreutzfeldt 2018).

While this characterization of the US president and his tactical approach hardly counts as favourable, Trump continues to be supported by hundreds of millions. The immediate reason for the phenomenon ‘Trump’ is the votes his supporters cast in his favour, not only in the primaries and the presidential election of 2016 but cast once again in support of his party, allies, rhetoric and policies in the 2018 midterm election (as well as most recently in the presidential election of 2020). Media contributions identify two main groups as Trump’s supporters on the national level. The first is value-driven and is made up of different conservative groups (Goldammer 2018), among others evangelical Christians, who hope for an implementation of their values, for instance on the topic of abortion (Lipstadt 2018). The second group is disillusioned by previous presidents and includes, for instance, blue-collar workers in the Midwest who feel overlooked by the Democratic Party (Klingst 2018) but also anti-establishment voters who during the primaries had been in favour of Democrat Bernie Sanders but who then favoured Trump as the newcomer to politics over long-term Democrat and establishment politician Hillary Clinton as his opposing candidate in the presidential elections (Gabriel 2018). Taken together, the legitimacy of his presidency within the traditional framework of US politics is acclaimed by stating that almost half of the population voted for Trump without these voters necessarily being right-wing extremists (Aydemir 2018).

After the midterm elections, this assessment is further specified by statements such as: ‘The Republicans now belong to Trump. Trump is the Republicans. This is also a form of normalization and enforcement of Trump in the US that is remarkable and must be recorded’<sup>9</sup> (Röttgen 2018). Trump, in this way, remains an expression of the regular political system in the US. His extraordinary nature is stabilized by the system within its regular modes of operations.

Glancing back to the media characterization of Trump on the basis of his values, further explanation of the support he is receiving from his followers is required. Jan Pfaff (2018) sheds light on this seeming contradiction by explaining the phenomenon Trump as a symptom of the abyss between globalist and nationalist mindsets. Indeed, a closer look at the situation in Europe in general and Germany in particular agrees with this assessment. On both the European and the German level, political changes are emerging: the unity of Europe is weakened through nationalist right-wing populists taking over in Hungary, Italy and Poland – and others like Marine Le Pen waiting to do the same in France (Assheuer 2018b). Germany itself is experiencing a similar division on the national level, manifesting in the rise of right-wing extremism in the form of the political party *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD) and the like-minded social movement *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident, PEGIDA). These expressions of right-wing extremist mindsets come upon established political parties like the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (Social Democratic Party, SPD), which is preoccupied with



identifying its future route (Reinecke 2018), and the Christlich Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), which, around the time of the US midterms, found itself in the middle of finding a successor for Merkel as their most prominent leader figure (Asmuth 2018). On both the general European and the German levels, the mindsets of these identifiable actors are complemented by a rise of anti-Semitism and nationalism (Aydemir 2018; Eder 2018). Moreover, the press identifies Trump's influence on the European and German context in that his international moves, like the one-sided termination of the nuclear agreement with Iran or the trade war with China but also the discussion over increased import tariffs for goods from Germany, contributed to the general perceived economic insecurity through other political happenings such as the impending Brexit (Veit 2018; Vogel 2018). This insecurity is further enhanced by Trump's boycotting of multilateral climate agreements and his confrontational tone with Russia, which reignited the fear of a new nuclear arms race, leaving Europe and Germany exposed to both the threat linked to climate change and the threat of nuclear annihilation (Annen 2018; Küstner 2018).

Given this context, the media portrays Europe and Germany as vulnerable entities that have a hard time grasping the change in US politics under Trump and filling in the void that the US left as Trump was reluctant to continue with the US in the role of an engaged and benevolent (that is, human-rights-oriented and mostly international-law-respecting) world leader (Pfaff 2018). Europe is described as a potential protective factor against Trump's policies; however, this protection seems to unfold only if the European states manage to speak with one voice, a situation that does not reflect the status quo of a union torn between nationalism and globalism (Assheuer 2018b). Moreover, in referring to the US sanctions against Iran, Michael Gahler (2018) points out that Europe is afraid of an open conflict with the US and is thus hesitant to back its own interests by self-confident policies. In Germany, the protective factor is embodied by Angela Merkel (Küppersbusch 2018). In stark contrast to Trump's values and tactical approach, Merkel is portrayed as a well-educated, responsible and pragmatic leader driven by highest ethics in big moments (Löwisch 2018; Maier 2018). These traits materialize in fine-tuned political actions and give her the air of being internationally competent and well respected (Hörisch 2018). She abides by the German values of multilateralism, liberalism and anti-nationalism (Naß 2018) and acknowledges the German responsibility of commemorative culture and working through the past in light of Germany's role in history (Balmer 2018; Sommer 2018b). However, as Merkel, who has always been an advocate for a strong and unified anti-nationalist Europe, has announced the end of her leadership role, Germany and Europe are once more exposed to Trump seemingly without any means of shelter (Küppersbusch 2018).

The juxtaposition of Trump's and Merkel's values and tactical approaches, as well as the portrayal of Europe and Germany as vulnerable, explains the

fascination and preoccupation with Trump. A few media contributions focus on Trump's inadequacy, resembling the bored 'odd man out' (Sommer 2018b) who is absent-minded at international occasions and whose staff is not well informed, for example on changes of the Iranian leadership since 1989 (Gehlen 2018). This inadequacy partially depicts Trump as a clown-like figure wearing a red tie and a baseball hat, as a maniac in the White House whose ideas, for instance regarding tax policies, are ridiculous (Kreutzfeld 2018; Wurm 2018).

However, Trump's power as president seems too enormous to portray him simply as a court jester. Through his attitude towards Iran, the INF Treaty and climate change, he endangered the future of the world and placed stress on the European economies. Furthermore, Trump's engagement (or lack thereof) in Afghanistan is interpreted as weakening national governments and jeopardizing security (*Die Tageszeitung* 2018b). Parallels with the rise of the National Socialists during US isolationism in the 1930s are drawn when discussing Trump's own isolationist mindset (Thumann 2018) and careful comparisons to the beginning of the Second World War are made regarding Trump's outspoken support of nationalism (Sommer 2018b). Moreover, Trump is viewed as contagious (Leonhard 2018) or, at least, as backed by other politicians like him on a global scale:

Those who appreciate the old world of permanent conflict once again feel themselves on the winning side of history: Putin and Trump, Xi and Erdogan, Assad and Kim, Bolsonaro and Duterte, Maduro and Bashir, Orbán and Salvini, to name but a few. Their mindset led to the catastrophe 100 years ago.<sup>10</sup>

Combined with Trump's disregard of facts and disinterest in the truth, his presidency announced the realization of a postfactual era (Haberkorn 2018), in which traditional certainties are no longer distinguishable from blatant lies: 'This president is blurring the lines between truth and lies, reality and fiction'<sup>11</sup> (Peitz 2018). Trump, in this way, posed a challenge not only to the world order as it was known before him but also to the art of journalism, that is, of fact-oriented reporting (*ibid.*).

### A Folk Devil Is Born

It is not uncommon that a state relies on enemy images in order to define its national identity, as the latter is only complete through the differentiation between self and other (Kelman 2010, 5). Moreover, insights from sociology and sociopsychology explain that enemy images are often used to distract from national challenges, thus making them an integral and, in fact, cherished part of a state's identity (Beck 1997, 78; Simon and Klandermans 2001). However, the media portrayal of Trump exceeds this level of mere othering: it goes beyond

the concept of collective or abstract enemies, which, according to Ulrich Beck (1997, 70), have since the end of the Cold War replaced individual enemies. This results from the various ‘anti’ ideologies listed above that Trump has become a symbol of, thus giving the enemy image both an abstract and a personal facet.

Furthermore, the results presented indicate that Trump became an institutionalized – that is to say, democratically elected and legitimate within the US political system – external folk devil who threatened Europe through his isolationist policies but also through his rhetoric and moral challenges to the European perspective (mainly embodied by Germany, at the time of analysis). Comparing the analysed articles to Cohen’s five aspects of moral panic – *concern* about the imposed threat; *hostility* and moral outrage towards the source of pre-occupation; *consensus*, especially among the media, on the necessity to address the threat; *disproportionality* of concern in comparison to objective threat; and *volatility* of the expressed panic (Cohen 2002 [1972], xxvi–xxvii) – the phenomenon ‘Trump’ complies perfectly with the first three aspects, but is less in line with the aspects of disproportionality and volatility. The actions of the US president were definitely met by concerned reporting and a dismissive characterization of his values and tactical approach, which is reminiscent of Trump being framed during the primaries as the epitome of evil (Haller, Michael, and Seeber 2017) and which, moreover, successfully reintegrates Trump into the endorsed moral reality. Furthermore, all contributions included in this analysis – that is, all three media outlets – homogenously agreed on the phenomenon ‘Trump’ posing a threat to Europe and/or Germany.

However, it is hard to detect an exaggeration of the impending risk if the source of the moral panic is the head of the largest economy and military in the world. On the contrary, Trump’s unpredictability marked a true change in US–European and US–German relations as it broke with the role of the US as the region’s close ally and protector against all outside threats (Heideking 2003). Thus, Trump not only took away the shield but through his political moves figuratively turned the shield into a sword pointed towards the rest of the world, potentially even against Europe and Germany. Similarly, it is not the media reaction to Trump that is volatile but Trump himself in his rhetoric and policies. In this way, it is Trump who is bedevilled by the media but who in this role as a modern folk devil limits the means of the moral outcry on the part of the media and thus leads ad absurdum to parts of Cohen’s concept of moral panic.

Referring to Joosse’s (2018) expansion of Cohen’s consideration by adding the component of charismatic leadership, Trump’s charisma may provide an explanation for the discrepancy between the traditional framework of folk devils and moral panic proposed by Cohen (2002 [1972]) and the phenomenon ‘Trump’ as portrayed in the analysed media: Joosse (2018) has found Trump to stage himself as a charismatic hero who attempts to outflank the moral panic by making any soft power and traditional leadership seem weak. Moreover, elements of exaggeration and volatility are highlighted as Trump himself relies

on fake news, thus playing with the dialectics of bedevilling (Joosse 2018). In so doing, Trump's rhetoric relies heavily on enemy images, often promoted in short statements on Twitter. Neither the chosen medium nor the wording of these messages allows for a thoughtful development of a convincing argumentative structure, less still for references to evidence-based data. Instead, Trump draws on the medieval tradition of pillorying, publicly accusing and denouncing any person or organization that might question his own presidential qualification or the suitability of his policies.

More recently, this became obvious in Trump's approach to the Covid-19 pandemic:<sup>12</sup> he questioned the existence of and danger associated with the virus; he bedevilled the WHO, leading to the renunciation of the US membership and funding for this leading international health organization; he promoted the usage of an untested drug that later turned out not to help against Covid-19 but to potentially increase the risks of a severe course of the disease; and he praised himself as a model patient and survivor upon becoming infected and being treated for Covid-19 – all while failing to take effective measures against the spread of the disease, the collapsing social and health systems, and the thousands of lives Covid-19 claims every day. This led to this appraisal of Trump's actions through *DLF*: 'The President downplays, obscures and conceals the pandemic disaster' (Kößler and Ridderbusch 2020).<sup>13</sup>

Most recently, Trump's reaction to the presidential elections of 2020 stressed his reliance on the tactics of bedevilling once more as he bluntly refused to acknowledge the election results, calling out President-Elect Joe Biden for electoral fraud and filing highly questionable if not downright absurd lawsuits with the highest courts of law (Roth 2020). If media outlets do not follow Trump's mode of media engagement but instead hold on to traditional values of media discourse and their function as information channels (KEK 2018), they have to continue operating within the behavioural code of the pre-Trump era, thus avoiding exaggerations and volatile discontinuities in their reporting. In this manner, part of the bedevilling undertaken by the analysed media outlets is to distance themselves from any over-estimation or escalation assumed by Cohen (2002 [1972], 160–61).

In fact, it seems like distancing themselves from Trump's rhetoric is the only means of defence with which German left-wing media discourse is presented. Even the possibility of an impeachment, which is mentioned mainly within reporting on the national US context, does not occur in the analysed articles as a realistic perspective (Kornblum 2018). Trump is not a regular folk devil who can be defeated by a moral outcry followed by legal steps being undertaken against him. In that Trump acted outside the range of German or European law and in that he by no means accepts international law, he is outside of Germany's and Europe's actual reach apart from rhetorical condemnation.

This did not make him less dangerous – or less charismatic. On the contrary: as traditional power structures are being questioned, Trump broke core taboos of the German moral compass for Europe and hence spurred on various national and European populist right-wing 'anti' movements (anti-immigration,

anti-Semitism, anti-environmentalism, anti-humanitarianism etc.). Europe and Germany, again, were ill-equipped to meet the challenges posed by Trump's presidency and reacted in panicked self-victimization. Even Merkel, who has all the necessary credentials to make her a valid antipode to Trump, could hardly counter his moral or manifest attacks, to say nothing of defeating him. Thus, while left-wing German media may be gripping on tight to their traditional moral guideline to save Europe's and Germany's soul, it seems to be the folk devil embodied by the US president who is playing the Trump card.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Donald Trump won the US presidential election in November 2016 for the Republican Party, thus enabling him to assume office as the 45th president in January 2017. His term of office lasted until 2021, when Democrat Joe Biden, who had served as vice president to Barack Obama (2009–2017), Trump's predecessor in the White House, was inaugurated as the 46th president. While Obama was known as a symbol of constructive dialogue, for instance receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in his first year in office, Trump's presidency was infamous for its confrontational, often directly offensive style and numerous scandals, which resulted in him being the only US president to date who was impeached twice (Gallant 2014).
- <sup>2</sup> For reason of replicability, this number refers to results directly accessible via [www.deutschlandfunk.de](http://www.deutschlandfunk.de), for which there was a transcription available.
- <sup>3</sup> This contribution was first conceptualized in the immediate aftermath of the midterm elections. Recently, the presidential elections of 2020 evoked extensive media coverage and gave new credence to the dialectical nature of Trump's bedeviling and bedevilling, calling for a sequential analysis of these elections and the time until Biden's inauguration.
- <sup>4</sup> The speaking speed of different German radio stations has been assessed by Sven Scherz-Schade (2004), thus highlighting the heterogeneity in speed depending on the type of contribution (i.e. interview vs news) and individual speaker. Among the included *DLF* contributions, the speaking speed ranged roughly between 120 and 160 words per minute.

- <sup>5</sup> Original: 'Beine auseinander, breiter Stand, Ansagen machen: Überall auf der Welt ist das erfolgreich. Gerade erst in Brasilien: Bolsonaro. In Italien: Salvini. In den USA: Trump. In Österreich: Kurz. In Ungarn: Orbán. Türkei, Russland, Saudi-Arabien. Was all diese Herren verbindet, ist ihre überhebliche Männlichkeit, die im gänzlich unbeeindruckten Stil auf zivilisatorische Errungenschaften, Gleichstellungsperspektiven und Minderheitenschutz pfeift.' (All translations in this chapter by the author).
- <sup>6</sup> Original: 'Auch wenn Trump selbst wohl kein Antisemit sei ... so habe er doch Antisemiten, Rassisten und weißen Nationalisten eine Art präsidentalen Freibrief zum Hassen gegeben.'
- <sup>7</sup> Original: 'Ja, dieser Tweet von Herrn Trump, der liegt so weit daneben wie häufig bei seinen Tweets, die er in die Welt hinaus sendet.'
- <sup>8</sup> Original: 'Erst mal irgendwas behaupten und dann, wenn die Lüge auffliegt, erklären, es sei alles ein Missverständnis gewesen: dieses taktische Verhältnis zur Wahrheit erinnert stark an den US-Präsidenten Donald Trump.'
- <sup>9</sup> Original: 'Die Republikaner gehören nun Trump. Trump sind die Republikaner. Auch das ist eine Form der Normalisierung und Durchsetzung Trumps in den USA, die bemerkenswert ist und die man festhalten muss.'
- <sup>10</sup> Original: 'Diejenigen, die die alte Welt des Dauerkonflikts schätzen, wännen sich wieder einmal auf der Siegerseite der Geschichte: Putin und Trump, Xi und Erdogan, Assad und Kim, Bolsonaro und Duterte, Maduro und Bashir, Orbán und Salvini, um nur einige zu nennen. Ihre Geisteshaltung führte vor 100 Jahren in die Katastrophe.'
- <sup>11</sup> Original: 'Dieser Präsident verwischt die Grenzen zwischen Wahrheit und Lüge, Realität und Fiktion.'
- <sup>12</sup> In December 2019, a previously undescribed severe acute respiratory syndrome was diagnosed in China. Quickly thereafter, the highly contagious virus responsible for severe pneumonia, among other symptoms, had spread worldwide such that by March 2020 Covid-19 was officially labelled a pandemic. At the time this chapter was finalized in April 2021, the pandemic remained uncontrolled despite national and local governments' various and diverse attempts to counter it, having caused more than 3 million deaths globally, with nearly a full fifth of these global deaths occurring in the United States.
- <sup>13</sup> Original: 'Der Präsident verharmlost, vertuscht und verschweigt das Pandemie-Desaster.'

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