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# Communicating Fear in the Corona Pandemic: On the Pattern of a linguistic-communicative Practice

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## 1. Systems-theoretical concept of media and fear-based communication

The hegemonic political mass-mediated communication in the context of the Covid pandemic is increasingly perceived as risk and fear communication, leading to the division of society into vaccinated and unvaccinated, vaccination supporters and vaccination skeptics or vaccination opponents. Fear is a term from psychology that describes an emotional state: Fear is

an unpleasant emotional state usually accompanied by physiological phenomena such as rapid breathing, sweating, trembling, palpitations, which occurs primarily when avoidance motivations are frustrated, i.e., when the individual has no possibility of escaping the situation in the presence of a goal with negative valence. Under these conditions, anxiety can be learned and generalized (Wörterbuch der Psychologie, 1983: 32).

This paper is not about anxiety as an individual psycho-physiological phenomenon, but rather about anxiety as a communicative problem. Referring to modern societies, Bergmann states, “Fear is outdated and at the same time current; in many respects it has become obsolete with the advent of modern societies – and yet it is currently produced again and again” (Bergmann, 2002: 2) in order to disturb or upset.

The central question of this paper will be what the observation of fear-related communication during the Covid pandemic in Germany is based on. In March 2020, the Federal Ministry of the Interior prepared a scenario paper entitled “How we get Covid-19 under control” [“Wie wir Covid-19 unter Kontrolle bekommen”] initially as classified information. On April 01, 2020, it was made available to the public on the “FragDenStaat” website (FragdenStaat, 2020). Point four of the paper sets out “Conclusions for action and open communication”: “To achieve the desired shock effect, the concrete effects of widespread infection on human society must be made clear.” As possible guidelines for achieving this communicative goal, figurative scenarios for an argument are developed to connect to the “primal fear” or to raise awareness of the consequences of falling ill with Covid. A second point addresses communication relating to children in the pandemic:

‘Children are unlikely to suffer from the epidemic’: Wrong. Children will easily become infected, even with curfew restrictions, e.g., through neighboring children. If they then infect their parents, and one of them dies in agony at home, and they feel they are to blame because, for example, they forgot to wash their hands after playing, it is the most horrible thing a child can ever experience (Ibid.).

What can be concluded from this paper is that, by all appearances, one requirement was and is to put the population in a state of fear by way of argument in order to enforce the respective measures to contain and control the pandemic. The requirements for this type of communication are directed at institutions that manage the pandemic, politicians, and the hegemonic journalistic mass media by it in print, radio, or digital.

Such an approach implies, in the sense of Niklas Luhmann, that communication is something improbable. Luhmann assumes that communication is rather improbable due to its complexity, because it can only be understood contextually (1). It is improbable to reach more addressees in communication than are present in the concrete communicative situation (2); the success of communication to be accepted and followed, even if it is understood (3), for example, in acting in accordance with certain directives, such as those issued as hygiene regulations during the pandemic (Luhmann, 1988: 216–18). In the course of communicative and social evolution, Luhmann argues, improbabilities of communication have been overcome and “transformed into probabilities” (Luhmann, 1988: 219). Promising communications consolidate into specific and typical communications of social systems. This process has been observable since the 18th century, when science, law, education, economy, politics, or art developed their own logics for communications. Economy communicates in the symbolically generalized medium “money”, science in the medium “truth”, politics in the medium “power”.

Luhmann describes the choice of fear topics in communication as a “resonance amplifier” that unfolds its effectiveness transversely to the functional systems of society and thus makes communication more likely, but “cannot be controlled from the functional systems” (Luhmann, 2008: 157). This is because anxiety is inherent to psychological systems as an emotional state, and politics cannot control this. However, he equally emphasizes that “in particular, better functional performance [...] (can) correlate with increased anxiety without being able to alleviate it” (Ibid.). Based on the named scenarios, then, it is the emotion of fear that politics rely on to communicate in the pandemic situation in order to achieve their goals.

With reference to communication, the scenario paper cited above deliberately chooses themes of fear to express the government’s concern. Hence, it is not surprising that this concern of politics is in linguistic expressions vehemently articulated via the verb *to worry* [*sich sorgen*] (formulaically: X worries, X is (very) worried, X says the worry is justified).

Fear as a psychological reality is not relevant here; what is important is its “communicative actuality” (Luhmann, 2008: 161). For example, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel often expresses in her speeches her worry about pandemic developments and the dangers for the population as well as the overburdened health care system and is quoted in the press – as the Minister of Health continually is – reflecting on said worrying accordingly. For the most part, this concern remains unchallenged, because the dangers posed by the virus are well known. Luhmann on this:

When fear is communicated and cannot be denied in the communicative process, it acquires a moral existence. It renders it a duty to worry and a right to expect sympathy for fears and to demand measures to avert the dangers (Ibid.).

In this way, the pandemic communication can be charged with morality through fear. Referring to ecological communication, Luhmann formulates:

In public rhetoric, fear is elevated to a principle of self-assertion. Whoever is afraid is morally in the right, especially if he is afraid for others and his fear can be attributed to a recognized, non-

pathological type. Despite these clear semantic contours, no system for coping with fear can be differentiated (Luhmann, 2008: 160).

What is meant by this is that anxiety can only be coped with within the consciousness of an individual. Now, it cannot be denied that in the pandemic situation every individual is surrounded by a rhetoric of fear and perceives and processes it in different ways. Journalistic media play an essential role in this process. As with other media – such as film or video games – it is true for articles in the daily or online press that the pandemic communication can evoke emotions such as fear, shame, hatred or guilt in images and text. If one assumes, as Eckoldt does, that journalistic media operate in the symbolically generalized medium of attention, then fear communication could be interpreted in terms of news value theory as an attracting negative variable with attention-enhancing value (Cf. Eckoldt, 2002: 202). Gaining attention or recipient loyalty to the medium itself cannot be considered in isolation. Rather, the contribution that mass media perform for society must be illuminated. Luhmann sees this in the “formation of public opinion” (Krause, 2005: 50). If, in this context, fear-related communication is a resonance principle “that magnifies certain things and obscures others” (Luhmann, 2008: 160), it is, according to Luhmann, being connected to a persuasive function – related to the pandemic it is the function to legitimize decisions instituted by laws or regulations. The fear of illness and death is supposed to promote acceptance for the Infection Protection Act [Infektionsschutzgesetz], hygiene ordinances [Hygieneverordnungen] or contact restrictions.

## **2. Linguistic concept of modality: text-image interaction**

In a linguistic perspective, it is not possible to investigate the fear that spreads in persons as a feeling. This would require recipient interviews. The aim is to examine, on the basis of communicative acts in the daily and online press, which type of rhetoric promotes fear-related communication and is available for perception.

It seems obvious that multimedia components play a central role in mass media communication. Multimedia contents are understood here in the sense of Stöckl and Zebrowska as “a structuring of texts with different semiotic resources” (Stöckl, 2013: 92). The most frequent combination of different sign systems is found in the combination of “static image(s) and text” (Stöckl, 2013: 91), as Zebrowska points out, and is unmistakably present in the coverage of the pandemic in the journalistic mass media. In the context of examining fear in terms of the lack of perceptibility of climate change, Lickhardt/Werber note that “it is precisely the sensory deprivation of the phenomenon that has a particularly eerie and threatening effect” (Lickhardt/Werber, 2013: 370). It is, however, not to be overlooked that both climate change and the Corona pandemic evoke mass media representations that may very well be threatening by presenting the corresponding phenomenon in a “medialized oversize” (Lickhardt/Werber, 2013: 372). Pictorial, photographic representations of looming, dark and threatening clouds over harvested fields symbolize prototypical ecological threats (Gansel, 2020: 71). The oversized as well as sometimes quite aesthetic modeling of the Corona virus as a sphere with its spikes in the background of TV news broadcasts or hundredfold repeated images of a syringe with vaccine, the view into an intensive care unit or a photo of the administration of an injection appear as strategies of visualizing dangers to health or its

protection and are in the service of a persuasive function, namely, to make plausible the necessity of an injection as the only protection against the virus and to increase the willingness of the population to be vaccinated.

Such photos seem extremely common and one encounters them with every visit of Google news over the past 20 months. To give an example: in the Google news on January 15, 2022, a Focus-Online article from January 14, 2022 / 16:23 appears with the headline “First France variant, then ‘Deltracron’. Is the super-mutation still coming? This is what the Covid experts say” (Focus, 2022). Below that, the usual oversized virus image with viruses still buzzing around in a yellow-orange-red ring-shaped environment. Below the image the corresponding signature: “Virologists estimate the risk of a completely altered mutation as low” (Ibid.). This actually says it all, and in the text several virologists comment, projecting a rather hopeful future with regard to an endemic situation based on their findings. However, in the article lined up next, a senior physician already warns against the dangerous omicron fallacy: “The booster is indispensable” (Ibid.). The accompanying video is illustrated with a personalized photo as well as a prototypical Covid-19 virus illustration.

The daily newspaper *Nordkurier* for the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern also uses these prototypical photos in conjunction with its editorial articles. The December 20, 2021 edition headlines its article: “Mandatory vaccination: physical injury or a necessary measure?” (*Nordkurier*, 2021: 4). This is accompanied by the prototypically conventionalized photo of a syringe drilling into an upper arm, a person administering the syringe wearing gloves and protective clothing. In the January 11, 2022 issue, a very large headline can be found with the trivializing phrase: “prick”: “A little prick against Omicron: How well does the (booster) vaccination protect?” (Kaukemüller, 2022:18). The text is supplemented by a photo with the subject already described. Both photos appear in the size of 12 by 13 centimeters. The text is arranged around the photo. It should be mentioned at this point, which designations the injection with a previously unknown and new drug experiences in the named issues: Physical Injury – Measure – Prick. While the lexeme *physical injury* has negative connotations, the lexeme *measure* acts in the sense of obligation and duty. The lexeme *prick*, which is used extensively in German, has a trivializing effect and contrasts with the photo, as protective clothing and gloves express dangerousness. In the January 18, 2022 edition of the *Nordkurier*, the article “A vaccinating Minister on promotional tour” [Ein impfender Minister auf Werbetour] is linked to a photo bearing the following caption: “Yesterday, Federal Health Minister Karl Lauterbach took up the syringe himself at the vaccination center in Schwerin and expertly placed a prick in the upper arm” (Becker, 2022: 3). DUDEN-online notes on the meaning of the noun “prick” = “(small, little painful) puncture in or through the skin”. In the lexical meaning, therefore, only the stinging appears as salient. The assumption that the “Covid-lexicon” of the Institute for the German Language lists the lexeme, since a variant may have developed during the Covid pandemic, is disappointed.

A search in COSMAS II revealed that the lexeme *prick* was already in use in connection with blood donations or diabetes in the decades before the 1990s. In the context of vaccinations, it appeared in the mid-1990s. The first evidence in the context of vaccination is found in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*:

With infants, it is better for the doctor to place the vaccination needle on the leg than on the arm. If a vaccine is injected into the thigh, it has fewer local side effects there. This is the result of a study at the University of Mainz led by Heinz-Josef Schmitt. In the study, 110 infants were vaccinated

three times at intervals of four weeks each against diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough as well as against diseases caused by the pathogen *Haemophilus influenzae*. 71 percent of the young patients had slightly reddened skin at the injection site after the third prick in the arm; among children who received the injections in the thigh, the figure was only 30 percent. Minimal swelling was four times more common in the arm than in the leg. In all children, the vaccination had the desired effect (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1995: 29).

Here [Cosmas II] we can also find the Frankfurter Rundschau article titled “Needle on the playground / three more months of uncertainty / Ministry of Health a prick frightens parents: Was their son injected with the HIV-virus?” [Spritze auf dem Spielplatz / Noch drei Monate Ungewißheit / Gesundheitsamt Ein Piks macht Eltern Angst: Wurde ihr Sohn mit HIV-Virus infiziert?] (FAZ 1997: 17). So the use of the term *prick* goes back to the context of “little patients” being vaccinated and the vaccination is being downplayed toward these to avoid fear. In the second document, however, the prick is then associated with danger. In the meantime, small children are provided with a four- or six-fold vaccination against quite a few childhood diseases and infection possibilities. Uses of the lexeme *prick* are also common in this context in the texts of the written language corpora in COSMAS II. The year 2020 shows the most evidence in the Cosmas search, which refers to mass media – 144 hits in 128 texts. However, *piks*, which now metonymically stands for vaccination in general, says nothing about the content of the vaccine and also hides the fact that one does not die from a *prick*, but a vaccination can occasionally lead to death. Thus, the language of the Corona pandemic continues to use *prick* in a trivializing way with reference to children and adults. This is related to the fact that little or no open and critical discussion is taking place about the new vaccine technology using mRNA vaccines or vector vaccines and about vaccine side effects. Thus, downplaying is now used to pacify, to reduce fear.

In the newspaper *Nordkurier* of December 22, 2021, the article “Significantly more Covid patients in intensive care units than planned” is illustrated by a view into an intensive care unit (medical staff in protective clothing, bent over an invisible person surrounded by apparatuses). The caption to the image reads, “Far fewer ICU beds were actually planned for Covid patients than are currently occupied in hospitals here” (Peters, 2021: 12). The presupposed knowledge, namely that about 4,800 hospital beds were eliminated in Germany during the pandemic, leads to the implication that there could well have been more beds. However, the impression of overcrowding and overloading of hospitals and intensive care units due to the pandemic is created, which follows a common narrative.

### 3. Selectivity and Strategies in the Rhetoric of Fear

#### 3.1 On the Intrinsic Logic of Journalistic Mass Media

The following section of this paper deals with aspects of the selectivity of a rhetoric of fear as Luhmann formulates it which will be illustrated with regard to mass media journalistic communication. He outlines that “selectivity is also inherent in the rhetoric of fear insofar as it emphasizes the development for the worse and conceals the many remarkable advances [...]” (Luhmann, 2008: 160). It will be shown below that selectivity is a central aspect not only for fear-related communication, but in mass media communication in general.

For the mass media of society as a functional system, the symbolically generalized medium and the binary coding related to it must first be determined against this background. For this purpose, Luhmann's insights into the construction of reality in the mass media will be used. The following first sentence from Luhmann's work "The Reality of Mass Media" is often quoted: "What we know of our society, indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media" (Luhmann, 2009: 9). In discourse linguistic works, this sentence is taken quite seriously. However, a few sentences further on Luhmann states:

On the other hand, we know so much about the mass media that we are not able to trust these sources. We defend ourselves with a suspicion of manipulation, which, however, does not lead to significant consequences, since the knowledge taken from the mass media coalesces as if by itself into a self-reinforcing structure (ibid.).

Luhmann explains this paradox in his reflections precisely not with the concept of manipulation, but with an effect of the functional differentiation of modern society and describes the "internal-behavior" [Eigenverhalten] of the system. In the search for an "inclined audience" the mass media construct a reality in the sense of "what appears as reality *for them* or *through them for others*" [emphasis in original] (Luhmann, 2009: 12). The advantage here is that in mass media communication, interaction among those present is excluded by the "interposition of technology". A spontaneous reaction to utterances, as can occur in the face-to-face situation, is not possible (Luhmann, 2009: 10).<sup>1</sup> This, according to Luhmann, ensures

high degrees of freedom of communication. This creates a surplus of communicative possibilities that can only be controlled internally in the system by self-organization and by its own reality constructions. On the other hand, two selectors are at work: the willingness to broadcast and the interest in broadcasting, which cannot be coordinated centrally. The organizations that produce mass media communication rely on assumptions about reasonableness and acceptability (Luhmann, 2009: 11).

From his approach of observing mass media observers "as they construct reality", Luhmann describes the self-reference and external-reference of the mass media (Luhmann, 2009: 15). The external reference, he argues, is reflected in the choice of topics that concern society as a whole and are the basis for communication. In other words: In the absence of self-referential content, the mass media select objects of observation in society and address them in their sections such as politics, economics, or sports. The relationship between external and self-reference requires a constant reconciliation, as Luhmann notes: "At the thematic level, therefore, there is an ongoing reconciliation of external reference and self-reference *within the system's internal communication*" (Luhmann, 2009: 21-22 emphasis in original). The current situation in the Covid pandemic illustrates how the selection of topics occurs. An event in its course over two years largely determines the media's choice of topics and is also likely to portray and maintain a perpetual potential for danger by presenting these topics in particular as worthy of representation. Since it is impossible to comprehensively observe everything that happens in society, the omission of information is common practice. Even for a report on a governmental press conference, it is necessary to select what information can be included, and this is the type of information that can be kept within the narrative of dangers to public health and the overburdening of the health care system. For example, the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* quotes the press conference held by Drosten, Wieler and Lauterbach on January 14, 2022: "As a result of the anti-corona measures, contacts in

Germany have been reduced to about 50 percent of the ‘pre-pandemic age’. ‘Nevertheless, there is no reason to sound the all-clear signal’, Lauterbach said”. Referring to Wieler, the report noted that “due to the mass of infections, one would have to be prepared for the numbers of hospitalizations and deaths to rise again. So far, deaths had not yet increased again: ‘But that will change’” (Schmoll, 2022). All in all, it is the negative statements that are directly quoted and counteract possible approaches moving in a positive direction.

For Luhmann, the symbolically generalized medium of success of mass media for communication clearly is “information”. This classification finds sufficient criticism in the scientific reception of Luhmann’s work on the reality of mass media, when it is countered that in every functional system in society information must be processed and communicated. However, this is done on the basis of other generalized media, such as *power* in politics or *faith* in religion (cf. Eckhold, 2007). However, if one connects, as Luhmann describes it, information with the aspect of selection *and only* with selection it makes sense.<sup>2</sup> Luhmann relates the binary coding to the symbolically generalized medium of information: “The code of the system of mass media is the distinction between information and non-information” (Luhmann, 2009: 28). It has to reflect something as non-informational because otherwise it “could not organize its own reduction of complexity, its own selection” (Ibid.). This further means that the system operates with reference to time and must decide in time what counts as informative or non-informative. In this way, news is perceived as current.

In the following, the aim is to identify and reflect on strategies for the selection of information with reference to fear-related communication. Through the chosen linguistic forms as well as about the modification of meanings, the current mass media journalistic use of language of the past two years provides information about possible ways of perceiving and distinguishing.<sup>3</sup> The lexeme *Querdenker* [maverick] is an example of the strategy of modifying meaning. I will further to look at strategies that seem particularly suited to evoking a sense of fear, of heightened anxiety. These include, in addition to reinterpretations or degradations of meaning, the expression of probabilities, numbers and vagueness, contrasts, or hyperbolically used figurative expressions. A first section on this is devoted to the lexeme maverick *Querdenker*[maverick].

### 3.2 Mavericks [Querdenker]

First, note the current meaning of the lexeme *maverick* [*Querdenker*], which the Institute for the German Language’s Dictionary of Neologisms notes in Corona pandemic as: “Person who rejects the generally applicable rules of conduct for containing the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other government regulations in connection with the pandemic (with varying political and ideological motivations)” (Dictionary of Neologisms: Keyword *Querdenker*).<sup>4</sup> A statement made by the Prime Minister of Hesse, Volker Bouffier, in November 2020, is listed as evidence, who warned against a wholesale condemnation of the protests. However, he was critical of people who use violence and should therefore be observed preventively by the German domestic intelligence service [Verfassungsschutz].

Now the lexeme *maverick* [*Querdenker*] has a longer history and has replaced the lexeme *Wutbürger*. The label “Wutbürger” [angry citizen] was named Word of the Year by the German Language Society in 2010 and has only been present in the DEREKO (Reference Corpus for German Language<sup>5</sup>) since 2007. Its use, especially in the press in the context of reporting on

the protests against the “Stuttgart 21” project, peaked in 2011 with 1,223 hits in 889 texts.<sup>6</sup> From the spring of 2020 onward, the label “lateral thinker” [Querdenker] became established as a devaluation of protest movements. In DEREKO, the lexeme *maverick* [Querdenker] has first been documented in 1972 still holding a positive connotation, as the following citation reveals: “a philanthropic Querdenker, a restless questioner/In-Frage-Steller, a colorful troublemaker – a helpful phenomenon” (Die Zeit, 1972: 42). In an article in the *Nürnberger Zeitung* of February 26, 1990, Ralph Giordano, at that time just honored with the prize of the Heinz-Galinski Foundation, is praised as a “maverick and inconvenient spirit”. In August 2020, *Spiegel Online* under the heading “Für die Traurigen und die Müden” [“For the sad and the tired”] presents a different picture that no longer relates to any type of appreciation: “This weekend, Nazis are again going to demonstrate in Berlin against protective measures and spread conspiracy theories. (Not exclusively Nazis, of course, but also people who have no problem demonstrating side by side with Nazis)”. The inconvenient spirit no longer plays any role in the meaning of the lexeme and neither does a positively considered troublemaker; in the sense of the change of meaning, the term has undergone a deterioration of meaning. This is reinforced by the fact that it is quite common to state a proximity between the demonstrators and the political party of the AfD [Alternative für Deutschland]. The author's comment in parentheses introduces a further point of meaning through this saliently placed sem: “whoever demonstrates side by side to Nazis = Nazi” and thus a protest movement is one-sidedly stigmatized. This one-sided assessment implies that no further explanation is needed: Protests against the Corona measures of politics are to be evaluated negatively because they are hosted by lateral-thinkers who join forces with Nazis and adhere to conspiracy ideologies. Statistical surveys on the composition of the demonstrators do not exist. Nevertheless, prerogative of interpretation and explanation is being claimed.

On the one hand, such an image, conventionalized by the mass media, obscures the perspective of demonstrators from the medical profession, the nursing profession, which is particularly affected by the obligatory vaccination which is already in force, as well as the perspective of parents concerned about their children. On the other hand, contents of the protest such as the right to bodily integrity is dismissed with designations such as *vaccine opponents* or *vaccine skeptics*, [see also Szymanski in this issue on the scapegoating of “Anti-vaxxers”] as a failure to take advantage of a Covid-19 vaccine does not necessarily entail a fundamental rejection of vaccinations in general. Vaccination is consistently promoted in the media as the way out of the pandemic. Fears of losing one's job due to compulsory vaccination or of being ostracized from social life as an unvaccinated person seem justified, but are addressed to a lesser extent. Rather, obscure justifications for vaccine skepticism are sought, such as in the article “Origins of vaccine skepticism. A German particularity” [Ursprünge der Impfskepsis. Eine deutsche Besonderheit] by Christian Jakob, which appeared on *taz-online* on Dec. 20, 2021. In the preface it says: “In German-speaking countries there is a mistrust of vaccination. This is due to historic romanticism”. Stefan Matuschek counters with his article using a form of third-order observation, by observing how the journalist Jakob observes the world: “Vaccination opponents: the romance-puppets (Popanz)”.

Now the same vaccination campaign has revived another cliché: Romanticism as German doom, as the collective inherited damage of irrational anti-modernism. This national peculiarity, journalistic reflections now argue to be responsible for the relatively low vaccination rate in German-speaking countries. The anti-scientific and anti-technical enthusiasm for nature, which believes more in the self-healing of a holistic consciousness than in laboratory products of specialized cutting-edge

research and the pharmaceutical industry, stemmed from Romanticism. In the popularity of natural remedies and homeopathy, the irrationalism of German Romanticism were living on, which now undermines an efficient Covid policy (Matuschek, 2021).

Ultimately, such a derivation of the rejection of injections, the effectiveness of which would have to be critically reflected in politics, lacks any plausibility. It does, however, seem to attract attention and stimulate introspective reflection by actors in the system itself.

### 3.3 Vagueness, numbers, assumptions, threats

Within the communication about the Covid pandemic, a lack of clarity is particularly noticeable with regard to changing decrees depending on the current situation on 2G, 2G+, 3G (vaccinated and recovered; vaccinated, recovered and tested; vaccinated, recovered and unvaccinated tested), which regulate access to social life and institutions. What applies at one moment in time can already be outdated, such as the decision of the Robert Koch Institute in consultation with the Ministry of Health on Jan. 14, 2022, to cancel the convalescent status after a lived-through infection after three months; previously, six months applied. The *Nordkurier* only reported on 18 January 2022 about under the title: “Recovered – attention: status is valid only three months”. In the beginning it is outlined: “Omikron is spreading at lightning speed – and politics and authorities are trying to adapt the rules to the Covid variant. Now the guidelines have been changed for those who have recovered”. Although this change is justified with scientific findings, it is not explained, as the author of the article also reflects in indirect speech: “The background was – it is said [sei] – that due to Omikron there was a much greater risk of falling ill again or being a carrier after that period” (Meyer, 2022: 17). The subheading of the article reads “New ‘rules of the game’ for compulsory vaccination due to Omikron?” and it continues “At the same time the RKI [Robert Koch Institute] explains: ‘These guidelines are reviewed regularly and may change according to the state of science’”. And indeed – two days later, a full vaccination counts as valid only when inclusive of a booster, while first and second injections are considered basic immunization only. These types of changes can cause irritation, disturbance and worry. It is also disturbing, however, that the article’s editor uses the term *rules of the game*. Gaming rules are usually valid for a certain time and changes to them must be indicated to the gaming partners, otherwise one plays and acts assuming misplaced preconditions. In this respect, there is not the slightest comment from the editor, whose task actually is to inform, what he has effected with the attention mark. Nevertheless, the term *rules of the game* appears inappropriate in the context of reporting during the pandemic, since it is not about a game, but about a serious matter that affects millions of people. Furthermore, the article quotes Christian Drosten, who refers to a broadly anchored vaccination-based protection in the population. The author deems it important to add and to reproduce Drosten in an indirect quote “– otherwise too many people would die” while the article concludes with the Covid-infection figures of the day in the sentence: “Within 24 hours 30 deaths were recorded” (Ibid.).

The goal of this type of communication ultimately is to increase vaccination rates as well as the willingness to do so even after recovering from a SARS-CoV-2 infection and illness, and to legitimize mandatory vaccination.<sup>7</sup> The final sentence of the article leads to another problem concerning clarity and vagueness associated with listing numbers.

The neologism *Corona mortality* [Corona Sterblichkeit] is described by the *Neologism Dictionary on Coronapandemic* of IDS as the “proportion of deaths among all persons infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus” (Neologismenwörterbuch zur Sprache in der Coronapandemie). What does this definition mean? Does infection refer to disease or severe disease, or does it mean that people die from other underlying diseases and were coincidentally found to be infected with the virus? In the mass media communication on the daily documentation of deaths during the pandemic, the formula “due to or in connection with” the virus had become established in this regard. It can currently be observed (in January 2022) that this formula is used less frequently, varied through the omission of “due to” or is no longer used at all (Matuschek, 2022), but instead it is formulated that: “The number of deaths increased by x to y”. Through this, the controversial formula is no longer used and also no longer questioned, as it remained equally unclear what *due to* or *with* the virus means and what a differentiated numerical balance might look like. In September 2021, a contribution by Nils Metzger on *ZDFheute* already argued:

RKI statistics. Too many people counted as Covid deaths?, ‘Coronavirus is probably not cause of death in 80 percent of official Covid deaths’, headlines *Die Welt*. There is only a thin body of evidence. Nevertheless, the Covid statistics could be improved. [...] AfD politicians and mavericks hence saw themselves confirmed in their opinion of a pandemic allegedly conjured up by the Robert Koch Institute (RKI). Even FDP politician Wolfgang Kubicki spoke on Facebook about a ‘further blow to the credibility’ of the RKI (Metzger, 2021, emphasis by author).

The article in *Welt-online* dated Aug. 30, 2021, to which this reference is made, it is argued with reference to a medical doctor: “For a large part of the Covid deaths reported by the RKI, it is unclear what they died of – the death statistics are increasingly being distorted”. The journalist at ZDF hence cites a rather critical paper in the self-monitoring of the system. At the same time is weakened in both media through the use of the term *probably*. The term *increasingly distorted* in *Die Welt*, is countered by the attribute *thin* in the ZDFreport. The concessive adverb announces the opinion that improvement would be good. With reference to the AfD and Kubicki, it is noted whom such critical contributions, like the one in *Die Welt*, could benefit (Cf. *ibid.*).

According to RTDE of January 14, 2022, the Danish tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* headlined “We have failed” in a self-referential introspection, and refers to the lack of questioning of

what it actually means that people had to be hospitalized with the Corona virus and not due to it. One had not been “vigilant enough”. But this question was crucial. Thus [...] it had now turned out that in 27 percent of the corresponding patients “Corona” was not the main diagnosis (RT 2021).

A similar percentage figure is used in the following days by *BildTV*. The preceding evidence demonstrates the complicated – due to direct taking this from the authorities – and non-transparent way of portraying numbers in the media – because it is taking place in an observation of second order – within pandemic reporting. Numbers create a factual and scientific impression in the selective journalistic operations. They are no longer transparent for the readership and also the idea that the readership could make up its own mind on the basis of named studies appears as an imposition, so they have to use what they are being presented with.

In *Zeit-Online* of January 05, 2022 Christian Drosten is quoted with the sentence: “What really protects against Omikron is the triple vaccination” (Drosten 2022), and that therefore it was particularly important. And further it is argued with reference to the *Corona Update* of

the Drosten podcast at *NDR-Info*: “Boosters make the difference”, says Christian Drosten. Only then would there be a significantly lower risk of infection. Omikron were to “take over the business” here as well. And it goes on to say:

A study from Denmark in December showed how important booster vaccinations are. According to the study, only the third vaccination dose significantly reduces the risk of contracting Omikron, Drosten said. ‘The double vaccination will probably contribute less for spread control for Omikron. We’re pretty unprotected there’ said the senior virologist at Berlin’s Charité hospital. ‘The triple vaccination makes all the difference’. Drosten here referred to a study by the Imperial College London dated just prior to Christmas. According to it the hospitalization risk with an Omikron virus variant infection was roughly up to 30 per cent lower than with the Delta virus variant. For people who received two vaccinations, the risk decreased by 34 percent, and for those who received one booster, the risk decreased by 63 percent. ‘The gain from being unvaccinated to being twice vaccinated is only ten percent, however, the gain between being vaccinated twice to being vaccinated three times is almost doubling’. When unvaccinated people infect themselves with the Omikron virus variant, the risk of hospitalization drops by 24 percent, according to the London study. According to Drosten, this is indeed good news, given the ‘many unvaccinated people we unfortunately have in Germany’. However, one did have to expect varying severities of the disease and the all-clear should not be sounded. Drosten warned urgently against concluding that it is better to live through an infection than to be vaccinated (Ibid.).

The figures, taken from a study, turn out to be quite coherent for understanding the text. But what do the numbers ultimately mean to an individual who is asked to take a decision concerning the vaccination. A few weeks later it becomes obvious, communicated via various news channels and information from the RKI, that even individuals provided with a third injection are not spared from vaccine breakthroughs, but perhaps from severe illness.<sup>8</sup> The numbers and comparisons could be reassuring to a readership. However, they are noted in the text as a quantity, which is put into relation with a following adversative, *however*, which leads to a warning that Drosten had pronounced.

Another example is to be noted, which played a role in the talk show Markus Lanz on January 19, 2022 and caused confusion not only for Lanz, but also in the newspaper *Die WELT*. In its online edition on January 20, 2022 *Die WELT* reports about the talk show under the title “Markus Lanz visibly irritated – Lauterbach’s confusing statements on rapid test” (Lübberding/Vorbrüggen, 2022). The talk show was concerned with the question whether positive rapid tests are included in the statistics as Covid-19 cases in the same way as do positive PCR-tests. The Minister of Health [Lauterbach] answered that “if a rapid test is reported to the health department, it is valid and counts”, thus confirming the Minister of Social Affairs from the federal state of Saxony, Köpping. In the article, *Die WELT* comments: “In response to an inquiry from *Die WELT*, a press spokeswoman for the RKI stated that positive rapid tests continue to play no role. Accordingly, only positive PCR-tests are included in the statistics” (Ibid.). How is this discrepancy to be resolved, the reader and author of this article may ask.

The Minister of Health had already determined that a double vaccination is only valid as basic immunization, while the booster vaccination “protected against all Corona variants – at least against severe illness and death” and this is indispensable, and a yardstick for the orientation of obligatory vaccination. There is no way around vaccination. And the minister warns: “The variant alphabet is not going to end with Omikron”. He further speaks of a possible mutated Delta virus mutation, of the likelihood that unvaccinated people who fall ill with Omikron would have only 50 percent protection against Delta. And finally, a threat by

Lauterbach in the original: “The variant alphabet will not end with Omicron” (RTDE, 2022).

In this sense, Christian Drosten is interviewed on January 23, 2022 by *Deutschlandfunk* regarding the Corona development and in this instance as well there is not end in sight to the probabilities: “It is by no means certain that Omicron will remain in its attenuated state”; there are various possibilities of development into a *stronger variant*; one currently *had to fear* that a *recombination* of Delta and Omicron might take place; that Omicron would *bypass* the immune protection of the population; *unfortunately*, uniting the strongest properties of Omicron and Delta; it could be that unvaccinated people would have *no immune protection*, immune system *could be tricked* by serotype; everything called for additional vaccinations, etc. (Drosten, 2022 b).<sup>9</sup>

The politician of the political party the *Left*, Sahra Wagenknecht, speaks of “scaremongering”, the virologist Klaus Stöhr formulates that Lauterbach is “delirious”. It is to be stated that probabilities, in particular, are gladly taken up by the media as well as linguistic means of signaling the modality of possibility like modal verbs, modal particles, vague temporal adverbs or adversative adverbs. In this context, contrasts are often built up, which on the one hand reassure, but then follow up with negative possibilities of disquiet. The following references are taken from online editions of *Focus*, *BR24* or *Tagesspiegel* or the *Nordkurier* print edition: are currently/at present (*still*) declining, but *should change soon*; one death *of above* 60 years – two lines further we find – one patient aged between 60 and 79 years in whom infection was proven or *suspected*; certainly proven and *probable* Omicron cases; data not valid, *writes* the RKI in a *limiting fashion*; *mild* course (but mild is not what is generally understood by it, as is explained later at some point, mild = lying in bed with fever); Omicron *somewhat* attenuated compared to Delta. (“Somewhat. Difference in severe courses unclear”. Drosten); a bitter after-taste is [...] contagion rate is at a level which *might still overburden the health care system* after all; now *wanting to* [...], “*but now Omikron is writing the rules*” (Drosten); the number of unreported cases *is likely to be higher* because no testing was done during the holidays; third booster dose *significantly* increases protective effect – *even if* it is lower compared to Delta; the next few weeks *could become very dangerous* for the unvaccinated; *no reason* to sound the all-clear; *too early* easing endanger; *probably* protects against severe disease. The listed evidence appear stereotypical and represents the “background noise” of such communication in the media.

A final possible aspect with regard to the selection of statements from the political area by journalistic representations is to be constituted by linguistic pictures or tropes. They serve to personify the virus: Omikron sets the “rules of the game”, “takes over business” (Drosten), only vaccination can “take away the horror of Omikron” (Drosten), Omikron circumvents the protective effect of vaccines. The virus is portrayed as an enemy that must be fought. The occurrence of infections is visualized as *waves*, *hills*, (*steep*) *walls* with reference to the graphical statistical infection curves.

A guest article published in ZEIT-ONLINE on January 19, 2022 by Hendrik Streeck who is a member of the newly founded Corona Expert Council of the German government, forms a contrast to the presented findings. The editor's note at the end of the article, which again underlines the problem of selectivity addressed in this article, is particularly relevant: “*Correction note: In an earlier version of the article, a text passage had unfortunately been misleadingly abbreviated. We have corrected the error*” (Streeck, 2022, emphasis in original).

The preface to Streeck's guest article is impressive, which, moreover, refers not only to the content but to the language and tone that follows: "The virus is becoming endemic. To get back to normal life, we need clear political decisions – and inner calm". And Streeck is absolutely right about that. The calmness alluded to is reflected in the text, which is formulated with full sobriety, in a clarity of expression, the renunciation of partisanship and fear-mongering as well as panic-mongering and empathy. The virologist's argumentation is appears convincing, and it remains to be hoped that it will be taken seriously in expert communication and not picked apart by the journalistic media in its self-reference and in support of some of the government's decisions that are no longer comprehensible. It is worth concluding by quoting a passage that sums up the communicative malaise evident in the German media's communication around the Covid pandemic:

The debates became more aggressive. Some critics and defenders of the measures overflowed with recriminations and defamations. Our society was not used to discussing a potentially deadly threat rationally – and to working out solutions pragmatically. Too much ideology, too little expertise. A mismatch between courage and moderation (Ibid.).

#### **4. The rhetoric of fear communication as a communicative practice**

In summary, it can now be stated against the systems theoretical background that communication represents something improbable that must be transformed into something probable. Panic and fear scenarios are used to generate attention as well as to form opinions and "social(s) expectations" (Köstler, 2011) so that communication, willingness to communicate, readability, follow-up communication as well as follow-up practices become more probable and legitimate. This occurs within the framework of a preformed communicative practice. Fiehler defines communicative practices as "preformed modes of procedure that are socially available when certain recurrent goals or purposes are to be realized communicatively" (Fiehler, 2004: 99). The findings gathered in this paper up to January 2022 can be summarized and systematized into a communicative (journalistic) practice at the macro level of a social subsystem. It has emerged as a conventionalized practice in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the practice to be described here emerged from certain social contexts of action of journalistic writing, within which it gains its functionality (Deppermann et al, 2016: 7). In this context, Deppermann/Feilke/Linke also speak of "context-bound customs" (Deppermann et al, 2016: 8). The rhetoric of fear communication in hegemonic journalistic media (their information and opinion text varieties), charged with moral impetus, has coined a pattern that can be summarized in a scheme of journalistic writing on the micro-level of linguistic means:

- a) The combination of topics occurs – at the lexical level – as a conflation of climate change and pandemic.
- b) The narrative of danger is dominant. Threat as well as fear of falling ill or even dying are kept in communicative topicality.
- c) The charging of fear communication with morality grips society as a whole and secures the right of the worried to feel obliged to take (political) action.
- d) Fear communication attracts attention by proclaiming uncertainties or a not-yet-

knowledge that must be transformed into certain knowledge in an expectable way for the readership. A level of expectation is maintained.

- e) Striking linguistic devices for constructing the not-yet-knowledge include devices of modality, numbers, markers of lexical vagueness, emphasizing the progression to worse, or maintaining disquiet through lexical devices.
- f) The pattern ultimately leads to a linguistic-communicative practice of warning of danger and non-compliance with rules and of asking people to follow measures such as vaccination recommendations, in particular.

The maintenance of alarm beyond the previous period of study is evident in current reporting by hegemonic media on Omicron variants BA.4 and BA.5. ZDF.de, for example, reports Frank Ulrich Montgomery's concerns on May 31, 2022, that "the variant will also spread in Germany". He warns of an outbreak: "Corona is not over yet – this is evidenced by the violent outbreak of Omicron in Portugal". It is further reported that "many people – including vaccinated people – would fall ill. However, vaccinated people would have much milder symptoms". Then follows, in bold type and in larger size, the "Recommendation for vaccination: 'Vaccinate, now more than ever! And no pitting freedom against security'" (ZDF, 2022). The emergence of the subtype of the Omicron variant BA.5 is further linked to the question "Is a new Corona wave threatening to take place?" in a Panorama report on zdf.de, 01 June 2022. The background to this is the spread of the variant in Portugal: "In Portugal, the Omicron subtype BA.5 is spreading rapidly. Minister of Health Lauterbach hence warns of a *Corona-autumn* for Germany as well. How likely is that?" Lauterbach continues to be quoted warning, "In Portugal, unfortunately, it shows that with the BA.5 Omicron variant, *mortality is also rising again*. In the fall, we have to *be prepared for this*". Other experts (Drosten, immunologist Watzl) confirm the likelihood. Watzl is finally quoted on vaccination: "In addition, for many people there (in Portugal – C.G.) the booster is now more than half a year behind. I therefore also assume a Stiko recommendation for a fourth vaccination for people 60 plus in the fall" (Hamann/Metzger, 2022).

In an article dated May 28, 2022, the editorial team of BR24 takes up the statements from an interview of the Bayerischer Rundfunk with the head of the RKI, Wieler: "Wieler urges new infection protection law. The risk for new dangerous viruses is continuously increasing". The repetition of the sentence from the headline within the article increases the danger statement once again. And Corona-rates would rise again in the fall, making it difficult to offer "forecasts for (the) Oktoberfest".<sup>10</sup> That the theme will be perpetuated throughout the summer does not need to be mentioned specifically.

## 5. Solidification and reproduction of the pattern

In the run-up to the WHO meeting in Geneva from May 22 to 28, 2022, reports of monkeypox infections appear in countries in Europe where the disease has not previously appeared. At this point in time, the G7 ministers around Karl Lauterbach, together with the WHO and the European Union, simulate a smallpox pandemic scenario with the aim to practice and improve crisis management for crises and possible pandemics.

Using the German online media coverage of monkeypox, the rhetorical patterns of fear communication can be traced once more. This will be exemplified by two contributions from May 22, 2022 to the program BRISANT of the ARD (16:15 and 19:06). The exemplary presentation results from the fact that this broadcast as well as other journalistic online contributions on the topic indicate the sources dpa/AFP/REUTERS or RND and themselves BRISANT. To begin with, the title of the contribution (19:06) works with the narrative of the danger (b), although the contribution does not speak of major danger, but rather of caution: “New wave of infections. More and more cases of monkeypox – Is the next pandemic looming now?” At this point, infections in Germany are in the low single digits. The unspecified danger “*alarms governments and experts*”, “On Sunday, U.S. President Joe Biden *warned* of ‘serious consequences’ if the disease continues to spread”; the WHO “*fears* that the number of cases could increase further in the summer months”; “experts *do not yet fear* a new pandemic, but call for consistent action” (c). This consistent action includes “making sufficient smallpox vaccine available” as well as for the WHO to “develop guidelines to contain the spread of monkeypox”. The suggestion of scarcity is justified by means of a reinforcing adverb: “Since for persons with pre-existing conditions or a weakened immune system, the virus may well become dangerous” (b, d). The narrative of danger and threat is further reinforced by concessive, constraining temporal adverbials, such as adverbs like *currently*, *so far*, which imply “not yet, but” and imply aggravation (d). In this sense, the compound conjunction *while*, *however* is prototypically used, as in the following sentence: “*While* the organization pointed out that contagions can occur at mass events, it also, *however*, emphasized that precautionary measures against Covid-19 also work against monkeypox” (ARD 2022a).

In the very first paragraph, reference is made to a possible vaccination by using a hyphen after two interrogative sentences to perform an attention-grabbing function (f): “How are smallpox viruses transmitted, how can you protect yourself from it – and who should get vaccinated against it?”

The article “First case: monkeypox now also in Germany” [“Erster Fall: Affenpocken jetzt auch in Deutschland”] (4:15 p.m.) notes that the Robert Koch Institute is *sensitizing* doctors in Germany to the viral infection: “*Rightly so*: now the first case has also become known here”. The article underlines and supports the concern of the actors with the causal operator *rightly so* to signal that the following sentence is to be understood as a justification. Thus, the editorial positions itself in this discourse around monkeypox. In this article, too, a not-yet-knowledge and uncertainties come into play: thus, stereotypically “only mild symptoms” are contrasted adversatively with “But severe courses are also possible in individual cases”. In the further course of the article, the question is raised as to the possible cause of the outbreak of the infection and the cases of infection. Thus it is assumed: the infection

*is said* to be caused by an infection in Nigeria. In response, British experts had stressed that monkeypox was not easily transmitted from person to person and that *the risk to the general population was very low*. The latest cases *seem to disprove that, at least in part*: The virus *can very well* be transmitted from person to person. The fact that in some cases the chain of infection cannot be traced *suggests* that *not all infections have yet* been detected in the general population (ARD, 2022b).

With modal verbs [German: *sollen*, *is said* and *can*], the modal adverbials *very well* or *at least partially*, the verb *seem* with modal character, restrictive particles and indefinite pronoun *not yet all* as well as the assumption *suggests*, a presumptive positioning on the dynamics of an

event (e) takes place. The quoted actors consider deaths “very unlikely”, yet reference is made to the fact that “the Central African variant of the pathogen [...] causes about ten percent of those infected” to die. “In Africa, the West African variant of the virus, which occurs in Europe and the United States, causes death in about one percent of those who become ill”.

With regard to the origin of the chains of infection, an “altered human-to-human transmissibility” is suspected, or “The pathogens can be transmitted by different animal species. According to the WHO, the viruses were exported sporadically by travelers” and this in 2018 already. At the end of May, one deals more intensively with the origin and spread of monkeypox. Thus, the *Berliner Zeitung* writes on May 27, 2022, (22:13), with reference to AFP and kme: “The current spread of the monkeypox virus was ‘unusual’ said Briand”. This is because the cases are being reported from countries where the virus is “not usually widespread”. And it goes on to say that “accordingly, experts continue to try to find out what has caused the current unusual spread” (*Berliner Zeitung*, 2022). In the same vein, *n-tv* headlines on May 30, 2022, “Much about the monkeypox outbreak remains mysterious” and it is being noted: “Many questions remain unanswered – including whether the pathogen can ever be contained again” (Stoppel, 2022). On *n-tv knowledge [Wissen]*, monkeypox are characterized as a zoonosis, i.e. one that has spread from animals to humans. *Dpa* headlines on 01 June 2022 “WHO suspects environmental factors behind monkeypox. Is climate change responsible for the spread of monkeypox infections? The fact is that the movement radii of animals are changing. This favors the virus jumping to humans”. “Pressure on ecosystems”, “threatened habitats and climate change” are put forward as reasons, but are not discussed in more detail (*dpa*, 2022). (a) Thus, the link to climate change is thematically set and is continually used in this way.

A final look into the selection of news provided by Google on June 11, 2022 confirms both the findings collected in this paper and the patterns they have laid bare. The *Ärzteblatt* [Physicians' Journal] stands out with a couple of posts, as it reports on the Corona Expert Council's deliberations on a change in strategy for Corona measures concerning the upcoming autumn-period. Pictorial representations of the virus appear even more colorful. Possibilities, probabilities of overloading the health care system, unpredictability, no reliability of the evolution of the virus are the bases of deliberation and selections for contributions. Attenuation of the virus would be conceivable but cannot be assumed, the vaccination gap as well as the immunity gap must be closed, scenarios from basic to unfavorable are played out. A *circulus vitiosus*?

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<sup>1</sup> The currently common form in journalistic communication of deliberately making articles available for comment by and to stimulate discussion among the readership in order to capture a spectrum of opinion is a form that has nothing in common with interaction situations of face-to-face communication.

<sup>2</sup> Luhmann (cf. *Social Systems* 1988:196–201) understands communication as the threefold selection of information, communication and understanding, which entails certain subsequent communications. Since selection is basically used for the concept of communication, it may be irritating that Luhmann resorts to selection for mass media. However, a choice of topics with reference to a certain readership can only be based on selection with regard to news values.

- 3 Interesting information on the emergence of new lexis can be found in the Pandemic Dictionary of the Department of Lexicography of the Institute for the German Language.
- 4 Against the background of this definition, stereotypically occurring sentences in reporting on protest demonstrations, e.g., against compulsory vaccination, are not surprising. "Most demonstrators did not wear protective masks, nor were distances observed." Or "police asked participants to wear a mask." Any demonstration, according to the now already conventional implication, can be called a cross-thinking demonstration if demonstrators do not wear masks, and the relationship to the right-wing scene is established. In the Nordkurier of 18.01.2022, the article "More demos than before the pandemic" by Robin Peters with reference to Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania says: "An infiltration of the actions of right-wing or left-wing extremists could not make out the state protection recently. People with the most diverse backgrounds or political attitudes would have participated in the demonstrations, according to their assessment." (p.12)
- 5 <https://www.ids-mannheim.de/digspra/kl/projekte/korpora>
- 6 The data and supporting documents noted in the footnote are available at <https://cosmas2.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2-web/> (Last accessed 10/24/2021)
- 7 On Jan. 23, the news reports of a proposal for mandatory vaccination that would require three vaccinations and that failure to provide them would be punishable by a fine.
- 8 The Dictionary of Neologisms for Language in the Corona Pandemic defines the lexeme breakthrough infection as follows: "a) disease triggered by the administration of a (deficient) vaccine b) infection of a person with a particular pathogen despite previous vaccination" and gives the current evidence: "A complete Corona vaccination does not mean that the vaccinated person can no longer become infected with the virus. Even vaccinated persons can fall ill – then one speaks of so-called vaccination breakthroughs. (www.merkur.de; SEPT. 10, 2021)." Matching the vagueness in the descriptions of meaning is also the definition of corona vaccine: "vaccine that triggers the production of antibodies against the SARS-CoV-2 virus." If vaccines trigger antibody production, why are tests to determine the level of antibodies in a person's blood not meaningful, ask patients who have been lectured on the subject. The definition contradicts the realities in the testimony of primary care physicians and medical practitioners.
- 9 It should be noted that Drosten's pronouncements alluded to here were selected days before the interview on Deutschlandfunk with reference to his current podcast on NDR-Info for representations for different media.
- 10 A podcast by Bayerischer Rundfunk on May 26, 2022, entitled "Humans versus viruses – Are we prepared for the next pandemic?" outlines the topic: "Corona will not be the last pathogen to strike the world. But what have we learned from the pandemic? What if the next virus is not only dangerous and highly contagious – but also life-threatening for children? Are we sufficiently prepared? Who will be faster: humans or the virus?" The podcast draws an apocalyptic fictional scenario for the year 2025 for the outbreak of a pathogen in a palm oil plantation, discusses the routes of spread, characterizes the threat of the pathogen due to the lightheartedness of travelers and revelers, describes exponential growth, the need for digital information services, the ideal case of sufficient vaccines. Lauterbach is still health minister in this scenario, is quoted as other current players in the original. Wieler focuses on broad-spectrum vaccines. The scenario is underlined in its threateningness by corresponding gloomy music in minor key as well as the sound of a heart-lung machine in the background. Bayerischer Rundfunk: Man versus virus – Are we prepared for the next pandemic. . (Last accessed: 06/10/2022).

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