

Making (female) health care work matter The performative publics of #systemrelevant during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany

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Abstract

Over the last two years, digital media have contributed significantly to increasing the visibility of those who are outstandingly challenged by the pandemic. In Germany, the Twitter hashtag #systemrelevant [systemically relevant] initiated a public debate on values and working conditions. Applying the practice-theory-based concept of performative publics, we analyze the formation of this specific public with a special focus on its gendered structure. Results of our mixed-methods approach show how health care work has become the dominant issue of #systemrelevant. Civil society actors and engaged health care workers set the agenda, and journalism primarily responds to these voices. Although care work is performed predominantly by women, most of the attention online is given to men. However, on the level of tweets and linked content, the discourse in #systemrelevant counteracts stereotypical images of women in health care. Overall, the ethnographic data on the most significant collective actor show a continuous tension between symbolic recognition and their struggle for improving working conditions.

Keywords

performative publics, media practice, health care work, berlin hospital movement, network analysis, digital ethnography

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic reached Germany in March 2020. The profound disruption of everyday life raised ethically challenging issues and revealed fundamental uncertainties. Many of these uncertainties had to do with the virus and the disease itself; others questioned taken-for-granted power relations and called for a renegotiation of the social order. #systemrelevant [systemically relevant] was one of the most popular and contested pandemic-related hashtags on Twitter in 2020 in German-speaking countries. It collected experiences from different, mostly female, job domains to make the values of their work and working conditions visible.

This study takes the emergence of public discourse around this hashtag as a case to describe and understand the relational setting of different groups of actors in digital media environments and their capacity to produce attention for issues of public concern. In the case of #systemrelevant, the discourse on Twitter spurred a wider public debate on the underlying living and working conditions of health care workers. With a special focus on its gendered structure, our study reconstructs the emergence of this public, its temporal dynamics, and its enduring consequences. Combining quantitative analysis of Twitter data and an ethnographic case study on the most significant actor, the *Berlin Alliance Health not Profits*, we are able to connect macro- and micro-perspectives. Our methodological approach also allows us to track the impact of public discourse on subsequent activities within the civil–societal collective.

In a first step, we introduce the theoretical concept of performative publics underpinning our research. We then outline #systemrelevant as a case study and present our methodological approach. The empirical results are structured along our research questions, which focus on the relational arrangement of different groups of actors, the gendered structure of the discourse, and its subsequent repercussions on health care workers' struggle for improved working conditions.

Performative publics as sensitizing concept

Over the past 15 years, numerous approaches have been developed to better understand the making of social media publics: from “networked publics” (boyd, 2011) to “ad hoc publics” (Bruns & Burgess, 2011), “issue publics” (Birkbak, 2013), “calculated publics” (Gillespie, 2014, pp. 188–191), “hashtag publics” (Rambukkana, 2015), and “affective publics” (Papacharissi, 2015). Each of these concepts hinges upon specific attributions—some focusing on basic technical and social structures (network logic as fundamental; hashtag as index), on the concern of actors as a requisite of participation for evolving issues, or on affects as major drivers of public attention. Others highlight the role of platforms and algorithms in creating (calculated) publics.

Our aim is not to replace these concepts, but to make the *performative character of public connection* in social media empirically accessible through a practice-based

approach and the conceptual framework of “performative publics” (Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2018; Lünenborg et al., 2020). The attribute “performative” emphasizes that publics are never given or fixed. Like gender (Butler, 1993) or other social categories, publics are made and re-made repeatedly by big and “small acts of engagement” (Picone et al., 2019) among heterogeneous actors. In their performative reiteration, publics emerge as an ongoing dynamic, fluid, and unstable process. The concept is situated between journalism studies, gender media studies, and media activism research, bringing forth several arguments that sensitize our empirical research.

A first essential principle is to give equal treatment to different groups of actors. Following a relational approach, we do not prioritize journalism or other types of actors from the beginning. Instead, we trace the participation and performativity of six different groups of actors defined beforehand: institutionalized journalism, noninstitutionalized media, civil society actors, scientific actors, political actors, and “private” citizens without clear affiliations to the other groups. The goal is to identify case-specific patterns and practices of performativity, and reconstruct the specific conditions of emerging publics in digital environments. Whose voice will become loud and heard is a question that needs to be answered empirically in each case. The concept contributes to relational journalism studies “beyond journalism” (Deuze & Witschge, 2018), paying attention to the possible (ir)relevance of journalistic actors in making specific publics and relations between non-journalistic and journalistic actors.

Second, the concept of “performative publics” emphasizes the importance of gender relations and gendered hierarchies. Following Butler’s (1993) understanding of performativity, publics are regarded as inevitably gendered. Gender roles, norms, and also sexes are continuously constructed through the repetition of verbal and corporeal acts. Research on nonfiction content in mass media consistently finds strong gendered biases, especially with regard to speaker positions of expertise, or political and economic power (Aaldering & Van Der Pas, 2020; Lünenborg & Maier, 2015; Ross et al., 2018). Gender biases exist on different levels regarding not only participation or representation, but also the way gender and gendered power relations are performed or depicted. Publics in social media can confirm, resist, or transgress gender roles and inequalities in representation (Wilhelm, 2021). Current feminist movements demonstrate how visibility can be raised through digital feminism (Baer, 2016; Clark-Parsons, 2019), while being countered simultaneously with misogyny and antifeminist sentiments (Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Sobieraj, 2018). The concept of performative publics addresses gendered structures of public discourse, regardless of whether public issues are feminist. We seek to trace and compare gendered voice and the performance of gendered power relations on a case-specific basis.

Third, the concept regards publics emerging from media practice that enable different forms of “public connection” (Couldry & Markham, 2006; Swart et al., 2017). The shared spaces of social media elicit both convergent and distinct gendered practices of social association. In a way, every actor is urged to be unique, but participation in social media

is likewise premised on very few anchoring practices (Raetzsch & Lünenborg, 2020) that emerge in relation to affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) and the collective appropriation of social media platforms. We consider practices of self-presenting, informing, valuing, and intervening as anchoring practices that structure further activities (Reißmann et al., 2022). The analytic goal is to attribute specific media practices to different groups of actors as well as to the different gender groups to allow for systematic comparisons across different cases.

Fourth, performative publics highlight dynamics and shifts of speaker positions over time. Social media research is often based on data for only limited time periods, sometimes just days or weeks. In contrast, we attempt to grasp performative publics over longer periods of time, from several months to years. Our goal is to reconstruct the ways in which significant actors or actor groups develop their practices over time. We emphasize transgressions between “layers of publicness” (Raetzsch & Lünenborg, 2020, p. 2874) and dynamic shifts between personal (“publicly private”) and public modes of communication that also allow new actors to become heard and seen, enabling shifts in traditional regimes of visibility.

The notion of performativity indicates that the performativity of practices can be used to identify and analyze contextually differing linkages of practices and their elements. Recurring on the distinction between “practice-as-entity” and “practice-as-performance” (Shove et al., 2012, p. 7), the concept invites researchers to follow the embedding and linkages of practices of public connection beyond the sphere of (social) media. Whereas the main focus is on reconstructing public debates on Twitter and other platforms, performative publics, as a sensitizing concept, reaches out to non-media-centric media research (Morley, 2008). It asks for connections between self-presenting, informing, valuing, and intervening in social media, on the one hand, and on the other, the corresponding or anchoring practice of selected individual, collective, or corporate actors outside of social media.

#systemrelevant as a case study

The case study on #systemrelevant is part of a larger research project on the performative character and emergence of publics between journalism and other public speakers around pandemic-related issues. Throughout 2020, #systemrelevant was on everyone’s lips, being nominated as the Swiss-German word of the year (NZZ, 2020) and making it to sixth place in a similar ranking in Germany (Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache, 2020). The hashtag is a prominent example of the renegotiation of social inequalities during an acute crisis, exposing blind spots in politics and the health care economy, but also their repercussions on affected actors – especially women – in everyday life.

Care and care work are long-standing subjects of research in the social sciences, ethics, and gender studies (Fraser, 2016; Tronto, 2013). Care work is critically analyzed to explain

gender imbalances, to criticize neoliberal capitalism, or to unfold visions for democratic progress (The Care Collective, 2020). On the ground, the overarching aim of care and nursing activism is to adjust the (national) health care system(s) to the needs of patients and to avoid precarious working conditions. It involves field-specific “values, action, sociopolitical knowing, and the ability to form alliances and coalitions” (Florell, 2021, p. 136). In Germany, a broader politicization of nurses and professional caregivers dates back to the introduction of the so-called DRG (diagnosis-related groups) flat-rate billing of care services. This billing system was introduced in 2003 and has led to high pressure on care workers while further exacerbating the commercialization of the care sector (Behruzi, 2021).

Against this background, #systemrelevant connected multiple overlapping discourses around health care, working conditions, and gendered inequality: From private, unpaid care work and homeschooling to increased domestic violence against women during the lockdown—women’s specific burdens became more visible. But women’s representation and voice in coverage of the pandemic remained at low levels in Germany, like in many other countries (e.g., Araújo et al., 2022; Jones, 2020). It was mainly male experts who explained the burdens on women during the pandemic (Prommer et al., 2021). #systemrelevant as a specific articulation on social media promised to be an alternative arena for the formation of a performative public that did not explicitly start as a feminist issue, but that had an impact on the societal valuation of women’s efforts during the pandemic. We ask how gender inequalities become addressed in #systemrelevant, how visible women are as active agents carrying this public, and which groups of actors are actually making the hashtag loud and influential.

The data collection from Twitter started in early March before the hashtag gained momentum on March 16, 2020. Initially, the term referred to the classification of “systemically relevant” professions, allowing for special exemptions for child care, e.g., “emergency care” (Notfallbetreuung), during the first lockdown. In the long run, #systemrelevant propelled a wider discourse on the societal recognition of certain professions and social injustice. The meaning of who is relevant to the system was all of a sudden up for reinterpretation, and social media became a forum of solidarity and contestation. But discourse on social media only reflected the continued relevance of such issues, which were already taken up by long-established civil society organizations. For example, the most relevant account in our Twitter data belongs to the *Berlin Alliance for More Hospital Staff*, which changed into the *Berlin Alliance Health not Profits* during the time of investigation. The alliance was founded in 2013 and goes back to trade-union–led strikes at the well-known University Hospital Charité in Berlin, before it expanded and included staff from other Berlin hospitals. To complement our quantitative data from Twitter, ethnographic research on the alliance’s political work was conducted, as will be described in the following section.

Methods, data, and research questions

To reconstruct #systemrelevant as a performative public, we applied a mixed-methods design of computational methods and qualitative analysis (Reißmann et al., 2022). Our aim was to combine the analysis of network structures with “a focus on individual experiences, practices, and socialities” (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 6, referring to Postill & Pink, 2012). The mixed-methods approach combined (1) network analysis, (2) profile and tweet analysis, and (3) an ethnographic case study.

Network analysis. In a first step, we performed a network analysis as an overall structural analysis. In order to map the dynamic development within the emergence of the hashtag, the dataset was split into three time intervals tracing the pandemic development: t1 (first COVID-19 wave, March–May 2020); t2 (“summer break”, June–September 2020; and t3 (second wave of infection, October–December 2020). By the end of our data collection, the hashtag had gathered around 27,776 tweets and retweets. For each of these time intervals, we created networks of Twitter accounts as nodes and their communicative relations as edges using the open-source programs R (R Core Team, 2020) and Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009). Due to the high tweet volume within the initial months of the investigation period, the first network was the largest in terms of the number of actors participating in the discourse. The analysis thus pays specific attention to the first time interval.

Profile and tweet analysis. In the second step, the results from the network analysis were combined with a standardized analysis of the central actors and their tweets. Different forms of centrality give information about diverging practices of public connection. The most central actors (97 pct. quantile) in terms of indegree, outdegree, and betweenness centrality were coded manually for each of the networks. This comprised coding the degree of organization (individual or organizational account), the societal affiliation to a specific group (journalism, noninstitutional media, politics, science, civil society, or private individuals), and the gender (female, male, nonbinary) of all individual actors. This procedure enabled us to compare group-specific actor profiles. A more detailed coding of the tweet practices was conducted for a quoted sample of 50 actors per societal group (with max. 5 tweets per actor).¹ Altogether, 752 tweets were analyzed with the help of a codebook. Each tweet was assigned to one or more of the basic practices of informing (self-related or related to information from others), valuing (strongly positive or negative), and intervening (either articulating substantive demands or direct calls for participation, e.g., to demonstrate, to sign a petition); to different topics; and to several stylistic features (such as the articulation of personal experience or emotional valence). Processed with MaxQDA, a software for qualitative data analysis, the pool of tweets also allowed for additional qualitative analysis, such as the recontextualization of the topics discussed in #systemrelevant.

Ethnographic case study. In the third step, we carried out an ethnographic case study on the *Berlin Alliance* whose account(s) are most prominent in our Twitter dataset. This

case study consisted of an in-depth interview with Anja Voigt, a spokesperson of the alliance, as well as digital observation (two Zoom meetings), on-site observation (in the context of a demonstration), and additional documents (e.g., the website of the alliance, media coverage on their activities and demands, and Twitter and other social media accounts). The interview (1 hr, 43 min) was structured by a guideline, included elicitation material (network visualization, selected tweets), and was subsequently scripted as a “basic transcript” (Fuß & Karbach, 2014, pp. 61–64). Anja Voigt gave informed consent to be cited by her real name. Although the interview guideline served as a point of departure for thematic coding (Gibbs, 2018; Schreier, 2014), categories evolved both deductively and in a bottom-up way through open coding. The interview took place in July 2021 and connected a retrospective discussion of the initiative’s activities in #systemrelevant during the pandemic’s first year with its ongoing struggle to improve working conditions. Against this background, we decided to follow the alliance into subsequent labor disputes to study the repercussions of #systemrelevant in the bargaining between unions and employers within the framework of a renegotiation of the social order during the COVID-19 crisis. Figure 1 gives an overview of the succession of events, and the points in time when we joined in with our research steps.

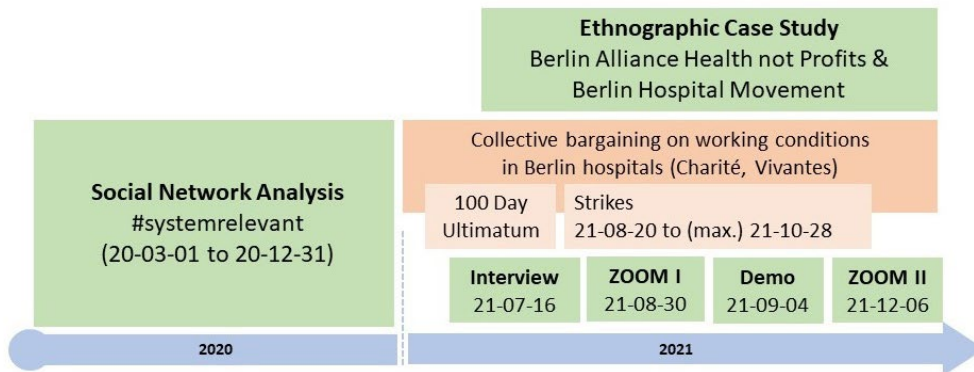


Figure 1. Timeline of events and research steps

The nonparticipant observation in August–December 2021 centered around the alliance’s activities in forming and curating the so-called *Berlin Hospital Movement*. In particular, this movement fought for relief for health care workers in Berlin hospitals. The first observed Zoom meeting (August 2021) of the *Berlin Hospital Movement* hinged upon preparations for longer, unlimited strikes. The second observed meeting (December 2021) was reflective, summing up and evaluating the resolved labor disputes. Both meetings were protocolled in written form, focusing on speaker positions and the linkage of media and nonmedia practice.² The on-site observation took place within the realm of a demonstration, entitled “indivisible” and was used to observe cross-linkages between the Hospital Movement and other urban initiatives. During the whole period of labor disputes, the

movement's publicly available Telegram channel was a focal source to keep in touch with the latest developments.

The mixed-methods approach allows for different data to be gathered that can be analyzed in multiple ways. In this article, we combine an analysis from a macro-perspective (network analyses with additional information of standardized tweet analysis) with a micro-perspective (ethnography).

Research questions. Through this case study, we seek to answer three research questions: First, we asked for the *relational arrangement* of different groups of actors in terms of their activity and visibility. On this level, we were interested in how far the performative public of #systemrelevant was driven by institutionalized journalism, noninstitutionalized media, civil society, politics, science, and private individuals. Our second question addressed the *gendered structure* of the network and asked how and to what extent female actors became visible in relation to male ones. Both questions were answered by relating to data from all three research steps. Our third research question was devoted to

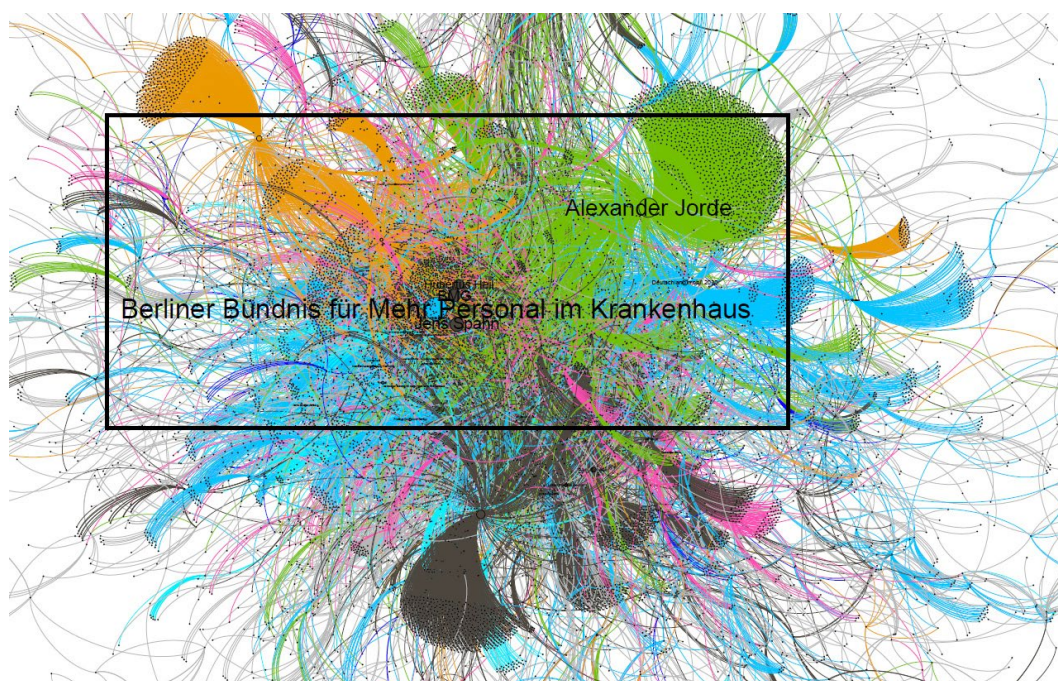


Figure 2. The network of #systemrelevant, t1 (March–May 2020)

Node color: Black = **Politics**; Light blue = **Civil society**; Green = **Private individuals**; Pink = **Journalism**; Dark blue = **Noninstitutional media**; Cyan = **Science**; Orange = **Other**; Grey = **Not identifiable/Not coded**. Nodesize follows **Indegree**. Edge color refers to the addressed node. Layout algorithm: Yifan Hu. Labels represent accounts with high indegrees; individual accounts of nonpublic persons are not labeled due to research-ethical reasons and the need for anonymity.

the ethnographic case study: How do media *practices of intervention* in #systemrelevant link to the formation of labor disputes in health care?

Results

Relational arrangement

Most tweets including the hashtag #systemrelevant were posted during the first months. The discourse network containing tweets from March-May 2020 (t1) consisted of 14,212 nodes and 30,725 edges. Over time, the usage of this hashtag decreased, and networks became sparser. The second network (t2) had 3,245 nodes with 5,110 edges; and the third (t3) consisted of only 2,736 nodes with 3,893 edges. Figure 2 shows the discourse structure during the first time period in terms of the attention that different kinds of actors received (node size proportional to indegree). The network visualization shows how different groups of actors recognized each other and did not build a polarized discourse. The network center was dominated by civil society activists and organizations (blue), political actors (black) who received a lot of attention by being addressed directly via @ mentions, and some private individuals (green) whose tweets were retweeted a lot. Journalistic accounts (pink) did not attain a prominent position within the center of the visual network.



Figure 3. Identifying the care cluster of #systemrelevant

Node color: Black = **Politics**; Blue = **Civil society**; Green = **Private individuals**; Pink = **Journalism**; Dark blue = **Noninstitutional media**; Cyan = **Science**; Orange = **Other**; Grey = **Not identifiable/not coded**. Nodesize follows **Indegree**. Edge color refers to the addressed node. Layout algorithm: Yifan Hu. Labels represent accounts with high indegrees; individual accounts of nonpublic persons are not labeled due to research-ethical reasons and the need for anonymity.

Making #systemrelevant a health care public. Zooming into the network, Figure 3 shows two important nodes in the center of the network: *Alexander Jorde*, and the *Berlin Alliance for More Hospital Staff (Berliner Bündnis für Mehr Personal im Krankenhaus)*. Together with other initiatives, they established the “care work cluster”. Whereas #systemrelevant is an artificial word, offering a diversity of potential meanings, thematic priority on health care work was established by this cluster during the first weeks. We already introduced the *Berlin Alliance* as our ethnographic case. *Alexander Jorde* describes himself as a “nurse and social democrat”. With more than 10,000 followers, he is one of the most visible heads of the care work community in Germany.³

Although the pandemic brought hospitals and residential care homes to public attention, the prominence of care work actors in the network is not self-evident. Recalling the beginning of the pandemic, our informant, Anja Voigt, spokesperson of the *Berlin Alliance*, reported on someone in her team: “This [the upcoming discourse on systemic importance] is absolutely an issue. If we don’t set it now and don’t become active on our own initiative [...], then we’re pretty stupid”. The movement used the hashtag both intensively and critically to *inform* about the shortcomings of the German health care system, to *evaluate* and critically comment on the lack of progress, and to *intervene* by addressing politicians in charge and mobilizing both the care work community and all possible allies. To understand the initiative’s communicative success in #systemrelevant, it is important to acknowledge its pre-pandemic status. The initiative benefited from the already well-established activist infrastructure before the COVID-19 crisis. In the visual network, the initiative is strongly connected to other civil society actors. Some of these are run by other local care activism initiatives (e.g., in Hamburg or Cologne); others act as allies from civil society (i.e., left-wing movements or trade-union-led initiatives campaigning against labor injustice). As a collective communicative action, they were able to form a strong voice and turn #systemrelevant into a discourse about the bad shape of the German health care system and the urgent need for change.

Solidarity and care gratitude. About one-third of all analyzed tweets ($n = 752$) addressed the situation of health care workers. The second most important group mentioned in the tweet corpus was other medical staff such as physicians (14 pct.). All other considered groups (kindergarten staff, retail clerks, teachers, women, migrants) were represented with significantly lower shares. Similar to international health care-initiated hashtags such as #GetUsPPE (Ojo et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2022), tweets reflected the risky situation of standing at the frontline of the pandemic. Beyond the current challenges, structural conditions were questioned, ranging from low income to long working hours, to chronic shortage of staff, and to neoliberal logics adapted to public health policy.

Criticizing the economic injustice and poor working conditions among health care workers was made urgent and received recognition from all sides of society, despite being a political topic for decades already. In contrast to using social media and Twitter to express solidarity among professionals (Brøgger et al., 2021), care workers experienced sol-

idity from other groups of actors as well. Many tweets expressed gratitude and respect for the efforts of care workers, such as: “We do not need bonuses for DAX-listed companies, but for the heroes of the everyday” (politician belonging to a left-wing party); “You are #systemrelevant and a #hero. Thank you very much!” (corporate scientific account); or “#systemrelevant and the #wages that go with it. This does not fit together” (journalist).

With #systemrelevant, care workers slipped into a position of growing visibility, prominence, and recognition. Care became a “buzzword of the moment” (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 889), the social figure of the “Corona hero” (Skog & Lundström, 2022) and the “SuperNurse” (Einboden, 2020) became public metaphors, and journalists covered the daily experiences of care workers in Germany widely.

Resisting the applause. Tweets in our sample that were authored by care workers themselves reveal that valuing and negotiating the ascribed status as “heroes” was an important communicative practice. Care workers articulated astonishment over the unexpected and unfamiliar appreciation, but mixed this with sarcasm and doubts. They criticized superficial forms of gratitude such as applause, and pointed to the lack of actual

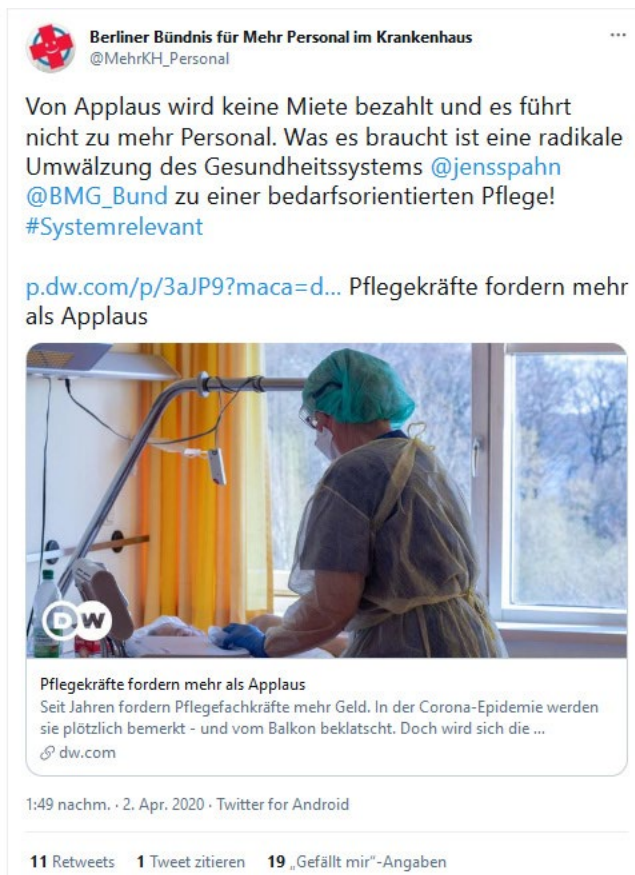


Figure 4. *Applause doesn't pay the rent—Exemplary tweet of the Berlin Alliance*

Tweet from April 2, 2020

Applause doesn't pay the rent and it doesn't lead to more staff. What is needed is a radical upheaval of the health system @jensspahn @BMG_

Bund towards needs-based care! #Systemrelevant

Linked Content = Online-Article by Deutsche Welle, entitled "Nurses demand more than applause"

change and measures taken by the government and hospital operators to improve working conditions.

The care workers' critical stance enabled them to counter the public mood of gratitude and simplified narratives, focusing instead on the need for structural change. Although journalistic accounts did not appear as major attention receivers in the network (see Figures 1 and 2), the distribution of links and commenting on journalistic content



Figure 5. Linking the “Corona Hero” narrative to political questions

5a

Tweet from October 19, 2020

The former Corona heroes are facing an icy wind in the collective bargaining for public sector salaries. To increase the pressure on the employers, @_verdi is calling for a two-day warning strike at hospitals. #systemrelevant

Linked Content = Online-Article by nd—Neues Deutschland, entitled “Let them eat applause”

5b

Tweet from October 30, 2020

During the first wave, there was a lot of applause for the #CoronaHeroes. This meant everyone who works in one of the #systemrelevant professions. But months later, there is hardly anything left of it. #Frontal21

Linked Content = Online-Video by ZDF (public service TV), political magazine frontal 21, entitled “Celebrated Corona heroes: Much applauded, hardly any recognition”

was important for activists to make this demand clear. Almost one out of five tweets posted by civil society actors referred to journalistic material. Care work activists navigated media coverage, positively valuing and (re)distributing especially those articles that focused on structural deficits (see Figure 4). The *Berlin Alliance* also seized the opportunity by contributing to legacy media with interviews and guest articles, including a critical article pointing to fundamental deficiencies of the German health care system, authored by Anja Voigt on the wide-reaching German online news platform *Spiegel Online*. Professional journalism thus appropriated the knowledge and credibility of the care workers' movement.

The relational emergence of publics here shows a loose connection between care work actors and left-wing/liberal media. This connection was not formalized or orchestrated, but rather resonated practically in a common direction of argumentation. Content from left-wing and liberal media circulating in #systemrelevant both took up and reframed the social figure of the pandemic hero. Storytelling here served to express individual experience, but was also used as a launchpad for asking political questions. The demand for structural change culminated during the collective bargaining between trade unions and employers in October 2020 (see Figure 5).

Resisting the applause gave the discourse a certain spin: Whereas for everyone else, the pandemic was an exceptional state, for care workers, the exception was routine and normality. #systemrelevant as a discourse enforced the tension between the *symbolic* (applause) and the *material* (wages and working conditions). On Twitter, other hashtags, such as #MoreThanApplause (#MehrAlsApplaus), emerged and accompanied the usage of #systemrelevant.

To sum up, civil society actors and a cluster of care work initiatives dominated the discourse in #systemrelevant in its most intense period. Journalism was not a significant player in terms of visibility and attention, but select journalistic content was circulated and valued by other actor groups. Care work activists made the hashtag popular, and used the upcoming discourse on systemic importance to reject mere applause and point to the need for structural change.

Female (in)visibility: Ambivalent representation of gender

As in many other countries, care work in Germany is done predominantly by women. In 2020, around 80 pct. of all jobs officially registered in geriatric nursing and hospital care were performed by women (Statista, 2021). Prommer and Stüwe (2020) have analyzed German TV news coverage and given evidence that women are generally underrepresented and rarely cited as experts by journalists. Media coverage during the pandemic is no exception in this regard. Prommer et al. (2021) have found no significant increase in the mention of female experts from the health and care sector in their analysis of TV news about Covid-19: 26 pct. of TV experts surveyed during the pandemic in 2020 were female compared to 28 pct. in 2016. This misrepresentation perpetuates the invisibility of nurses' voices in media, as has been repeatedly found in both national (e.g., Isfort, 2013)

and international (e.g., Mason et al., 2018) research. Male care workers, such as *Alexander Jorde* or *Ricardo Lange*, are prominent figures in the German care discourse, with *Ricardo Lange* gaining visibility throughout the pandemic, e.g., by writing a weekly column for Berlin-based newspaper *Tagesspiegel* and being portrayed by the leading political magazine, *Der Spiegel* (Laurenz, 2021). Through the case study, we sought to reveal patterns of gender relations that either affirm or transgress such broader trends.

Female invisibility in visual networks. In our network analysis, gendered (in)visibility was represented by high respectively low indegrees of individual accounts. The indegree

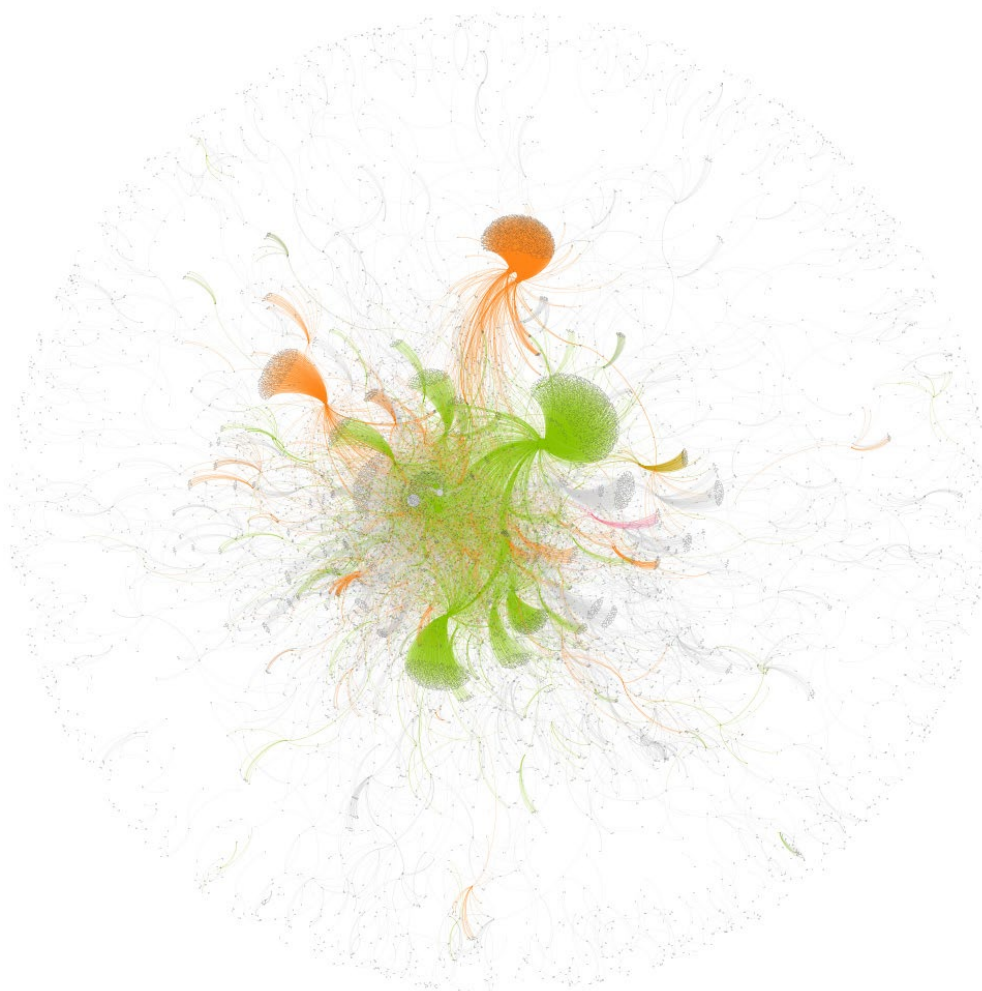


Figure 6. Network structure of attention receivers according to gender, t1 (March–May, 2020)

Node color: Green = **Male**; Orange = **Female**; Pink = **Nonbinary**; Grey = **Not identifiable/Not coded**. Nodesize follows Indegree. Edge color refers to the addressed node. Layout algorithm: Yifan Hu.

measures the share of incoming edges established by retweets, mentions, quotes or replies. Actors with a high indegree get a lot of attention and are thus often called authorities. The performative public of #systemrelevant reaffirmed the gendered hierarchies of mass media rather than challenging them. The most addressed individual account in the first period belongs to *Alexander Jorde* (see Figure 3), next to accounts by two male federal ministers. The visual network is thus skewed towards masculine dominance (see Figure 6). Female accounts appeared only in the periphery during all three time periods. Whereas this gendered gap is not surprising for network and Twitter research in general (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013), we expected a more balanced picture here—not least as a performative space to overcome the dominance of male experts in legacy media.

As part of her general reflections on gendered visibilities, Anja Voigt gave a partial explanation for this observation, pointing to the dominance of male officials in health management positions. The problem of unequally gendered representation in social media may be entangled with power relations in the medical sector itself, in which hierarchies between care workers and management, as well as trade unions, are also strongly gendered.

Women's invisible work behind the scenes. The density of mutually connected civil society accounts was characteristic for the aforementioned “care cluster”. Although female actors did not receive much attention in the network, they were committed members of collective initiatives and associations that carried the discourse forward. The *Berlin Alliance* was exemplary for intense female participation in a collective. Anja Voigt works in a team of eight persons who take responsibility for the initiative's accounts on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Together with another woman and a man, she steers the Twitter account, rotating individual responsibility week by week. The engagement of women in the initiative's “coordination circle” is strikingly high as well. Women's investment of time and energy here remains invisible, because it feeds into collective accounts. The two observed Zoom meetings were also chaired by a woman. In the second meeting, three representatives of different striking groups summed up and reflected on the keys to success—all of them were women.

A second form of female engagement can be described as an extension of invisible work (Hatton, 2017). Our network data revealed a gap between those accounts that receive attention—mainly male accounts. When it comes to accounts shifting attention toward others (share of outlinks), the gender distribution is more balanced. Women take a relevant role to disperse attention within the network. Both men and women link more toward male accounts (see Table 1). But men's visibility within the network was made up disproportionately by communicative work of women, compared to the attention women receive by men. 60 pct. of female interaction with individual accounts via retweeting, quoting, or replying addressed males. This relational work reproduces the division between visible versus invisible work, yet over time, stabilizes the discourse by growing the network around it.

Table 1. Gender relations in inlinks and outlinks, t1 (March–May, 2020), n = 2,588 edges)

	Nonbinary	Female	Male	Not identifiable	Share of outlinks
Nonbinary	0%	27%	71%	2%	2%
Female	1%	35%	60%	4%	38%
Male	1%	21%	76%	2%	45%
Not identifiable	0%	24%	68%	8%	16%
Share of inlinks	1%	27%	69%	4%	100%

Notes: Green = Male; Orange = Female

Female visibility in visuals and linked contents. In contrast to women’s limited visibility in the network, women were more likely to be seen in tweets themselves, especially when tweets embedded visuals. 29 of the 180 visuals in our tweet sample include images producing meaning related to care work and health. Eight of these images depicted only women, most of them female nurses (photographic and nonphotographic); only three depicted men. The *Berlin Alliance’s* account clearly showed a strong presence of both female voices and visuals depicting female care workers. Anja Voigt and her colleagues joined #systemrelevant with a series of protest images that became (local) memes through sharing. The first image showed a group of four female nurses in work clothes (see Figure 7). In later posts, each woman was portrayed individually. The nurses hold signs in front of their bodies stating, for example, “never again a cost factor”. The visuals are accompanied by textual quotes of the nurses, critically pointing to issues such as DRG billing. Anja Voigt commented that this group photo had become a kind of local icon: “It has gone mega viral”. At the time of the interview, a large-format print decorated the hospital building, and the image also became part of a pocket calendar. The entanglement of individual female voices articulating structural problems is characteristic for the *Berlin Alliance’s* media work.

The biggest problem for Anja Voigt is not the underrepresentation of female care work, but forms of misrepresentation—the *way in which* and the *reasons for which* (female) care workers are portrayed in the media:

I think that there is always more at that point, can always be more, of course, but at that point, I think we [female care workers] are not so underrepresented. I just sometimes have the feeling that people are chosen who are particularly suffering and particularly [saying], “Oh, I’m in such a bad way. It’s so awful”—which is certainly true, but I would rather have voices that say, “Yes, it sucks, but we’re doing something about it. We are actively against it.” So, I would prefer that kind of focus.

Exhaustion and suffering are certainly part of nurses’ everyday life, yet this image contradicts the self-understanding of female care work activists seeking to be recognized as reasoning and fighting civic actors—as political subjects. The transitioning of the *Berlin Alliance* during the period of investigation reflects and highlights this ambition. Whereas

feminist thought was previously an intellectual basis, it moved more into the spotlight. For example, “#feminism” became an explicit part of their self-description on Twitter.

Although nursing activism has a rich history, care workers still struggle with an image characterized by selflessness and dutiful caring for others (Balaam, 2017, pp. 171–175), with its roots in historic stereotypes of women as “caring mothers” (Villa Braslavsky, 2020; Vinken, 2001). Compared to the *longue durée* of female devotion, the “nursing’s protest narrative” (Gordon, 2005, p. 205) is a rather new phenomenon (Grist & Jennings, 2020).

Depictions of exhausted female nurses during the pandemic partially reproduced the historic stereotype of women as “caring mothers”. In contrast, tweets and linked content in #systemrelevant presented female care workers as rather active and powerful. Interestingly, this was also true for most of the journalistic content shared under the hashtag. We assume that #systemrelevant counters and differentiates mainstream images of nurses’ pandemic burdens.

Summing up, our analysis reveals ambivalent findings regarding the gendered structure of the performative public #systemrelevant. In terms of visibility and attention in the network, gendered hierarchies as known from legacy media are reproduced rather than transgressed. Female activity remains invisible, because women do not appear as single players but contribute significantly to care work collectives such as the *Berlin Alliance*. A different picture emerges with regard to tweet content and embedded visuals. Not least because of the activist dominance in the discourse, female care workers not only gain visibility, but are also presented as active and combative fighters for their rights.



Figure 7. Protest image by the Berlin Alliance

Tweet from March 23, 2020

For years, care was just a cost factor that was subject to saving cuts. In times of #COVID-19 with once #Systemrelevant We will remind politics later #Spahn

From symbolic recognition to structural intervention

The symbolic renegotiation of the social order in #systemrelevant and the struggle for improved labor conditions are entangled as two sides of interventionist practice. At the time we approached the alliance in July 2021, the second round of labor disputes within the pandemic was about to begin. Activists were fighting for an additional agreement to relieve the pressure in Berlin hospitals (*Tarifvertrag Entlastung*), demanding more leisure time and a guaranteed ratio of nurses to patients. Our focus here is on connections between the preceding symbolic intervention in #systemrelevant and the subsequent interventionist (media) practices of mobilizing, protesting, and striking one year later. In 2021, the *Berlin Alliance* became a major driver of the newly formed *Berlin Hospital Movement*. This movement was performing an intense campaign that was carefully integrated into the local and national political agenda with two political elections (federal elections and elections for the Berlin House of Representatives) and the bargaining between trade union and employers on different levels. In the end, the trade union could enforce many of its demands after tough labor disputes, including 30 to 43 days of strike. But to understand the repercussions of #systemrelevant, we first have to go back to the second half of 2020.

From #systemrelevant to “relevant in the wrong system”. September and October 2020 brought a first test of what symbolic recognition was worth materially. For the first time, the nationwide wage bargaining in the public service sector took place during a pandemic. The result was some minor improvements, but no major changes in working conditions. Our network data show that the *Berlin Alliance* turned away from #systemrelevant just at the same time. Whereas politicians and institutional actors of civil society, such as trade unions, were still using the hashtag, the participation of care work initiatives declined considerably. Anja Voigt explains:

Because people in the system couldn't hear that anymore either, this “systemically relevant”. What does that actually mean? What is it actually? What does that mean to me? We discussed this for a long time and we don't really use it anymore.

The decision to leave #systemrelevant was a protest against a discussion that ended up in only symbolic recognition. By the end of 2020, the *Berlin Alliance* decided to index their posts (inter alia) by using #relevantinthewrongsystem (#relevantimfalschensystem). This hashtag did not trend, but it disclosed the growing sentiment of being fobbed off with symbolic appreciation.

“Boycotting” #systemrelevant was an intermediate step within a broader process of reframing and rebuilding the alliance. At an earlier stage, the transformation from the *Berlin Alliance for More Hospital Staff* to the *Berlin Alliance Health not Profits* already reflected this process by explicitly naming the economic pressure. The rather narrow call for more staff—still an important goal—gave way to a broader demand to change the health care system in general. The launch of the network's new Twitter account on Labor

Day 2020 (1 May) and a fresh new website were symbolic turning points that changed the narrative and radicalized the alliance's public image.

Trajectory of a discursive contradiction. #Systemrelevant has largely disappeared as a performative public on Twitter, but its repercussions can be seen in the labor disputes one year later, where the tension between the symbolic and the material became a major launchpad. Particularly at the beginning, the *Berlin Alliance* and the *Berlin Hospital Movement* argued with reference to experiences during the pandemic. An invitation to a public Zoom meeting in May 2021 put this as follows:

2021 is a decisive year for the conflicts in the healthcare system. With the experience of the Corona pandemic, it has become clear to many people that a healthcare system characterized by economization and the profit logic can no longer continue.

In mid-August, in the context of an announcement for a public discussion with a journalist and sociologist before the start of token strikes, activists asked "what it is about to be 'systemically relevant' and nevertheless to be exploited?" They wanted to unfold visions for a society "in which care has its appropriate place". Other messages repeated were, now is the time "to let the applause be followed by action", or "clapping was yesterday". As the disputes intensified and turned into lasting strikes, the pandemic slogans of "systemic relevance" and "more than applause" gradually toned down. Media work by activists concentrated on concrete demands, informing about the status quo of bargaining, on mobilizing for demonstrations and visiting strike pickets. The repertoire of interventionist practices combined digital and analogue media, including a set of sharepics⁴ to spread core messages, offering press reviews to confirm resonance, and images and videos from protest actions ranging from traditional demonstrations to artistic performances. Particularly on the road to the elections, activists created a mood of restlessness. They pinned themselves to politicians, visited their polling booths while also using a series of demonstrations to provoke citizens' sense of being affected.

From societal recognition to collective action. Conceptually, the *Berlin Hospital Movement* is underpinned by the idea of a "solidary urban society" ("Solidarische Stadtgesellschaft"), which includes the support of other activist movements and the Berlin population in general. The basic idea is to mobilize citizens for *their* local hospitals and to create a sense of community around a shared interest among otherwise dispersed groups. This emphasis on reaching out and networking existing initiatives has consequences for the internal organization and public representation of the alliance. A solidary urban society becomes a visionary narrative for the future of care (work) and a core element of the movement's public self-presentation. While appealing to solidarity is a common protest practice, here it is connected to the pre-established discourse on systemic relevance. Care activists and their allies reenact and recollect the public mood of the pandemic's beginning. Slogans like "You for us?" or "We save lives, who saves us?" (see Figure 8) gently and

provokingly remind citizens and politicians to stand by their pledges at the height of the pandemic.

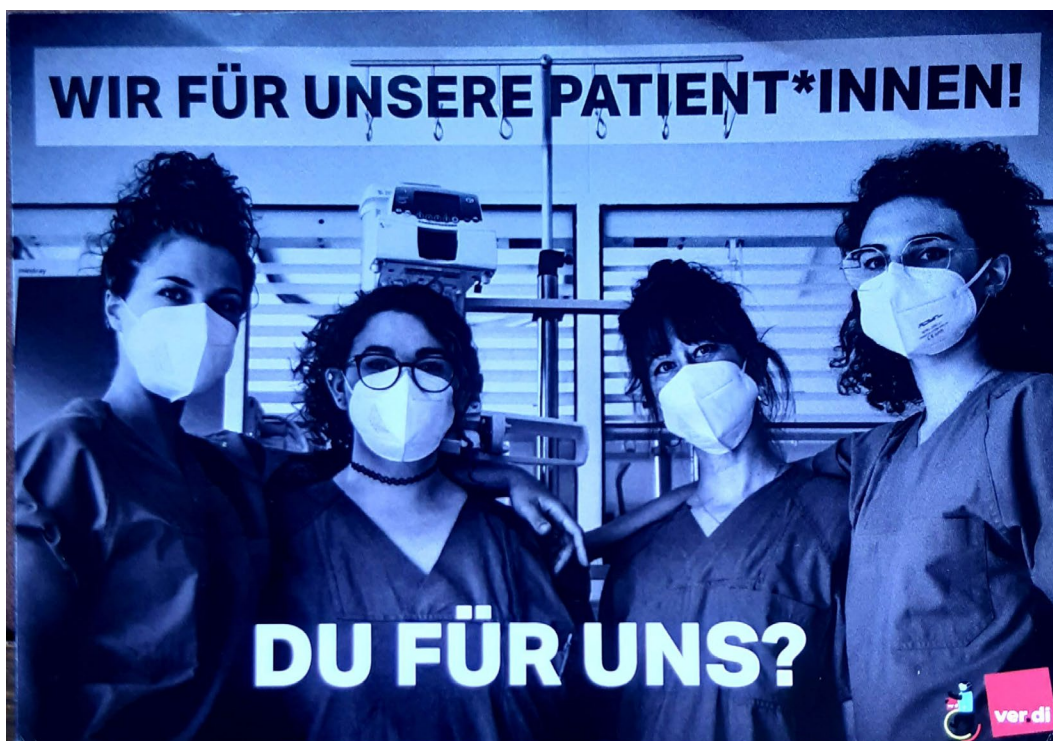


Figure 8. Flyer of the Berlin Hospital Movement, September 2021: "We for our patients! You for us?"

As an offspring of the movement, a large variety of local protest activities emerged, including a protest camp. The collective action performed by the *Berlin Hospital Movement* should not be described as a fluid participation of faceless actors, and thus needs to be distinguished from what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe as "connective action". A set of visible actors and a network of pre-established allies that grew rapidly during the protests is essential to understand the dynamics of this public intervention. As an indissoluble connection of online and offline activities, using materialities of digital media as well as hospital buildings, the urban environment, and the streets, media practices and media-related practices enabled the protest of care workers. The societal recognition that care workers previously had experienced in #systemrelevant was now turned into collective action of diverse actors on a local basis.

To sum up, interventionist practice in #systemrelevant and intervention in subsequent labor disputes show some common features. The discourse on systemic relevance vanished little by little but remained traceable with regard to the tension between the symbolic and the material that culminated on the road to elections, and with regard to

the societal recognition that transformed care workers' activism into a communal body of heterogeneous groups fighting for better health work conditions.

Conclusion

Our analysis offers profound insights into the formation of performative publics at a moment of social crisis during the global pandemic. It aimed to answer three research questions addressing: (1) the relational setting of actors, (2) the gendered structure of discourse, and (3) the entanglement between symbolic discourse and the material working conditions of care workers. We want to close by reflecting on performative publics as a sensitizing concept to understand the emerging dynamics of publics in digital media environments. To frame the results of this case study in a theoretical perspective, five aspects are especially relevant.

Publics as relational arrangement: Going beyond journalism. An emphasis on the relational emergence of publics in social media includes a variety of actors and thus goes beyond journalism itself. Our results show the relevance of such an approach, because it clearly identifies journalism as a peripheral actor in this specific case rather than a driving force. We do not expect such a setting to be stable, but to depend on topics and discourse formation. It will be up to further research to identify which (pre)conditions structure or even determine the intensity with which different groups of actors feed into the dynamic formation of publics.⁵ To understand how public discourse on health care work in #systemrelevant became relevant, we could identify the relational communication between a variety of civil society actors—relying on networks established already before the pandemic—that allowed them to strategically address politics as well as the general public. Within the relational setting of #systemrelevant, journalistic content is mobilized and valued primarily by civil society and care work actors. Of course, care workers do not only use Twitter to make their working conditions a subject of public debate. However, Twitter is crucial for them, as the platform enables them to address responsible politicians as well as institutionalized media directly.

Gender relations as contested terrain in emerging publics. In legacy media, the discourse on health issues during the pandemic has reproduced a strong gender bias in the form of male expertise and female invisibility. We expected social media to offer more balanced forms of visibility, but our data confirms this expectation only in part. The gendered structure in the public of #systemrelevant remains ambivalent. The network structure reaffirms traditional gender hierarchies, giving high visibility to male accounts. But shared content promotes progressive images of female nurses. While care work is a predominantly female work domain, in terms of participation, Twitter data unexpectedly show a dominance of male voices receiving more attention than women in the network—quite similar to the unequal representation in journalism. Interestingly, women pay a disproportionately high level of attention to male actors in the network.

This new form of invisible work reproduces the gendered imbalance in the network of #systemrelevant and thus perpetuates inequality. Digging deeper into the data and into the case, however, offers a more nuanced picture: The visual practices of the activists on the ground create images of the active care worker, correcting and criticizing stereotypical images of the self-sacrificing nurse. This shift in meaning reflects broader struggles over gendered hierarchies in the medical system and public discourse. The case study on #systemrelevant also sheds light on the gendered unfolding of a nonexplicit feminist discourse. In future work, we shall be able to compare the patterns found here with case studies that are much more driven by feminist action.

Raising voice: Making public connection. #systemrelevant pushes care workers from the fringe of society into the spotlight of public attention. Starting with collective empathy by symbolic recognition, care workers later counter this empathy—rejecting symbolic recognition alone and demanding structural change in the health care system. The hashtag organizes attention and visibility for the community coming to terms with both the changed situation and their emerging public role. Confronted with unfamiliar public attention, care workers position themselves critically in the pandemic discourse, expressing the normalcy of crisis in their field of work through practices of informing and valuing, although practices of intervention matter most for the activists. This case-specific anchoring sensitized our analysis to search for repercussions of the discursive interventions in #systemrelevant and for structural interventions in the political struggle for improvements. Strategically building alliances, mobilizing participants for action, and dealing with the contradiction between the symbolic and the material are all activities linked indispensably to media practices.

Publics as dynamic processes: Instability and contestations. Highlighting the dynamic processes of emerging and disappearing publics, the sensitizing concept of performative publics seeks to make visible its fluid and (in)stable character, including the changing visibility of different actor groups. In this case, we studied a public whose overall relevance turns out to be limited in time. The trajectory of #systemrelevant can be summed up as follows: First, care workers adopt an emerging societal discourse and use #systemrelevant as a communicative forum to give the discourse a certain spin. Once established, other institutional actors jump on the bandwagon, and activists themselves reorganize their activities, abandoning the initial hashtag. As a discursive launchpad, however, the debate on systemic relevance prevails in subsequent interventionist practice. A systematic comparison of the dynamics between different (pandemic) publics will enable further research to identify patterns of similarities and differences here.

Going beyond media-centric media studies. Starting our analysis with Twitter data and focusing on a hashtag seems to be at odds with talking about non-media-centric media studies. Twitter analysis is, in contrast, a typical, data-driven approach to identify dynamic processes of the formation of publics based on select publicly available media data. However, with our mixed-methods approach, we try to open up the terrain and go substan-

tially beyond this traditional approach. Our ethnographic case study demonstrates the need for approaches that do not start with media data nor necessarily end up with them. Following the actors, interviewing, engaging in nonparticipant observation, and carrying out document analysis opens up visibility for a wide range of activities that are related to media, but that are typically not at the center of traditional media studies. Our analysis also demonstrates how media and nonmedia practices are intermingled, sometimes in unexpected ways: The observed interventionist practices in later labor disputes relate only vaguely to #systemrelevant, while practices of mobilizing, organizing, and their mediated representation of protest reenact basic characteristics of the prior discourse. The debate on system relevance forms a background to publicly reframe the alliance's ambitions to change the health care system in general, and translate public solidarity into localized collective action. Our approach allows us to grasp the diversity and performativity with which actors in the field relate to media in order to orchestrate, organize, and mobilize public attention for their interests.

The combination of truly different kinds of data—social network analysis to identify the overall structure of Twitter communication; content and practice analysis to describe groups of actors and their media practices; and virtual as well as in situ ethnography following single actors in their digital and social environment—allows us to switch from abstract patterns to thick descriptions, or to zoom in and zoom out analytically. We suggest applying this kind of data combination and triangulation to describe and understand the performative dynamics of (local) publics—and not just in the global health crisis.

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Notes

- 1 Intercoder reliability for the categories used: 4.1.1 Subject areas: 83.48 pct.; 4.2.1 File type: 90.53 pct.; 4.2.2 Area of reference: 75.46 pct.
- 2 We decided not to record these events, because it was not possible to obtain informed consent from about 30 participants (first meeting) and about 160 participants (second meeting).
- 3 In our network, Alexander Jorde is visualized in green because he was coded as a "private individual" who was not formally affiliated with an institution or a collective initiative according to his Twitter profile at the times of data collection. At the same time, since he is engaged in improving caregivers' working conditions, he can be understood as being part of the civil society block represented in blue. Both central nodes need to be seen as belonging together.

- 4 Sharepics are images designed to spread quickly and consist of either text only (claim, slogan) or a text-image pair (e.g. portrait and quote; claim and symbol/logo).
- 5 Our ongoing research includes further cases that already allow insights into quite different levels of involvement of journalism in the emergence of publics.

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