ALLIES OF EXPERTISE: HOW LAYPEOPLE DEFEND THE EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY OF SCIENCE ONLINE

Katharina Berr

Weizenbaum Institute, Germany

ABSTRACT

Social media is often perceived as a particularly hostile environment for established expertise. Instead of following the advice of scientists or other established experts, there is a fear that laypeople may turn to alternative claims from online communities, influencers, or even populists and conspiracy theorists. However, this study demonstrates that laypeople not only circumvent or challenge the epistemic authority of established expertise online, they also engage in ways aiming to uphold it. Drawing on a two-year digital ethnography of an online community organized in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, I conceptualize such engagement as that of allies of expertise. When taking on this role, laypeople perceive the epistemic authority of established expertise as threatened and defend it against post-truth phenomena on social media platforms. Thereby, they aim to convince others to favor scientific expertise over alternative claims when informing their opinions and decisions. With this concept I contribute to expertise scholarship, especially to understandings of a crisis of expertise.

Keywords: Crisis of expertise; public engagement with science; social media; post-truth; Covid-19; digital ethnography

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With the internet it seems that anyone can pass as an expert. At least this is a prominent concern in discussions about a "post-truth era" (D'Ancona, 2017, p. 2) or the "death of expertise" (Nichols, 2017). Social media in particular seems to enable laypeople[1] to circumvent or challenge established expertise[2] and draw on alternative claims instead. This may be authentic advice from social media influencers (Arnoldi, 2023; Larrson Heidenblad & Nilsson, 2023), the lived experiences of online communities (Au et al., 2022; Ritwick & Koljonen, 2025), conspiracy theories (Bauer et al., 2023; Harambam et al., 2022), or populist narratives (Collins et al., 2020; Mede & Schäfer, 2020). Scholars of expertise have discussed these concerns – somewhat less alarmist than those over its death – as a "crisis of expertise" (Eyal, 2019; Heimstädt et al., 2024; Reed & Reed, 2022). They regard the internet and social media not as causing this crisis, but as a "multiplier" (Eyal, 2019, p. 83). Competing claims to expertise become increasingly visible online and the question of whose advice to follow becomes more and more difficult to answer.

However, the internet and social media not only contribute to a proliferation of alternative claims to expertise. Recent phenomena suggest that they also enable counteractions. For example, following the 2016 election of Trump as US president and the Brexit vote in the UK as landmark events for a "post-truth era" (D'Ancona, 2017, p. 2), laypeople mobilized online to join scientists in so-called science marches (Riesch et al., 2021). In a similar vein, public scientists who advocated Covid-19 measures such as vaccination, face masks, or social distancing were not only at risk of being harassed but were also celebrated on social media. Some were even treated like celebrities (Joubert et al., 2023). While these phenomena suggest that laypeople not only challenge but also support the epistemic authority of established expertise online, less is known about the mechanisms of such engagement. This study therefore asks how lay engagement that aims to uphold rather than challenge the epistemic authority of established expertise online can be conceptualized.

To examine this research question, I draw on a two-year digital ethnography of an online community organized in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Focusing on how this community defines its own role in relation to scientific experts (as subservient) and post-truth actors (as antagonistic), I demonstrate how laypeople become what I term *allies of expertise*. When taking on this role, laypeople perceive the epistemic authority of science in society as threatened and in need of support. Thus, they defend (what they regard as) scientific expertise against (what they regard as) post-truth phenomena. Contrary to previously studied forms of lay engagement with science, such as citizen science (Baudry et al., 2022) or lay expertise (Epstein, 1995, 2023), *allies of expertise* do not claim insight into or participation in expert work. Instead, they see their role in reproducing scientific virtues such as objectivity, facticity, and rationality in online debates. However, they are not only following role models from the world of science, but are also copying their post-truth antagonists by leveraging the logics and infrastructures of social media. Their goal is to make scientific expertise as visible as alternative claims and to ultimately convince other laypeople that scientific expertise is the most credible and reliable knowledge to inform their opinions and decisions.

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This study contributes to the academic discourse on a "crisis of expertise" (Eyal, 2019; Heimstädt et al., 2024; Reed & Reed, 2022). It illustrates how laypeople on social media not only drive such a crisis forward by circumventing or challenging established expertise in favor of alternative claims. As *allies of expertise,* they perceive such alternative claims as deliberately eroding trust in established expertise and organize themselves to counteract this. Their engagement can contribute to solving this crisis by making established expertise more visible and bolstering its epistemic authority in sometimes confusing and contested online debates. At the same time, their engagement bears the risk of reproducing idealized and "pure" (Shapin, 2010) images of science that the realities of expert work, especially at the science-policy interface, might not be able to fulfill.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

At the heart of many post-truth discourses are binary notions of a "valued objective realm of facts, science and reason," on the one hand, and a "dangerous subjective realm of emotion, ideology and irrationality" (Harambam et al., 2022, p. 787), on the other hand (see also Eyal, 2019; Meyer & Quattrone, 2021). Observers fear that laypeople might reject the former and fall prey to the latter; that they might, for example, bypass the expertise of professional scientists in favor of misinformation, conspiracy theories or science denialism (D'Ancona, 2017; Nichols, 2017). The internet and social media are regarded as breeding grounds for such – to stick with post-truth vocabulary – "fake" or "alternative" claims to expertise. Concerns about a "death of expertise" (Nichols, 2017) even suggest that laypeople might reject established expertise altogether and, with seemingly infinite information at their disposal, resort to their own judgments.

Scholars of expertise can add nuance to these post-truth concerns. Instead of diagnosing an assault on a capital-s science or the demise of a once rational society, they see a "crisis of expertise" (Eyal, 2019; Heimstädt et al., 2024; Reed & Reed, 2022). This crisis can be explained not only by a mistrust of experts but also by their unprecedented role in shaping public opinion and political decisions. Following this line of scholarship, the internet and social media are not regarded as causing this crisis, but as introducing novel dynamics to the public recognition of expertise. On social media in particular, competing claims to expertise are becoming increasingly visible, making the question of the most credible and reliable ones more and more contentious (Eyal, 2019; Eyal & Medvetz, 2023; Knight & Tsoukas, 2019). In other words, the question of who is ascribed epistemic authority and gets "to diagnose and treat a class of problems" (Huising, 2023, p. 455) becomes increasingly difficult to answer. But what does this mean for established expertise online?

Previous research has identified various ways in which laypeople can circumvent or challenge the epistemic authority of established expertise on social media. Key figures in this context are influencers. Previously, traditional gatekeepers like

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academic or media institutions held sway over publicly recognizing knowledge as expertise, usually by drawing on formal credentials or affiliations. On the one hand, social media influencers, especially those with large followings, can now take on this gatekeeping role and endorse alternative claims to expertise (Arnoldi, 2023; Weingart, 2023). On the other hand, logics of social media influencing such as algorithmic visibility, self-branding, or rhetorics of authenticity seem to be influencing lay expectations toward performances of expertise more generally (Bishop, 2023; Hund, 2023). For example, research on so-called "finfluencers" argues that ordinary retail investors are recognized as financial experts by giving emotional and entertaining stock market advice (Guan, 2023) or presenting themselves as more relatable and independent than "greedy bank advisors" (Larrson Heidenblad & Nilsson, 2023, p. 115).

Another way in which the epistemic authority of established expertise is challenged online is the collective mobilization of and knowledge exchange between lay experts (Epstein, 1995, 2023). For example, Au et al. (2022) show how Long Covid patients who feel dismissed by medical experts turn to the lived experiences shared in an online forum. In an adjacent study, Au and Eyal (2022) illustrate how patients use these online communities to develop hybrid knowledges from experiential and established expertise, which they hope will not only result in credibility among their peers but will also make them more likely to be heard by medical professionals. While such active lay engagement with established expertise generally corresponds to the ideal of democratizing science (Weingart et al., 2021), it can be understood as undermining established expertise if it deviates too far from professional standards and regulation (Mayes, 2024). For example, Ritwick and Koljonen (2025) illustrate how laypeople share alternative therapies for chronic illness in an online forum; in this way, unreliable or even dangerous claims are presented as an alternative to established expertise.

Moreover, alternative claims to expertise can be intended to cast doubt on established expertise and frame it as stemming from an intellectual elite that has lost touch with "the will of the people" (Collins et al., 2020). Research on such "science-related populism" (Mede & Schäfer, 2020) or conspiracism (Akrich & Cochoy, 2023; Harambam et al., 2022) shows that such rejections of established expertise are often not rejections of scientific epistemologies per se. Populists and conspiracy theorists accuse the "scientific establishment" (Eyal & Medvetz, 2023, pp. 6–7) of being corrupted by financial or political motives, and thus of being unable to meet its own epistemic and ethical standards. This observation also offers an explanation as to why populist narratives or conspiracy theories are often presented in seemingly scientific forms. For example, Panofsky and Donovan (2019) report how laypeople discuss the quasi-scientific practice of genetic ancestry testing on an online forum to further their white nationalist agenda. Bauer et al. (2023) show how laypeople draw on a controversial study from a scientific preprint server to spread Covid-19-related conspiracies on social media, even though scientists had already rejected the study for not meeting scientific standards.

From social media influencing to lay expert online communities, to populism and conspiracism – existing research can help us understand the different ways in which laypeople circumvent and challenge the epistemic authority of established

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expertise online. However, few scholars have observed that there are also ways in which laypeople support established expertise. The internet and social media seem to function as a "multiplier" (Eyal, 2019, p. 83) in this context, too. For example, in reaction to the presidential election of Trump in the USA and the Brexit vote in the UK, people in various countries mobilized on social media to join political protests. Scientists and lay "sympathizers" (Riesch et al., 2021, p. 46) then took to the streets and marched against "populist knowledge practices" (Stephens et al., 2022, p. 212). Similar forms of lay engagement became evident during the Covid-19 pandemic when some public scientists gained large followings online and were even treated like celebrities (Joubert et al., 2023). Laypeople also supported scientific expertise in private on- and offline conversations. For example, as a New York Times article proposed, by looking for guidance on "how to talk to friends and family who share conspiracy theories" (Warzel, 2020). Moreover, the phrase "follow the science" became a popular "slogan" (Fisher, 2022) or "mantra" (Safford et al., 2021, p. 1) to publicly express support for evidence-based Covid-19 measures (Bozeman, 2022).

So far, empirical examples like these have rarely been discussed as belonging to one phenomenon. However, it is important to not only examine how laypeople challenge, but also how they support the epistemic authority of established expertise online. I argue that gaining a better understanding of such engagement allows for more nuanced views on post-truth concerns and lay perceptions of expertise. With these insights, established experts like public scientists might be better equipped to navigate both social media environments and a "crisis of expertise" (Eyal, 2019; Heimstädt et al., 2024; Reed & Reed, 2022). This study therefore asks how lay engagement that aims to uphold rather than challenge the epistemic authority of established expertise online can be conceptualized.

METHODS

Empirical Setting

To examine this research question, this study draws on a two-year digital ethnography of an online community that was organized in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The community comprises seven German-speaking Facebook groups, all of which were founded between March and November 2020 (see Table 1).

At the heart of the community are the two largest groups, named after German scientist Christian Drosten: *Drosten Ultras* and *Team Drosten.*[3] At the time of my fieldwork, Drosten was (and continues to be) the director of the Institute of Virology at Charité Berlin, where his research focuses on emerging viruses. During the Covid-19 pandemic, he acted as a policy advisor and science communicator. He was both celebrated and attacked for this engagement as a public expert (Joubert et al., 2023; Kupferschmidt, 2020). During our interview, an admin revealed the reasoning behind their group name: "We are soccer nerds. And just like the ultras fans do for soccer, we want to set the mood for science" (Interviewee A). The peculiar combination of the Drosten name and sports fandom ("Ultras," "Team") was supposed to draw in more members.

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Table 1. Overview of the Online Community (Sorted According to Group Size).

	Group Name	Founded	Members (as of March 2023)	Accessibility
1	Team Drosten	May 2020	40,663	Public, visible
2	Drosten Ultras	May 2020	7,442	Public, visible
3	Covid-19 Science	August 2020	3,162	Public, visible
4	Stop Conspiratards	October 2020	2,489	Public, visible
5	How to Deal with Conspiratards Online	May 2020	1,644	Private, visible
6	Support the Real Expert	November 2020	928	Private, visible
7	Stop the Spread	March 2020	820	Private, hidden

Excerpts from the Facebook group descriptions further suggest that the community takes Drosten as a role model, for example: "the Drosten name stands for intelligent expertise, political integrity and good communication. These should also be the guidelines of our group" (Group 1). But while his name featured prominently, the groups' content extended more generally to the current state of the pandemic, scientific advancements, or policy measures. Members usually posted links to content from other websites (news media, blogs, rarely also preprint servers), accompanied by their own summaries, interpretations, or questions. The administrative teams needed to approve each post before it was published in the feed and opened to discussion. Over the course of the pandemic, they also created stricter rules about what to share with the community: they discouraged posts about lived experiences (e.g., about falling ill, or challenges of parenting during a pandemic), moral questions (e.g., visiting elderly relatives, or leaving the home with common cold symptoms), or provocative content (e.g., mocking conspiracy theories). These rules aimed at making the large number of posts manageable, but more importantly, at focusing the groups on scientific expertise instead of anecdotal evidence.

The other five adjacent groups were recommended to me during interviews. For example, the group *Stop Conspiratards*[4] was founded so that members could continue posting emotional or provocative reactions to post-truth phenomena without disturbing factual discussions in other groups of the community. In contrast, the group *Covid-19 Science* aims to provide a space for sharing and discussing scientific expertise with a higher level of complexity and more factual tonality than the two largest groups. Additionally, I was invited to the group *Stop the Spread*. Here, members built their own repository of Covid-19 information. Or in their own words: "this group is a place to gather information so we can have factual discussions outside" (Group 7). To do so, they added links to scientific and journalistic sources, which were diligently sorted according to the most discussed and controversial topics (e.g., "masks as containment measure," "long covid," or "vaccines"). Whenever members wanted to inform themselves – or more importantly, others – they could draw from this shared library. The group *How to Deal with Conspiratards Online* also supported its members with knowledge about algorithmic visibility and other social media logics that would allow

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them to make scientific expertise just as, or even more visible on the platform than content they considered as belonging to post-truth phenomena. Finally, I gained access to a group called *Support the Real Expert*. The group prominently featured a scientist who, similar to Drosten, became a public figure in the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany. However, this scientist was accused of misusing his expert status to spread misinformation about health risks and vaccinations. Individual scientists and science institutions publicly distanced themselves and discredited him as a "bad expert" (Sweet & Giffort, 2021). The group *Support the Real Expert* was explained to me as a so-called honeypot (Interviewee H), a trap to lure in, educate and mock those who supported said scientist.

I understood these seven groups as belonging to one online community, as their administrative teams (consisting of admins and moderators) either overlapped or were connected "behind the scenes." In our interviews, many admins and moderators explained how they took on multiple roles across groups (e.g., the admin of one group would also be listed as moderator in another group), or depending on their resources, took on different responsibilities throughout the pandemic (e.g., they would focus their engagement on one group later on). They also emphasized how the individual groups complemented each other.

Data Collection

In January 2021, a post from the group *Drosten Ultras* appeared on my private Facebook feed. Drawn in by the peculiar combination of German virologist Christian Drosten and the association with sports fandom, I requested membership. Retrospectively, this was my entry to the digital field site. Instead of sampling and analyzing individual posts or comments, however, I chose a digital ethnographic approach (Kozinets, 2019; Pink et al., 2016). This allowed me to gain deeper insight into why and how this community had decided to organize in support of scientific expertise and how they themselves experienced this form of engagement. In line with this approach, the boundaries of my field site were largely informed by the administrative teams of the community. By working in this way, I followed the tradition of "multi-sited ethnography" (Marcus, 1995), which encourages ethnographers to leave it up to research subjects whether a study is about a "particular bounded place or about networks of diverse connections" (Hine, 2009, p. 8). Moreover, I followed the idea of "digital flows" (Markham & Gammelby, 2017, p. 451), meaning that I focused my research on what my interviewees deemed most relevant to the community, or reacted to "hunches and clues" (Markham & Gammelby, 2017, p. 459) gleaned from my observations. Ten months into my field work, I had joined all seven groups relevant to this study. I decided to exclude other groups from my research focus because they did not fit the research question. For example, I excluded Covid-19 and Long Covid patient groups that were used to exchange experiences about the illness and its treatments, or a lack thereof.

Sometimes, the community's practices spilled over into the offline world, for example, when members attended protest marches to stress the necessity of Covid-19 measures in between lockdowns. While my research focuses on the community's

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online activities, I was able to capture some of these practices since they were often reported on and shared in the Facebook groups. In total, the field work lasted for two years with approximately 10 hours per month, during which I took screenshots from the groups' feeds, wrote field notes about my observations, and conducted 24 interviews with members of all seven administrative teams lasting an average of 45 minutes. I de-identified screenshots, interview transcripts, and notes before entering them into the research software MAXQDA, where the data was coded.

When first contacting admins and moderators through the private messenger on Facebook, some were hesitant to speak with me since they had previously experienced hate speech and trolling on the platform. They agreed to interviews only after I had proven my status as a doctoral researcher (e.g., by sending a link to my research profile on my employer's website). To cater to the interviewees' individual preferences (e.g., in terms of privacy or digital literacy), the interviews were conducted via different video and audio call tools. As requested by the interviewees, the conversations were either recorded or substituted with written notes. I obtained verbal consent for these recordings or notes, and to use the contents of our conversations for scientific analysis and reports. Most conversations were followed up with a Facebook friend request and so continued throughout the field work via the private messenger function. I decided to observe but not participate in interactions in the group feeds (e.g., by liking, reacting, commenting, or posting), to disturb the group dynamics as little as possible.

Ethical considerations have been incorporated into the research process throughout and were based on methodological literature and existing guidelines (e.g., AoIR, 2020). Especially challenging in the context of observing large online communities is the so-called "consent gap" (Kozinets, 2019, p. 173). Although social media users publicly share information online, they might not agree to this information being used for research. However, disclosing my role as a researcher through public posts in the group feeds would have carried risks. For one thing, since I presented myself on the platform with my full name, I would also have been exposed to the risk of being harassed by social media users with anti-science attitudes. Moreover, public posts would have been searchable via the platform and would have linked me to the groups I was researching; the pseudonymization could easily have been circumvented, therefore, by searching for my name on the platform. Thus, and in line with considerations about "ambiguous consent" (Roulet et al., 2017), I decided to accept this state of covert observation vis-à-vis the group members with whom I did not interact, and instead prioritized the confidentiality of the admins and moderators I interviewed and whose interactions in the feeds I observed most closely.

Data Analysis

Following an exploratory and inductive research approach, the data analysis was carried out in a highly iterative process. For clarity, it is described here in three steps. The first step comprised exploratory open coding, guided by a general interest in what appeared to be a peculiar form of science fandom. In sports fandom, being an "ultra" means going beyond what a normal fan would do in support of their team.

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In soccer, for example, ultras fans are often associated with provocative chants, pyrotechnics, or even violence (Doidge et al., 2020). To better understand what it means to be a "Drosten Ultra" or member of "Team Drosten," therefore, I focused a first round of open coding on those practices that the community engaged in to support science on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic. Those were labeled, for example: celebrating public scientists, sharing science communication content, debunking misinformation, or mocking conspiracy theories.

The second step entailed the clustering of open codes into broader analytical categories. By drawing on relational mapping (Clarke et al., 2022), I first examined how the community made sense of its own role in relation to scientific experts (as subservient) and post-truth phenomena (as antagonistic). Assigning the open codes to either one of these analytical categories allowed me to subsequently compare and contrast practices in the service of science with practices to counter post-truth phenomena. Interestingly, this led to the observation that the community adopted practices from both their scientific role models and their post-truth antagonists. On the one hand, members of the community reproduced virtues that they attributed to science such as objectivity, facticity, and rationality in online debates. On the other hand, they copied practices from their post-truth antagonists with the goal of leveraging social media infrastructures and logics equally skillfully.

In a third step, and drawing on observations from the digital field site, I applied the conceptual lens of "allyship" to my data. This term is commonly used in the context of social justice causes to describe people who express solidarity and support for marginalized groups that they themselves do not belong to (Dabiri, 2021; Sumerau et al., 2021). This support often becomes visible in social media environments (Clark, 2019; Liu et al., 2024). On Facebook, people regularly use profile filters (i.e., designed frames with symbols or text to add to a profile picture) to declare their allyship (e.g., for Black Lives Matter, or queer rights). They also did so in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, to demonstrate their support for vaccinations. Viewing the data through the conceptual lens of allyship unveiled additional layers of meaning. While it appears counterintuitive to understand established or scientific expertise as marginalized, during the Covid-19 pandemic and especially in social media environments, the community perceived it as being drowned out by post-truth phenomena. Much like allies in the context of social justice causes, they wanted to lend their voices to science in order to make its expertise heard. This highlights that in addition to an expression of fandom toward individual scientists, the community regards its engagement as politically motivated mobilization for the role of science in society.

FINDINGS

Based on the empirical case of this study, I came to understand laypeople that aim to uphold instead of challenge the epistemic authority of established expertise online as *allies of expertise*. To conceptualize their engagement, I first examine how *allies* come to understand their role in relation to scientific experts (as subservient) and post-truth actors (as antagonistic). For both relational categories,

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I then identify practices via which they orient themselves toward their role models from the world of science but also toward their post-truth antagonists. As a result, I argue that the engagement of *allies of expertise* must be understood as being both in the service of science and to counter post-truth phenomena. I support these findings with illustrative examples from my interviews and ethnographic observations.

Lay Engagement in the Service of Science

Allies of expertise engage independently from scientific experts or science institutions, but put themselves in the service of science. In their role, they signal their epistemic subservience to scientific experts. Thus, they refrain from making their own claims to expertise or to participation in expert work. Instead, they orient their practices to their scientific role models and aim to reproduce virtues that are commonly associated with science – objectivity, facticity, and rationality – in otherwise confusing and contested online debates. Through these efforts, they also construct a shared understanding of science and its desired role in society.

Epistemic subservience to scientific experts. "Science is the basis for democracy. Without it, we would live like in the Middle Ages, but instead we had the Enlightenment. We could not have fought the pandemic without science" (Interviewee K). This is what a group admin told me when asked about the role of science in society. There was consensus in the community that when it comes to solving societal challenges – from the pandemic to climate change, to global migration and wars – both individual and political decisions ought to be guided by scientific evidence. While they perceive and acknowledge certain limits of science, such as its inherent provisional quality and uncertainties, or a lack of engaging communication skills in many scientific experts, they were generally convinced of the epistemic superiority of scientific expertise against other ways of knowing. As a moderator emphasized: "a scientist is, after all, a scientist. They are the ones who know something and not the ones who believe something. I think that we should put more trust in them" (Interviewee J).

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the community prides itself on recognizing and putting trust in scientific expertise rather than falling prey to post-truth phenomena. At the same time, however, its members continuously emphasize limits to their own knowledge and skills. "Knowing one's place" outside of expert domains is crucial to them. This epistemic subservience to scientists is reflected in group descriptions such as: "we are no experts. [.] We rely here on the wisdom of the many, surely risking a certain 'swarm stupidity'" (Group 7). Members of the community also signal this stance to each other, especially when sharing sources or information that they are unsure about. As in this case, where a member links to a blog post about Covid-19 transmission: "those who know me, know that I only share what is based on secure knowledge. That's why I ask for your help in assessing this. It sounds correct, but I am not an expert" (Group 2). This rhetoric also matches the self-ascribed tasks of the administrative teams. A moderator described their tasks to me as "lots of fact checking – not on a subject level, I can't fact check any scientific results – but I can check the sources"

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(Interviewee S). They thereby clearly distinguished their expertise in media literacy from scientific expertise.

The community does, however, host people with relevant, even scientific, expertise. In the context of their engagement as *allies of expertise*, however, even they are careful to make no claims to expertise for themselves. For example, Interviewee E is well-known within the community for sharing and interpreting scientific expertise at a high level. During our interview, they disclosed their professional background to me: they used to hold an academic position in the life sciences before switching to a corporate career. On Facebook, however, they act under a pseudonym and no longer state their profession. This is to protect themselves from being targeted with hate speech or trolling from post-truth supporters, but also because they feel uncomfortable in light of the community's expectations toward their expertise. I observed this in the following exchange in a comment section:

Member A:	With [Interviewee E], the entire knowledge of science is available to the group. Many thanks to [Interviewee E].
Interviewee E:	Thank you dear [Member A], but this is not correct. […] I am not a virologist […] 😉 I don't hold the entire knowledge of science either, even if I feel flattered, of course 😅
Member A:	Thank you for your explanation, which only reaffirms your expertise. But maybe you feel like addressing something fundamental about the topic to us in a post?
Interviewee E:	With reluctance. I prefer science to be in the foreground instead of scientists.
Member A:	I meant something basic about the Corona pandemic, the connections between climate, environment, health and pandemic. Without any scientists. It would be interesting to hear the interdependencies explained not only by politicians.
Interviewee E:	I prefer to leave that to the experts and those who are researching it. Of course, I am happy to support the interpretation of the studies where I can.

In this exchange, Member A voices their gratitude for Interviewee E's engagement in the group. In doing so, however, they exaggerate their knowledge and skills as holding "the entire knowledge of science." When Interviewee E rectifies the matter of their competencies and points out the limits of their knowledge, this is met with favor by other members of the community including Member A. This exchange illustrates how epistemic subservience is valued and rewarded within the community.

The value of epistemic subservience for the community becomes especially evident when members overestimate their knowledge or skills. For example, one moderator voiced criticism about group members engaging with scientific preprints: "if some civil engineer thinks he can listen to a podcast, which is without question excellent [note: they are referring to a science communication podcast by Christian Drosten], to then hang around on preprint servers and properly evaluate that, that's not how the world works. I think that's disastrous" (Interviewee G).

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While preprints are in fact publicly accessible, they were rarely discussed by laypeople before the pandemic. With the great need for information about the virus, vaccinations, or policy measures, some of the related preprints found their way into media reports or social media (Bauer et al., 2023). Interviewee G considers it problematic to open up this typically inner-scientific practice of reviewing preliminary scientific work to the public. From their perspective, laypeople should not be involved in it. Declaring scientific knowledge production and evaluation as an exclusive expert domain further emphasizes the community's epistemic subservience to scientists.

Reproducing scientific virtues in online debate. Although members of the community regard epistemic practices such as scientific knowledge production or evaluation as exclusive expert domains, they strongly orient their engagement toward what they deem as scientific virtues. This becomes evident in their critical assessment of new information, in diligently maintained repositories, or discussion rules aiming toward rational deliberation. In group descriptions, these practices are often framed as similar to science communication: for example, as "sharing scientific and socially relevant information around the SARS-CoV2-pandemic and Covid-19" (Group 3), or as presenting "data, facts, study results [in an] up-to-date, rational, concise and understandable way for laypeople" (Group 1).

Within its groups, the community aims to provide a space for respectful and rational debate "on a higher level than typical for social media" (Group 1). They are thereby able to meet the informational needs of many of their members, who regularly voice their gratitude in posts and comments, for example, for "scientific information on the development of the pandemic," or "the (non-political) assessment of scientific facts" (Group 1). Some groups are specifically strict about adhering to this idea of scientific practices and virtues. For example, the group *Covid-19 Science* is known within the community for its high level of complexity and factual tonality. Its administrative team has created a sophisticated filing system for Covid-19-related research, along with a set of rules for its compliance. This is by design. As one of the admins notes: "we are too factual to trigger anyone emotionally" (Interviewee E). By focusing on the dissemination of scientific expertise and refraining from more emotional or personal posts, they also aim to avoid attention and trolling from post-truth supporters. A group admin of *Stop the Spread* makes a similar statement about how they adapt their behavior within the community, but can also depart from the ideas of rational deliberation in broader online discourse. They say: "I also mock people online, for example, when I come across a post from Bullshittistan, but in *Stop the Spread*, I try to be factual" (Interviewee K).

Not all groups and members follow this example. But while groups and members have different views on how strictly they ought to separate science from politics, factual information from personal experiences, or rational deliberation from humorous and emotional engagement, they do agree that there are clear boundaries to be drawn. The community thus constructs a shared understanding of science, which allows the groups to work together despite their different approaches.

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Lay Engagement to Counter Post-Truth Phenomena

Allies of expertise not only hold common understandings about science and its desired role in society, they also recognize a common enemy in post-truth phenomena. Notably, they not only orient their practices on role models from the world of science but also copy practices they observe in their post-truth antagonists. These entail practices to "game" the platform and gain algorithmic visibility (Petre et al., 2019) so that they can make scientific expertise just as, or even more visible on the platform than conspiracism and misinformation. However, some members go so far as to copy practices like trolling or incivility that might also increase social media engagement, but are actually at odds with the scientific virtues they aim to defend.

Antagonizing post-truth actors. When I first applied for membership in the group *Drosten Ultras*, the following text appeared on the screen: "no admission without an answer. Why are we called Drosten Ultras?". There were two answers to choose from: "because we are sleep sheep listening to Merkel, and parrot everything from Bill Gates," or, "because we consider Prof. Dr. Drosten to be a very competent doctor who explains the situation very calmly." When asked about this clearly satirical application process, the group admin explained to me that it is important to take a stand against "conspiratards and populists" (Interviewee A). This illustrates that aside from disseminating scientific expertise and reproducing scientific virtues in online debate, the community also pursues another goal. It mobilizes against the commonly perceived enemy of post-truth phenomena.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the community perceives phenomena such as misinformation or conspiracism as threats to individual and public health. But more than that, the people I observed and interviewed were worried about a general decline in facticity, rationality, or objectivity in public discourse. They feared that trust in scientific expertise was being deliberately eroded by post-truth actors, and with it the possibility for rational deliberation and decision-making. In many conversations, it became clear that these concerns were not limited to the Covid-19 pandemic. Such was the case with this moderator, who said:

> The pandemic was only a case of the infodemic. It's not quite scientifically defined, but the UN is already talking about it, saying that an overload of information, both correct and incorrect information, means that suddenly everything or nothing appears credible anymore and people lose the plot. That was Trump's strategy in his [note: first] legislative period (Interviewee S)

Prior to founding the online community, admins and moderators had observed how well post-truth actors appeared to be networked and organized on social media platforms. For example, when asked why they put time and effort into the community, one moderator referred to such post-truth actors: "I believe that so many people simply want to enrich themselves with such topics, want to pursue their own political or other goals, and that you have to stand up to them" (Interviewee J).

Copying practices to gain algorithmic visibility. In their mission to combat an "infodemic" and the deliberate attacks on scientific expertise online, the community is often confronted with the limits of adhering to practices such as

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disseminating factual information or encouraging rational deliberation. Group discussions regularly turned to the question whether post-truth supporters could be convinced otherwise by adhering to scientific virtues alone. As this member shares in a comment, for example: "I don't think that you can get the extreme conspiratards to think rationally. My nerves and time are too valuable for that. Two years of arguments, facts and science have so far achieved nothing with them, on the contrary" (Group 4). Others respond to this frustration by emphasizing the impact that the community can have on those who have not yet fallen prey to post-truth. By setting up most groups as publicly visible and disseminating scientific expertise outside of their groups as well, the administrative teams hope to inform the "movable middle" (Buerger, 2021), like those who are still on the fence about getting vaccinated. This is also reflected in a quote by a group admin:

> We wanted the groups to be publicly visible so that everyone can read our information. But we do not want any conspiratards in here. So, we check every profile before admitting them. If someone has previously spread misinformation, […] no chance (Interviewee A)

Members of the community perceive social media as a particularly hostile environment for scientific expertise, but also post-truth actors as being better at leveraging social media logics and infrastructures for their agendas. While some groups set up barriers (e.g., obligatory membership requests, or checking profiles) to protect themselves from being "infiltrated" (Interviewee A) by post-truth actors, others leverage their knowledge about digital infrastructures and algorithmic visibility with the goal of drowning out post-truth voices in online discourse.

The group *How to Deal with Conspiratards Online* is especially notable in this regard. On the one hand, this group provides epistemic resources (e.g., links to science communication content) that can be used in debates with post-truth supporters. On the other hand, the group draws on knowledge about community guidelines and blocked accounts, or strategies to optimize the visibility of posts and comments. For example, when coming across misinformation or conspiracy theories elsewhere on social media, members can link to these digital places (e.g., Twitter threads, Facebook comment sections), so that others can join them there in counterspeech. Interviewee K shared some of their insights on how to interact in ways that would promote the best visibility. They also reveal that they have observed similar practices in post-truth supporters and have copied them, since: "you shouldn't write too long, and very early, with high frequency, that way you can increase reach and get triple digit likes sometimes." This illustrates how the community aims to be as networked and organized as their antagonists and thus, to be able to make scientific expertise just as, or even more visible on the platform.

These observations further suggest that the community perceives their post-truth antagonists as better equipped at leveraging platform infrastructures and logics. In efforts to "beat them at their own game," parts of the community not only adopt strategies to optimize the algorithmic visibility of their own posts and comments. They also copy practices, such as trolling or incivility, that are

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strongly in conflict with what they regard as scientific virtues and would be considered inappropriate for scientists themselves. Most notably, I observed a scheme to troll supporters of a discredited public scientist. The scientific community had publicly accused this scientist of spreading Covid-19-related misinformation through social media and popular science books. During one of my interviews, I learned about a group called *Support the Real Expert*. The purpose of the group is to mock and lecture those who continue to support this discredited scientist. The debates in the group's comment sections are heated and oftentimes offensive. Members advise each other to "go back to elementary school and learn to read," or ask offending questions, such as: "if less-educated populations are less likely to get vaccinated, does that mean the stupid ones will die out in the long run?" (Group 6).

When I get in touch with a member of the administrative team of *Support the Real Expert*, they tell me that it is their mission "to show the people how dangerous their behavior and that of their 'gods' [note: they are referring here to scientists misusing their expert status to make alternative claims] is to democracy" (Interviewee N). Another interviewee supports what I learned about the group's mission, but also seems uncomfortable in their answer: "You could think of it under the heading 'honey pot'. It was founded […] with the goal of getting as many conspiracy theorists in there as possible" (Interviewee H). When asked about their motives – will they then disseminate scientific expertise there? – they admit, "Yes, it's to share scientific expertise, but also to make fun of people" (Interviewee H).

Based on these observations, the community not only reproduces scientific virtues in online debates but also defends the epistemic authority of science by less virtuous means if this is deemed necessary. When practices such as fact-checking, evidence-based arguments or rational deliberation appear to be futile in convincing others of scientific expertise, some members of the community even resort to uncivil practices. A moderator reconciled such tensions by describing the community as "an unholy alliance pursuing the right goal" (Interviewee S). In other words: The end of defending science against post-truth phenomena appears to justify even incivil means.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to scholarship concerning a "crisis of expertise" (Eyal, 2019; Heimstädt et al., 2024; Reed & Reed, 2022), and in particular to the question of how this crisis can unfold in social media environments. While existing research has focused largely on how laypeople circumvent or challenge the epistemic authority of established expertise online (see, e.g., Au et al., 2022; Bauer et al., 2023; Larrson Heidenblad & Nilsson, 2023), this study shows that there are also forms of engagement that aim to uphold it. When taking on the role of what I term *allies of expertise*, laypeople perceive established expertise as being drowned out by widely shared "alternative" or "fake" claims to expertise. To counteract this, they disseminate and defend (what they regard as) established

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expertise against (what they regard as) post-truth phenomena. *Allies of expertise* can contribute to solving said crisis by making established expertise more visible and bolstering its epistemic authority in often confusing and contested online debates.

However, this form of lay engagement also bears risks. The question that comes to mind: When becoming *allies of expertise*, what kinds of expertise do laypeople consider worth defending, and what means do they use to do so? In the empirical case of this study, the online community constructs a shared understanding of science that builds on virtues such as objectivity, facticity, and rationality as well as their strict separation from experiences, emotions, and values. They orient their engagement toward this understanding but regularly experience the limits of fighting misinformation or conspiracism with, for example, fact-checking, evidence-based arguments or rational deliberation. Some then resort to less "virtuous" practices that are at odds with this understanding of science – and would not be deemed appropriate for scientists themselves.

With its understanding of science and the practices members choose to engage in, the online community echoes popular post-truth concerns and their often binary notions of fact versus fake, evidence versus experience, or science versus ideology (D'Ancona, 2017; Nichols, 2017). Existing work drawing on the social studies of science has criticized such binary notions for misrepresenting the realities of scientific work, the knowledge it produces, and what it can achieve at the science-policy interface. In this line of thought, scholars emphasize how scientific knowledge production can be regarded as inherently political (Meyer & Quattrone, 2021) and how in questions of expertise, facts and values are often "inextricably entangled" (Eyal, 2019, p. 76; see also Harambam et al., 2022). Moreover, while such binary notions fail to represent the realities of any type of scientific work, historically they have especially disadvantaged expertise from the social sciences and humanities, which as so called "soft" sciences were often (and continue to be) ascribed less epistemic authority (Lewis et al., 2023; Shapin, 2022). This is also mirrored in the online community's understanding of science, which draws on practices and virtues that are generally associated with "hard" sciences: quantitative and statistical methods, controlled experiments, objectivity, or value neutrality (Shapin, 2022). Thus, *allies of expertise* run the risk of reproducing monolithic and "pure" (Shapin, 2010) images of science that might not match the realities of expert work and the diversity of established expertise.

A further risk in the engagement of *allies of expertise* lies in their subservience to scientific experts and the clear-cut boundaries they draw in lay-expert relations. They thereby contradict existing efforts to promote trust in science and established expertise, where academic literature as well as science policy programs have long emphasized the need to open up the work of experts and invite public engagement and participation (Weingart et al., 2021). In line with this call, studies on citizen science (Baudry et al., 2022) or lay expertise (Epstein, 1995, 2023) have documented how laypeople aim to contribute to expert work, often at great effort and expense. While Epstein (1995) warned fellow scholars to understand laypeople as "a resource available for use, or an ally available for enrollment"

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(p. 409), this study shows how laypeople take on such a role of their own accord. They signal their epistemic subservience to scientists (for similar observations, see Mayes, 2024; Wenninger & Dickel, 2019) and regard epistemic practices such as scientific knowledge production and evaluation as exclusive expert domains. This conflicts with ideals of democratizing science (Weingart et al., 2021). Moreover, previous work has warned of the negative effects of a "deference to scientific authority" (Howell et al., 2020; Post et al., 2021), that is, the belief that matters concerning science and technology ought to be decided upon by experts and not through democratic processes. *Allies* run the risk of ascribing a role to experts that cannot be fulfilled – and is not desirable in the context of public deliberation or political decision-making.

In summary, this study conceptualizes the lay engagement of *allies of expertise* who aim to uphold the epistemic authority of established expertise in online debates. However, it also suggests that *allies'* service to science can turn into a disservice. By building their engagement on idealized images of science and subservient lay-expert relations, they run the risk of reproducing false expectations that the realities of expert work and knowledge might not be able to fulfill. It is important to note that this conceptualization of *allies of expertise* is based on qualitative insights from the Covid-19 pandemic. The unprecedented role of scientific expertise and the prevalence of post-truth concerns in everyday life during that time most likely contributed to this specific manifestation of allyship. However, similar phenomena observed in earlier work (see Riesch et al., 2021; Stephens et al., 2022) suggest that the concept is applicable and insightful beyond the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Future research ought to investigate in which other on- and offline contexts laypeople take on the role of *allies of expertise*, what types of expertise they consider worth defending, and what means they use to do so. On a more practical note, this study can also provide an opportunity to reflect on how to create and communicate public images that better reflect the realities and diversity of science and expertise in society.

NOTES

1. I speak of laypeople to describe a role that is realized when people are dependent on or draw on (what they recognize as) expertise in everyday contexts. I apply the term to make an analytically necessary distinction between experts and non-experts, while also being aware of its shortcomings in describing more complex lay-expert hybrids and relations (for further discussion, see Epstein, 2023).

2. I understand established expertise as knowledge that is recognized and endorsed by the traditional institutions of science, media, and politics.

3. I have assigned pseudonyms to all groups. However, the two largest groups whose names allude to German scientist Christian Drosten as well as sports fandom ("Ultras," "Team") could only be de-identified to a limited extent. Maintaining these allusions was crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the empirical setting. I further protected the privacy of admins, moderators, and members by assigning them pseudonyms and refraining from providing further details about them, such as binary-gendered pronouns or other demographic information. The translation into English provides a further layer of de-identification.

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4. "Conspiratards" is a derogatory term for conspiracy theorists, made up of the words "conspiracy" and "tard." It is used here as a non-literal translation of the German term used in the empirical case. For reasons of pseudonymization, I will refrain from stating the original term.

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