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Constructing corporate media legitimacy through the public interest: a framing analysis of Big Tech in the news

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Abstract

Purpose – As Big Tech corporations are increasingly scrutinized for their central role in our digital societies, they face pressure to sustain corporate legitimacy in the face of their main watchdog, news media. This article analyzes corporate-attributed statements in legacy news media to understand how public interest frames cultivate pragmatic, moral and cognitive media legitimacy.

Design/methodology/approach – We draw on a qualitative framing analysis of (in)direct corporate statements that receive media visibility in 93 news articles from four major U.S. and German newspapers spanning the period 2000–2020.

Findings – Five frames were identified that promote technological innovation as a universal solution to societal challenges, align corporate and public interests, embed corporate citizenship into the societal fabric and personalize corporate leadership. These frames position Big Tech corporations in public interest, which cultivates pragmatic, moral and cognitive media legitimacy.

Practical implications – Findings provide insights into media framing of public interest appeals, and how these influence media legitimacy. This perspective offers guidance for practitioners seeking to engage effectively with journalistic scrutiny and create resonating narratives in public debates.

Originality/value – Our study intersects public interest framing and media legitimacy literature, and in doing so, presents this type of framing as a versatile discursive resource for legitimacy building via news media in contested sectors like Big Tech in particular, where such claims are highly scrutinized and relevant for regulatory debates. We call for greater critical reflection on how public interest framing may obscure corporate accountability and shape democratic debates about the power and responsibility of Big Tech.

Keywords Corporate legitimacy, Public interest framing, Big Tech, Strategic communication, Media relations

Paper type Research article

Introduction

As their economic, political and cultural reach expands, Big Tech companies – among them Alphabet (Google), Meta (Facebook), Amazon, Apple and Microsoft – increasingly shape how public interests are defined, debated and acted upon in society (Sharon and Gellert, 2023; Helberger, 2020). High-profile cases, such as Twitter's (now X) decision to remove US President Donald Trump from their platform, Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal or YouTube's approach to anti-vaccine content, illustrate this public involvement (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). Big Tech governance is often discussed in the context of how well these companies align with the public interest or how social media regulation is of public interest

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(Napoli, 2019). Public interest framing refers to portraying corporate actions as aligned with societal welfare (Ihlen *et al*., 2018). Inherently flexible and ambiguous, often presented as "an empty vessel waiting to be filled with whatever values the user wishes" (Feintuck, 2004, p. 2), the "public interest" can be understood as a contested, socially constructed and negotiated notion (Johnston and Pieczka, 2018). However, the "empty vessel" is not filled arbitrarily but shaped by journalistic selection, framing and contextualization, which influences how Big Tech companies are constructed as public good for audiences.

We argue that public interest framing is one key mechanism by which media-based corporate legitimacy is built. News media serve as watchdogs of public interest (Morton and Aroney, 2016; Schwinges *et al*., 2023), and the legitimacy of these corporations rests not only on their economic performance but also whether they are presented in alignment with societal values, ethical norms and the broader common good (Suchman, 1995). Thus presenting a crucial discursive space, legitimacy is constructed through the selection, emphasis and repetition of corporate narratives, where journalistic framing can endorse, question or undermine corporate claims (Marschlich and Ingenhoff, 2023). Particularly in legacy news coverage (Kjær and Blach-Ørsten, 2019), media framing can lend legitimacy to corporations by capturing the instrumental benefits corporations provide (pragmatic), the normative approval they receive (moral) and by presenting their societal role as taken-for-granted (cognitive) – but can also create opportunities for scrutiny and contestation (Vogler and Eisenegger, 2021; Marschlich and Eisenegger, 2024; Schwinges *et al*., 2024).

Existing research has extensively investigated corporate strategies for legitimacy building via news media, also going beyond tone or visibility (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008; Kjær and Blach-Ørsten, 2019; Marschlich and Ingenhoff, 2023), or corporate instrumentalization of the public interest (Ihlen *et al*., 2018). However, there is limited understanding of how legacy news media pick up public interest claims by corporations and their framing constructs media-based legitimacy in its nuanced dimensions, particularly in contested sectors like Big Tech. This gap is especially relevant in context of Big Tech, whose societal role is contested and whose claims to act in the public interest are both highly scrutinized (Schwinges *et al*., 2023), transgressive (Sharon and Gellert, 2023) and relevant for further tech regulation (Helberger, 2020). Our empirical study addresses this gap by studying: *How do public interest frames attributed to Big Tech corporations in legacy news media construct pragmatic, cognitive and moral media legitimacy?* To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative framing analysis (Entman, 1993) of corporate-attributed statements that receive media visibility in 93 news articles from major U.S. and German newspapers spanning a period of 2000–2020. While these claims may originate in corporate communications, our focus remains firmly on how these appear in legacy news media coverage. This offers a unique vantage point on how corporate voices appear in the media arena and thus provides an empirical perspective rather than engaging in a normative debate on what the public interest should be (see Johnston, 2017 for a comprehensive overview).

This study makes several contributions. First, we advance literature on media-constructed legitimacy by integrating the concept of public interest framing and demonstrating its instrumentalization as a dynamic framing practice among journalists and their corporate sources. Second, we contribute to the intersection of corporate communication and news media watchdog functions, showing that legacy media remain crucial discursive spaces where Big Tech's societal role is normalized or contested. Third, we show how legitimacy is mediated in two distinct national media environments and thus offer a transferable analytical framework that can be applied to other contested industries like Big Pharma.

Theoretical framework

Media legitimacy

Legitimacy has been studied in different conceptualizations, traditionally centering around the perception of an organization in alignment with existing norms and regulations (Suchman, 1995). In its mediated form, legitimacy refers to media constructions of the legitimacy of organizations (Arts and Cormier, 2009) based on "perceptions of an organization, [. . .] rendered by media [and other actors] [. . .], who [. . .] supports, remains neutral, or sanctions the organisation depending on whether the organisation provides the benefit(s) prescribed by the prevailing norms and regulations" (Bitekine, 2011, p. 159). Unpacked, this means that legitimacy emerges from deliberation among various actors involved in the production of news (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Etter *et al.*, 2018), with Big Tech organizations being an active participant in news media that evaluate their organizational behavior (Schwinges *et al.*, 2024). Deephouse and Suchman (2008) and Marschlich and Ingenhoff (2023) describe how media legitimacy is co-constructed. Journalists do not merely transmit corporate self-legitimation efforts; they evaluate and adapt them in light of broader societal debates and professional norms, including their commitment to serving the public interest (Napoli, 2019). Deephouse and Suchman (2008) argue that news media act as intermediary "between specific legitimacy-granting authorities and society-at-large" (p.55) positioning corporations as either fulfilling or violating societal expectations (Bitekine, 2011). Hence, media coverage plays an active role in shaping corporate reputation and legitimacy by filtering what is included, how it is contextualized and whose voices are prioritized (Marschlich and Ingenhoff, 2023). This makes legitimacy a dynamic, multifaceted and contested issue (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008; Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Rendtorff, 2020), and thus needs to be earned through continuous alignment in communications with shifting societal expectations (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Sandhu, 2009; Rendtorff, 2020).

While news media construct legitimacy through positive endorsement more generally (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008; Etter *et al.*, 2018), legitimacy can be understood through three interrelated dimensions – pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy – that can each be discursively signaled, representing a distinct pathway for legitimacy-building in media (Suchman, 1995). Pragmatic media legitimacy involves demonstrating the fact that corporate self-interests are mutually beneficial to its stakeholders (Bitekine, 2011), thus emphasizing benefits for society at large (Marschlich and Ingenhoff, 2023). Corporations signal this legitimacy by showing their ability to meet essential needs (Kim and Rader, 2010; Suchman, 1995). Moral legitimacy is the most complex and contested dimension, as it hinges on demonstrating that corporate actions align with broader societal values, ethical standards and ideals of fairness and responsibility (Suchman, 1995). It is based on constructing corporations as going beyond these self-interests (Bitekine, 2011) and in mediated pursuit of societal values and norms (Marschlich and Ingenhoff, 2023; Suchman, 1995). By representing the company in adherence to ethical and philanthropic standards (Scherer *et al.*, 2013; Kim and Rader, 2010), news media cultivate social responsibility and moral legitimacy (Lock and Schulz-Knappe, 2018). Lastly, cognitive media legitimacy rests on the recognition of and even familiarity with an organization – often driven through media visibility (Bitekine, 2011) – as well as on the representation of a corporation's goals as desirable by society, taken-for-granted and necessary (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Suchman, 1995).

Big Tech's unprecedented scale, technological and social reach and growing influence on socio-political life (Sharon and Gellert, 2023) combined with their substantial opinion power (Helberger, 2020; Schafraad *et al.*, 2016), mean that questions of legitimacy are central to whether and how they should be regulated or held accountable (Sharon and Gellert, 2023). Prior research has primarily examined strategic legitimation practices of Big Tech, focusing on how companies themselves construct legitimacy narratives. For instance, it demonstrates a deep embedding of Meta into future imaginaries (Haupt, 2021) and speaks heavily of techno-libertarian responsibilities towards the public interest (Lischka, 2019) – for example, by pushing the imaginary of global connectivity and global community (Haupt, 2021), values that are synonym with techno-libertarian Silicon Valley narratives (Ferrari, 2020). Historical-mythological narratives of "making the world a better place" is one of Silicon Valley's central topoi (Haupt, 2021) and aid to intertwine pragmatic legitimacy of digital platforms like Meta with tech-utopian and technosolutionistic perspectives. These studies, however, do not examine how media coverage – particularly in collaboration with corporate sources – frames the societal role of these companies and thus cultivates Big Tech's media legitimacy.

Public interest framing

The public interest is also a guiding principle for news media. As watchdogs, journalists critically evaluate corporate conduct against societal expectations, guard the public interest (Morton and Aroney, 2016) and provide important discursive spaces for different strategic actors – and prominently among them, corporate sources (Schwinges *et al.*, 2023) – to push for an evaluation of corporations and their activities. Media framing thus becomes a discursive resource for media legitimacy (Aerts and Comier, 2009), as it conveys what is at stake, who is responsible and what are appropriate solutions (Entman, 1993). Corporations provide strategic frames that align corporate interests with the public's (Ihlen and Raknes, 2020), which journalists then integrate and adapt to create media frames (Scheufele, 1999). Which frames in the form of direct and indirect quotes successfully pass through the "gate" reveals intentional framing choices and information retention of both the corporation and the journalist (Lee and Riffe, 2017) – and allows insight into the procedural construction of the public interest (Johnston and Pieczka, 2018).

Thus, public interest is both a framing object and legitimizing device. Framing theory (Entman, 1993) provides a useful lens for analyzing how the public interest is constructed in the media as "what emerges from [these] deliberative processes" (Anthony, 2013, p. 128). A longstanding debate across disciplines has assigned many merits to the notion of the public interest as a rhetorical device for "arguing that your [organization's] interest is also in the interest of the public, of society in general, in some way or the other" (Bentele and Nothhaft, 2010, p. 113). Broadly, we follow Bozeman's (2007) definition of the public interest as "outcomes best serving the long-run survival and well-being of a social collective construed as a 'public'" (p. 12). While Ihlen *et al.* (2018) further define a corporation in public interest when it conducts itself "in a particular way to serve society and the public interest best" (p. 111), we understand public interest framing as a media representation of a corporation as in the best interest of society. Its contextual and ambiguous notion (Ihlen *et al.*, 2018) allows for strategic interpretations to fill the "empty vessel" (Feintuck, 2004) with meaning and varied instrumentalization of its framing. In practice, public interest appeals often manifest through claims towards job creation, environmental stewardship, contributions to social welfare or simply claiming to be "of public interest" more directly (Ihlen and Raknes, 2020).

Method and materials

We analyzed corporate-attributed statements in 93 news articles about Big Tech published between 2000 and 2020 in four major newspapers: the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* (U.S.) and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Welt* (Germany). These outlets, influential agenda-setters and gatekeepers in their respective countries, share similarities in journalistic professionalism but differ in political and media contexts within the two countries (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Public interest framing is "best considered within specific social, legal, cultural, and time contexts" (Johnston, 2017, p. 1) and a focus on print news coverage offers a longitudinal analysis of accessible legacy news media that set the agenda for a wide readership across diverse demographics (see Table 1). Our longitudinal perspective covering the period of 2000–2020 allowed us to trace how public interest frames have persisted or shifted alongside Big Tech's growing societal role and increasing regulatory scrutiny. Given this extended timeframe of this study, we narrowed our selection to two newspapers per country to ensure coverage across the audience's political spectrum. The selection of the U.S. and Germany was motivated by a most-different-design approach in terms of regulatory, political and media environments. While this study does not pursue a comparative analysis *per se*, conducting our analysis across these two countries provides insights into the validity of observed patterns.

Table 1. Sampled news articles

Newspaper	Country	Leaning of newspaper	n News articles	n News articles with corporate quotes	n of public interest appeals (Frequencies)
The *New York Times*	United States	Center-left	230	201	36 (17.91%)
USA TODAY	United States	Center-right	230	189	34 (17.98%)
Süddeutsche Zeitung	Germany	Center-left	230	131	13 (09.92%)
Die Welt	Germany	Center-right	230	136	10 (07.35%)

Note(s): Frequencies refer to the frequency of public interest appeals in news articles with corporate sources
Source(s): Authors' own work

This project builds on a larger quantitative analysis of news media coverage of Big Tech. The term "Big Tech" commonly refers to the dominant players in the technology sector, notably Meta (formerly Facebook), Microsoft, Amazon, Apple and Alphabet (Google). Relevant news stories published by the four news outlets were identified by searching for articles where the company's name appeared at least twice within headline and opening paragraph in the database NexisUni. To create an initial sample from this population of news coverage on Big Tech between 2000 and 2020 ($N = 20.123$), stratified random sampling was employed ($n = 920$) to ensure broad representation across outlets and years.

To build the final sample for this study, a reference to the public interest was measured by the following item: *Does the news article make reference the role of a Big Tech corporation in context of broader societal or economic welfare/well-being and values?* Due to the concept's ambiguity, the codebook presented a broad definition of the public interest appeal based on Johnston (2017) and Bozeman (2007), as well as a broad range of examples. We operationalized public interest framing by focusing on whether corporate-attributed statements in news articles explicitly referenced the role of Big Tech company in connection with broader societal welfare, that is, by (in)direct mentions of corporate actions towards the "common good", public health benefits or references to technological innovation as beneficial to society as a whole, among others. Importantly, our codebook distinguished public interest references from narrower notions of consumer convenience or direct shareholder benefit. For example, an article highlighting Amazon's job creation during the COVID-19 pandemic would be coded as a public interest frame, while a story focusing solely on faster delivery times would not. For each article, coders assigned a binary value to indicate the frame's presence and recorded whether the reference originated from corporate sources, either directly or indirectly. The codebook is publicly available via OSF and Appendix. A total of five coders engaged in eight hours of coder training until their agreement reached satisfactory levels. The codebook contained examples in both English and German to ensure applicability across contexts. To address issues with skewed variables and multiple coders, we used Fretwurst's Standardized Lotus coefficient ($\geq$0.67) to test intercoder reliability on a sub sample ($n = 30$). We achieved intercoder reliability across both national samples, detecting the presence of references to the public interest (standardized lotus = 0.71) in corporate-attributed statements within the news text (standardized lotus = 0.84).

Data analysis

The final sample consists of news articles which include corporate-attributed statements that make claims regarding the public interest ($n = 93$, 10.1% of the initial sample; see Table 1). Following prior research on public interest frames (Ihlen *et al.*, 2018; Johnston and Pieczka, 2018; Valentini *et al.*, 2020), we applied framing analysis (Entman, 1993) to study problem definition, causal interpretation, evaluation of the public interest (replacing “moral evaluation”, Ihlen *et al.*, 2018) and treatment recommendation (see Table 2). Our iterative process moved bidirectionally between existing literature and relevant passages in the text. In a first step, we explored when and how these reasoning devices (Entman, 1993) become embedded in news coverage and promote a particular interpretation (D’Angelo and Kuypers, 2010). By identifying framing devices, such as key concepts and verbal devices, we looked at rhetorical devices that emphasized corporate contributions to societal well-being, examining how these frames aligned with public values. These frames often co-occurred within articles.

In a second step, we analyzed whether and how framing elements signaled media legitimacy in the form of mutual benefit or stakeholder responsiveness (pragmatic media legitimacy), alignment with taken-for-granted norms and societal expectations (cognitive media legitimacy) or adherence to ethical standards and moral responsibilities (moral media legitimacy; Suchman, 1995). To enhance the reliability and validity of our qualitative framing analysis, we combined systematic coding procedures with iterative researcher triangulation. One author conducted the primary inductive frame identification and mapped each frame to the dimensions of legitimacy as defined by Suchman (1995). The second author then independently reviewed the coding decisions and interpretive linkages, providing critical feedback to refine the frames and legitimacy connections. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached.

Findings

Sample descriptives

U.S. outlets showed notably greater use of public interest framing, around 17% of articles, compared to 7% in German outlets, $X^2(1) = 26.42$, $p < 0.001$, indicating greater visibility. Over time, public interest framing became more prominent (see Figures 1 and 2). While all companies except Apple were represented through this framing, notable peaks appear for Meta during coverage of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the 2016 U.S. elections (Napoli, 2019). Amazon and Microsoft likewise became increasingly associated with the public interest, especially during the pandemic and from 2020 onwards.

Constructing media legitimacy through public interest framing

We identified five public interest frames in corporate-attributed statements that appear in news media articles (see Table 2). Taken together, these five frames reveal how Big Tech’s public interest appeals in news coverage draw on and reinforce all three dimensions of corporate legitimacy – pragmatic, cognitive and moral – but with distinct emphases.

Thinking Big(ger tech). This frame positions Big Tech corporations as pioneering forces whose scale and scope match the unprecedented nature of today’s global challenges, signaling pragmatic media legitimacy by claiming practical ability and cognitive media legitimacy by normalizing their indispensability. Corporations are quoted describing societal threats as “of previously untracked magnitude” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Microsoft, 25.03.2004). This language constructs Big Tech’s expansion as justified as problems are too vast for traditional actors to solve. Heading technological innovation, corporations signal they “are doing [their] part” (*USA TODAY*, Meta, 30.09.2020) in turning the wheel of technological innovation (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Microsoft, 25.03.2004), and can and must set new standards (*New York Times*, Apple, 09.01.2018) to fight the “tyranny of low expectations” (*USA TODAY*, 24.10.2014). Therefore, generalized corporate and philanthropic goals of enormous size and scope are presented (*Die Welt*, Google, 01.03.2016) which match their own scale and which can only be pursued because of their powerful status in society. Microsoft appears promoting its cognitive legitimacy by suggesting societal dependency on its services, questioning “how [we] actually lived before without these services [and] without this other kind of big computer?” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Microsoft, 30.10.2008). These statements signal cognitive

Table 2. Framing and reasoning devices

Frames	Reasoning Devices					Framing Devices	
	Problem Definition	Causal Interpretation	Public Interest Evaluation	Treatment Recommendation	Key Concepts	Verbal Devices (from the data)	Examples
Thinking Big(ger) Tech	Big Tech's scale and scope remains uncharted	Devoid of corporate precedence, Big Tech pioneer the tech industry	Exceed and set new customer expectations regarding CSR	Co-shape prevalent societal norms and expectations	Scalability, global philanthropy, innovation	"intractable", "meeting and exceeding customers' expectations"	Philanthropic goals of eradicating all diseases, extension of global life expectancy, climate change
Synergy of Interests	Consumer deprivation of optimal products and services	Public distrust of corporate interests	Consumer interests are ultimately of public interest	Embrace the reciprocal relationship of profit and public interest	Balance, popularity, safety, reciprocity, economic rationality, value creation	"balance", "business that will support the mission", "two sides of the same coin"	Promotion of competition, job opportunities, customer experience
Technosolutionism	Society is faced by a range of societal problems	Inconceivability of Big Tech's eventual scale and scope	Practical benefits of technological innovation	Adherence to leadership responsibilities	Innovation, solutions, global challenges, innocence	"lead the industry", "foster innovation", The idea that a product could make your life worse was not in anyone's perception"	Unprecedented technological innovation and their practical benefits
Good Corporate Citizen	Society is faced by a range of societal problems	The causes of societal problems do root in Big Tech	Global connectivity contributes to social and democratic welfare	Formalization of collaborative and integrative efforts to meet (public) interests	Global challenges, global community, active socio-political engagement	"committed", "responsibility", "connect the world", "do good", "we"	Formal collaboration with civil society actors, connecting powers of social media

(*continued*)

Table 2. Continued

Frames	Reasoning Devices					Framing Devices	
	Problem Definition	Causal Interpretation	Public Interest Evaluation	Treatment Recommendation	Key Concepts	Verbal Devices (from the data)	Examples
The CEO at the Kitchen Table	Public distrust of moral values in technology	Acknowledgement of past (unintended) mistakes	Customer-centric digital infrastructure and consumer protection	Societal trust in morally driven technological innovation	Personalization, customer protection, trust, emotions, advice, ethical responsibility, care for employees and customers	“father”, “hope”, “optimism”, “courage”	High visibility of the CEO, personalization, trust in morally driven innovation, protective stances

Source(s): Authors’ own work

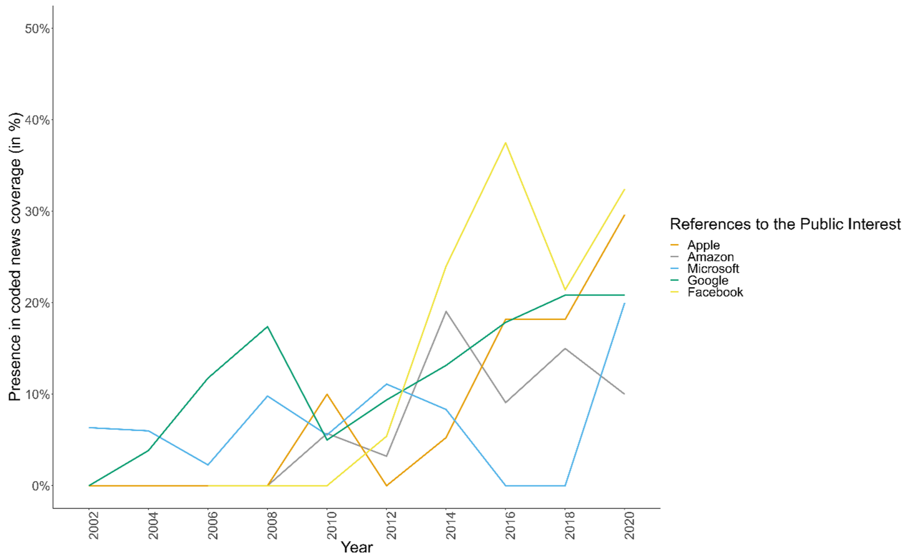

Figure 1. Public interest appeals by different corporations in news coverage (2002–2020). Source: Authors' own work

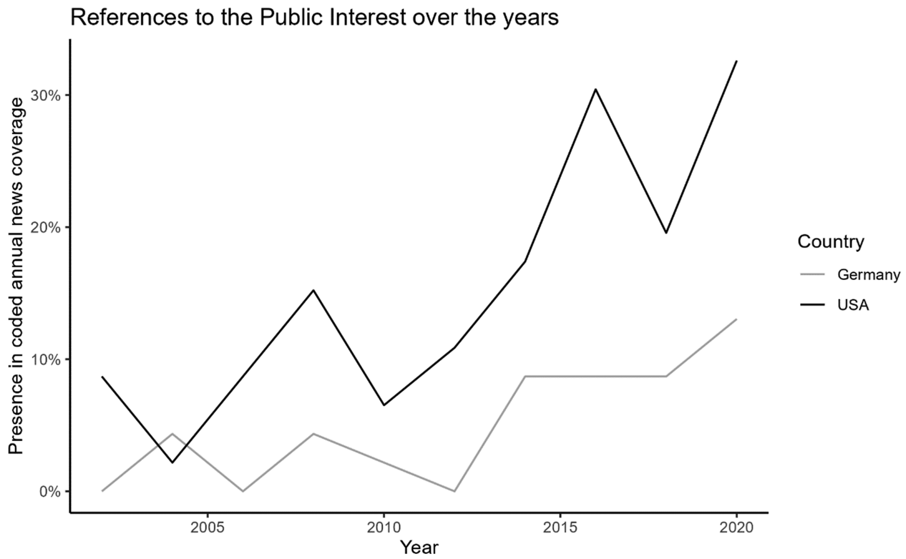

Figure 2. Public interest appeals in news coverage, per country (2002–2020). Source: Authors' own work

media legitimacy, framing Big Tech as an indispensable part of the societal fabric (Suchman, 1995). By defining complex problems as uniquely solvable through their technological power, corporations normalize their presence as not only beneficial but necessary.

Synergy of interests. This frame fuses corporate self-interest with public interest claims, explicitly cultivating pragmatic media legitimacy by presenting economic success and societal benefit as mutually reinforcing. Typical examples are Meta's emphasis on balancing corporate growth with community needs (*New York Times*, Meta, 25.03.2018) or the infusion of social benefits with economic rationality (*New York Times*, Google, 23.04.2012), suggesting a reciprocal relationship between corporate and public interests. Similarly, Amazon is mentioned linking safer neighborhoods to stronger product sales (*Die Welt*, Amazon, 12.11.2018) and using job creation during the pandemic to illustrate economic benefits for local communities (*Die Welt*, Amazon, 20.04.2020). Cultivating pragmatic media legitimacy, companies appear rationalizing and instrumentalizing their profits for their corporate missions. Microsoft stresses advantages of corporate profit, as this form "creative capitalism" would "serve poorer people as well" (*New York Times*, 25.01.2008). Big Tech is quoted positioning its actions as responses to consumer demands for quality products and services, enhancing customer convenience and contributing to their popularity (*Die Welt*, Amazon, 18.02.2020; *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Microsoft, 30.10.2008). This framing reinforces pragmatic media legitimacy by demonstrating the corporations' responsiveness to stakeholders (Kim and Rader, 2010) and constructing consumer benefits as synonymous with societal good. The repeated emphasis on synergy in news coverage illustrates how media frames link corporate actions to economic rationality, portraying them as mutually beneficial for companies and stakeholders.

Technosolutionism. Technology is framed as the solution to virtually every societal problem, thereby affirming pragmatic and cognitive media legitimacy. News articles frequently rehearse Big Tech leaders' claims of indispensability in solving issues from climate change to digital safety, while downplaying any responsibility ("had no idea this was going to happen", *New York Times*, Apple, 09.01.2018). By situating technology as a "meaningful, though imperfect contribution" to society (*USA TODAY*, Google, 08.03.2006), news coverage frames technological solutions as practical benefits that serve both stakeholders and the wider public (pragmatic media legitimacy). This also carries cognitive media legitimacy as these portrayals normalize the idea that society cannot adequately address modern challenges without these essential actors ("helping society help itself" through new technologies, *New York Times*, Google, 10.09.2012). Echoing the frame of "The CEO at the Kitchen Table," corporate-attributed statements rehearse the leading role that tech CEOs play in this.

Good Corporate citizen. This frame highlights how Big Tech are positioned socially responsible actors embedded within communities and democratic institutions, thereby constructing moral media legitimacy through partnerships, community initiatives or commitments that extend beyond core business operations to address collective challenges. Statements communicate Apple's commitment to "add more diversity and military veterans to its workforce" (*New York Times*, Apple, 14.12.2018) or Meta's corporate mission "to connect the world . . . we need everyone to come together" (*New York Times*, Meta, 01.02.2016) and emphasize communal connection. The *New York Times* highlights the fact that Big Tech companies "want to work alongside others" (Amazon, 18.02.2020), partner with respected institutions such as educational bodies, governments and municipalities to "support the mission" (Microsoft, 22.07.2004), and "do good" (Google, 18.01.2008). In *Die Welt*, a statement by Google rehearses that "searching the Internet is so extraordinarily important that it must be left to a trustworthy company interested in the welfare of mankind" (*Die Welt*, Google, 28.07.2004). This frame cultivates moral media legitimacy as it signals alignment with societal norms, ethical standards and collaborative public problem-solving (Lock and Seele, 2016; Suchman, 1995). Meanwhile, formalizing partnerships with respected institutions reinforces their role as responsible stewards of public welfare and signals cognitive media legitimacy. This is crucial for Big Tech in diverse societies, as their global operations require to appeal to generalized public interests and articulate broad objectives aimed at a wide audience.

The CEO at the kitchen table. This frame humanizes Big Tech's leadership, portraying CEOs as moral entrepreneurs who personify corporate values and respond to public concerns on an intimate level. Personal stories are presented as evidence for their ethical intent to serve societal needs. This establishes moral media legitimacy. Mark Zuckerberg (Meta) and Jeff Bezos (Amazon) define societal issues as rooted in a failure to recognize the moral values underpinning their technologies. For instance, in an article by the *New York Times*, Zuckerberg urges readers to trust in morally driven technological innovation because as a caring father, he would want his children to believe that "what their father has built is good for the world" (*New York Times*, Meta, 15.03.2018). This interweaves personal responsibility with moral legitimacy. Similarly, Bezos is depicted during the pandemic as ensuring "industry-leading pay and health care," framed as more meaningful "in a time like this" (*New York Times*, Amazon, 28.04.2022). In another news article, Daniel Rausch, former CEO of Amazon's Alexa, emphasizes consumer protection while highlighting Alexa's integration into everyday life – even "under the shower" (*Die Welt*, Amazon, 18.02.2020). This personalization embodies corporate values in relatable narratives and cultivates moral media legitimacy, suggesting that corporate conduct is guided by authentic human values and ethical leadership (Scherer *et al.*, 2013). Together with the frame *Synergy of interests*, this frame presents broader justifications that economic growth and technological progress inherently advance the public interest. However, by downplaying unintended consequences of this innovation, this rhetorical move shields the company from moral accountability while reinforcing its image as an indispensable innovator – bolstering pragmatic legitimacy, yet raising questions about moral alignment.

Evolving dimensions of media legitimacy

Ultimately, media legitimacy is built on public interest framing in a multi-layered and evolving manner. Across the 20-year period, the co-occurrence of these dimensions shows how public interest framing is not static but shifts in emphasis. The first three frames emphasize the efficient use of technology to address societal challenges. Notably, Meta, Apple and Amazon are most prominently associated with pragmatic media legitimacy. However, the longitudinal perspective shows that this appeal has evolved in response to growing criticism. Earlier coverage tended to foreground cognitive and pragmatic claims – portraying technological expansion as a universal good. While early coverage highlights broad benefits like global connectivity, later articles increasingly link business resilience (e.g. pandemic responses) with local job creation and social welfare, signaling how pragmatic media legitimacy adapts to shifting contexts of societal risk and uncertainty. Big Tech's taken-for-granted status is reinforced through references to global challenges, like health, climate, security, that resonate with the public imagination and are hard to contest in principle – but can be tackled by technological innovation according to these frames. Corporate-attributed statements in more recent articles increasingly incorporate moral legitimacy appeals, likely in response to rising societal concerns about privacy, misinformation and platform power, as well as demands for corporate social responsibility. Further, the results demonstrate that each dimension is analytically distinct but not mutually exclusive: They often bundle multiple dimensions, by, for example, justifying pragmatic benefits through moral narratives.

Discussion and conclusion

This article empirically investigates corporate-attributed statements as they appear in legacy news media coverage about Big Tech to study how these cultivate pragmatic, moral and cognitive media legitimacy through public interest framing. Despite – or perhaps because of – multiple Big Tech legitimacy crises over the years, public interest framing has gained in prominence positioning this type of framing as a popular, sophisticated and diverse discursive resource. Traditionally seen as an ambiguous "empty vessel" (Feintuck, 2004), public interest framing appears as an adaptable device signaling pragmatic, moral and cognitive media legitimacy at once. Frames such as *Thinking Big(ger) Tech*, *Synergy of Interests*, *Technolutionism*, *Good Corporate Citizen* and *The CEO at the Kitchen Table* reflect pragmatic media legitimacy by linking business success to public interests, thus reflecting Big Tech's sphere transgressions (Sharon and Gellert, 2023) in the mediated news space. Humanizing leadership through personal narratives – a trend in tech news (Marschlich and Eisenegger, 2024) – contributes to moral media legitimacy by signaling ethical intent and becomes a resource for societal acceptance (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006). By portraying these unprecedented companies as uniquely capable of solving global challenges like climate change or world hunger, news media coverage normalizes their indispensability and cultivates cognitive media legitimacy. Importantly, these frames do not simply reflect corporate self-legitimation strategies previously identified by Haupt (2021) or Lischka (2019) but reveal how these are reproduced, adapted or challenged in news media coverage. While previous studies found that the public interest manifests through mediated contributions towards job creation, environmental stewardship or social welfare (Ihlen and Raknes, 2020), Big Tech news reporting embeds digital logics of the Silicon Valley, such as technological innovation, global connectivity and consumer convenience, into the public interest. This redefines the boundaries of this concept.

Such media portrayals position Big Tech in resonance with diverse audiences and address complexities in fragmented societies (van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021). Yet focusing on broad, intangible benefits can also deflect attention from local or structural problems – such as data privacy or working conditions – which often receive less scrutiny. While Big Tech news coverage has shown to adopt a critical stance in previous studies (Schwinges *et al.*, 2023), the overall pattern suggests that news media can inadvertently bolster Big Tech's legitimacy by foregrounding expansive public interest narratives and deprioritizing deeper interrogation of conflicts of interest, privacy risks or structural harms. This highlights the media's ambivalent position as both a critical watchdog and a conduit for powerful corporate frames (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008; Marschlich and Ingenhoff, 2023).

The capacity of Big Tech's oligopolistic communicative power to influence which societal problems and solutions move onto the public agenda and are perceived as legitimate and in public interest has been well documented (Helberger, 2020; Lindman *et al.*, 2022). Our findings reveal how news coverage rehearses Big Tech's ambition to co-shape and institutionalize (new) democratic expectations regarding their own role in society, often justifying, mitigating or reframing the perception of power concentration. Amidst ongoing regulatory debates surrounding Big Tech's influence in society, the persuasive power of public interest framing in the news becomes especially salient for policymakers. Showing how such frames circulate in legacy news coverage – rather than focusing on the corporate strategy alone – contributes to our understanding of the mediated nature of legitimacy construction. If corporations leverage the public interest for their own interests, and public interest framing in turn cultivates media legitimacy, it challenges the normative understanding of both concepts as emerging from democratic deliberation and collective welfare (Bitonti, 2020; Johnston, 2017; Palazzo and Scherer, 2006). Therefore, our study calls for a reevaluation of the evolving relationship between Big Tech legitimacy and the public interest.

Practical implications should be interpreted within this media framing discourse. For corporate communication practitioners, this presents a double-edged sword. Our study highlights how public interest appeals, once they enter and pass through the editorial filters of legacy news media, can cultivate a company's media legitimacy. This underscores the importance of crafting public interest narratives that can withstand journalistic scrutiny while still conveying a clear, credible link between corporate actions and broader societal welfare. If picked up by media as an intermediary (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008), these frames can demonstrate tangible benefits of technological progress or job creation (pragmatic media legitimacy) or signal ethical responsibility (moral media legitimacy), all in alignment with widely accepted norms (cognitive media legitimacy). However, legitimacy is constantly negotiated in the media and subject to shifting public expectations. Inflated or vague appeals risk being reframed critically, eroding moral media legitimacy and inviting reputational risks or stricter regulation. This may involve engaging proactively with journalists to provide meaningful data and demonstrating long-term societal benefits. While personalizing corporate leadership – as seen in *The CEO at the Kitchen Table* frame and other studies (Marschlich and Eisenegger, 2024) – can help humanize companies, it also invites heightened scrutiny of personal behavior and expectations of individual accountability.

Implications extend beyond Big Tech. The frames identified – such as *Technosolutionism*, *Synergy of Interests* and personalized leadership appeals (*The CEO at the Kitchen Table*) – are relevant for other industries facing legitimacy challenges, including Big Pharma or Big Oil. As these frames were derived from systematically sampled legacy news coverage across two distinct national media systems and analyzed rigorously, the findings offer both conceptual and methodological transferability. By showing how these narratives take shape through news framing, our study provides a transferable and more granular framework for analyzing how media legitimacy is constructed and questioned also in other contested sectors that are similarly debated and scrutinized.

Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged and that can be addressed by future research. First, our analysis is based on four prominent legacy newspapers in the United States and Germany. While these outlets still play an influential agenda-setting role and provide valuable insights into mainstream discourse, they do not fully capture the dynamics of digital-first or algorithmically driven news feeds. However, their editorial standards and perceived credibility mean that their framing often shapes broader public perceptions, regulatory debates and journalistic norms in the digital sphere, thus, providing an important benchmark.

Second, our design did not explicitly aim for a systematic cross-national comparison. Although some country-level differences appear, these patterns should be interpreted with caution, as they were not central to our research questions nor grounded in a comparative theoretical framework. Framing analysis is inherently interpretive and context-dependent, so our findings should be seen as illustrative rather than universally generalizable. Future studies should adopt a comparative approach to study how media systems and cultural contexts shape the framing of corporate legitimacy, particularly for companies operating across global markets.

Third, our analysis specifically focused on public interest appeals made in corporate-attributed statements in news coverage. We did not systematically include counter-frames put forward by civil society actors, policymakers or marginalized communities who may actively resist or challenge Big Tech's legitimacy narratives on, for example data privacy violations or platform manipulation. Future research could expand this lens by analyzing how competing stakeholders engage in counter-framing, as in its procedural definition, the public interest is constructed from divergent values and interests (Johnston, 2017). Additionally, future studies should examine how public interest framing evolves on social media platforms, independent digital news sites and user-generated spaces where corporate narratives can be amplified or contested in real time.

Finally, our longitudinal sample covers the period 2000–2020, which does not capture the most recent regulatory developments in Europe and beyond, particularly in the wake of intensified regulatory scrutiny of Big Tech in the early 2020s. Nonetheless, this two-decade perspective shows how public interest frames persist and evolve alongside major corporate events, offering insights into longer-term trends in Big Tech's media legitimacy narratives. Despite these limitations, our findings offer an important starting point for understanding how public interest framing cultivates media legitimacy in established media channels. Such research can help practitioners better understand the opportunities and risks of seeking media legitimacy through public interest appeals. The examined ability of public interest frames to construct media legitimacy also prompts critical reflection on whether these mediated discourses risk empowering corporations to define both problems and solutions, potentially distorting democratic debate around corporate power and accountability in an increasingly digital society.

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Supplementary material
The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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