

Journalism Research

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3 | 2018 | Vol. 1

HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

TABLE OF CONTENTS

001 Editorial

Papers

- 002 Svetlana Maschinez
Ideological Representation of the U.S. Presidential Candidates in the Editorials of English Online Newspapers in Russia
A Critical Discourse Analysis
- 021 Gabriele Hooffacker
Citizen reporting: between participation and professional journalism
Formats of citizen journalism in local television
- 034 Horst Pöttker
Journalism Started with its Professional Ethos
Daniel Defoe on Publicness, Press Freedom and its Limits

Essay

- 047 Carsten Brosda
How can the state promote journalism?
The legacy of Joseph Pulitzer

Debate

- 054 Lutz Frühbrodt
The peculiar logic of the content marketer.
Justified critics of established mass media?
Or just lobbyists for their own cause?

Reviews

- 064 *Deutscher Fachjournalisten-Verband (ed.): Journalistische Genres [Journalistic genres]*
reviewed by Hans-Dieter Kübler
- 067 *Volker Lilienthal, Irene Neverla (ed.): Lügenpresse [Lying press]*
reviewed by Marlis Prinzing
- 070 *Barbara Brandstetter, Steffen Range: Wirtschaft. Basiswissen für die Medienpraxis*
reviewed by Ralf Spiller
- 072 *Felix Koltermann: Fotoreporter im Konflikt [Photo reporters in conflict]*
reviewed by Evelyn Runge
- 076 *Jan Fredrik Hovden, Gunnar Nygren, Henrika Zilliacus-Tikkanen: Becoming a Journalist*
reviewed by Volker Banholzer
- 082 Legal Notice

How can the state promote journalism?

The legacy of Joseph Pulitzer

By Carsten Brosda

Abstract: If the state were to promote journalism in a targeted way, we would be able to motivate and support journalism that aspired not only to empirical analysis but also to provide context and thus form part of a critical and emancipatory practice of enlightenment. There are four fields of action that could be pursued in order to promote journalism for the common good: a contemporary legal framework; improved education; targeted support for innovation; and promotion of an “editorial society.”

When Joseph Pulitzer bought the *New York World* in 1883, there was no way of knowing that it would develop into one of the most influential newspapers of its day. His first editorial became a manifesto for the independence of journalism. He argued that the role of independent journalism is to fight for progress and change, and against injustice, poverty, and corruption. According to Pulitzer, publishers and journalists should not be allowed to be members of political parties and should maintain “radical independence” in all other ways, too. In short, he believed that newspaper people had a duty not to specific interests, but to the common good.

The fundamental principles Pulitzer listed back then remain unchanged to this day. Around 150 years later, the Federation of German Newspaper Publishers (BDZV) states in its guiding principles that “The newspapers are economically and journalistically independent. (...) The newspapers play the role of a watchdog in the public interest.” [1] Journalists inform their recipients and thus make a relevant contribution to the complex process of forming opinions and policy in a democracy.

As in Pulitzer’s day, the relationship between the media and policymakers is nothing if not complex. However, when it comes to protecting democracy, both are on the same side.

Journalists as watchdogs of democracy

Two key forces are buffeting the foundations of the rule of law, freedom and plurality of opinion in today’s world. The first is autocratic regimes; the second the fragmentation of social discourse into individual filter bubbles, aided by algorithms. Faced with these adversaries, a democratic and constitutional state should have a great interest in allies who are obligated to the same fundamental

values.

The potential of newspapers to act as a medium relevant to democracy was described as far back as 1787 by state theorist Thomas Jefferson, before he became US President:

“This formidable censor of the public functionaries, by arraigning them at the tribunal of public opinion, produces reform peaceably, which must otherwise be done by revolution.”[2]

Journalistic media organize the day-to-day conversations that a modern society conducts with itself on the questions of the day. They communicate important information and points of orientation, thus creating an understanding of the coherence and cohesion of functionally nuanced social systems.

This applies to this day. Going beyond any specialized localism, journalists can be the impetus behind public processes of understanding and, ideally, reform. In an age in which anyone can publicize his thoughts and opinions to a ubiquitous public at almost no cost and without having to run them by an editor acting as a filter, there is an even more urgent need for media and people that can distill this mass of information and opinions into a discourse relevant to the common good.

Intermediaries like Google and Facebook can serve up content that is tailored to each user’s personal preferences. In doing so, the focus on the relevance of the information to the individual, an orientation on the common good, and therefore public relevance, necessarily play a less important role in how the information is selected and presented.

The fact that Google, Facebook, and, more recently, Snapchat act as promoters of journalism makes sense for society, but changes little in terms of their fundamental disposition. As they rely on professional content, they have an interest in media using their platforms. Journalism can benefit from this, but we must not use it as the only way to safeguard journalism’s position in society.

To promote or not to promote?

One urgent role that the state must perform is to guarantee freedom of the press and to create the legal and regulatory framework needed to achieve this.

While considerations for promoting the press and journalism that go far beyond this are common in many countries[3], this debate is limited by certain reservations in Germany. Historic reasons may be behind this: When Germany was restructured after the Second World War, the Allies saw the independence of the German media as a crucial pillar of the country’s democratization.

Even today, state promotion quickly leads to suspicion of state influence – a suspicion that would be particularly serious in the media sector. In Germany, many press businesses enjoyed a good economic position for so long that decades went by with no need for promotion. This situation has now fundamentally changed, with many media businesses facing significant economic difficulties as a result of structural change.

However, a look at our European neighbors, for example sales support in France, shows that even extensive state support has only improved the situation of journalism slightly.

In general, journalistic content must be able to stand its own on the market for readers without external promotion. Only then can the medium show whether it is viable. After all, users' willingness to pay for a service remains the best proof of how highly they value it. In future, the priority will have to be to convince users that it is worth making a contribution to financing journalistic content. If at all, promotion models only come into question when they concentrate precisely on weak points, market failures or aiding innovation and are designed carefully so as not to cause any dependencies – direct or indirect.

Actively shaping the change in the media ecosystem

For many years now, the sales and advertising revenue of conventional publishing houses has been falling as a result of digitalization and the changing media environment. The old formula of generating two thirds of income from advertising and one third from sales is long gone. Today, journalism has to be largely self-funding. The economic challenges this presents to media companies sometimes makes it difficult for them to initiate the transformation processes needed, hindering investment and dampening the joy of innovation. All this is happening at a time when willingness to experiment should really form the foundation of forward-looking journalistic formats. As a result, it is increasingly important to ask whether the economic problems faced by so many media companies are putting structural limitations on the quality, diversity and freedom of the press going forward.

The intensity and historical uniqueness of this change demand further examination of the steps it will take to safeguard journalism as a democratic resource for the long term. There can be no doubt that there is a need for positive stimulus to drive the process of digital transformation in journalism forward more boldly. At the moment, if editorial offices change at all, it is too often influenced by ever more extensive money-saving measures – a fact that especially applies to many small local and regional newspapers. However, even for large daily newspapers, investigative research is expensive and demands a high level of expertise, especially when it concerns modern scoops such as the data analyses of the “Panama Papers” and “Paradise Papers”.

Anyone who believes that journalists should continue to play a role in the realization of democratic public life in future, needs to guarantee that they are truly able to fulfill this role with modern, including digital, means.

In fact, we are facing much deeper structural change. Increasingly, our media face a problem not only with their profit models in digital media contexts, but also with their audience's expectations. When users have access to new sources of information in more and more forms, conventional journalism itself needs critical examination. Journalistic services need to legitimize themselves to their users time and again. This means that the communicative tasks of journalists need to reposition themselves if they are to remain relevant in the future.

Delivering journalism is a difficult journey that demands a long-term approach. By promoting journalism in a targeted way, we can provide motivation and concrete support for journalistic actions that aspire not only to empirical analysis but also to provide context and thus form part of a critical and emancipatory practice of enlightenment.

Four fields of action appear particularly suited to giving journalism orientated towards the common good an increased chance of survival in Germany:

1. A contemporary legal framework

If journalism is to be able to remain self-funding in future, it will require a media structure that can deal with the new environment. In Germany, the federal and state governments are working together to create a reliable framework for publishing houses and journalists, in areas such as improved legal protection for journalistic content, press wholesale, and the enforcement of the reduced rate of VAT regardless of the form of distribution.

In addition, it needs to be made easier for charities to support journalism.[4] Promoting journalism is still not recognized as a charitable purpose in its own right.

This is one of the reasons why only 120 of the more than 21,000 charitable foundations in Germany are active in this field, largely conducting activities to support education, science and research, understanding between different nations, or the democratic state. [5] There is a wide spectrum of support activities, ranging from prizes for journalists to funding journalists in difficult economic situations, promoting media competence and holding symposia. It would be better if journalistic production were not only honored *ex post*, but also supported *ex ante*.

Networks of journalists in the same vein as large American research offices like ProPublica are another important reason to add the promotion of journalism to the catalog of charitable purposes contained in Art. 52 of the German Fiscal Code. This kind of non-profit organization produces content that is relevant to society, funded from various sources, and thus enjoys a very particular form of independence. If their emergence and development could be supported, journalistic organizations like this could become interesting stakeholders in the German media landscape, too.

2. Improved education for journalists

If we want dedicated, intelligent and versatile journalists in the future, too, we need good institutions for their education. One person who undoubtedly recognized this was Pulitzer himself, who provided funds for the world's first school of journalism in his will. Educational institutions teach not only the tools of the trade, but a professional ethos. Protected from the pressures of the market, they can reflect on the structural changes and incorporate them into new methods and skills in journalistic education.

One plausible option would be for the state to take on responsibility for teaching journalistic skills at universities. The opposition to academia still cultivated in many fields of media and journalism to this day is a particular feature of the German media landscape that has no place in today's world. We must recognize that practical elements of training, such as traineeships, are unsuited to generating the innovation skills editorial offices need. Academic education and the experiment and laboratory conditions it provides can help.

The structural changes triggered by advances in technology mean that learning does not end with initial training. Constant improvement in knowledge transfer and lifelong learning are essential for journalists if they are to develop new strategies in a public world increasingly organized digitally.

Given this background, it would seem a good idea to promote exchange between universities and practitioners all over the world. Local journalists who do not work in a large urban region suffer particularly from a lack of opportunities to learn modern ways of working or even to launch their own start-up. Fellowships, research sabbaticals and advanced seminars could create new options for journalists. Once again, it is down to educational institutions to develop new forms of outreach teaching that enable knowledge to be transferred right into editorial offices. One option would be bursaries that enable people to spend a few months working in the editorial office and share their knowledge in their field of expertise. Such experts could include, for example, outstanding editors from non-competing media from Germany and abroad, data analysts, audience researchers etc.

3. Targeted support for innovation and transformation

One crucial factor will be the establishment of a culture of innovation in journalism that takes on research and development strategies and agile development beyond traditional routines. Hamburg has had very positive experience in this field with its *Next Media Accelerator*^[6] (nma). The nma brings media start-ups from all over the world to Hamburg, promotes them and brokers contact with established media houses. Recently, the second round of financing tripled external investment - a clear indication of how much the media companies involved benefit from this promotion or and collaboration with young media start-ups. The accelerator model should serve as an example for how to promote media innovation.

As part of Hamburg's *nextMedia*^[7] initiative to promote the city as a business location, the City

Senate is also supporting the digital transformation process at the media companies based there by focusing on the dynamics of innovation at the interface between content and technologies. It uses sector platforms and appropriate formats to bring project partners together and support knowledge transfer. In the virtual reality (VR) segment, for example, publishing houses and other media houses can work closely with VR producers to develop prototypes and test their own content in VR.

4. Empowerment for the community of editors

The transformation of the media world demands particular skills not only from journalists, but increasingly also from users. These include understanding digital mechanisms and communicative responsibility among amateur journalists. At the same time, the transformation is increasing awareness of the challenging work done by qualified, professional journalists.

The media studies expert Bernhard Pörksen created the term “the editorial society” to describe the idea that all citizens should base their behavior on journalistic principles. The core ideas behind his code of ethics for communication in the digital age are reflection and responsibility.

One body taking the first steps towards this kind of training for amateur journalists is the “Reporterfabrik”[8] run by the Correctiv charitable research center. The project’s supporters include the Hamburg Office for Culture and Media.

Working together across multiple channels, we can and must ensure that what counts in future is not the loudest voice, but the most incisive analysis of lifeworld contexts. In times of fast change, one thing is often forgotten: There are some things that do not change. Pulitzer’s principles of thorough research, accuracy and independence are one of them – and so is humans’ need for truth.

Translation: Sophie Costella

About the author

Dr. Carsten Brosda (*1974) is Senator for Culture and Media of the City of Hamburg. Before this, he was State Councilor for Culture, Media and Digital Affairs and Senate Representative for Media in Hamburg. In Berlin, he previously worked as Head of Communication for the SPD party leadership and as Deputy Head of the Leadership and Planning Staff at the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. He studied Journalism and Politics at Dortmund University, completed a traineeship at the Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung and wrote his doctoral thesis on the topic of “discursive journalism.”

[1] <https://www.bdzv.de/der-bdzv/das-leitbild-der-zeitungen/>

[2] <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=FOEA-print-04-02-02-3837>

[3] Cf. e.g. Deutscher Bundestag, Wissenschaftliche Dienste 2017: Öffentliche Förderung journalistischer Informationsmedien in ausgewählten Ländern.
<https://www.bundestag.de/blob/508970/e0e7132a038f913f9cdecf6991760835/wd-10-064-16-pdf-data.pdf>

[4] Cf. The discussion in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia:
<https://correctiv.org/blog/ruhr/artikel/2017/01/18/rot-gruen-fuer-gemeinnuetzigen-journalismus/>

[5] <https://www.stiftungen.org/verband/was-wir-tun/vernetzungsangebote/arbeitskreise-foren-und-expertenkreise/expertenkreis-qualitaetsjournalismus-und-stiftungen.html>

[6] <http://www.nextmedia-hamburg.de/events/partner-events/next-media-accelerator/>

[7] <http://www.nextmedia-hamburg.de>

[8] <https://correctiv.org/reporterfabrik/>

Journalismus



Claudia Mast (Hrsg.)

ABC des Journalismus. Ein Handbuch

Praktischer Journalismus, 1

2018, 600 S., 76 Abb., Hardcover (Faden),
240 x 170 mm, dt.

ISBN 978-3-7445-0821-6

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Journalistik.
Zeitschrift für Journalismusforschung
3/2018
Vol. 1

<http://www.journalistik.online>

Editors

Prof. Dr. Bernhard Debatin
PD Mag. Dr. Petra Herczeg
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Prof. Dr. Tanjev Schultz

Redaktion

(Verantwortlich für den Inhalt (gem. § 55 Abs. 2 RStV)
Dipl.-Journ. Christina Kieseewetter (v.i.S.d.P.)

Acknowledgement

Stiftung Presse-Haus
Wir danken der Stiftung Presse-Haus NRZ in
Essen für die freundliche Unterstützung.

Publisher

Herbert von Halem Verlagsgesellschaft
mbH & Co. KG
Schanzenstr. 22
51063 Köln
Telefon: +49(0)221-9258290
Telefax: +49(0)221-92582929
E-Mail: info@halem-verlag.de

represented by:
Herbert von Halem Verlagsges. mbH
Geschäftsführer: Herbert von Halem
Registergericht: Köln
Registernummer: HRB 25647

Registereintrag:
Eingetragen im Handelsregister.
Registergericht: Köln
Registernummer: HRA 13409

Umsatzsteuer-ID:
Umsatzsteuer-Identifikationsnummer nach §27a
Umsatzsteuergesetz:
DE 172 714 183