Essay

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Between mistrust and instrumentalisation

On dealing with the AfD in journalism

Abstract: Like many populist parties, the »Alternative für Deutschland« (AfD) attempts to generate media coverage and public attention through targeted provocation. Journalism is thus faced with the question of how to deal with these attempts at instrumentalization. This paper discusses three possible strategies and their consequences, and calls for the AfD to be treated professionally, but not uncritically. Excluding the party from public discourse or reacting indignantly to its provocations is counterproductive and contradicts some of the fundamental rules of journalism

In August 2015, the AfD was at a crossroads. The party had initially gained attention largely for its Eurosceptic views but, following constant conflict, had now lost many of its founding members, including long-standing Chair Bernd Lucke. At this point, opinion polls showed that just three percent of Germans would have voted for the AfD at the next national election. Over the months that followed, however, the party enjoyed a meteoric rise, the like of which had never been seen in the history of the Federal Republic. By spring 2016, the AfD's share in opinion polls had more than quadrupled to 13 percent. Today, the AfD is the largest opposition party in the German Bundestag and has become even stronger by votes with state parliament elections in some Eastern German states in 2019.

So what happened? The easy answer is that the AfD shifted its focus to migration policy, was essentially the only party to criticize the admission of around a million migrants during the refugee crisis of 2015/16, and thus gained the support of the section of society that did not agree with this migration policy. Yet this is not the only answer. Parties' representation of popular positions among sections of the public is necessary for their success, but it is not the only factor. It may sound trivial, but the public first has to know the parties' positions. A party that

wants to enjoy lasting political success needs to gain lasting public attention for itself and its positions.

To attract and maintain this attention, the AfD uses a striking two-pronged approach. Populist parties know that they will receive little positive reporting in the established media, and counteract this by denying such media's credibility (calling them »lying press«). Instead, the AfD therefore uses social media as a platform for communication on which it can interact with its followers without being disturbed by those with differing views. Its favored platform is Facebook, where it currently has around the same number of followers as Germany's two main political parties, the CDU and the SPD, combined. However, even this is not in itself sufficient explanation for the significant rise in the party's vote within just a few months. The number of people seeking political information via social media remains relatively small and parties tend to reach only those people on social media who already hold similar views.

As a result, the AfD also relies on its presence in established news media. An internal party paper leaked in January 2017 reveals the strategy behind this (cf. https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/afd-strategiepapier-101.html). It calls for the use of »carefully planned provocations« to ensure that the party and its core election campaign issue, immigration, remain on the agenda. Negative reactions from established parties and media are an inevitable and acceptable consequence. To examine how successful this strategy was, in an as yet unpublished study at the Department of Communication in Mainz, we compared three data series with one another on a weekly basis: 1) the number of reports on the AfD in leading German media with high coverage; 2) the number of searches on the AfD on the online search engine Google as an indicator of the public attention received by the AfD; and 3) the opinion poll figures for the AfD. The results are astonishing. A rise in media reporting about the AfD led directly to public attention on the party rising to a similar extent. In the long term, this in turn led to an ever larger number of people considering the AfD electable.

There are two reasons why media reporting on the AfD increased. Firstly, reporting rose significantly just before federal and state elections. Such rises were probably less relevant to the AfD, however, as reporting on the other parties also rose shortly before elections. In contrast, the other rises in reporting were all initiated by the AfD itself. All of them can be attributed to provocations by AfD politicians that were usually related to immigration policy and were highly likely to have been deliberately targeted at generating media reporting. Examples include Frauke Petry's call to shoot at women and children at the border; Björn Höcke's claim that the Holocaust Memorial is a monument of shame; Alexander Gauland's call to ›dispose of‹ Germany's integration minister in Anatolia, and many more. Although many of these statements were originally made at events with only a few hundred participants, they were picked up on by the news media and thus became

the subject of discussion among an audience of millions. Using tactics like this, the AfD has succeeded in keeping the issue of immigration in the spotlight for years, even though the number of immigrants has fallen significantly since 2016.

Marginalizing, showing outrage, remaining objective: Strategies for dealing with the AfD in journalism

Media reporting undoubtedly plays a key role in the success of populist parties, and the AfD uses the mechanisms of media logic in a targeted way for its own benefit. The question thus arises of how journalists can deal with this situation. There are three main strategies: 1) to offer little or no reporting on the AfD, 2) to show outrage about the AfD and 3) to report on the AfD in more or less exactly the same way as on other parties.

1) Before the parliamentary elections in the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate in 2016, SPD Prime Minister Malu Dreyer cancelled her participation in a television debate between the leading candidates of all the main parties because a representative of the AfD had also been invited, arguing that it was important not to give the party a platform. When the German newspaper FAZ printed an article by Alexander Gauland in October 2018, it received heavy criticism, especially on social media. There have been many such cases in recent years. It is clear that many segments of journalism, politics and the population want to exclude the AfD from public discourse. Anyone who talks to the party or gives it the opportunity to express an opinion in public is almost suspected of complicity. From a normative perspective, however, this is a questionable position. Democracy lives on the discussion between different positions and no-one should be robbed of the opportunity to take part in this discussion. To start with, it does not even matter whether or not the people in question are interested in a real exchange of views. Refusing such an exchange of views can also easily be construed as weakness: The person avoids discussion out of fear of losing. From a journalistic point of view, it is also important to note that the media in general, and public service broadcasters in particular, are required to represent the entire spectrum of opinion in their reporting. The exception to this is positions that violate legal principles and are therefore not covered by freedom of expression, for example. Whether this is true in a particular case is a question for lawyers, not journalists. A party that is now supported by around 15 per cent of the population cannot be excluded from media reporting and should not be left out of public discourse. The question is therefore not whether, but how, the media should report on the AfD.

2) A content analysis – conducted at the Department of Communication in Mainz and not yet published – of how various regional and national daily newspapers reported on 17 cases of provocation between 2015 and 2018 shows that the

media reported intensively on most of the AfD's provocations, strongly denouncing the provocateurs. The journalists often did not make this assessment themselves, however, instead including extensive quotes from third parties, especially politicians from other parties, who were outraged about the AfD. Journalists and politicians clearly shared the impression that they could not simply leave the AfD's provocations unchallenged. This impulse is understandable, but not especially useful. Here, too, the key question is a normative one: Can it really be down to journalists to combat disagreeable political parties? This may be appropriate in opinion-based styles and formats, but it cannot be reconciled with the neutral and objective communication of information in news and reporting. Instead, the job of combating populists falls to the established parties, who, if nothing else, must do so in their own interest. The data presented above also shows that media outrage about the AfD's provocations is actually useful to the AfD. The fact that the reaction is negative is largely irrelevant. Unlike the large established parties, parties on the political fringes benefit from any media attention. Negative reporting is used just as skillfully to claim the role of victim and as further evidence that the established media are part of a dysfunctional social elite that the AfD is rightly fighting against. By acting on their well-meaning impulse to stand up to the AfD, journalists thus allow the party to instrumentalize them for their own benefit.

3) The answer to the question of how journalists should deal with the AfD is therefore clear: When reporting on the AfD, journalists should simply remember the essentials of their trade – objective, non-moralizing, fact-based reporting, just as should be the case for any other party. This does not mean ignoring or failing to criticize extreme right-wing tendencies in sections of the party, but reporting should not be limited to these aspects. So what might this mean in detail?

- There is no need to report on every provocation by the AfD. Instead, journalists should weigh up the public interest in each case. What counts is not only the severity of the provocation, but also the number of people who would be reached by the provocation were it not reported in the media. Does the fact that an AfD politician insulted the Federal Government's integration minister in a small village hall in East Germany really need to be the subject of days of discussion in the media? Or is there a better use for the space this takes up?

- Instead of merely reacting to provocations, the media should be proactive in deciding when and what they report on the AfD. After all, journalists do not approve of other parties dictating their reporting either. Furthermore, reporting on a party voted for by almost six million people in the last federal election should not be limited to the issue of immigration. Journalists can also ask AfD politicians targeted questions on other topics – albeit not with the aim of embarrassing the party for (allegedly) having no other issues. Instead, the focus

should be on giving voters an opportunity to make a comprehensive judgment on the AfD's positions. This means that journalists need to make the effort to actively approach AfD politicians. Interviewing them does not mean unnecessarily giving the party a platform, but is in line with the journalistic principle of representing a diversity of opinions and removes the pressure on journalists to report on AfD provocations simply in order to meet this principle.

• In some cases, however, reporting on an AfD provocation is arguably unavoidable from a journalistic point of view, for example because an incident appears particularly severe or the situation has already been discussed so intensively on social media that the news media feel they need to follow suit. In such cases, the media reports can at least expose the strategy behind the provocation. The recipients would then not only gain information on the provocation and the reactions to it, but also be sensitized to the fact that it is a deliberate strategy by the AfD.

Conclusion: Media reports on the AfD and other parties

The media have to report on the AfD, but not on its every provocation. They should not see it as their role to debunk, expose, or warn against parties like the AfD. The media's race to be the most outraged and to distance themselves the furthest from the AfD's provocations merely gives the party more public attention in the short term and increases its potential voters in the long term. Journalists should not allow themselves to be instrumentalized by populist parties, but should make efforts to approach them. This way, the journalists can determine the timing and content of reporting themselves. An objective exchange of opinions with the AfD is a democratic duty; refusing to do so is not a route to glory.

However, in all probability, the success of the AfD depends not only on how journalists report on the AfD, but also on how they report on other parties and democratic institutions. Populist parties benefit when the population loses trust in established political institutions and thus becomes open to the populists' claims that only they can return power to the people. The media's tendency to focus its coverage on problems and conflicts and to paint established parties and institutions in a negative light can cause the population to develop an increasingly negative image of politics. The question of how journalists should deal with the AfD therefore also includes the question of how they should deal with the established political institutions. This reporting cannot be uncritically positive, of course, but can be more constructive. Editorial offices should at least discuss the question of whether every problem needs to be attributed to politics, every political proposal torn apart in the media, and every attempt to reach political compromise labelled »conflict«.

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