

Debate

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Disinfection journalism

Reporting on coronavirus has not been a beacon of orientation

Abstract: The journalistic reporting on the coronavirus pandemic displayed many essentially familiar deficits. Research and diversity of opinion came up particularly short. Journalism failed to ask crucial questions or look for critical voices. At the same time, policymakers were implementing measures that will have effects and side-effects for many years to come and for which, given its lack of involvement, the democratic sovereign cannot bear responsibility.

At the start of the coronavirus pandemic, demand for journalistic media boomed (B5). And indeed, people were largely satisfied with the media on offer (B20). However, neither demand nor customer satisfaction say anything about the quality of the reporting, nor especially about individual deficits. Journalism studies will undoubtedly take an intensive look at the sector's performance in the future and, as any journalistic plumber should, will spend more time examining the dripping, sticking, limescale-encrusted taps than those that work perfectly. Aside from various niggles, the criticism that has been heard so far has focused on two key perceptions: firstly, »almost spookily uniform reporting« (Meier/Wyss 2020)^[1] that carries »the Federal Government's crisis strategy largely without critique« (Linß 2020) and thus puts itself in the position of »system journalism« (Jarren 2020); and, secondly, the dominance of the topic in itself. »Agenda setting always means agenda cutting: The broadcast time [...] given over to the coronavirus pandemic pushes other situations and events out of sight« (Haarkötter 2020).

1 This and the following quotes were translated from German.

There is plenty of evidence of both points, some of which I will highlight in this paper. Numerous reactions to the media critique made certainly illustrate one of the core problems of journalism, namely confusion between facts and the associated points of view. But let's start from the very beginning: Why is ›corona reporting‹ there in the first place?

1. Democracy demands well-informed citizens

We will never know for sure how useful, or how harmful, the journalism that exists in a democracy is, as conducting the experiments this would demand is simply not feasible. The idea is that general elections demand well-informed voters, both for their own good and in order to protect others. Scrutinizing governments and their countless official bodies demands conversation within society. No-one had a specific mandate for the executive decisions made on coronavirus policy. No election manifesto offered the option of a shutdown or lockdown, while the political synchronization between the German federal and 16 state governments alone (B₁) made it more than clear that voters had no say – even the parliaments were of no importance. Instead, journalism raised politicians, who have already long called themselves »heads of government« (B₁), to the status of »heads of state« (B₁₄) or princes (B₁₅). Even if one adheres to a minimalistic model of democracy, such as that advocated by Joseph Schumpeter, and is in favor of a »democracy of elites,« this still needs to remain modifiable. After all, the right to self-determination forms the heart of democracy (cf. Abromeit 2002: 165). The focus is never on making the best decisions, but on acting as a (compulsory) community in such a way that the greatest possible satisfaction and the lowest possible dissatisfaction is created: My freedom becomes the subject of negotiation only and exactly at the point where it impedes on the freedom of others (for more detail, see Rieg 2020a).

But what did the media broadcast, print, post around the clock? What the executive – from the federal government to local health authorities – recommends, prescribes, and enforces can always be reported within five minutes; with background information (›What is a virus?‹ etc.) perhaps fifteen. And then? Anything vaguely related. Here a new coronavirus case, there a travel ban; frustrated non-holidaymakers here, ›stranded‹ holidaymakers there; here a study, there a chaotic mess of rules. Surely we should have known, should have been able to act? Wasn't this or that done too late? Where are the checks, penalties, why such a soft touch? Appeals for people to stay strong: ways to slow down their lives, tips on home schooling, ›What's your favorite mask?‹ And of course, there are scandals: The media have been harping on about »conspiracy myths« for months – single incidents such as Ischgl, Rheda-Wiedenbrück, and a banned visit to someone's parents (B₂) are chewed over for days or weeks on end.

2. Well-informed citizens demand journalistic research

Today, policymakers and the bodies that work for them are more than capable of keeping citizens up to date on the rules they pass themselves (B8). This is not »bypassing the media« (B17), but democratic progress made possible by technology. Indeed, for economic reasons alone, it should force journalism to up its own game: to conduct their own research before commenting rather than seeing PR as competition for journalism (B7).

Instead, journalism dutifully reported on what policymakers said (cf. Reisin 2020a) and reduced all options for action to the prescribed »flatten the curve« policy, meaning that anyone who does not stay at home puts their own life and those of others in danger. Most journalists appeared to find this so logical, so without alternative (cf. Ruß-Mohl 2020a), so factually accurate, that they did not even pursue the first and most obvious research question, namely: What consequences might this have? There are no effects without side effects. How much will a lockdown cost and who will pay for it? What will be made impossible by it? Which social consequences of a lockdown can be expected or are even conceivable? What suffering will it cause, from animal transports stuck at closed borders and bankrupt businesses to deaths caused by untreated illnesses? What will the changes in hospitals mean? What about the interruption to the global movement of goods and people? This list of side effects is so long and wide-ranging that only those who are familiar with every aspect could take democratic responsibility for the planned effects. The role of journalism was to provide information on this (Rieg 2020c). But it did not take on this role – perhaps not due to a lack of ability to do so, nor for reasons of comfort or personal fear, but because of the sheer scale of the issue: »The initial phase of reporting on coronavirus in Germany can be justified in terms of the ethics of responsibility. It can be argued that the hesitance that defined it, even to the extreme of a kind of court reporting, could have served the purpose of eschewing responsibility for the consequences (more infections!) that could have been triggered by, for example, sowing doubt on social distancing measures« (Prinzing 2020).

This attitude did certainly exist, but I find it impossible to imagine a situation that would justify a »kind of court reporting.« If journalism has nothing to contribute, it should keep silent, rather than mutating into a »kind of service journalism« (Linß 2020). Those who want to report must first conduct research (cf. Section 2 of the German Press Code) – even more so when we know that the government's attitude is »the population does not need to know everything« (B19). Only those who know what does not appear worthy of reporting can take responsibility for not reporting it. There can be no refusal to research for reasons of the ethics of responsibility. Yes, journalists can keep a kidnapping quiet (Schicha 2019: 38; cf. Pöttker 2019), but only when they know the situation (confidential

information from the police, their own findings) and where informing the public does not appear necessary for their orientation (at this point in time). Would any of the ›court reporters‹ claim to have researched every consequence of the state's actions and, given this well-founded background, have kept all his knowledge quiet? Would any journalist claim to have decided instead of the sovereign how many deaths, injuries, and destroyed lives can be accepted without question in the cause of protection against coronavirus; how many trillions of euros need to be spent without alternative (B4) in this brief moment?

It was not about some small details, nor about investigative questions (who knew what when?). It was about fundamental information for a democratic society. How many resources can those living today take from those living in the future for their own lives or survival (according to the government, »all available,« B3)? Questions like this were not addressed (Rieg 2020b). Instead, the media presented protecting the lives of the German population as the non-negotiable top priority, above all else. Although journalists made no protest against Wolfgang Schäuble's small contradiction (B23), the media got plenty of mileage out of Mayor of Tübingen Boris Palmer (B25). A well-known poltergeist went right ahead and called Palmer »stupid« (B26); a quality newspaper called his statement »unacceptable« (B27); and a continuum so popular in journalism was created: ›it is not the first time that XY has made negative headlines‹ (B24). Palmer had dared to ask what journalism refused to: What about the side effects of the lockdown, which according to the UN could lead to numerous deaths through poverty (B28; Rieg 2020b)? But instead of conducting research into this question, the media came up against Palmer's statement that the issues need to be weighed up, and his reaction to the scandalization in the media (B21, B22).

So many questions were not asked, so many rules not analyzed, so many illogical decisions not named, that it is impossible to imagine that different journalism would not also have led to the development of different public opinion.

3. Journalistic research demands the ability to recognize and distinguish between opinions and facts

The »separation of facts from comment« (B11) in publications has been the subject of discussion time and again. It is certainly essential in research. However banal this may sound, empirical observation shows how rarely it is adhered to (B12). For example, every coronavirus status report we read states that Covid-19 patients »*have to be* put on ventilators« (B38). But the fact is merely that they are put on ventilators. Journalism cannot decide whether or not this is necessary – the treatment is based on the opinion of the doctors. Someone who does not understand that the decision to ventilate is an opinion, rather than a law of

nature, will fail to pose elementary research questions. The same goes for all the measures used to fight the pandemic: Pneumologists, intensive care doctors, and palliative care experts have fundamentally different ideas about what to do, because they are pursuing different goals and may be following different philosophies (B30).

Another example: A dpa fact check stated, »Government not planning compulsory app for restaurant guests« (B37). Of course, no evidence for this apparent fact can be found in the text. After all, no-one outside ›the government‹ knows what ›the government‹ is planning. No informer, no minutes, not even an illegally hacked conversation could help. It is the old familiar story of incorrectly claimed facts: »Schmidt does not want to be Chancellor« (Esslinger/Schneider 2015: 24).

Numerous opinions are sold as facts. What about the widespread claim that someone who insists on his personal freedom is automatically putting the lives of others on the line (B16)? Is it possible that one's own opinion is mistaken for a fact here? In his motivational podcast »Wir gegen Corona« (Us against corona), Hajo Schumacher gives his view on the »distortion of reality« by »noisy troublemakers.« More than 70 percent found »the course charted by ›them up there‹ good. »But the 20 percent who are against it are those who are always against things. They are the same people who think climate change is a lie, who say that migrants should all drown in the Mediterranean, who argue that the Earth is flat, and who vote for a certain party – I would say« (B18, from 11:07). This world view is in no way different from the belief that the Earth is flat. But why conduct research if one considers one's own opinion to be fact?

Brost and Pörksen (2020) write: »In the first phase of the crisis, it may have been right to listen predominantly to virologists and to discuss medical measures.« No, that is where the »Politics chief of the ZEIT« and »the Christian Drosen among media researchers« (Ruß-Mohl 2020a) are wrong. In order to judge what may or may not have been right, one first has to clarify what the issue is in the first place, and then find every researchable viewpoint on it. Listening to virologists is always supposed to mean listening to the »professionals« (B35) – to those who know what to do. That sounds reasonable if I want to know something about viruses, but a virus professional cannot decide which goals our society pursues. Many problems are all down to the words and deeds of experts: straightened rivers, car-friendly cities, aseptic childhoods, a large-scale animal processing industry like at Tönnies, tree plantations replacing forests, and a railway system that cannot cope with rail travel (B33). These professionals did, or advised others to do, what they believed right in their expert view. »Not only politics, but also science, is based on prerequisites, interests, values, assumptions, models, and prognoses – in short, interpretations that need to be fought over« (Dotzauer 2020).

The greatest obstacle to journalism that provides orientation is journalists who believe they have understood a topic. After all, someone who has understood everything considers his substantiated opinion a fact, the truth (B13), the correct explanation of the world – every other viewpoint must of course be fake news.

4. Facts demand diversity of opinion

The role of journalism is to look for answers to questions that would not otherwise be available. This will always include delivering different interpretations of the facts researched, assuming that these opinions are not the entire research work in themselves, given that the facts are already known.

Because so many journalists fail to separate fact from opinion, the necessity of diversity of opinion is repeatedly countered with cries like: »No platform for climate deniers« (B36). But of course, the name alone reveals that climate change deniers are not representing an opinion, but ignoring facts. The greenhouse effect of CO₂ can be measured and recreated in experiments – there is nothing to discuss. On the other hand, even the greatest experts cannot say how humanity should react to the very complex side effects of climate change's effects, as interests and values are not facts, but opinions. Whether people should throw a huge goodbye party, immediately start living climate-neutrally for the benefit of future generations, or choose a path somewhere in between is not a question of right or wrong, but merely a democratic decision-making process. This means that »climate change deniers« should of course not be given a platform, but proponents of the view »après moi, le deluge« definitely should. Every opinion must face a counter-opinion, otherwise it is not an opinion, but a claimed fact or belief that cannot be discussed, voted on, negotiated, or commented. Those who do not want diversity of opinion do not need journalism, and journalism without diversity of opinion is propaganda.

In order to enable diversity of opinion, journalism needs to wave goodbye to its »good versus evil« narrative. »Everything is exclusively judged in the categories of the friend-foe dichotomy. Every argument turns into an ideological killer-phrase demanding confession instead of reasoning« (Lübberding 2020).

It is absolutely fine for Christian Drosten to respond to a statement by French virologist Luc Montagnier (who won a Nobel Prize in 2008 for his research into HIV) with: »It is difficult for a scientist active in virology to say that a Nobel Laureate is spreading nonsense. But that is absolute nonsense« (B29), but it also means that another virologist needs to be allowed to contribute to the media discussion with a view on a Drosten opinion that is just as strong (cf. Meyen 2020). When criticism was voiced of a preprint by Drosten, the media defended the virologist like a pack of hounds, accusing the message-bearer (B34) of cam-

paigning (B32) and scandalization (B31). Unlike in the case of bad virologist Hendrik Streeck (or the virologist who let a bad ex-BILD man close to him, B10): his ›Heinsberg study‹ was »accompanied by the highest skepticism from scientists and the media from the very beginning« and he himself »torn to pieces in the media air« (Reisin 2020b). In both cases, journalism had little time for diversity of opinion – exactly the thing that is revered as science’s power of self-regulation. Referring to Rezo’s criticism of the press, Marion Kuchenny saw »colleagues from the large print media« in particular as having a certain »tendency to consider themselves as the measure of all things and to claim journalistic prerogative of interpretation on topics and how they are evaluated for themselves in an almost arrogant way« (B9).

5. Diversity of opinion demands media critique

There is a need for continuous, up-to-the-minute discussion of the quality of journalistic reporting, for accuracy and correction of errors, completeness, relevance, representativity, objectivity, transparency, independence, and diversity. Public critique of media and journalism is a necessary corrective – and as such journalism itself should conduct research in line with it, scrutinize it, and make it public. But »journalism journalism« (Malik 2004) is rare, or stuck at the level of ›journalists were spotted somewhere not wearing face masks‹ (B6). In the press, »the media side is a television program side or culture side,« a »meta-level for reflecting self-critically on one’s own work« (Schicha 2020) is merely attempted at best. To my knowledge, a first comprehensive study on the quality of corona reporting in Switzerland (cf. Eisenegger et al. 2020) has not received any attention in media magazines so far. Yet as an essential service for orientation, media critique should be found within the media itself. However, journalists clearly perceive even mere questions on their work as pretension – I at least know of no other professional group that responds so rarely and in such a cagey way.

»Those who, like Claus Eurich, sees the reporting on coronavirus as nothing other than a ›systematic failure of journalism,‹ eliminate themselves from the debate,« commented Werner D’Inka (2020) on the »interjection« of the Dortmund emeritus professor (B39), instead of passing on even a single point of criticism to the FAZ readers. D’Inka countered the critical remarks from Meier and Wyss (2020) with the question: »Does he (Meier) not read a newspaper?« and gave his diagnosis that »it would have helped the two of them« to read a specific article in the FAZ and one in the SZ. Unfortunately, both appeared after the critique of Meier and Wyss was published. A focus on being right, rather than acknowledging a different perception of the world.

But it is almost a tradition for media research to attract little interest, as Noelle-Neumann complained all of forty years ago (1977: 8). Ruß-Mohl (2020b) recently commented: »Journalism must be the only profession that is not taken seriously by the science associated with it. I ask myself if one would continue to go to a doctor who told one to one's face that he was not at all interested in medical research.« This does not even mean that journalism would have to attend journalism studies seminars, for example – instead, it should make more effort in this regard within its core business, such as in the cases of Drosten, Streeck, Kekulé & Co. After all, virology and epidemiology are not the only fields in which »science is always fallible; errors and examination of positions are the most frequent sources of progress« (Prinzing 2020).

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würde, um jedes Menschenleben zu kämpfen. [...]«

Palmer: »So konnten es aber nur Leute verstehen, die entweder nicht zugehört haben, den Kontext nicht sehen wollten oder halt böswillig sind. [...]«

Holderried: »Für die Aussagen über die Corona-Maßnahmen haben Sie sich aber hinterher entschuldigt. Also können Sie auch ein Stück weit nachvollziehen, dass Sie mit solchen Aussagen anecken?«

Palmer: »Sie sollten exakt bleiben. Ich habe mich nicht für die Aussagen entschuldigt, sondern für die ungewollten Wirkungen. [...]«

<https://www.faz.net/podcasts/f-a-z-podcast-fuer-deutschland/warum-boris-palmer-bei-den-gruenen-bleiben-will-16788763.html>

B22 https://www.tuebingen.de/Dateien/stellungnahme_corona_ob.pdf

B23 <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/bundestagspraesident-zur-corona-krise-schaeuble-will-dem-schutz-des-lebens-nicht-alles-unterordnen/25770466.html>

B24 »Palmer stand in den vergangenen Jahren wiederholt wegen provokanter Äußerungen in der Kritik. Es ist das erste Mal, dass er sich ausdrücklich entschuldigt hat.« <https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/baden-wuerttemberg/tuebingen/palmer-bekraeftigt-entschuldigung-nach-aeusserung-alte-menschen-100.html>

B25 <https://taz.de/Boris-Palmer-und-die-Coronakrise!/5682102/>

B26 <https://www.bild.de/politik/kolumnen/franz-josef-wagner/post-von-wagner-lieber-boris-palmer-70357844.bild.html>

B27 <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/boris-palmer-inakzeptabel-1.4890996>

B28 Palmer Interview <https://www.sat1.de/tv/fruehstuecksfernsehen/video/202082-oberbuergermeister-boris-palmer-spricht-ueber-die-deutsche-wirtschaft-clip>

B29 <https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/info/coronaskript194.pdf>

B30 https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/palliativmediziner-zu-covid-19-behandlung-sehr-falsche.694.de.html?dram:article_id=474488

B31 <https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/medizin/streit-ueber-corona-studie-von-christian-drosten-die-maer-vom-unfehlbaren-wissenschaftler-a-15f5e38c-ob76-4a07-aa73-bb9863d3ca56>

B32 <https://medienwoche.ch/2020/06/04/kampagne-statt-kritik-was-bei-bild-vs-drosten-schief-lief/>

B33 <https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Ab-Sonntag-gilt-ein-neuer-Fahrplan-der-Bahn-und-wieder-soll-vieles-besser-werden-4245027.html>

B34 <https://www.bild.de/politik/inland/politik-inland/fragwuerdige-methoden-drosten-studie-ueber-ansteckende-kinder-grob-falsch-70862170.bild.html>

B35 <https://bit.ly/31Cunnt>

B36 <https://www.republik.ch/2019/04/25/keine-buehne-mehr-fuer-klimaleugner>

B37 <https://www.presseportal.de/pm/133833/4627315>

B38 »Für 80 Prozent der infizierten Menschen verläuft eine Corona-Infektion mild, bei 20 Prozent schwer und rund fünf Prozent trifft es richtig hart. Sie kommen auf die Intensivstation, müssen beatmet werden und kämpfen um ihr Leben.« <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/reha-klinik-in-pfronten-macht-corona-patienten-wieder-fit,S3VSynC>

B39 <http://www.interbeing.de/2020/04/06/journalismus-desastroes-ein-zwischenruf/>