

Debate

Tanjev Schultz

Unjustified media critique

The coronavirus crisis has demonstrated not the failure, but the value of journalism

We are living in strange times. Few other countries have (so far) dealt with the coronavirus crisis as well as Germany, yet there are many who would have you think that the country and its institutions are on the brink of ruin. Arrogant media critique is not satisfied with merely highlighting the errors and mistakes that the press has undoubtedly made – it clamors to diagnose systemic failure of the media. This type of media critique noticeably suffers from exactly the distortions that it claims to see in journalism itself: negativity, one-sidedness, and exaggeration.

In his paper »Disinfection journalism« in this edition of *Journalism Research*, Timo Rieg strikes a sweeping blow against the media (cf. Rieg 2020). He sees fundamental deficiencies in the reporting on corona. It is amazing how widely perceptions can differ – my impression is totally different (cf. Schultz 2020a). To me, the image drawn by the media of the pandemic and its consequences seems entirely diverse and multi-faceted. This is in line with one of the first content analyses on the coronavirus reporting (cf. Quandt et al. 2020), although its methods are a little controversial. Of course there are examples of poor journalism, but all in all the media have done an impressive job.

In next to no time, many people have undergone basic training in scientific thinking and learned a huge amount about virology and epidemiology – as well as about the uncertainties in studies and the difficulties faced by policymakers in having to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Many now have an understanding of phenomena like »exponential growth« and »excess mortality.« Without the work of the media, it is doubtful whether people in Germany would have behaved so carefully. Of course, people are welcome to believe that this behavior is based on a kind of brain-washing, but I find this claim both arrogant and ignorant. There have always been alternatives, and every measure should be sub-

jected to scrutiny – but the fact that huge numbers of people found the measures taken by policymakers correct, at least on the whole, cannot simply be dismissed as an expression of false consciousness. Just as the majority is not right simply because it is the majority, broad approval is not in itself an indicator of manipulated masses.

The role of journalism is not to simply accept the policies of a government. But this does not mean that the media has been converted to naivete and a lack of criticism simply because it occasionally agrees with policymakers. When people swim against the media tide (warning: mainstream!), it is not always necessarily the result of sensible insight. It may be a result of a refusal to learn (cf. Schultz 2020b). One is reminded of the joke about the man who takes the wrong slip road onto the freeway, hears a warning on the radio about someone driving the wrong way down the freeway on his route – and mumbles in amazement, »Just one? There are dozens of them!«

One can be grateful that not everyone with a strong and abstruse opinion makes it big in the media. Of course, anything is available online, but luckily reputable media providers such as *Tagesschau* [a daily television news program] and the FAZ newspaper still hold some weight in the discourse – whereas in other countries, conspiracy theories can gain a foothold among the population virtually unchecked. A look at the USA is enough to show what could happen if Rieg's demand of German editorial offices were to be adopted: »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.« If one were to take this sentence seriously – gosh, where would one start?! It is possible to find someone with an esoteric opinion on almost anything. But regardless of how important it is to aim towards diversity in reporting, boundaries will always have to be drawn somewhere. That is in part what the media is there for – to help provide orientation and to present people not with *every* opinion, but with those that are relevant. Of course, the decision as to what and who is relevant is based on a judgment by editorial offices and may also reflect the balance of power in society. But the media are nevertheless not simply puppets of the powerful.

Timo Rieg is right to call on the media to act as a check and balance on policymakers – even, indeed especially, when the executive makes decisions with far-reaching consequences. I also think that journalists could often have been more critical during the initial phase of fighting the pandemic in particular. But I am still not convinced by his arguments.

On 1) Democracy demands well-informed citizens

Contradicting Rieg's claim that the media spent too long focusing on »anything vaguely related« to the topic and »appeals for people to stay strong,« there has

been a huge number of informative and sophisticated reports and analyses on a wide range of aspects of the pandemic. The questions of what viruses are, how the disease spreads, how it can be diagnosed etc. have always been anything but »vaguely related.« We know that researchers' knowledge of SARS-CoV-2 has been developing all the time, so offering a good overview of the information has been no mean feat. I, too, found some of the slogans on public service broadcasters intended to create a sense of community a little overbearing (»stick together,« »here for you«). On ZDF, cartoon characters the Mainzelmännchen promoted the hygiene rules.

However, I consider it a little excessive to draw conclusions on the entire media discourse based on these factors. And I simply cannot understand how one can dismiss the outbreaks in Ischgl or Rheda-Wiedenbrück as »single events« that should not be »chewed over« for weeks. I thought that research and recording important background information and contexts was important? There is a lot to learn from how the authorities and people behaved in Ischgl, and the media would certainly not be fulfilling their educational role if they were to merely touch on this issue or report on it superficially. The same goes for the meat factory at Tönnies and the structures of the meat industry. Incidentally, it was the media who repeatedly drew attention to the untenable conditions in slaughterhouses even before the pandemic hit.

On 2) Well-informed citizens demand journalistic research

There is no doubt that, in a crisis, the media should not limit itself to reporting only on what is happening front of house. They need to look behind the scenes, ask questions, and pursue leads. Rieg believes they do too little. I would even agree: In my view, there can never be enough research. But resources are notoriously limited. The demand for the media to make (even) more of an effort and place even more importance on conducting research is therefore always applicable. This is good for media critique, since it always has a point in its favor. But it would be fair to also honor the interesting research conducted in sometimes adverse circumstances: on coronavirus in China, on intensive care medicine, on help with harvests, on the situation of refugees. There were plenty of detailed reconstructions of the political decision-making processes – and plenty of critical, doubting voices outside the YouTube hygiene demonstration bubble: The »established« media, for example, discussed Sweden's relaxed method of fighting the pandemic seemingly endlessly.

Criticism and doubt have come just as much from the left as from the liberal-conservative side. Jakob Augstein, publisher of *Freitag* and co-owner of *DER SPIEGEL*, professed some sympathy for the Swedish model. He was even allowed

to do so in the program *Presseclub* on public service television. The head of the Springer publishing house, Mathias Döpfner, published a long article in *Welt* entitled »I have doubts« (Döpfner 2020). In it, he asked as early as late March whether the measures were really without alternative and whether they went too far. Early on, author Juli Zeh published an article in *Focus* magazine warning of the importance of maintaining proportionality in the measures for fighting the pandemic (Zeh 2020). The list goes on – although it does not change my perception that the initial phase of the crisis saw the establishment of a very broad majority opinion that followed multiple premises:

First: The SARS-CoV-2 pathogen and the disease Covid-19 are not equivalent to the familiar flu; the dangers are greater and more difficult to predict.

Second: In order to prevent the health system from becoming overwhelmed, measures must be taken urgently.

Third: As long as there is neither a vaccine nor good, effective medicines, it makes sense to prevent exponential growth in infections.

Just like a majority in politics, the media, and the population, I consider these three points logical and, according to what we know at the moment, empirically accurate and normatively sound. One can voice objections to them, but those who do will have to live with perhaps failing to convince others. If this is the case, he or she cannot blame the media for having failed in their reporting. I certainly agree with Rieg that no-one needs court reporting (except the court, perhaps). But if the media and policymakers come to the same conclusion independently for good reasons, it is not court reporting.

On 3) Journalistic research demands the ability to recognize and distinguish opinions and facts

There is no doubt that the media could be more sensitive and diligent in distinguishing between facts and opinions. Yet Rieg overlooks the fact that every news selection is already normatively saturated. What is considered *worth* reporting depends on how the media and society view and evaluate a situation – so it is no wonder that even news formulations intended to convey the facts contain normative traces. For media critique, it is often worth looking for such traces and ensuring that they are not simply taken for granted as a matter of course. But, in doing so, there is no need for sophism: Rieg's criticism of the phrase »have to« in the phrase »have to be put on ventilators« may be logical, but it is so subtle that it almost vanishes into thin air. As a responsible reader seeing the criticized phrase, I already understand that the ventilation was the judgment of the doctors who decided it was necessary. There are plenty of similar examples: The victim of an accident »had to« be flown to hospital by

helicopter. A student »had to« retake an exam because he failed the first time. None of these is truly without alternative, but I consider it a step too far to see them as deliberately misleading the reader.

It is a similar case when it comes to Rieg's example of a dpa text entitled »Government not planning compulsory app for restaurant guests.« Strictly speaking, the dpa should have written, »Government announces that it is not planning a compulsory app.« Of course the dpa can never know what may have been planned in secret, but that is not the point here. What matters is that the government has officially announced – counter to reports to the contrary – that there will be no compulsory app. It has thus made an external statement and can be taken at its word. If it later becomes apparent that the government is making the app compulsory after all, this reflects on the government, which communicated incorrectly or perhaps even lied. However, there would be little point in lying here, as it is a situation that cannot be concealed – a government introducing a compulsory app needs to announce it. The dpa therefore runs little risk in repeating the word of the government as fact (if the dpa were reporting on Trump, it may be a different story).

On 4) Facts demand diversity of opinion

Rieg describes the core role of journalism as delivering a range of interpretations on research facts. This is challenging. It cannot be achieved by someone presenting a counter-opinion to every opinion, as Rieg demands. Journalists need to have the skill and judgment required to decide what an esoteric opinion is and who is ignorant or even a charlatan who can safely be ignored. Given the populism, disinformation, and conspiracy theories that abound, the media needs to pay even more attention to creating platform for those voices who have a substantial contribution to make. Of course this decision is not always easy – and always controversial. But the mere existence of a wide range of apparent experts plying their truths on YouTube is certainly not in itself a reason to allow them all to have their say on *Tagesschau*.

According to Rieg's view, climate change deniers must not be given a platform (because climate change is a proven fact), but proponents of the »après moi, le déluge« viewpoint definitely should. Can this be continued to its logical conclusion? No media platform for Holocaust deniers, but one for neo-Nazis who say that destroying Jews is the good and right thing to do? Sensibly, the media also draw certain boundaries for the discussion of normative positions – and not just the limits set by criminal law.

In view of the coronavirus situation, I understand Rieg's argument as saying that the media should present a diverse range of opinions on how to deal with

the pandemic. But exactly this has been the subject of much argument and wrangling for months. The fact that talk shows are not constantly populated with people who hold the opinion that people can just be allowed to become ill and die could simply be because there are not many people who seriously hold this position.

As Rieg would probably agree, the media can now turn this ethical gallantry critically against policymakers and the majority opinion and highlight a huge range of inconsistencies (and perhaps even a certain amount of hypocrisy): What are the benchmarks for fighting misery and illness outside this acute crisis? Is society willing there, too, to do everything in its power to protect the weak?

There are many questions that the media should ask and a great deal of research that the media should drive forward. Encouraging them to do so does not have to mean completely writing off the way it reports at the moment.

About the author

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