

Debate

Timo Rieg

The neglect of media critique

Tanjev Schultz takes a different view from me on how German-language journalism has reported on the coronavirus. This was not just likely, but truly ›without alternative,‹ at least if we drill down to the tiniest details. After all, what we both have to say are points of view – ›based on individual observations and opinions,‹ as the pre-print study by Quandt et. al. quoted by Schultz puts it. Such a wide-ranging spectrum of opinions or interpretations is exactly what I have missed in the reporting on coronavirus. Of course it was ›multi-faceted,‹ and even underdog Jakob Augstein had the chance to say something somewhere outside his own weekly paper. But our role here is not one of a judging panel for a journalism prize, searching for pearls in a sea of oysters. What matters to me at least is the orientation that journalism provides, and thus ultimately its quality/ies. My question for journalism research is therefore the following:

How can we measure the information performance of journalism? Additively, by crediting every aspect that is addressed somewhere to the total performance of the media? Selectively, using the usual random sampling? As full recording of a full program (broadcaster, newspaper, website)? Or as an ecosystem in which real users spend time, i.e. with their Instagram timeline, their radio broadcasters, their YouTube consumption, and their personal discussions – i.e. their actual media use? Every provider of information or opinion would rightly be able to say: ›But we offered this or that!‹ Yet this is insignificant for real discourse in a democracy (and perhaps it is worth asking to what extent general interest media should create links here that have so far been excessively concentrated on Twitter storms of the variety: ›the internet is laughing/outraged...‹). In other words, are we interested in what ›journalism‹ has offered us in some form or what has reached society?

At no point was it my intention to pass judgment on coronavirus policy. What interests me, at the point at which democracy and journalism meet, is to what extent we citizens had all the information we needed to form our own opinion,

to be able to decide as sovereign (if one were to ask us), if applicable to make suggestions, to protest, to celebrate, whatever – at any rate to be subjects, rather than objects, of policymakers. I am surprised by Schultz’ starting assertion that »Few other countries have (so far) dealt with the coronavirus crisis as well as Germany.« I would be able to neither claim nor contradict this. What does »deal with well« even mean? What period of time are we looking at? How are we weighing up the various effects and side effects? And what do I know about the other countries of this world? Anyone who has just lost their job is likely to be somewhat less enthusiastic. How are we counting the consequential damage, the opportunities lost due to coronavirus? A reminder is due of climate change, which is actually omnipresent but has been largely pushed off the agenda by coronavirus: Our forests are drying out (even if it rains a little), a new wave of forest dieback is visible everywhere, the consequences will be catastrophic. Will we see a new period of mass migration once we have recovered from coronavirus? The Haber-Bosch process – the basis of today’s ubiquitous artificial fertilizer – has massively increased agricultural yields for a hundred years, but may soon radically reduce them for eternity. When measuring its success, do we look at the first few years, the first hundred years, or the entire story? Perhaps the amazing Haber-Bosch process was a terrible idea – just like genetic engineering, nuclear power, and the totally indiscriminate use of antibiotics (the consequences of which we are incidentally noticing in the treatment of coronavirus, too) may turn out to be.

There is nothing sophistic about examining effects and side effects: According to current research, many people have died not *despite*, but *because* of ventilation! That is why it is so essential to separate fact from opinion. Facts do not require any further research; opinions always do (and, picking up on Schultz’ example of »Godwin’s Law« as a purely empirical statement: Until a few days ago at least, Mark Zuckerberg as a (formerly secular) Jew considered Holocaust denial as worthy of publication in certain cases – I, in contrast, clearly excluded it as misinformation). At least to begin with, coronavirus policy was based overwhelmingly on emergency medicine, on the provision of intensive care beds with all the negative consequences that entails. While Germany clapped for the ›lifesavers at the front,‹ doctors and nurses played cards in empty hospitals and panicked about how they would deal with the triage decisions that they would imminently be required to make (I know this not from the media, but from my own research).

I am (I hope) not a denier of anything. I want journalism to provide me with facts and the various opinions on them, as I myself am unfortunately not clever enough to think of everything myself. The bad-tempered title of my original piece, »Disinfection journalism,« reflects precisely this mix of opinion and fact: »wash your hands, wash your hands, wash your hands« is the main message coming out of the media to this day, as if coronavirus were a skin fungus. It drowns out all the side effects of this disinfectant mania and could only be

written by people whose hands touch nothing but a computer keyboard. As an ›outdoor‹ biologist, I really have dug a lot of dirt, and any farmer would laugh his head off at the RKI's recommendation to wash hands »every time you come into contact with animals.« For goodness' sake: Do not treat us like idiots. Tell us what the facts are and what you think about how we are dealing with the facts. »Don't pick your nose without washing your hands first« would be okay, but perhaps too obvious to base a hygiene campaign around (incidentally, even Drosten found this excessive).

»There have always been alternatives,« says Schultz, agreeing with me. But was the question of what we could do with a trillion euros to truly improve our lives researched in such a way that ultimately at least a majority of the population got behind government policy and said: ›What you are planning is right; we have no new ideas to add; and we are absolutely in agreement with where you have taken the money from and whom you have thrown to the wolves for this policy‹? Journalism has spent its time raking over the entirely insignificant lobbying of Philipp Amthor, while billions of euros of coronavirus aid are being distributed every day at the moment, practically without any transparency at all, with no public scrutiny, and especially without public discourse in advance. Where were the much-lauded research teams, especially at the beginning, before the first state measure was passed whose effects and side effects were entirely unknown to the public? There will surely be some nice reconstructions at a later date. But for many people, these will come too late.

About the author

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