

## Debate

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# The mainstream media are the problem

Why the counter-discourse might help journalism

**Abstract:** The very fact that this magazine is dedicating space to the topic of »alternative media« is a symptom of the decline of journalism. Its compulsive focus on attention, increasing medialization, and the proximity between editorial offices and decision-makers are keeping the mainstream media from fulfilling their public mandate. This article relies on Ulrich Beck's (2017) concept of »power relations« as »definitional relations« and thus considers platforms that challenge the defining power of the mainstream media as a seedbed of social debate that might strengthen democracy and remind journalism of its »social public mandate« (Pöttker 2001).

## Introduction

This article assumes, firstly, that the mainstream media have created their own competition on the internet. If everyone is satisfied with what is being discussed in the big arena, no one has a reason to leave their place in the grandstand and take it upon themselves to inject issues or positions into the public debate (cf. Gerhards/Neidhardt 1990). We saw the same phenomenon occur in 1970s West Germany and in the waning days of the East German GDR (see Lokatis/Sonntag 2008).

Secondly, we can thus conclude for the present day that media criticism is a central element of the digital platforms we are discussing here.

My third hypothesis is that, unlike on previous occasions, today's critical instances are facing a journalism that is in a tailspin and therefore more likely to retreat behind its own walls than to open up to new topics, people, and formats,

as West Germany did back in the day, as Gabriele Hooffacker describes. Here and there, individual challengers (such as Rezo) may find their way into established editorial offices, but many others don't have this option (as there are ever fewer positions available in the trade), and many don't want it in the first place. Instead, we are experiencing a struggle for sovereignty over meaning and the power of definition, which is also a challenge to our very system because of the position media communication holds in traditional power structures – to put it a bit less provocatively, the question is how we want to live as a community in the future.

Hypothesis four: This question also applies to journalism itself. Advertising revenue, which has afforded journalism a certain autonomy from political or corporate patrons for a good 150 years in many capitalist societies, has been rendered obsolete by the triumphant advance of the internet, as has the concept of cross-financing content for which there would otherwise be no market in a profit-oriented media system, as has a professional ideology geared mainly towards maximizing audiences. Norms such as objectivity, neutrality, balance, or impartiality used to be inseparably linked to the business model of the past and were always impossible to meet. Now these promises are becoming attack vectors for media criticism, encouraged by the fact that most barriers to public access have fallen.

The current debates amongst the profession about ›attitude‹ or ›activism‹ reflect the »great deal of inner insecurity« that Horst Pöttker already observed two decades ago. Pöttker's diagnosis from back then is still valid: Journalists would be more immune »to external influences« and could »do better« if they had a clearer understanding of the »professional mandate« they are supposed to fulfil (Pöttker 2001: 20, 24-27). If they did, we would probably not be having this debate today.

I have deliberately avoided the term ›alternative media‹ so far. Gabriele Hooffacker's contribution shows that this term makes analysis more difficult because it is firmly rooted in the history of emancipatory movements (cf. Hooffacker/Lokk 2009; Mies 2020) and thus almost inevitably leads to a degradation of any media offerings that pursue other political goals. In contrast to my colleague, I do not believe that media research has a duty to develop criteria to differentiate between ›good‹ and ›bad‹ (or even: dangerous) platforms and thus possibly provide politicians with a tool to regulate or ban them.

The criteria for »quality journalism« (Arnold 2009) are misleading for the mere reason that alternative media usually cannot compete with mainstream media in terms of personnel or financial resources. The portal *Rubikon*, for example, relies on volunteers and did not hire its first three staff members (on limited contracts) until the fall of 2020. It would be presumptuous to compare such platforms with institutions like public broadcasting stations, which are endowed with several billion euros in public funding each year and under a legislative

mandate to act as a »medium and factor in the process of free individual and public opinion-formation, and thus to meet the democratic, social, and cultural needs of society« (Section 11 of the State Treaty on Broadcasting, which has been in force since 1 May 2019).

If my hypothesis is true that the mainstream media are the problem, then a resource-starved academic discipline such as communication science should focus on this subject and ask the question how journalism might be organized so it can meet its »social public mandate« (Pöttker 2001). In this article, I will propose two approaches. First, I will lay out a theoretical framework to capture the structural change that is going on in the public sphere. Then, I will point out some problems with the way we are currently financing journalism. The message I want to convey in this piece is that the ideas and »real utopias« (Wright 2017) that already exist on the internet might help solve these problems and trigger the »reform of the definitional relations« that is so urgently needed for a democratization of the media (Beck 2017: 146).

## The mainstream media's power of definition

The social public mandate, which legislators and media research also refer to as »journalistic diversity« (cf. Rager/Weber 1992: 8-11) or diversity of opinion, is rooted in the pluralistic social model: In a society, there are many, and sometimes conflicting, opinions and interests, which are fundamentally equal (individual or marginalized interests are as valid as interests that are organized in parties or associations). The battlefield where these interests are negotiated is the public:

»The notion of the public rests on the principle of unrestricted communication. In principle, no social group, not even an individual, but also no topic, issue, or problem may be excluded from it.« (Pöttker 1999: 219f.)

A balance seems possible only if the various interests are given room to articulate themselves in the mainstream media without immediately being judged (or devalued) in the coverage. In this context, by mainstream media, I mean media that have the decision-makers' attention and that wield symbolic power with them as well as with the general population, because we must assume that others also perceive them and adapt their behavior accordingly (cf. Gunther/Storey 2003). In a nutshell: Whatever the mainstream media does not cover or legitimize, does not exist (no matter whether it is a topic, a person, or an opinion). Mainstream media exist at the global, national, regional, or local level.

The reality of the mainstream media is a reality of the first order that no one can ignore. This is where a »society's memory« (Luhmann, 1996: 43, 120-122)

or »background knowledge« is formed (another Luhmann term). Because we have to assume that everyone else has seen, read, and heard the same thing, the mainstream media define what is and what is allowed to be, thus ensuring that their constructions of reality are espoused in our everyday actions and world views. Mainstream media give order to our world and provide the categories with which we describe it (see Couldry 2012). Therefore, when we talk about »trust« in journalism (see, for example, Prochazka/Schweiger 2020) we are asking the wrong question. We don't have to »believe« what the *Tagesschau*, the FAZ or the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* are telling us. When we use mainstream media, we observe definitional power relations. Who is able to place their topics and viewpoints in these arenas? Who is allowed to speak with legitimacy, on which side, and for how long, and who may not? To whom can and must I therefore refer in public without running the risk of being isolated (cf. Noelle-Neumann 1996)?

This is also the most important difference to what Gabriele Hooffacker collectively calls »alternative media«. I can blithely ignore the issues that are covered by *RT Deutsch*, *Nachdenkseiten*, or *KenFM* without any loss of reputation. Often, the opposite is actually true: Whoever publishes on these platforms must fear for their legitimacy, regardless of the content. This has consequences for the way we use these media, which can best be described with the opposites »must« vs. »can«. I need the mainstream media for orientation and to be able to act (which is one of the reasons there are so few people who fully abstain from media). If the mainstream media or media research (see Schindler et al. 2018) pathologize the use of other platforms, it comes with a threat of isolation, turning the »can« into a test of courage.

The term »definitional power relations« was coined by Ulrich Beck, whose latest book conceptualizes »definitional relations as relations of power«. To put it bluntly: Today, the powerful are those who have the »necessary resources« to impose their version of reality in public (Beck 2017: 129, p. 100). Ulrich Beck addresses global risks such as climate, nuclear power, medicine, terrorism, or »risks to digital freedom« in association with surveillance programs (p. 185), as well as the interest of nation states to relativize, deny, or even eliminate such risks because they threaten not only our life and our self-determination, but also the »authority and sovereignty of the nation state« (p. 133). »This implies: Politics of invisibility is a prime strategy for stabilizing state authority and reproducing social and political order« (p. 134).

The concept of »definitional power relations« can easily be transferred to the national or local level: Here, too, it is a matter of determining the reality of the respective mainstream media. Ulrich Beck (2017: 172) distinguishes between »two forms of communication«: a »progressive public« discussing »the future of modernity« and how »goods« are produced and distributed (income, education, medical care, social benefits), and a »side-effects public« addressing risks

(»bads«) and »norm violations produced and largely ignored by the mainstream of the nationally organized progressive public«. The most important structural difference between the two forms is access of the ruling classes. While progressive publics are created »intentionally« (»one can allow them, suppress them, etc.«, p. 172), side-effect publics are harder to control because their occurrence is »unplanned«, they oppose the »hegemonic« discourse, and they write and broadcast against »a risk-oblivious progressive coalition [...] consisting of experts, industry, state, parties and established mass media« (p. 173).

What Ulrich Beck calls the »side-effect public« is actually the »real« public (or: pluralism, journalistic diversity, and access to all relevant information). He adopted the term »side effects« from John Dewey (1927), who considered the size and complexity of modern democracies their greatest weaknesses: Since we depend on others at any time and everywhere, and since much of what we do has consequences that we understand only partially or not at all, his argument goes, we need people who act on behalf of the public (such as civil servants and politicians). And since power can be abused and no state is perfect, we need transparency and freedom of opinion, and not just in theory. Without these preconditions, there would be neither a social understanding nor a balancing of interests, nor would there be any valid social research because the relevant methods would not work (p. 167).

Admittedly, the term »side-effect public« is just as misleading for platforms like *Rubikon*, *Multipolar*, or *Infosperber* as the term »progressive public« is for today's mainstream media. Since Gabriele Hooffacker classifies *RT Deutsch* as an »alternative medium« (and thus presumably also *Sputniknews*, likewise financed by the Russian state budget), the question is how the global struggle for power of definition and thus the activities of foreign media fit into Ulrich Beck's grid. On the one hand, *RT Deutsch* explicitly undermines the exclusivity of »nationally organized« media power with programs such as »The Missing Part« (Beck 2017: 172), but on the other hand, the Russian state broadcaster, just like its counterparts from France, China, and the UK, or CNN, aims to preserve the »prevailing power structures« with its »discursive world constructs« (Karidi/Meyen 2019: 225).

I therefore propose that we generally exclude state-financed media from our definition of »alternative media«. Moreover, it should have become clear that the other platforms we are discussing in this debate are not an »alternatives« to the mainstream media, either. If I use media to observe the definitional power relations and align my behavior accordingly, a portal like *KenFM* cannot replace the *Tagesschau*, the *FAZ*, or my local newspaper. Depending on the theoretical background, terms such as heterodox, heretical (both in Bourdieu) or counter-discourse (Foucault) are therefore more appropriate. Within the community itself they are also referred to as »free media«.

## Journalism, commercial media logic, and medialization

The rise of such challengers leads us to the question why journalism is currently failing to meet its »social public mandate«. The debate format of this article does not allow me to substantiate this diagnosis and to differentiate it with the many points of proof that the mainstream media undoubtedly provide. Instead, I will limit myself to three trends that considerably restrict the leeway of editorial departments: a media logic that is enslaved to the imperative of attention, medialization, and the proximity of journalism to decision-makers; in this respect, too, I follow John Dewey, who, almost a century ago, lamented the state of the channels that were actually designed for mediation (in short: sensationalism), and blamed their failure on »publicity agents« as well as the quasi-religious aura and associated taboos that protect institutions once they are established (such as the nation state, cf. Dewey 1927: 169f.). But John Dewey was also an educator, for whom society was all about trial and error, and who believed in science, enlightenment, and the professional ethics of journalism. If only reporters were allowed to work unencumberedly according to Dewey (1927: 182 ), the news would look very different and present the world's knowledge in a way that is captivating and comprehensible for everyone.

The fact that the construction of media reality today does not serve this ideal, but instead obeys the imperative of attention (cf. Karidi 2017) has to do with the three media revolutions of the recent past. On the one hand, commercial television and radio broadcasters, the internet and, above all, digital platforms have multiplied the number of players that are vying for attention. On the other hand, many of the new competitors operate under very different conditions than daily and weekly newspapers or public broadcasters. When there are players in the system whose only mission is to maximize attention and who can blissfully ignore press laws, broadcasting treaties, and the media's public mandate, it has consequences for everyone else, too – also because resources are dwindling (both attention and revenue are divvied up) and premium content is becoming more expensive at the same time. That means that today, journalists have to produce far more content much faster and with a lot less money than those who once taught them their skills. There is less on-location research and more content is copied from other journalists. Digital platforms are not only competitors in the battle for attention, but have also become suppliers of material as well as one of journalism's major distribution channels. All this explains why the mainstream media today not only cover politics less than they did 30 or 40 years ago, but they also report in a different way – with an even greater focus on the extraordinary (superlatives, uniqueness, exclusiveness), celebrities, and conflicts (see Meyen 2018). In other words, when it comes to criteria for the selection, presentation, and interpretation of content, commercial logic has

prevailed over the public mandate of mass media and the normative logic of the media system (cf. Landerer 2013).

This trend is reinforced by resource-rich actors who seek public legitimacy, who have internalized the imperative of attention, and who are therefore able to ensure that reporting is either positive or does not happen at all. What I call »medialization« encompasses both upgrading the PR apparatuses of authorities, parties, corporations, or universities (such as press offices, PR and advertising agencies, corporate publishing) as well as adaptation to meet the selection criteria of commercial media, ranging from flashy events or buildings to new hires in top positions, media training, internal organization, and raising awareness for PR among staff (cf. Meyen 2018). Ulrich Beck's concept (2017: p. 129) of analyzing »relations of power as definitional relations« becomes tangible here: Shrinking editorial departments juggling far more tasks than before (also due to greater technical possibilities) are facing PR machines that know exactly what journalists are looking for and that are even able to buy the best people if necessary.

These first two problems (commercial media logic, medialization) are also rooted in the way we are organizing journalism today – dependent both on commercial success (as in publishing houses) and on the good graces of the political powers that be (as in public broadcasting, which is forced to keep competing for audience reach for the simple reason that every major loss of reach immediately questions its very right to exist, cf. Stuiber 1998). These dependencies are cloaked in a hegemonic professional ideology that is replicated through internships, in journalism schools, and, to some extent, by media research, suggesting to the public that journalism is a craft that follows learnable rules and that is largely independent of the involved actors. I mentioned the relevant keywords in the introduction (objectivity, neutrality, impartiality).

This promise is rendered absurd by a media reality that serves the imperative of attention and is subject to influences by medialized actors from politics, business, sports, culture, or science because its production routines make journalism dependent on official sources, which means it often only reflects the discourse of the elites (cf. Bennett 1990) and is chastised whenever it slips in other contents. Hermann und Chomsky (1988: 26-28) call this »flak« or »harassing« fire, meaning that government representatives call editorial offices, publicly attack the media, or get experts to do so. The gap between mission and reality is one of the causes of the mainstream media's loss of credibility and of the growing importance of internet platforms that offer a different approach to reality (cf. Krüger 2016).

In addition, there are the hiring practices, composition, and structures of mainstream media editorial offices, their close association with decision-makers in the aforementioned social functional systems, and their strong orientation towards their own profession, which has been further reinforced by digital plat-

forms such as Twitter. Due to debate format of this article, I must limit myself again and forego any further differentiation or relativization. Therefore, suffice it to mention a few bullet points: Today's journalistic field is socially homogeneous (white academics, leadership is often male) and dominated by a »middle class mode« – i.e. »geared towards adaptation« and an »acceptance of the powers that be« (Klößner 2019: 33). Journalists and other decision-makers have similar backgrounds, attend the same universities, pursue similar lifestyles, and therefore hold a similar worldview.

Training, selection, and proximity make sure it stays that way: »The elites choose their journalists« (Krüger 2016: 84), then feed them attention and exclusivity and thus produce what Uwe Krüger (2016: 105) called a »conspiracy of responsibility«: Journalists know what is good and what is bad (pretty much the same things the ruling classes consider good or bad), and believe that they have influence on people. So »the parts [...] that do not fit this mindset« are cut from reality, and whatever seems to further the desired outcome are emphasized (Meinhardt 2020: 87). This creates »gaps in representation« (Patzelt 2015), which are then filled by other platforms – all the more so when the mainstream media »mindset« also involves delegitimizing any dissenting voices (for example, dismissing them as a »conspiracy theory« or »fake news«; cf. Schreyer 2018: 33) and thus openly refusing the »social public mandate« in front of everyone.

## Outlook

Good journalism costs money. It costs money to publish on all topics, perspectives, and opinions, and to thus ensure a balance of interests or at least a peaceful negotiation of social conflicts. We need larger editorial offices, and in them, greater diversity and autonomy in every respect. We must have a debate on what journalism is expected to achieve, what we consider to be quality journalism, and what we are prepared to pay for it.

Media research could, in a way, reset this debate back to the starting point. At the end of his long life, Karl Bücher, founding father of academic journalism studies in Germany, was convinced that the press must be »a public institution«, just »like trams or gas and power utility companies« (Bücher 1926: 424); further down in the text, he states: »The editorial office, by its nature, must pursue the loftiest interests of mankind« – but, he argued, it cannot do so as long as it is beholden to »private interests« (Bücher 1926: 397, 426) like advertisers, audience preferences, profit. As early as during World War I, Karl Bücher publicly denounced the news monopoly of the big agencies and proclaimed that the newspaper industry had reached a »low point«. In 1919, at the request of the Bavarian Communist Government, he presented a legislative proposal to expropriate



media and put an end to commercial competition. No more advertisements for private publishers, instead one local newspaper per community, published by the municipality, free of charge for everyone, financed by what companies and public authorities want to communicate. In the accompanying essay which he submitted later, Bücher refers to Ferdinand Lassalle, among others. He wanted to move away from a »public opinion« influenced by »capital« and by the »privileged high bourgeoisie« and towards a »free daily press« that addresses »current political questions« (Bücher 1926: 396).

Online competition to the mainstream media often comes very close to this ideal. It calls out journalism whenever it fails to fulfil its social public mandate, thus forcing it to reflect, contributing to »journalistic diversity« (Rager/Weber 1992), and already exercising a discernible impact on the mainstream media, as evidenced by the trend towards »constructive journalism« (see Urner 2019) or initiatives like »Deutschland spricht« (*Die Zeit*). While I reject the term »alternative media«, in a certain respect, these offers actually do open up »alternatives« to commercial and public media providers: They have experience with new financing models (such as donations, subscriptions, or political activism), new forms of audience participation, forging strong bonds with the audience, and a method of media production that not only detaches itself from official sources, but rather starts out by criticizing such sources. The very existence of such platforms has heightened our awareness for issues with journalistic quality and thus prepared the ground for an urgently needed self-assessment.

Media research holds a special responsibility in this debate. I understand the impetus that leads Gabriele Hooffacker to distinguish »innovative media projects by a critical counter-public« from »backward-looking, right-wing to right-extremist« projects and to leverage Wilhelm Heitmeyer's concept of »hatred towards specific groups«, because it affords us an easy and immediate »sense of being on the right side« (Maaz 2020: 132). Then there is the issue of how these or comparable criteria are to be operationalized in content analyses: On the one hand, a separation of »good« from »evil« is incompatible with a pluralistic model that assumes that all interests and positions are fundamentally equal. On the other hand, Heitmeyer himself pointed to the mainstream media when it comes to understanding »authoritarian temptations« and the rise of AfD – a journalism focused »on sales-boosting extremes« and an audience, which he places in the »milieu of the unrefined bourgeoisie«, that relies on the concept of »competition and personal responsibility« and holds barely veiled »authoritarian attitudes under a thin layer of civilized, posh (>bourgeois<) manners« (Heitmeyer 2018: 279, 305, 313). This is another reason why the mainstream media and hegemonic journalism are much higher on my research agenda than any platform on the internet.

## About the author

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