

Debate

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Political correctness – a threat to journalism?

Facts provide the answer

Abstract: Much has been written about political correctness (also: Cancel Culture) in many media. Less attention has been paid to the question of whether and why political correctness represents a serious threat to freedom of the press and thus poses a danger to journalism. The following debate contribution answers this question in the affirmative, referencing key aspects such as information bans, topic bans, governmental language regulation, and a trend towards intolerance.

1. Information bans

Freedom of the press and freedom of broadcasting rely on freedom of information. The fundamental right of freedom of information, as guaranteed in Article 5 (1) of the German Constitution and the relevant constitutional provisions in the German federal states, serves both the media and its audiences. Therefore, if a government authority seeks to block information, it needs a constitutional or at least a legal basis to do so. A simple call for political correctness (which the authoritative German dictionary Duden defines as an »attitude regarded as the correct one by a certain public«) is not a sufficient justification.

A well-known example of an information ban, which is partially ordered by authorities and partially practiced voluntarily, concerns mentions of criminal offenders' foreign nationality (the term »Staatsbürgerschaft«, which is frequently used in press reports, is presumably owed to political correctness, but neither matches the wording of the German Constitution nor that of the German Nationality Act). When they are not under an official information ban, journalists are

expected to self-commit to this policy as per the relevant guideline in German press code, published by the German Press Council. As early as 2013, Horst Pöttker demanded that this guideline be removed from a previous version of the press code. His case remains equally compelling today regarding the current version of the code, which has been only slightly altered in this respect (cf. Pöttker 2013: 13). Hugo Müller-Vogg considered this guideline a pact »to withhold part of the truth from the public« (Müller-Vogg 2017). Journalists should be reminded of the words of American writer Flannery O’Connor: »The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.« In this context, readers of German newspapers and magazines might find it interesting to take a look at the Swiss press, where political correctness seems to be less of a deterrent to report on crimes perpetrated by foreigners, as the following headline shows: »Algerian asylum seekers are causing problems. Many migrants from the North African country whose asylum requests have been rejected become delinquent, but Switzerland cannot deport them« (Gafafer 2020: 23).

2. Topic bans

While information bans are imposed on journalism from the outside, topic bans are more of a home-grown phenomenon. In German, this sort of self-censorship is often referred to as »scissors of the mind«. While the metaphor is not new, it has become much more prevalent since the emergence of political correctness. In the era of »pack journalism« (»Rudeljournalismus«, a term coined by former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt), journalists don’t want to offend with a supposedly incorrect expression of opinion or find themselves in the »wrong corner«: Who would not rather be on the »light side of Germany« than its »dark side«? The fatal journalistic consequence of this division is that quite a few topics – which are of interest to many media recipients – do not receive the journalistic attention they deserve. There are countless examples of politically correct silence on the radio and in the press. The worst example is probably the best known: the collective silence (especially of public television) on the incidents of New Year’s Eve 2015 in Cologne, when more than 1,200 women were reportedly sexually assaulted by men of mostly non-European origin (cf. von Münch 2017: 31). This unbelievable topic ban, which was only resolved later, can only be explained with concerns of political correctness. It is also striking that while the plight of refugees receives frequent and detailed coverage – as it should – we rarely ever read or hear about the abhorrent exploitative business of traffickers. The fact that we hardly ever read about slave trade that was formerly practiced by Oriental Barbary Coast states – in contrast to slave trade practiced by European colonial powers – is probably due to a fear of being accused of Islamophobia. If

you want to learn more about a journalist's (i.e. an insider's) experiences with topic bans, I recommend Birk Meinhardt's *Wie ich meine Zeitung verlor. Ein Jahrbuch*. [*How I lost my newspaper. A yearbook*] (2020) – a textbook example of freedom of the press and lack thereof.

3. Governmental language regulation

The effects and repercussions of political correctness are clearly evident in the use of language, every journalists' indispensable toolbox. Governmental language regulation is actually a familiar feature of totalitarian regimes; we all remember examples such as »frontline correction« (a euphemism for your own troops' retreat) and »anti-fascist protective wall« (for the Berlin Wall). So I will certainly be careful not to equate the two, yet I must note: An essential feature of political correctness is that a word that is allegedly unpopular or even tainted is replaced by a more pleasing word, or even banned from language use altogether. As long as these guidelines are established by a self-appointed private language police, they may not pose a great threat to journalism. But things are different when political correctness is incorporated into public, governmental rules on language. Unfortunately, there are numerous examples of this, as well. As early as 2015, then interior minister of North Rhine-Westphalia Ralf Jäger (SPD) argued that any term that could be misused to devalue people must be avoided, »[...]which means that the term 'criminal family clans' must not be used in law enforcement.« Fortunately, the press did not pick up the ministry's language rule, as evidenced by an abundance of press reports on criminal family clans, especially in Berlin. Some occasionally use the vague wording »large families«.

In Berlin's Pankow district, the cultural committee of the district assembly declared that the the word »Flüchtling« (literally »flightling«, or »refugee«, which is mentioned in article 116 of the German Constitution, is »not culturally sensitive enough« – it should be replaced by »people who fled« (a brief comment on this: the author of this article is himself a refugee child from 1944/45, but has never taken issue with the word). The Berlin Senate is also the driving force behind a 44-page guideline »on diversity-sensitive language use«, prepared by the State Equity and Anti-Discrimination Office, which is associated with the Berlin Senator of Justice. The State Office wants to replace the word »Ausländer« (literally, »outlander«, or »foreigner«, which is commonly used in German legal texts, especially in the law on residence, employment, and integration of foreigners in Germany, with the term »residents without German citizenship« (Kopietz 2020). This officially mandated absurdity by the Berlin Senate reminds me of the words of Napoleon Bonaparte: »It is only one step from the sublime to the ridiculous.« Another »guideline« (a term which immediately rings a bell, reminding

us of the »Leitkultur« (guiding culture), which the political left strongly rejected not too long ago), the »Humboldt University Guidelines for Gender Equitable Language«, seeks to replace the word »list of speakers« (which contains the word »Redner«, the grammatically masculine form of »speaker«) with »list of speeches« (which is not the same thing) and the word »spectator« (another German grammatical masculine) with »person from the audience«, among several others.

Formally and *prima facie*, such »guidelines« only apply to the staff of the public administration that issued them, but journalism is not entirely unaffected by such absurd bouts of political correctness, because we really do not need a discrepancy between officialese and journalistic language. When the wording used by public authorities deviates from the letter of the law on basically the same subject, it will likely cause uncertainty in journalism. It is also obvious that the language of political correctness has little to do with common colloquial language. Hans Peter Bull correctly points out that the disproportionate and ongoing preoccupation with »gendering« will »further alienate the majority of the population from the media« (Bull 2020: 451). Trying to keep up with the demands of politically correct »gender justice« will, in any case, put off more readers than it will win over. One can only marvel at how this relatively small (and not democratically legitimized) group of activists manages to change the language of the majority in the name of political correctness.

4. A trend towards intolerance

As I mentioned at the beginning, political correctness is based on political attitude. In theory, this in itself need not be a negative narrative. In practice, however, the phenomenon of political correctness, which came to us from the US as a thought and argumentation pattern, usually has rather critical connotations. Accordingly, the ideology of political correctness is associated with a tendency to moralize, to lecture, to impose certain opinions, but above all, with a trend towards intolerance, cultivated in opinion bubbles. Karl Heinz Bohrer made the statement: »The stale air of political attitude is paralyzing science« (Steinmayr 2021). The critical remark about a »stale air of attitude« in science also applies to journalism; because science and journalism not only have many parallels, but also frequent overlaps, also in terms of personnel: There are scientists who are 'semi'-journalists alongside their main profession as well as journalists who are also 'semi'-scientists – a phenomenon that has not received much academic attention in professional field research. Times like the COVID-19 pandemic are not only the oft-cited »hour of the executive branch« (perhaps with the legislative branch taking too much of a back seat), but also the year of science and the media.

Back to the topic of political attitude and thus, political correctness: Years ago, Hermann Lübke, in his book »*Political Moralism*«. *The Triumph of Attitude over Judgment*, pointed out the dangers of moralizing and the associated trend towards intolerance that often comes with categorical, uncompromising demands for political correctness. On the other hand, of course, we may not generally reject all the moral demands made in the name of political correctness, such as sensitivity on gender issues or the rejection of any form of racism and anti-Semitism. However, journalism in so-called quality media should not submit to every dictate of political correctness and thus degenerate into outrage journalism. Differentiated and deliberative writing doesn't have to be boring; today more than ever, we need a counterpole to the intolerance of social media shit storms.

Summary and conclusion

I am not trying to answer the question whether political correctness is a danger to democracy (the subtitle of a book by Michael Behrens and Robert von Rimscha). It is undeniable, however, that the propagation of political correctness exerts pressure on journalism and that political correctness in its different facets – information bans, topic bans, and governmental language regulation as well as a trend towards intolerance – poses a threat to independent and self-confident journalism.

About the author

Ingo von Münch (*1932) served as Professor of Public Law from 1965 to 1998, first at Ruhr University Bochum and later at the University of Hamburg. From 1987 to 1991, he served as Second Mayor and Senator for Science and Culture of the Free Hanseatic City of Hamburg. He held professorships in Australia, France, New Zealand, South Africa, and in the US. His publications include: *Staatsrecht* (6th edition, Stuttgart 2000); *Die deutsche Staatsangehörigkeit: Vergangenheit-Gegenwart-Zukunft* (2007); *Rechtspolitik und Rechtskultur* (2011); *Gute Wissenschaft* (2012); *Der Autor und sein Verlag* (co-authored with G. Siebeck 2013); *Spannende Jahre* (2014); *Meinungsfreiheit gegen Political Correctness* (2017); *Die Krise der Medien* (2020).

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