

Research Paper

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How deep is the ›misery of the media‹?

A report on ›alternative‹ journalism criticism – gleaned from a collection of voices on the propaganda battle waging around Covid-19 coverage (and other things)

Abstract: Never has journalism in Germany been attacked more ferociously than in the many publications of ›alternative‹ media criticism, which has gained momentum in recent years. The tone has become even harsher since the ›mainstream media‹ started reporting widely on the management of the pandemic. They are accused of total professional failure, further narrowing the corridor of acceptable opinions, one-sided propaganda in favor of the restrictions in general and the vaccination effort, in particular, as well as a complete lack of balance in their selection of experts who are given a platform. Based on Chomsky's ›propaganda model‹, which itself has a problematic genesis, and/or Bourdieu's ›habitus theory‹, which I will discuss here, they paint an apocalyptic manipulation scenario that leaves no room for reform. Instead, they advocate scrapping the entire media and communication system – if not our very social model –, which puts them in conspicuous proximity to the ›conspiracy theorist‹ scene. For all their radicalism, these ›alternative media critics‹ do not differ that much from the ›mainstream‹ in that they, too, like to self-reference amongst their own pack and are also quite adept at harnessing sensationalism to command attention, even if the facts are rather thin.

If you are a regular viewer of German talk shows, you may have noticed that the word ›difficult‹ has been popping up a lot lately – with a rather unusual connotation. Talk show guests mainly use it when they really want to call something ›wrong‹, ›bad‹, or even ›absurd‹ or ›aberrant‹, but are reluctant to use such strong words. (Alternative) journalism and society critics, who have also been

churning out a lot of heavy tomes, are less shy about bringing out the big guns. Compared to their rhetoric, the tone used to be – usually – far more cautious and differentiated not too long ago (cf. Weischenberg 2015).

Alternative Media Criticism (AMC), on the other hand, is one-sided, unequivocal, uncompromising, and also aggressive. And that starts with the book titles. They no longer suggest a more or less balanced account about »Fake News as a battle term« or the »media crisis«, but rather make sweeping accusations of propaganda (most recently, with titles such as *The Propaganda Matrix*), »pack journalism«, and even warn of a worldwide »state of emergency« (caused by media) (cf. Wernicke 2017; Meyen 2018a). These books allege that the media sabotage reality, lamenting *The Misery of the Media*. The pinnacle of this sort of polemic, in every respect, was the book *Zombie Journalism* (cf. Meyen 2021a; Klöckner 2019, 2021; von Mirbach/Meyen 2021).

In this current crop of AMC publications, the movement takes a fundamental stab at the very media system. Relativization and differentiation, which they love to demand from »mainstream journalism« and science, do not seem to be part of their own toolbox – even less so in the »age of Covid«.¹ This is creating deep divisions, especially since »mainstream journalism« had already been quite touchy about »system-compliant criticism« of Covid-19 coverage voiced by media research. Right at the beginning of the pandemic, the FAZ complained that it was downright »grotesque« that »the« media were accused of accepting restrictions on fundamental rights like »lambs being led to the slaughterhouse« (d’Inka 2020).

AMC has now expanded this »basic rights discourse« as well as other specific issues with news reporting into a general reckoning with actual, real-life journalism in Germany, which they believe is beyond help and repair. Alternative media critics feel vindicated in all their judgments and prejudices by what they observe in current media. Their assessment of Covid-19 is fundamentally different from the »mainstream«. On their portals, they welcome fan mail from the camp of »Covid deniers«, anti-vaxxers, and a German protest movement who style themselves as »Querdenker« (»against-the-grain thinkers«) – in other words, they welcome input from conspiracy theorists. Is this why their »media critique as social critique« (cf. also Klöckner 2017) is so »difficult«?

1 To date, only two books that drawn similar ire because of their author’s sweeping criticism, namely those by Udo Ulfkotte (2001): *So lügen Journalisten. Der Kampf um Quoten und Auflagen* (How journalists lie. The battle for quotas and circulation), and, by the same author: *Gekaufte Journalisten. Wie Politiker, Geheimdienste und Hochfinanz Deutschlands Massenmedien lenken* (Bought journalists. How Politicians, Secret Services, and Big Finance Control Germany’s Mass Media) – a bestseller that seemed to fill a gap in the market at the time.

1. Alternative Media Criticism (AMC) and its ›champion‹ Noam Chomsky

War and Peace: Wilson and Lippmann in World War I

Jens Wernicke's *Lügen die Medien?* (Are the Media Lying?), published parallel to the founding of online magazine *Rubikon*, marked the launch of this new genre. The book is based on interviews the author led with »go-getters«, »thinkers«, and representatives of »civil society«. Some of them had previously appeared on online alternative media such as *NachDenkseiten* and *Telepolis*. This publication provides the basic lines of AMC argumentation, which were later focused and updated by Covid-19 and its coverage.

Alternative media critics seem to agree that the »corridor of published opinion is now narrower than it has ever been« (Wernicke 2017: 124), since they all reiterate this reproach in their various publications. One of the more »difficult« statements, on the other hand, is an assertion like this one: »Our country is swiftly slipping towards a totalitarian state – because what may not be, cannot be. And because what contradicts the interests of the powerful, is not allowed to be.« (Wernicke 2017: 15) That is why alternative media critics demand that the entire system be scrapped. And they obviously don't only mean media and journalism.

Wernicke's book, which made a big stir, is of particular importance because it uses precise, but also tendentious/rhetorical questions and consistently long answers to describe what AMC is all about and what it recurs to. Central topics (at least in the years leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic) are one-sided coverage of wars and what might be called the »capitalist complex« – an intricate web of cold manipulation by the powerful and subservient media and journalists. There is also a warning (voiced by late former DJU chairman Eckart Spoo) that »the powerful are quick to accuse those who would tell us the truth« of being conspiracy theorists; one of the most commonly used words in today's political propaganda (Wernicke 2017: 97). The »icon« of this approach is (of course) Noam Chomsky; his 1997 lecture, also included here, contains his radical systems analysis »in a nutshell« (see Chomsky 2017).

By the time you get to this part in the book *Lügen die Medien?*, you will have noticed a great deal of agreement with the dominant propaganda approach and its fields of application, both in the questions the book raises and in the answers it provides (cf. Wernicke 2017, esp. 72ff., 96ff., 118ff.): It is about war and peace – with the Ukraine crisis, the book claims, acting as the »initial spark for a mass uprising of media users« – and about imposing a neoliberal ideology using sophisticated (PR) techniques. Most of the interviewees, however, seemed

reluctant to adopt the term »lying press«, despite the interviewer's best efforts.^[2] One of the interviewed publicists, Ulrich Teusch, for example, said he preferred the term »press of the gaps« instead, even conceding: »Historically, there have probably never been more comprehensive opportunities to obtain information and to conduct research than we have today« (Wernicke 2017: 53).

Especially on the topic of »war, propaganda, and the media«, Noam Chomsky, supposedly the »most-cited intellectual in the world« (Wernicke 2017: 95), is not an unproblematic authority to rely on.^[3] For Chomsky, who is also frequently cited and highly praised in other relevant AMC publications, bases his central thesis of »state propaganda« on the events surrounding the US entry into World War I in 1917. He claims that it was all a long-prepared propaganda stunt by political and corporate stakeholders to lessen the population's reluctance to go to war, leveraged by President Woodrow Wilson for the sole purpose of getting elected. »Yet his intention, from the outset, was to enter the war,« Chomsky asserts (Chomsky 2017: 114) – a hypothesis that does not do justice to Wilson's role and personality and does not hold up in the light of historical research findings. The US only entered this war (from which they later emerged victorious) when Germany expanded its U-boat war.

For a long time, Wilson remained hesitant to go to war – and when he finally gave up his opposition, he claimed idealistic motives for doing so. These arguments were provided by his young »spin doctor« Walter Lippmann (1889-1974), who had flipped from socialist to conservative after the onset of the war and wanted to see the US fight at the side of its European allies. Lippmann, who later became a famous publicist and confidant of almost every President until the post-World War II era (cf. Buhl 1974), had therefore broken with his pacifist friends on the radical Left (cf. Steel: esp. pp. 81ff., 88ff., 95ff., 108ff.). Among them was the later legendary adventurer John Reed (1887-1920), his college friend from Harvard, who observed the October Revolution as an eyewitness and wrote about it the book *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1920/21), which was endorsed by Lenin himself. Now, the official rationale for the US to enter the war was to show themselves as champions of democracy – a narrative that endured for a century and was only abandoned (for now?) in August 2021 with the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.^[4]

2 Cf. Wernicke 2017: e.g. 46, 61, and 83. Philosopher Werner Rügemer holds a different view; he feels that the »lying press« is »an established democratic fighting term« (Wernicke 2017: 86).

3 Those who care about differentiation can probably generally relate this to Chomsky's undoubtedly fascinating system critique, whose central thesis is that of a fabrication of consensus (cf. Herman/Chomsky 1988). The text discussed here is partially identical with the introduction to *Media Control* (Chomsky 2006).

4 I cannot delve any deeper into the relevant research here. See, for example, Tuchman 1982 [1958], Tuchman 1984; Münkler 2013, in particular pp. 518f., 621, 653ff., 788f.); Kershaw 1980, as well as, more pointedly: Herzfeld 1980: 75-127; which justifies Wilson's »honest policy of neutrality« biographically (pp. 106ff.).

World War I, which trapped the nations in a mesh of entanglements and misjudgments on the part of their rulers (cf. Clark 2013), is a great example of the complexity of political decision-making processes and how hard it is for journalism – straightjacketed by systemic constraints both in the narrower and in the wider sense – to meet the high demands its critics place on it. Questions of guilt, in particular, are difficult to answer. This also applies to our era, for example, to the Kosovo war and the Ukraine conflict, which are critical case studies for AMC (cf. e.g. Wernicke 2017: 238ff., 55ff., 123ff.).

Walter Lippmann and the genesis of state propaganda and public relations

As for the role of the American President, at least Chomsky and Lippmann agree on one thing: »Each saw in Wilson what he wanted to see.« (Steel 1980: 107) But the sources indicate that »Wilson himself became a prisoner of the war fever« far later than those around him (Steel 1980: 124). The very circumstances of the peace negotiations since late 1916, whose Russian protagonist was Leon Trotsky, show that – contrary to Noam Chomsky’s conspiratorial assumptions – there was never a White House »master plan« that predated the war; the White House had by no means »committed to enter the war« from the outset, which then forced it to create a »Committee for Public Information« (short »Creel Commission«) in order to »do something about the pacifist mood« that prevailed in the USA at the time, as Chomsky claims (Chomsky 2006: 29).⁵

Yet it was on this narrative that the linguist-turned-alternative-media-critic built his entire theory of the genesis of propaganda and public relations. The central message is that a staged war hysteria helped unleash an avalanche of impacts that determined US and European history for decades to come. At the time, Hitler had, »not wrongly«, concluded that »Germany suffered defeat in the First World War because it had lost the propaganda battle« (Chomsky 2017: 116).

Chomsky’s manipulation thesis still informs AMC discourses today – which is why we dedicated some detail to it here. In this context, Walter Lippmann, whose book *Public Opinion*, published after the First World War, was considered one of the milestones of communication research, was (once again) brought to the center of interest. In addition to discovering »stereotypes« and »pictures inside the heads« as determinants of action, the book warned not to place overly lofty expectations of veracity on journalism, because

»news and truth are not the same thing, und must be clearly distinguished. The function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act.«.⁶

5 Among the members of the Creel Committee, besides Lippmann, was Edward Bernays, who later (1928) produced the standard work *Propaganda*.

6 Lippmann 1965 [1922]: 85ff., 18, 226; cf. also Weischenberg 1995: 172ff., 228ff.)

In a sense, this epistemological description relieves journalism of exaggerated demands – which AMC is now taking to an extreme. Chomsky (and his later followers) are not too interested in this aspect, though; they care most about Lippmann's role as a propagandist who is »manufacturing consent«, yet without offering any further evidence. Political leaders are thus able to strip formal elections

»of all meaning [...] and thus to limit people's choices and attitudes to the point that they will ultimately just obey and do what they are told [...]. According to Lippmann, this is a real democracy, working as it should. This is the lesson he draws from past experience with propaganda« (Chomsky 2017: 117f.).

In addition, Chomsky offers a daring thesis on the »doyen of American journalists« and the supposed parallels between his liberal-democratic theory and Marxism-Leninism, which allegedly share the same ideological premises. According to Lippmann, »only a small elite [...] can adequately implement the interest of the general public. This is a very old and at the same time typically Leninist view, perfectly in tune with Lenin's concept of a revolutionary vanguard« (Chomsky 2017: 30).

Political scientist Harold Lasswell is mentioned on the same breath as Walter Lippmann. The formula named after him, which describes communication processes as a one-way street, and in this sense, subscribes to a propaganda model, has also been quite popular in communication science. As Chomsky notes, Lasswell says quite frankly »that one must not be rigidly beholden to democratic dogmas. [...] In this respect, too, lessons were drawn of the wartime experience [...]« (Chomsky 2017: 121f.). In an information box in that section, »propaganda« is defined as an »attempt to deliberately influence people's thoughts, actions and feelings«. Methods used in this context are typically a blending of opinion and information as well as, among other things, concealment, lies, smears, demonization, distortions, and double standards (see Chomsky 2017: 118ff.). It's pretty obvious that this can only be meant in a pejorative way – a completely different sense than what the term meant in its early history.

Three years after Jens Wernicke's ambitious *Medienkritik-Kompodium* (Media Criticism Compendium), Covid-19 fell into the lap of AMC: an ideal topic for specifying and plausibilizing its fundamental critique of communication relations. In exploiting it, they once again eagerly resorted to Chomsky's propaganda approach; before the term was tainted by Covid-19, Chomsky's German publisher had hailed him as one of the foremost »Querdenker« of the US on the back cover of *Media Control*.

2. The Bourdieu tradition: Media criticism as social criticism

On the ›misery‹ of the media and democracy in the pandemic

The book by Alexis von Mirbach and Michael Meyen entitled *Das Elend der Medien. Schlechte Nachrichten für den Journalismus* (*The Misery of the Media. Bad News for Journalism*) also refers to Noam Chomsky, but its theoretical and empirical approach is primarily based on Pierre Bourdieu (see also Weischenberg 2014: 144-151). The subject and title of the book are a terminological echo of Bourdieu's famous study *La misère du monde* (*The Misery of the World*) (Bourdieu 1997). Its »empirical« basis consists of conversations with rather arbitrarily selected journalists, journalism critics, and »media consumers«, leading Meyen to the following finding: »40 voices on the ›miserly of the media‹ (the same number originally collected by Bourdieu's team) are also 40 voices on the ›miserly of democracy.« (11) And this is (somehow) what the book is really about.⁷¹

Marcus Klöckner had previously also made strong reference to Bourdieu in his work *Sabotierte Wirklichkeit* (*Sabotaged Reality*), whose main objective was to prove that journalism had degenerated into a »doctrine of faith«. It contained one of the few convincing attempts to harness the French sociologist – with some necessary adaptations – for the discourse on media and journalism (cf. Weischenberg 2012: 246-264). Citing a statement by Bourdieu, Klöckner came to the radical conclusion that »[w]e need a new media system« (Klöckner 2019: 215ff.).

Meyen and Mirbach link their title directly to a personal experience. In early summer 2020, they stirred attention with a post on the blog *Medienrealität* in which they »treated Ken Jebsen and his portal KenFM in a neutrally positive way,« Meyen says in his foreword »Vom Elend der Demokratie« (page 10).⁸¹ This catapulted them into the news (including *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) and drew the ire of their colleagues at the Münchener Institut (cf. Krass 2020, Demmelhuber 2020; Meyen 2020b, Rötzer 2020). Meyen's commentary on this incident provides the guiding line for the conversations and their classification in this book:

»Apparently, disregard or distancing was the expected behavior [regarding journalist Jebsen, who is an icon of the anti-vaxxer scene, SW]. Hopefully, this book will make clear that this is not possible when we ask about the »miserly of the media« and the future of journalism.

From that moment on, we were both guilty by association« (von Mirbach/Meyen 2021: 10).

The central chapter on the »other« journalistic field gives a forum to four journalists: Florian Rötzer, Paul Schreyer, Jens Wernicke, and Marcus Klöckner. It reveals that they all had to contend with difficult biographies, that they write on certain friendly portals (*Rubikon*, *multipolar*, *NachDenkSeiten*, and *Telepolis*), and that they are all able to think and talk about media and journalism competently, albeit sometimes very pointedly and also unfairly. And that they – like various other voices in the conversation – have a very unique opinion on the subject of »Covid-19«. Schreyer, author of the best-selling *Chronik einer angekündigten Krise* (*Chronicle*

7 I reviewed this work in more detail in r:k:m (cf. <https://www.rkm-journal.de/archives/22964>).

8 Some time earlier, Meyen had appeared on Ken Jebsen's Youtube channel *KenFM* (»Free Media for Free People«); cf. Meyen 2018b.

of a Crisis Foretold), puts it this way: »I would [...] not talk to a journalist who calls people Covid deniers« (von Mirbach/Meyen 2021: 170).

We really did not need to read Meyen and von Mirbach's book to understand these men's world view; Wernicke's and Klöckner's positions, in particular, were already abundantly clear from other contributions on the subject. Of course, a rather grumpy Wernicke (who is the founder of *Rubikon*) pulls out all the stops. »Our starting point,« he says, is this: »We are being lied to and deceived« (von Mirbach/Meyen 2021: 192). Before they met for the interview, Meyen reports, Wernicke was saying goodbye to a lawyer who is one of the heads of the »Stiftung Corona-Ausschuss« (Covid Committee Foundation). Later, Wernicke said: »It was clear to me from day one that [Covid-measures critic Wolfgang] Wodarg was the expert, because he is so knowledgeable about epidemics and epidemiology as well as about the crimes of the pharmaceutical industry« (von Mirbach/Meyen 2021: 193).

Something else becomes clear here: The extent to which even »alternative« media reference other media and actors reference other actors. Mutual self-referencing is therefore not exclusive to the »mainstream media« and their journalists, although it should also be noted that »alternative journalists« apparently represent a tiny minority. This and other relevant publications also fail to use gender-inclusive language and to address or even resolve the striking contradiction between their (probably correct) criticism of neoliberalism as the »mainstream media's« mantra and the empirically well-documented fact that German journalists' actually have a traditional »leftist« political bias (cf. on this also Weischenberg et al. 2006a; Hanitzsch et al. 2020).

The ›other‹ journalistic field: Positions and (self-)referencing

While the Mirbach and Meyen's interviews and the editorial segues between them repeatedly refer to the (journalistic) handling of the pandemic, the book *Zombie-Journalismus* takes a far more dramatic stab at the pandemic, as well as other topics. Author Marcus Klöckner is actually considered a moderate voice. His previous focus had been mostly on the lack of representation in the media due to misguided recruitment practices (cf. Klöckner 2019). In this book, he is taking aim at journalism as an instrument of manipulation. There are a lot of original (linguistic) ideas; the book is brilliantly written – albeit in the format of a huge editorial that could hardly be harsher and more one-sided.

It sketches a picture of journalism in which most »mainstream media« actors would not even recognize themselves, though the author does produce a vast array of negative examples, many of which do hit home. Klöckner keeps the ball close to his foot and mercilessly attacks various actors and institutions, not shying away from any conflict (or pun). When it comes to practicing media criticism as

social criticism and providing evidence for the decline of journalism, he consistently follows the old bonmot by Luhmann »The joke justifies the means«.

In doing so, of course, he makes his case vulnerable: Did journalism ever fulfil the postulate of questioning power and power relations in the past? Did the majority of journalists – especially in postwar West-Germany – see themselves as critical counterweights to the ruling system or rather as its »servants« (cf. Weischenberg 1987)? Were the »lead media« »fulfilling their task of representing the public discourse« (Klößner 2021: 26) better than they are now?

There are good reasons why this current debate has been on the agenda of sociology and communication science for decades already. The author himself cites C. Wright Mills (cf. Klößner 2021: 254f.). We could refer to empirical evidence, especially on affiliations between the press and the local power elite, as first demonstrated in the »Wertheim Study« (cf. Zoll 1974; Wolz 1980); to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's remarks on the theory of the »consciousness industry« (Enzensberger 1971 [1962]); and, for example, to Botho Strauß's polemic »Anschwellender Bocksgesang« (Swelling song of the he-goat), which caused a big stir in the 1990s (Strauß 1994; cf. also Weischenberg 2018: 209ff.); and finally, to all the critical findings compiled in recent years by communicator, quality, credibility, and news research, as well as studies on foreign reporting and the role of news agencies.⁹¹ Many of the issues that are now gaining visibility have already been addressed in research. A central aspect of it has been a demand for more diversity in editorial offices and in constructions of reality (cf. Merten et al. 1994), as well as, more generally, the fundamental problem of how a media system in a capitalist society can meet democratic demands.

Klößner delivers on these subjects in relentless polemic staccato. Until the very end, it remains rather unclear whether this is deliberate satire (which, as we know, has license to do anything) or whether it is non-fiction, which after all, is subject to consistency and fact checks and should be free from inconsistencies – especially when it comes to such a serious topic as the Covid-19 pandemic and, in particular, the question of how to protect the population (through vaccination).

Journalism has had to contend with »bad news« (in the form of media criticism) for as long as it has existed (cf. Weischenberg 2015), but this book may be one of the fiercest attacks of our day – not even Jens Wernicke shares its merciless final verdict, as expressed in the subtitle (»The Death of Freedom of Expression«), conceding: »In the public discourse – as far as it takes place – freedom of expression is still largely guaranteed« (Wernicke 2017: 333).

Among other things, Klößner attempts to substantiate his rigorous verdict with an argument between Norbert Bolz and Harald Welzer, broadcast by news

9 Cf. e.g. Weischenberg 2002 [1995]; esp. p. 152ff., 293ff.; Weischenberg et al. (ed.) 2006a as well as: Forschungsgruppe zu Propaganda in Schweizer Medien (2017); Altschull (1984); Steffens [Stefan Zickler] (1969).

channel Phoenix in June 2021. Media scientist Bolz, who has written a number of interesting books and has long been in high demand as a public speaker, had been attracting attention with his idiosyncratic views on communication relations in the country. Although Bolz, a philosopher by trade, actually claims to educate and inform, and is well versed in systems theory, he has spent the last few years spitting general polemics at all forms of political correctness and a mainstreaming of »do-gooderism« in the media. In particular, he is concerned with the many »schoolmasters« in the journalistic trade. On Swiss television, he attacked the »public shaming by the media« and programs such as *Heute Journal*. All this goes down well with the AfD, which is why he also gave a lecture in the same vein at their Desiderius Erasmus Foundation, whose President is Erika Steinbach.^[10]

Under the promising title »Anyone can say anything anytime – as long as you’re willing to get lynched for it,« Klöckner took an in-depth look at the show *Heute Journal* to buttress his apocalyptic thesis. He opened rather plausibly: »The benchmark of freedom of speech is not what you can say on a blog with fifty readers, but what you can say on a forum where the members of a pluralistically constituted, democratic polity are supposed to articulate themselves.« The question then is whether one can claim that many things are indeed »unspeakable« in the »mass media« – one of Bolz’s pet peeves, as became clear at also on this occasion. Sociologist Welzer, who is by no means an uncritical observer of the media and journalism, countered as follows:

»Freedom of opinion also means that Mr. Bolz and the viewers have the right to criticize what I am saying here. I can handle it. [...] So this is still a given in our country.«

Those who have seen the program will remember that Welzer provided further arguments against sweeping judgements, while always conceding that communication conditions are anything but ideal. But that didn’t score him any points with the author of *Zombie-Journalismus*, who chose to attack the »star sociologist’s« and »model intellectual’s« professional honor, addressing him very directly and personally. Given that almost half of the population is afraid to speak their mind, he contended, one must acknowledge the realities: »One might well come to the conclusion – especially as a sociologist! – that we are dealing with a problem that has nothing to do with the ›right-wing spectrum‹.« Sociology must »finally get its act together« and do »what it is supposed to do: analyze power, domination and real-life relations of oppression and criticize them publicly with appropriate vigor« (Klöckner 2021: 15f.).

Klöckner has no doubt, of course, as to the result of such analysis and criticism: (In line with the entire field of AMC,) he calls for a new system for media and journalism – perhaps for society at large. He does not provide any detail as to what this new system should look like. But that would also be getting really – difficult.

¹⁰ You can watch it on Youtube.

3. Apocalypse Now: Is Covid creating ›zombie journalism?◀

Lauterbach, Lauterbach, and then some Lauterbach...

Noam Chomsky also provides blueprints for current AMC regarding the specific, closer than ever relationship between journalism and science, which developed during the pandemic – at least for virology and epidemiology. Journalists work closely with universities because »the media is a kind of ideological system«, Chomsky explains. Particularly in the case of certain more complex topics, journalists must, »of course, turn to the major universities to find an expert who will tell you what to write« (Chomsky 2017: 110). On the subject of »Covid-19« in Germany, Klöckner complains cynically, but not without some empirical backing, that the slots for experts in political talk shows are all pre-assigned:

»Neither Wodarg nor [›Covid entrepreneur« and ›Jebesen promoter« Michael] Ballweg, nor anyone else who would have put the fearmongering and panic into an appropriate perspective would ever have been invited to any of the political talk shows. Because these chairs were all taken already. Mostly by Karl Lauterbach, some by Karl Lauterbach, and the rest by Karl Lauterbach. And then there was Karl Lauterbach, Karl Lauterbach and let's not forget: Karl Lauterbach« (Klöckner 2021: 106).

Particularly in his reckoning with Covid-19 coverage, Klöckner spares no one as he rages in his role of the righteous ›angry citizen«. The »formerly great« taz, for example, and in particular Stephan Hebel (FR), who Klöckner actually »very much appreciates«, have fallen from his good graces because the latter had the audacity to criticize celebrities for their controversial (here, that little word that Klöckner dislikes so much really does fit) video *#allessdichtmachen* (Klöckner 2021: 66, 111). The book devotes much space to defending the campaign and its protagonist, actor Josef Liefers. Towards the end, there is even a »Ken Jebesen section« (Klöckner 2021: 108-153, 263-270).

Klöckner is certainly not a »Covid denier«. Yet his reckoning with journalism under the categorical title »Journalism in times of Covid-19: a total failure« is clearly exaggerated. It would certainly be a justified criticism that in this country (unlike in South Africa, for example), too many political measures were inconsistent and both political and media communication was often cryptic. That includes the use of the term »lockdown«, which was used generously, but rarely accurately. But Klöckner is not satisfied with such criticism. Instead, he lets himself get carried very far in his selective and redundant criticism. Sometimes, he is way off the mark, for example when he compares proof of vaccination with »Aryan certificates« from the Nazi era (Klöckner 2021: 36ff., 156).

On the other hand, a number of his examples of imbalances and inequities in reporting seem quite compelling, making his talk of the »misery of the media« seem somewhat justified in certain respects. Incidentally, on the »difficult«

subject of »false balance« – the allegedly inappropriate equal weighting of »outsider opinions« in the media (example: virologist Hendrik Streeck) – tabloid *Bild* has followed suit, expressing the view that this practice is designed to silence unwelcome critical research voices outside of the mainstream of »zero Covid« advocates (no publisher 2021).

One truly contentious general statement is that »our lead media« are no longer fulfilling their task of reflecting the public discourse. The entire pandemic is marked by an absence of this genuine discourse.« More than a few viewers would counter that such discourses – even with »outsiders« such as virologists Hendrik Streeck, Jonas Schmidt-Chanasit, and Alexander Kekulé – did take place regularly, on the *Markus Lanz* show, for example. Certainly, it is true that people like Wolfgang Wodarg, Michael Ballweg, or even Ken Jebsen were not given a platform there (and maybe for good reason?).

Right out of the gate, Marcus Klöckner voices his criticism by opening the book with the following direct, second-person attack on journalists:

»Let's put it bluntly: What many of you journalists delivered in the pandemic has as much to do with »objective« and »world-class journalism« as the »jazzed-up« stories of creative reporter Claas Relotius have to do with serious journalism: nothing. Journalism of our time has become, even if you don't want to hear it, a zombie. [...] Zombie journalism is the exact opposite of what journalism should stand for: objectivity, factuality, neutrality, balance, diversity of opinion. That basic degeneration into a journalism that doesn't »say what is« but what should be, has been in the making for a long time. The shamelessness with which not only individual journalists, but entire editorial offices abuse journalism to impose their world views can only be described as a journalistic disgrace« (Klöckner 2021: 11f.).

›*Deep in the Muck of the Modern Media Landscape*«

Standing on the shoulders of giant Chomsky, Michael Meyen quickly followed up with another book that conjures up an end-times scenario, and not just in its title. Originally, the book was supposed to be titled simply »The Media Matrix«, the author tells us. But *Rubikon* editor Jens Wernicke insisted on *The Propaganda Matrix* because »otherwise, it won't sell.« Of course, sales were also what drove the blurb, which starts out like this:

»Journalism is dead. It died either with or of Covid, after long infirmity. Even before the pandemic, the »fourth estate« was seriously ill, unfit for work, infected with politics, and on the drip of business. The virus just dealt the patient the final blow. An in the throes of death, the mainstream media fights anyone who might be taking over its job. It fights by banning, slandering, censoring, and cancelling. Those who ask the wrong questions will be silenced.«

Students of journalism and communication science will certainly be thrilled to hear this. Of course, there is a need for legitimacy, which the author – who has been proving for some time how well he masters the art of generating attention

with his presence on almost all channels – tries to attain on multiple media: a »*Rubikon* exclusive interview« held at his home in front of the inevitable wall-covering bookshelf and posted on Youtube (28 August 2021) just in time for the publication of his book; a book excerpt published on the online medium *multipolar*; favorable reader comments, and press reviews from friendly sources (cf. Meyen 2021b; Gratias 2021). Well – it almost seems as if AMC knew a thing or two about how to operate in the current media business. We are not surprised that publisher *Rubikon*, according to its own information, churns out one bestseller after the other, scoring eager and consistently enthusiastic reviews on Amazon.

Admittedly, the two interviews do not exactly meet the criteria of critical journalism that AMC usually demands; it feels more like a petting zoo – for instance, when they lament the »propaganda matrix« and our alleged impending doom and the review reads like this: »Then why is Michael Meyen almost beaming into the camera while talking to Jens Lehrich? One would think that someone digging in the deepest muck of the modern media landscape would have a different facial expression« (Gratias 2021).

In his amiable office chat on the topic »Journalism has died of or with Covid«, Meyen presented his very broad notion of propaganda by referencing his experiences in the GDR, on which he had already written a book some time ago (Meyen 2020a). What is happening at the moment feels quite familiar to him, he says. Accompanied by polite nods and empathetic smiles from his like-minded interlocutor, this encounter might even surpass Ingo Zamperoni's »Pulitzer Prize-worthy interview« with Bill Gates on the show *Tagesthemen*, which Klöckner mockingly described in his book *Zombie-Journalismus* (Klöckner 2021: 278).

In his attempt to draw parallels between »media propaganda« in former East Germany and modern-day Germany, Meyen takes the precaution of first abandoning the »press formula« by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, to whom Chomsky likes to refer (see also: Michael Meyen 2020c), but then follows Chomsky all the more eagerly as he traces the footsteps of Walter Lippmann and PR guru Edward Bernays. But here, too, he proves his skills as a spin-doctor – for example, with the aforementioned keywords »stereotypes« and »the function of news«. This presentation does not properly fit Lippmann's text, but is made to fit (for the purposes of AMC). For instance, with a sentence like this one: »We only see what the images in our head make us see. Russia is on an expansion course. The US are a haven for human rights. SARS-CoV-2 is a killer virus.« And then, he follows up with a rather typical severability clause: If you like, you could »see Walter Lippmann as an early critic of journalism« (Meyen 2021b). I don't think even Noam Chomsky would follow that. No, Lippmann, as a »communications scholar«, was an (early) analyst of the structures and functions of media and journalism.

Michael Meyen concludes with an autobiographical confession: »My symbolic world of meaning collapsed in 1989/90. And what came after has yet to convince

me« (Meyen 2021b). That doesn't sound very apocalyptic at all, and it doesn't fit with his claim to be collecting ammunition from a multitude of conversations for an alternative media critique, which – especially in the »age of Covid« – portrays real-life journalism in overwhelmingly negative terms.

Perhaps the word »difficult« (in the original sense of the word) does fit when it comes to empirical media and journalism criticism – especially when operating with an ambitious, apocalyptic frame. Shouldn't this otherwise peace-loving AMC rather contribute to the discourse by (linguistic) disarmament?

About the author

Dr. Siegfried Weischenberg (*1948) started out as a journalist before moving to academia – initially to train journalists. After a professorship in journalism at the University of Dortmund (1979-1982), he was appointed to chairs at the University of Münster (1982-2000) and the University of Hamburg (2000-2014) to teach communication studies and media sociology. He now lives in Hamburg and Port Alfred (South Africa). Contact: weischenberg@gmail.com

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