

## Debate

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# What is »alternative media criticism?«

An argument for a well-founded understanding of critique

**Abstract:** In his article »How great is the ›misery of the media?« Siegfried Weischenberg introduces the term »alternative media criticism« (AMC). However, he neither defines what AMC is supposed to mean, nor does he justify the selection of texts according to which he outlines the concept. The following text is an attempt to clarify the debate. On the one hand, it explores the concept of AMC, examines its usefulness, and contextualizes it in a broader debate of (media) criticism. On the other hand, it suggests other well-founded approaches to critique the articles discussed by Weischenberg. Last but not least, it presents ideas for how this debate can influence an understanding of critique in communication and media studies.

In the article »Wie groß ist das ›Elend der Medien« [How great is the ›misery of the media?], Siegfried Weischenberg takes on a challenge that communication and media studies and journalism research have so far neglected: the growing body of (popular science) literature on media and journalism criticism.<sup>1</sup> It is a canon that cannot be ignored, not least because it is constantly gaining in importance in public discourse (cf. Bucher 2020). Weischenberg calls it »alternative media criticism« (AMC). According to his analysis, prominent representatives include authors such as Michael Meyen (*Die Propaganda-Matrix* [The propaganda matrix], 2021, and *Das Elend der Medien* [The misery of the media], 2021), Markus Klöckner (*Der Zombie-Journalismus* [Zombie journalism], 2021, and *Sabotierte Wirklichkeit* [Sabotaged reality], 2019) and *Rubikon* publisher and editor Jens Wernicke

1 Although this paper is based on discussions that I have held within the Network for Critical Communication Research (Netzwerk Kritische Kommunikationswissenschaft), it does not represent the views of the network as a whole. It was written in consultation with members of the steering committee, but I retain sole responsibility for its content.

(*Lügen die Medien?* [Are the media lying?], 2017). Weischenberg provides an overview of what these authors have written over recent years, positioning himself against them. This is commendable in itself, but he fails to define what he thinks AMC actually is, or to justify his selection of texts to outline it. Nor does he contrast AMC with a supposedly legitimate counterpart, which could intuitively be called »mainstream media criticism« (in her editorial, Gabriele Hooffacker (2021) points at »professional media criticism« as the opposite (p. 166)). In short, Weischenberg does not make clear what it is he is actually writing about. At the same time, he delegitimizes a series of critical approaches, such as the propaganda model by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, which he includes under the undefined AMC.

Questions we should be examining given the general increase in social tensions remain unanswered: What exactly characterizes media and journalism criticism (as a part of broader social criticism)? Why is it not only legitimate, but important? And how can the articles discussed by Weischenberg help to establish an understanding of critique that can stand up to today's challenges (climate crisis, monopolization of digital communication etc.)? The aim of this debate should be to develop sophisticated critical approaches for the workings and failures of media and communication in democratic-capitalist societies. After all, only a well-defined understanding of critique can prevent media criticism from becoming instrumentalized politically and thus be delegitimized (on the derivation of such a definition for communication and media studies and associated fields, see van den Ecker/Tröger, forthcoming).

What follows is therefore an attempt to clarify the debate. First, the term »AMC« will be examined and its usefulness investigated; the term will then be positioned within a broader debate of (media) criticism. Next, the text suggests well-founded approaches to critique the articles discussed by Weischenberg. Last but not least, it presents ideas for how this debate can influence an understanding of critique in communication and media studies.

»Alternative media criticism«: a useful concept?

Weischenberg does not define »alternative media criticism.« Throughout his paper, he characterizes work that he believes to fall under AMC as »one-sided,« »unambiguous,« »uncompromising,« »aggressive« (p. 170), »very exaggerated and also unfair« (p. 175), and »polemical« (p. 177). It is not unusual, he argues, for AMC to make the »general accusation of propaganda« (p. 170), meaning that it is based on a »broadly defined definition of propaganda« (p. 181). In addition, he continues, AMC authors conduct a »fundamental stab at the very media system« (p. 170), often by means of a »general reckoning« (p. 170). Alongside the issue of

COVID-19, in which he claims AMC authors' »assessment [...] is fundamentally different from the ›mainstream‹« (p. 170), core themes in Weischenberg's view are »one-sided war reporting and something that could be termed the ›capitalist complex‹« (p. 171), i.e. »imposing a neoliberal ideology« in society (p. 171). He finishes by claiming that AMC is characterized by »selective and even redundant criticism« (p. 179) whose approach is »cynical« (p. 179).<sup>2</sup>

Weischenberg does not go far in explaining why the type of criticism he outlines has earned the name »alternative.« First, it appears to be produced by non-mainstream media, specifically blogs such as *multipolar* and *Rubikon* (and the associated publishing house), before being distributed in a »multimedia« way across »all channels« (p. 181) and by »friendly sources« (p. 181). As Weischenberg neither defines nor delineates these media, nor justifies his choice of articles, AMC is hard to pin down here. Second, the form of criticism (in language and style), its topics and its political views (on COVID-19, war etc.) seem to appear »alternative« (or non-mainstream) and thus seem to play into the classification of AMC. The (seemingly legitimate) counterpart to AMC is merely sketched out in fragments. It is described as »balanced« (p. 170) and as »criticism that conforms with the system« (p. 170) and that offers »relativization and differentiation« (p. 170). Its derived counterpart might thus be a fair, non-polemical form of critique willing to compromise and not raising systemic issues.

The attempt to define AMC clearly shows that Weischenberg's classification is unsatisfactory or even useless. At the level of research practice, it confuses interesting aspects and levels of media criticism (topics covered, political/ideological standpoint, style, quality). On a second, more analytical level, it neither explains the underlying dynamics of production and distribution, nor does it examine the term »alternative« (see also Hooffacker 2020).

Yet it would be essential to look closer at the terms »alternative« and »criticism,« along with their historical relationship to one another. According to Herbert Marcuse's 1964 paper »The chance of the alternatives,« for example, both terms are mutually dependent. »Uncritical thinking derives its beliefs, norms, and values from existing thought and social practices, while critical thought seeks alternative modes of thought and behavior from which it creates a standpoint of critique« (Marcuse 1964, quoted in Kellner 2007: xiv). Here, »alternative« primarily means fundamental systemic criticism from a left-wing, socialist point of view. It is the definition on which the 1968 movement was based and its counterpart, according to Marcuse, is »affirmative criticism.« During the 1970s, »alternative« became established as the left-wing counterpart to »bourgeois.« The foundation of the alternative German newspaper *taz* in 1978 is just one

2 Thanks to Uwe Krüger, who composed this text analysis and presented it at the online event *KriKoWi:talks* »Alternative Medienkritik: Ein brauchbares Konzept von Siegfried Weischenberg?« [»Alternative media criticism: A useful concept from Siegfried Weischenberg?«] on December 15, 2021.

example that stood for a left-wing counter-public sphere (Hooffacker 2020). As the term became increasingly depoliticized and alternative media began to adapt to *the mainstream*, the term »alternative« was taken over by a range of groups in the 1990s. Today, it is predominantly associated with right-wing populist parties such as »Alternative für Deutschland,« while »alternative media« in communication and media studies are being discussed under the banner of right-wing counter-public spheres (cf. Engesser/Wimmer 2009; Holt 2019).

In contrast, Marisol Sandoval (2011) defines *alternative* media primarily as *critical* media. The question is where »critical« is located on the political spectrum (right wing, left wing, bourgeois center etc.) and how criticism is expressed accordingly. For instance, if one looks at what Weischenberg dubs the »propaganda war over COVID-19 reporting« (p. 200), in which he claims that AMC plays an integral part, it is clear that categories such as »right wing« and »left wing« cannot be applied without second thought. The study »Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste« [Political sociology of the COVID-19 protests] (Nachtwey/Schäfer/Frey 2020) found the movement against COVID-19 restrictions to be drawn from a diverse political spectrum. According to the authors, the movement is:

»to be characterized above all by a deep *disaffection with the core institutions* of liberal democracy. Parliamentary politics and the parties, science and the media – all institutions are met with *great mistrust*. [...] The critics feel *misunderstood and ostracized* for their deviation from the mainstream; at the same time, they *exaggerate their status and their expertise* compared to the mainstream« [italics by author, M.T.] (Nachtwey et al. 2020: 62).

Although the defining features of the movement can only be outlined briefly here, they provide a potential blueprint that can be used to analyze the journalism and media criticism of the articles discussed by Weischenberg. The common denominator shared by all AMC-authors is their criticism of the COVID-19 reporting as part of a comprehensive (and often one-sided) systemic criticism. This analytical limitation does not necessarily make Weischenberg's categorization more tangible, nor does it justify his choice of texts. However, given the »normative disorder« (ibid.) of the movement, it does provide a non-static framework of analysis: Allowing for political diversity, this sort of delimitation gives credit to broader social realities – between established (political) categories towards definitive trends of a movement (experiences of disaffection, mistrust etc.).

## Criticism of the criticism and potential solution approaches

By categorizing AMC so vaguely, Weischenberg takes an (uncritical) swipe at media criticism in general. For one thing, he delegitimizes a series of critical

approaches in media and journalism research by throwing them all into one pot of an undefined AMC. When it comes to the propaganda model in particular, there is an overriding sense that reading the literature and Chomsky's extensive catalog of work properly would have allowed for a more differentiated view.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Weischenberg follows the proclaimed standards of the authors he criticizes. He does so without any apparent scrutiny. In other words, just because authors set themselves the standard of working on the basis of certain theoretical perspectives, this does not mean that they actually do (or do so well). The focus should therefore be less on the theories and more on their application.

The texts examined by Weischenberg could be discussed based on their potentially under-complex application of theories, their curtailed interpretation of entire works, or their use and creation of eclectic but simplified theoretical constructs. If one were to reclassify the texts in line with the blueprint described above, it would also be important to examine the extent to which media and journalism criticism conducted by the authors really does testify to their deep-seated experience of disaffection and mistrust in democratic institutions. Do they explicitly rail against a *mainstream* scientific canon (with its inherent quality criteria) and, in doing so, do the authors exaggerate their own expertise as »misunderstood« and »ostracized« (Nachtwey et al. 2020: 62)? If so, how do they do this? One way to answer these questions would be to investigate the instrumentalization of specific terms (such as »alternative« or »critical«) or the use of generalizations (tarring all journalism, media, elites with the same brush). Further, one could relate these points to the analysis of other stylistic means that Weischenberg defines as »polemical« and »one-sided.«

In this context, it would also appear necessary to analyze the authors' standards of conducting criticism. According to Weischenberg, for example, journalist Klöckner demands the »journalism of our age« to deliver »objectivity, neutrality, balance, diversity of opinion« (Klöckner 2021: 11f., quoted in Weischenberg); communication researcher Meyen wants to make a contribution to the »future of journalism« (Mirbach/Meyen 2021: 10). It would thus be worth asking to what extent the authors will or can meet these standards and objectives if, in the same breath, they mention »zombie journalism,« »shamelessness,« and »journalistic disgrace« (Klöckner 2021: 11f.) or declare journalism as a whole to be »severely ill,« »incapacitated and infected throughout with politics under the pay of industry« and now, »after a long illness,« »dead« (Meyen 2021: cover text)? Does this language not imply double standards? To what extent is criticism that uses

3 The criticism of the propaganda model is reductionist, the language polemical. Weischenberg writes of Chomsky, for example, that he makes »conspiratorial assumptions« (p. 173) and is the »champion« (p. 171) of AMC. Dealing sufficiently with this and other accusations would require a whole article in itself (see Florian Zollmann: »Of scientific relativization and differentiation. Why Siegfried Weischenberg's assessment of Noam Chomsky's propaganda approach is wrong« in this issue).

such language useful, if the aim really is to be constructive? Armin Scholl (2016) speaks in this context of instrumentalized demands for the »liberalization of the public sphere«: When authors demand »diversity, involvement, representation, tolerance,« but do not allow others these demands in equal measure, they are merely spreading »propaganda of their own objectives« and »the (one) correct opinion.« Pursuing Scholl's argument, therefore, the question is to what extent the accusation of »zombie journalism« implies an instrumentalization of the demand for »objectivity, neutrality, balance, diversity of opinion.« Weischenberg does not answer these questions, but they would be ideal for future analyses.

A debate among »old, white men?«

In his blog post »Siegfried Weischenberg und die AMK« [Siegfried Weischenberg and the AMC], Michael Meyen (2021) examines the paper in which Weischenberg attacked him. There are two striking points: first, the narrative of resistance (Meyen the high-ranking professor as underdog and mouthpiece of critical citizens) and, second, the representation of background information that Meyen believes drives Weischenberg's criticism. Both are done on a highly individual, even personal level (with inside knowledge) that is almost impossible to counter with facts. However, it is also impossible to avoid the impression that the debate is being driven by the first-person narratives of »old, white men.«

Examples of this include the very male pool of AMC authors and the argumentative methods these men use. Meyen's texts (*Die Propaganda Matrix* and *Das Elend der Medien*), for example, feature the first person (and personal motives) on the very first page, before this first person is played in each role (academic, researcher, media critic, journalist, GDR citizen etc.) to fit each argument. This is not a bad thing in itself. Academic research (or the production of knowledge) does not work without a subject, and that subject is made transparent here. However, personal motives, backgrounds, and roles are not a useful way to argue at an analytical level. This is especially true, as is the case for Weischenberg, when they are used on overlapping levels (personal and analytical) to refute legitimate criticism and when structural (not the sum of individual) problems are at the heart of the interest.

In summary, the ego of an author weakens any criticism. If the (re)production of the self is at the center of attention and inward-looking narratives seem to drive the line of argument, it is an indication that critical perspectives are being instrumentalized and private struggles are being transferred into public arenas. While this, to a certain extent, is essential for all criticism, overexaggerating the first-person perspective can be counterproductive – critique itself gets lost.

Weischenberg's paper and the discussion surrounding it should therefore motivate us to rethink concepts of critique and our own role as academics. It should also encourage us to reexamine our work for its social relevance. After all, communication and media studies and associated fields have a mountain to climb if they are to regain the power to define, interpret and apply certain theories (of systematic criticism) and thus to define the very field of media criticism. What is needed is a well-founded understanding of critique to meet the challenges we face today. This critique pushes emancipatory media criticism into the center of legitimate social criticism.

Following the Network for Critical Communication Research and its understanding of critique (esp. van den Ecker/Tröger, forthcoming), for example, an ideal sort of media and journalism criticism champions radical pluralism of identities, perspectives, and opinions with the aim of collective emancipation. Marcuse (1964 [2007]) argues that it is not affirmative, i.e. it can also be systemic criticism. In analyzing current structures in society, it distances itself from reductionism and dogmatism, opening up complexity from self-reflective research that is also self-critical. It analyzes and criticizes both mainstream and alternative media in equal measure and asks about the ideological constructs of both. It thus takes media and journalism criticism in »alternative media« (commercialization and concentration of journalism, one-sided reporting on COVID-19 etc.) as seriously as possible, works out how much truth it contains, and pursues it using scientific methods. At the same time, it asks about the ideologies on which this criticism is based, the language that legitimizes it, and the power structures inherent to it (see also van den Ecker 2021). One is free to agree or disagree with this ideal version of media and journalism criticism. Ultimately, however, it is crucial that any discussion of critique avoids being shaped by old turf wars and is instead enriched by new perspectives grounded in sound theory.

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