

Debate

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The parole on the ›misery of the media‹

Abstract: The feud between Siegfried Weischenberg and Michael Meyen is no secret in the world of communication studies (cf. Meyen 2021; Weischenberg 2012) and provides the only logical explanation for the claim that our book *Das Elend der Medien* [The misery of the media] (von Mirbach/Meyen 2021) forms part of a field called alternative media criticism (AMC). According to Weischenberg's definition, AMC is one-sided, unambiguous, uncompromising, and aggressive, with a sharp tone and destructive streak. In addition, he continues, AMC likes to self-reference amongst their own pack and to draw attention to itself through exaggeration, »even if the facts are rather thin« (Weischenberg 2021a). The odd thing about Weischenberg's article in *Journalism Research* is that not one of these criticisms applies to *Das Elend der Medien*.

In an initial review of *Das Elend der Medien*, Weischenberg expresses surprise that, despite its »strong title,« the book strikes an »amazingly mild tone« and respondents provide »very nuanced« answers (Weischenberg 2021b) – thus contradicting himself. In contrast to Weischenberg's claim, our work is based not on Noam Chomsky, but solely on Pierre Bourdieu and his classic *Das Elend der Welt* [The weight of the world] (cf. Bourdieu et al. 1997). Of the 174 references included in the introduction, three refer to books on the so-called AMC and one to Chomsky. That makes 2.3 percent. Weischenberg is quoted nine times. The publisher alone – Herbert von Halem – shows how self-referential *Das Elend der Medien* is with social sciences: The renowned specialist publisher also publishes Weischenberg's work (cf. Weischenberg et al. 2005). One of *Das Elend der Medien's* eleven chapters also covers AMC protagonists: four of a total of 40 respondents, who, ranging from an editor-in-chief to full-time and amateur media observers to »totally normal people,« have lost their trust in journalism. Wanting to find out where media criticism comes from, we conducted guided interviews and located the respondents in the social space using field descriptions.

As well as the factual errors in the *langue* (writing), Weischenberg's *parole* gives rise to images that are just as incorrect. »The author sees himself as following the tradition of Bourdieu.« No, *Das Elend der Welt* is the *reference work*. When an academic follows the example of Luhmann, Popper, Newton, or Kant, it does not mean that he sees himself as their reincarnation. Weischenberg claims that Meyen and Mirbach link their title »to a personal experience« that forms the guiding principle of the book and refers to a scandal surrounding Meyen's blog that I triggered in early summer 2020 (cf. Krass 2020; Rötzer 2020).¹¹ The prologue states, however, that the idea for the title came about six months earlier, through a collaborative project in our research network *Zukunft der Demokratie* (ForDemocracy). Weischenberg notes that, like »other relevant publications,« *Das Elend der Medien* does not use gendered language (does this make the German newspapers *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Der Spiegel* and *Zeit* part of the AMC, too?). On the other hand, in our work, the initiator of the journalists' strike, a Syrian community journalist, and a deaf woman journalist of the Bavarian public broadcaster all share their ideas for increasing diversity in journalism. One chapter is dedicated to the Kurdistan activist Peter Schaber from *The Lower Class Magazine*. There can be few more progressive images of women than the ideal presented in Kurdish society (cf. Schamberger/Meyen 2018; Öczalan 2009). The first female presenter of *Das aktuelle Sportstudio* and inventor of collaborative journalism, Carmen Thomas, appeals for playful gender creations in order to avoid generating reactance (cf. Thomas 1984; Thomas 2021). And yes, *Das Elend der Medien* also gives an opponent of a vaccine mandate like singer-songwriter Hans Söllner the chance to have his say. As a field researcher, I do not have to share the views of those I interview; moreover, this position on COVID-19 may not be too far removed from that of our own Federal Minister of Justice (much like the admission of having consumed cannabis also mentioned earlier in the text; Weischenberg 2021b). The only remaining criterion for AMC thus remains whether the title is exaggerated in order to attract attention. No, it comes from Bourdieu. I could ask why Weischenberg picked out the book with the mildest media criticism for his title, but much more important is an error that is relevant for all of journalism research.

1 On my boss' blog, I wrote that a protagonist of AMC had told me that the World Health Organization receives more private than state funding. The post triggered a storm of criticism on Twitter. The Head of Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich's Department of Media and Communication distanced himself from the blog. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (cf. Krass 2020) and *Telepolis* (cf. Rötzer 2020) reported. My book *Medienräume* [Media dreams] (due for publication in summer 2022) places the events in the context of transdisciplinary research.

From double to triple blind

Weischenberg writes that the »striking contradiction« between the bewailed neoliberalism of the mainstream and the empirically »well-proven fact« of a »left lean« in journalists' political attitudes has been neither addressed nor resolved. He refers to his representative survey of journalists (cf. Weischenberg et al. 2006; also Hanitzsch et al. 2020). If he were to place the results in his famous onion model, he would be able to answer the question himself (cf. Weischenberg 1992). The »onion« shows that journalism arises not only in a context of roles, but also in a context of norms, structures, and functions. This means that, as well as the personal attitudes of the journalists, social constraints and economic and political imperatives also have an impact on reporting. This contradiction has long been resolved in international journalism research: In the USA in the mid-1980s, left-leaning, radical, and alienated journalists were found to be threatening the political system (cf. Lichter 1986; Kepplinger 1979) (the Mainz school led by Noelle-Neumann came to a similar conclusion). One response came from the neo-institutionalist Herbert Gans: »even if journalists held such personal beliefs or values, these are effectively neutralised by the prevailing professional values, newsmaking routines and norms and organisational constraints in US media« (Gans 1985: 29; cf. Preston 2009: 35ff.). The dispute over whether »Mr. Gates« from the pioneering study of journalism research asserts his opinion in the selection of news (cf. White 1950) or which other factors dominate reporting has been going on for a long time (cf. Shoemaker/Reese 1992; McQuail 2000) and has now been the subject of comparative research in around 100 countries (cf. Hanitzsch et al. 2019).

When a researcher fails to reflect upon himself and the field, Bourdieu talks of a *double blind* (cf. Bourdieu/Waquant 1996). What makes the review of *Das Elend der Medien* a *triple blind* is the fact that we explicitly talk about the alleged contradiction. Indeed, it is the very crux of the introduction – and the guiding principle of the book, as even Weischenberg notes in a first review (cf. Weischenberg 2021b). I resolve the contradiction with the »frame of the Third Way,« which argues the following: International social democracy (as well as the Green party in Germany) converted to neoliberalism in the 1990s/2000s. Through the homology of social fields in the social space, the red-green journalistic milieu helped to complete this »conversion« (cf. Bourdieu 1992, Bourdieu 2004). One example is Gabor Steingart, who was once a Green member of a City Council and later supported the introduction of Agenda 2010 as Head of Department at *Der Spiegel*. He is just one prominent example of a journalist who probably voted Green or SPD, but was actually neoliberal.

In the 1990s, Bourdieu predicted the consequences of the neoliberal counter-revolution (restoration) in the public sphere with »scientific certainty:«

Frustrated people rush to follow the first demagogue they can find, the result is violence, »xenophobia,« and chiliastic flights of fancy (Bourdieu 2004: 67, cf. Bourdieu et al. 1997: 428) – *symptoms* of crisis that began long before COVID-19. We apply Bourdieu’s work to journalism. But Weischenberg seeks in *Das Elend der Medien* quotes that can be used to back conspiracy theories, thus missing the key message. We argue that the crisis of trust in journalism (and democracy) is not a result of disinformation, but originates in the organization of the media system itself. The fake news from the internet, so often decried, falls on fertile ground that is yet to be fully understood. Our book investigates the causes – for example in the form of a detailed field research report from Hildburghausen, a stronghold of the German right-wing populist party “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD) and a COVID-19 hotspot in southern Thuringia. It is the ideal place to learn why the topic of vaccination is not a medical problem in East Germany, but one based in politics and the leading media (cf. Fahrenholz 2021). Populists and »anti-vaxxers« are not themselves the problem of representative democracy – they simply show that it has one. »One will find it difficult to defend democracy against its challengers, as one has become used to confusing cause and effect,« says political scientist Philip Manow (Manow 2020: 226). This statement applies in the same way to *the media*.

Our book is the result of a transdisciplinary research network of eleven sub-projects, funded by the Bavarian Ministry of Science (*ForDemocracy*, period: 2018-2022).² It is one piece in the puzzle, looking to find new ways of living together as a society through greater citizen participation, as a reaction to the crisis of legitimation in democracy. We have clearly failed to sufficiently emphasize the idea of reform, which Weischenberg wanted to see. As usual when developing a utopia, we first gathered criticism of the situation in society (leading to the sub-heading: »Bad news for journalism«), before moving on to solutions (cf. Jungk/Müller 1981; Wright 2017). In the follow-up to *Das Elend der Medien*, entitled *Medienträume* [Media dreams], we work with 30 users of alternative media to develop a citizens’ book on the future of journalism. If the people who take a critical view of the measures to combat COVID-19 are not permitted to voice their thoughts publicly, we find ourselves on the academic fringe. Our project is well-founded grassroots work on democracy (cf. Merkel 2003; Crouch 2004; Streeck 2013; Nanz/Leggewie 2016). What is harmful is reviews that result from feuds or are written at a comfortable distance from the field. How »true to life« democracy, media, and research are allowed to be (cf. Dewey 1916, Defila/Di Giulio 2018) will be the topic of discussion at the research network’s closing conference on October 28, 2022. The reviewers are looking forward to lively debate. Professor Weischenberg is warmly invited to give a re-response.

2 See: ForDemocracy.de

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