Research Paper

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Discarded news

On news enlightenment, agenda cutting, and news ignorance

Abstract: **When important news fail to reach their recipients, namely, the politically interested, socially open-minded public, we sometimes refer to this process as agenda cutting. This article presents the key theoretical positions on this under-researched phenomenon, presenting important study results as well as our own empirical findings on internal editorial decision-making processes whereby topics are removed from the agenda. Last, we will critically examine the role of the audience as an actor in agenda cutting, which could be described as »news ignorance«.[1]**

The top story showcased by Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung (INA) e.V. in 2022 was the creeping abolition of free textbooks in German schools. In a public radio broadcast, the head of TV news magazine *Tagesthemen* and deputy editor-in-chief of ARD-Aktuell, Helge Fuhst, conceded that he considered this topic highly relevant, yet it had indeed not been covered in his TV news program. »Leaving out topics is, in fact, the most difficult challenge,« Fuhst said. »Having to drop topics hurts every day. There are only a few days a year when we have absolutely no idea what to put on the air.« (WDR 2022)

The process of news selection is editorial routine, which includes omitting, discarding, or abandoning topics. When this negative process is intentional, it can also be referred to as agenda cutting. This term from the field of communications science describes a distinct form of editorial routine that has been little

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1   This essay summarizes the key positions and results of an anthology to be published later this year in a new series of publications by Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung (INA) e.V. (Medien – Aufklärung – Kritik, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, Haarkötter/Nieland 2022).

studied to date and whose mechanisms, with their considerable influence on the formation of public opinion, are in urgent need of media research scrutiny.

Theory – concept – science

Journalism sets its agenda by way of news selection. This grand theorem, originally formulated as a hypothesis by Bernhard C. Cohen, was elaborated, in particular, by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. Regarding media effects, it postulates that the topics chosen by journalistic-editorial media are the ones that determine the audience agenda and thus, social discourse (Cohen 1963; McCombs/Shaw 1972).

While news selection per se is a quasi-natural process, its intentional variant mutates into the very counter-concept of agenda setting, namely agenda cutting. The term ›agenda cutting‹ was first coined in the 1980s by Mallory Wober and later elaborated more systematically by Rita Colistra. McCombs and Shaw pointed out that news content is »not treated equally when presented to the audience. Some are used at length, some are severely cut« (McCombs/Shaw 1984: 69): The concept of agenda cutting was first mentioned by Mallory Wober and Barrie Gunter in their book *Television and Social Control* (1988). Their initial observation was very similar to that of Johan Galtung and Maria C. Ruge when they first systematically elaborated on the concept of news value (Galtung and Ruge 1965). While in the 1960s, the Norwegian researchers questioned the scarce coverage of war and peace in international newspapers, Wober and Gunter wondered why large peaceful demonstrations often go unmentioned while events that do not represent public opinion receive undue media attention:

> »Selection for inclusion in the news has been entitled ›agendasetting‹ [...]. We also need a term for the exclusion of material from the news. For this, we suggest ›agenda-cutting‹, referring to the cutting off from access to the stage of public attention events that are judged to be ›non-newsworthy‹ (by journalists, that is)« (Wober 1988: 81).

During the same period, Robert Entman found that agenda setting affects not only the audience agenda, but also the audience's perception of the issues that are being negotiated (Entman 1989, 1991). He compared coverage of two airplanes that were shot down, an Iranian passenger plane downed by U.S. military and a Korean plane downed by Soviet military. They found that the media assessment of these catastrophic incidents differed greatly, and that these differences were also reflected in the way the audience assessed the two events – not only in a positive, but also in a negative sense. Aspects and facts that were covered very briefly in the reporting did not impact the recipients' awareness. Entman, without using the term ›agenda cutting‹, describes this negative or subtractive effect as »de-emphasized information suggesting that the human cost was not worth the

(controversial) benefits of the U.S. presence, by reducing its salience in the text and making it harder to discern in the onrush of news.« (Entman 1991: 23)

Rita Colistra conducted empirical research on agenda cutting among U.S. television journalists in the 2000s, also offering the first detailed theoretical reflections on the concept (Colistra 2008, 2012, 2018). Colistra distinguishes three manifestations of agenda cutting: »(1) by placing an item low on the news agenda (burying it); (2) by removing it from agenda once it is there; or (3) by completely ignoring it by never placing it on the agenda in the first place« (Colistra 2008: 60).

In particular, Colistra draws on Pamela Shoemaker's and Stephen Reese's theoretical explorations whose study *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content* (1996) examined, in particular, the influence of external variables on media content (Shoemaker/Reese 1996).

In a recent paper, Yosuke Buchmeier explored options to conceptualize and operationalize the term agenda cutting for a more in-depth empirical study. According to him, any attempt at empirical analysis is faced by an »epistemic dilemma«: »How can one empirically study the absence of content?« (Buchmeier 2020: 2008; see also Buchmeier 2022) For Buchmeier, agenda cutting is always an intentional act, i.e. deliberately omitting or ignoring certain topics with a certain objective on the part of the actor (»claim of purposiveness«; Buchmeier 2020: 2021). This, he claims, is the only way to distinguish real agenda cutting from »regular« news selection. In his opinion, these topics must have specific characteristics, they must be *relevant* and *controversial*. Since so-called »soft news« do not possess such relevance, Buchmeier argues, they can never be the target of agenda cutting. When Buchmeier says a given news issue must be of *controversial* nature, he means that its coverage »would be to the disadvantage of particular interest groups« (Buchmeier 2020: 2015).

As a Japanologist, Buchmeier examines the phenomenon of agenda cutting primarily through the lens of Japan's media system and its distinct culture of silence. Instances of agenda cutting can be empirically detected in the way media cover other countries and continents, in particular, as I will discuss in the following section.

News – justice – geography

The »News Atlas« of ARD's *Tagesschau* is an online world map showing countries from where the show has been reporting in a given time period (ARD 2022). Even a casual glance at it reveals large blank spots on the world map of ARD's television news broadcasts, While this is not a novel observation, it has not yet

been associated with the concept of agenda cutting. As early as the 1960s, Wilbur Schramm made the following programmatic statement:

> »We must conclude that the flow of news among nations is thin, that is unbalanced, with heavy coverage of a few highly developed countries and light coverage of many less developed countries, and that, in some cases at least, it tends to ignore important events and to distort the reality it presents« (Schramm 1964: 65).

In the wake of extensive discussions on a »New World Information and Communication Order« (NWICO) in the 1970s and 1980s, the UNESCO's MacBride Commission, named after Nobel laureate Sean MacBride, presented a report entitled *Many Voices, One World*, diagnosing a stark imbalance in reporting, with media of the Western industrialized nations reporting primarily about themselves and omitting the Global South (Galtung et al. 1992: 54ff.; Padovani 2005). While the Commission's proposals led to the »Windhoek Declaration for the Development of a Free, Independent and Pluralistic Press« (and subsequently, to the proclamation of May 3, the anniversary of the Declaration, as International Press Freedom Day), we must note that to this day, nothing has changed about this basic finding. Today, pertinent research conducted under the rubric of news geography distinguishes between news centers, news neighborhoods, and the mostly ignored news periphery (Kamps 1998: 275f., 2008: 89). Certain regions, even continents, are neglected to the point that one might even speak of »areas of invisibility« (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1985: 52). Kamps summarizes the situation thus: »The globe of television news resembles an inversed Swiss Cheese: It is not the substance, but the missing parts that dominate.« (Kamps 1998: 293)

In addition to the UNESCO-sponsored studies, there are and have been a number of individual analyses on news geography and news distribution justice that suggest that agenda cutting is taking place. Josef Eckhardt also examined coverage of the so-called Third World in ARD programming and West German television as early as the 1980s (Eckhardt 1982). Guy Golan demonstrated a neglect of the African continent in U.S. television coverage (Golan 2008). Astrid Lüttich and others conducted similar work for the Austria Press Agency and Inter Press Service (Lüttich et al. 1985). In a large-scale analysis of international television news, a group of researchers led by Thorsten Quandt found that certain topics in particular, such as business/trade or culture, »carry hardly any weight in overall« foreign reporting (Quandt et al. 2014).

The phenomenon of agenda cutting has also been studied in detail recently, especially with reference to news geography. You don't have to reference the ARD's proprietary News Atlas to see that the African continent, in particular, is *terra incognita* in ARD daily news reporting. This phenomenon can also be scientifically proven. Fabian Sickenberger's dissertation empirically examined the ARD's *Tagesschau* coverage of Africa between 1952 and 2018. His quantitative content analysis took a closer look at 1,685 contributions from seven decades of

Tagesschau, showing that the vast majority of African states receive hardly any or even no news coverage at all. This form of agenda cutting is particularly evident in Central and West Africa. Thematically, Africa coverage is clearly focused on political, military, and social perspectives, with an emphasis on negatively framed news topics (crises, wars, conflicts). Sickenberger sums up this practice with the concise phrase: »Cutting Africa« (Sickenberger 2021, 2022).

Ladislaus Ludescher also examined German coverage of Africa as an example of particularly drastic agenda cutting in elaborate empirical studies. In addition to German television news, he also analyzed leading domestic and foreign print media in the period from 1996 to 2019. Ludescher concluded that leading German media strongly marginalize or even ignore not only Africa, but the countries of the Global South overall. Sociopolitical developments and catastrophes in the Global South are barely noted, with a few, predominantly military, exceptions. In Ludescher's view, this situation even worsened in the »pandemic year« 2020 (Ludescher 2022).

Recent studies

Rita Colistra notes that, in contrast to agenda *setting*, »the reverse phenomenon, keeping an item off the agenda, has largely been ignored in scholarly research« (Colistra 2008, S. 59). Nevertheless, there is some empirical research offering strong evidence that agenda cutting not only exists, but is manifest, demonstrable, and measurable.

One of the better-known standalone studies stems from the communication scientists at the Media Tenor research institute. In the early 2000s, they examined the correlation between coverage of mad cow disease and consumption of beef in the coverage area (Media Tenor 2003). During the time that this animal disease, suspected of being a zoonosis, dominated reporting in German-language media, beef consumption declined sharply. When the topic received significantly less coverage the following year despite nearly identical case numbers, beef consumption resurged proportionally.

Nagwa Fahmy examined the particular role of journalistic blogs in the Egyptian public. In an authoritarian state like Egypt, certain topics are published in online blogs precisely because they are subject to agenda cutting in regular journalism due to governmental pressure (Fahmy 2014). Hasmah Zanuddin et al. analyzed two daily newspapers and a number of Facebook accounts during Malaysia's 2013 general election, concluding that out of 17 selected issues, no less than eight were deliberately kept from the public eye (Zanuddin et al. 2017). Both essays confirmed Buchmeier's hypothesis that while agenda cutting does affect controversial topics, many topic areas have lost their controversial energy in the

Western hemisphere, while in the Global South, they are considered »taboo« and therefore more likely to fall victim to agenda cutting (Buchmeier 2020, 2015). In Fahmy's study, the issues of human rights violations, torture, and corruption were most measurably affected by agenda cutting. Zanuddin and others found that the topics of crime, social issues, the environment, national unity, nationalism, the health care system, international relations, and immigration were measurably affected.

In Germany, as in the U.S., NGOs have taken up the cause of raising awareness about issue neglect and agenda cutting. The Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung (INA) e.V., founded in 1997 at the University of Siegen, publishes a »Top Ten of Forgotten News« every year (Pöttker/Schulzki-Haddouti 2007; Haarkötter/Nieland 2018). Its U.S. sister organization Project Censored also publishes an annual list of issues that have been ignored by the media public (Roth 2022). Both organizations, which are primarily based at universities and run by academic student research crews, rely on juries of scholars and journalists to vote on these topic shortlists and determine the degree of neglect. In addition to researching the facts, the research crews also conduct media analyses and review press databases and online archives. The selection criteria include social relevance and a detailed examination of media ignorance or de-publication.

Empirical evidence for agenda cutting in newsrooms

In a dedicated survey of communicators, we interviewed 43 journalists, mainly from the Cologne/Bonn area, and conducted a qualitative analysis of their responses (see Haarkötter and Kalmuk 2022 for more details). This survey also took into account the respondents' employment situation (employed or freelance) and the financing type of the medium sponsoring the coverage (private or public). The guiding research question behind the interviews was the internal editorial decision-making processes involved in rejecting topics.

Only two respondents said they had never been affected by topic rejection. More than half of the journalists surveyed said they had to deal with such rejections rather often. Public media employees are more often affected by topic rejections than private media staff.

The key research interest of the survey was why topics are rejected in editorial offices. The most commonly stated reason was that a topic had already been assigned or had been covered in the past. The second most common reasons for rejecting a topic, according to respondents, were content- and/or audience-related. One of the respondents described the reasoning behind a content-related rejection as follows: »There are topics that work very well, but there are also topics that don't work so well. So when we report on Cambodian textile workers

manufacturing for fashion brands here in Germany, of course, that is interesting. But once we get into domestic issues in Thailand, that doesn't hold much relevance for the target group here in Germany.« (respondent 12, question 8) Audience-related rejections occur when editors and journalists assess the interests of the target group differently. An audience-related topic rejection may be explained as follows: »The audience expects entirely different stories from our program.« (respondent 4, question 8) Economic motives are also cited as reasons for editorial topic rejections, such as excessive production costs: »We may end up not doing a shoot we wanted to do because it's too expensive. Then you have to do something else instead.« (respondent 21, question 8)

Time constraints also keep coming up as reasons for topic rejections »when the information is very time-consuming to research and we don't have the time to do it« (cf. respondent 34, question 8). Pressures of topicality and deadlines are a major factor in editorial topic setting. In this regard, resource scarcity becomes particularly evident as a reason for agenda cutting.

Other reasons, such as the visual appeal of a topic, moral concerns, or lack of space in a newspaper or broadcast are rare, but were also occasionally mentioned as possible reasons for editors to reject topics. Regarding moral concerns, one respondent cited a specific case »about a new cancer drug where we had ethical concerns about making people hopeful about a medication that had not yet been fully tested. We had moral doubts whether we could do that.« (respondent 10, question 8)

Topic decisions and topic rejections are internal editorial processes inside a newsroom. They become problematic when there is an external influence, because that is when, most often, non-journalistic considerations come into play. More than half of the journalists surveyed stated that external influences on topic decisions are evident occasionally or even frequently. Influences exerted by business representatives, corporations, or advertisers were mentioned a total of ten times. One respondent recounted: »When there's financial dependency, the advertising partner will often assert itself strongly in regular reporting.« (cf. respondent 5, question 12) The following statement also reveals the influence of advertisers, in particular, on editorial departments: »Then, of course, customers who buy ads from us and have an advertising spot in our magazine wish to be represented the way they want.« (respondent 39, question 12)

A total of eight times, respondents described influences by politicians, political parties, or foreign powers. One respondent reported a specific case of transnational agenda cutting: »The state of Azerbaijan refused me a visa and entry because they did not want me in the country. We have been monitored by the secret service in a European state; these are a few examples.« (cf. respondent 1, question 12) Another respondent described political influence exerted by the North Korean state (cf. respondent 12, question 12). However, it is not only the

political actors of other countries that try to influence local reporting. In local journalism, too, politicians try to influence certain aspects of reporting, as told in one of the interviews: »A political party wanted us to change something after the fact, but I was able to prove that I had afforded all parties the same options and conditions.« (respondent 18, question 12)

Influence by private, low-profile individuals, such as readers, was also mentioned five times. One journalist reported an instance where a local association attempted to influence coverage about itself. »If you don't report quite the way a club president wants you to, they'll sometimes say ›I'm going to tell all my club members to cancel your paper‹.« (respondent 11, question 12)

Influence by other external players was mentioned a total of eleven times. This includes, in particular, lawyers threatening legal action in order to remove topics from the agenda even during the research phase prior to actual coverage. In extreme cases, this tactic can result in litigation. This is called a »strategic lawsuit against public participation«, or SLAPP (cf. Solmecke 2022). One of the journalists we interviewed recounted: »So if one of us uncovers a real scoop, those affected will, in fact, get their lawyers involved to avert it. They will attempt to prevent broadcasting.« (respondnet17, question 12)

Explanations for agenda cutting on the newsroom floor

In addition to content-related and social-structural reasons (Pöttker 2014), there are three theoretical approaches to explain internal editorial decision-making processes: The concept of journalistic economics and of the journalist as a »homo oeconomicus maturus«, as Susanne Fengler and Stephan Russ-Mohl put it (Fengler/Russ-Mohl 2005); a modified rational choice model, as known from political science and as explained by Anthony Downs (Downs 1957); and lastly, the so-called *garbage can model* of organizational theory, as Cohen, March, and Olsen have described (Cohen et al. 1972).

The »homo economicus« approach assumes that actors always act under conditions of scarcity, that their decisions are based on personal preferences, that their options for action are limited by restrictions, and that in their interactions, actors have both shared and conflicting interests (Kirchgässner 1991: 12ff.). Under conditions of resource scarcity, limited information, and limited rationality, in particular, actors are unable to fully maximize their returns – which in our context means coverage of all possible relevant topics and thus information totality for their audience. Instead, according to Herbert Simon, they usually have to settle for merely satisfactory results, for which he formed the portmanteau »satisficing« from the verbs »satisfy« and »suffice« (Simon 1955: 99, 1983: 75ff.).

If we define topic selection as interactions of multiple actors in social cooperation, we can also draw on game-theoretical considerations and economics models to explain topic selection (Neumann/Morgenstern 1944; Simon 1983: 87; Braun 1999: 196ff.). A particularly relevant notion here is the idea that editorial negotiations are iterative games and that actors can draw conclusions about their options in a given situation from the behaviors of their peers in past situations. The decision-making situation in an agenda setting meeting can therefore also be described as a »tit-for-tat«, a concept from economics according to which one player's cooperation is contingent on the other players' cooperation. Agenda cutting, i.e., the exclusion or non-selection of socially relevant topics in editorial routines, then appears as an act of non-cooperation, which in economics is called defection (Fengler/Ruß-Mohl 2005: 55).

Our interviews with journalists confirmed this view. It became particularly clear that topic setting and topic neglect are products of interpersonal interactions in which the actors' different preferences can lead to dilemmas that ultimately get in the way of covering a topic. Such dilemmas are often resolved according to the principal-agent model, which means that the buck stops with the boss. As one respondent frankly put it: »Sometimes it's up to the editor-in-chief.« (cf. respondent 30, question 8)

This defection, which we can identify as agenda cutting and define as a negative selection process in everyday editorial routines, not only affects the editorial team members as a lost opportunity for coverage, but may also have serious negative external effects for third parties who were not directly involved in the interaction, i.e. the audience or society. The positive external effect would a society that is well-informed about relevant topics and stories. Accordingly, the negative external effect is a lack of information in society.

The rational choice approach is another possible theoretical matrix to explain agenda cutting processes. This concept, which actually stems from political science, seeks to explain voting behaviors in democracies (Downs 1957; Mueller 2003). Decision-making behaviors of voters in democratic elections lend themselves well for comparison with decision-making behaviors about topics in newsrooms. According to the rational choice approach, selection decisions are assumed to be rational, as the name suggests, meaning that under this theory, actors calculate the best possible attainable consequences of their choice given the perceived circumstances and based on their own preferences. The rational choice approach also assumes that a choice first requires information, which incurs information costs. This is the main reason why actors will content themselves with incomplete information and make their decisions under certain conditions of uncertainty. In election research, the assumption is that uncertainty can be reduced by transferring some of the information costs to third parties. When journalists select topics and news, they may rely on topics that have

already been published as news elsewhere. Research on newsworthiness even considers this selection method a news factor in its own right, namely continuity (Schulz 2009: 391; cf. Mast 2018: 80f.).

The garbage can model is yet another way to explain journalistic selection processes. In their essay on the garbage can model of organization theory, Cohen, March, and Olsen describe a form of organization they call »organized anarchy« (Cohen et al. 1972). Anyone who has worked in a newsroom will be able to empathize with this approach to journalism – through the authors actually used universities as textbook examples of anarchic organization (for good reason). Rational decision-making models often suffer from their assumption of unambiguous structures and rationally acting actors. According to Cohen et al., however, such models do not do justice to a complex, ambivalent, and constantly changing world. The authors assume that organizational decisions in institutions of organized anarchy are based on four independent dynamic streams that are constantly cluttered like trash in a »garbage can«, namely a) problems, b) solutions, c) participants, and d) decision opportunities. Any rational decision behavior is disavowed by the fact that it is subject to a plethora of uncertainties. These include problematic preferences, confusing technologies, and fluid participation (see Haarkötter/Kalmuk 2022 for more detail).

Which decisions end up being made is sensitive to both time and context. According to this model, it thus very often depends on the temporal order in which decision elements (for example, topic proposals in editorial offices) are tossed in the »garbage can«. Situational conditions, often defined by random constellations, also shape selection behavior. While it is not impossible that such decision-making processes lead to genuine solutions to problems (»decision by resolution«), it is rather rare. It is more likely that decisions will be taken »by oversight«, simply ignoring essential aspects of issues at hand, or even overlooking key issues entirely. If a decision is taken »by flight«, problems may even migrate to other decision contexts after longer periods of unsuccessful problem-solving attempts, enabling the organization to return to the original decision context for a seemingly simpler choice of alternatives (Scherm/Pietsch 2007: 32). Cohen et al. summarize these anarchic processes as follows:

> »Although decision making is thought of as a process for solving problems, that is often not what happens. Problems are worked upon in the context of some choice, but choices are made only when the shifting combinations of problems, solutions, and decision makers happen to make action possible« (Cohen et al. 1972: 16).

News find me? The role of the audience and news ignorance

In this »news game«, the audience is by no means only a victim at the mercy of the media companies' negative information policy, ignorant newsroom routines, and the influence of various social interest groups. A somewhat deeper look into media reception research shows that recipients can also play an active role in what has been identified here as agenda cutting. Agenda setting research rarely points out that the recipients themselves engage in their own form of news selection, which can also be negative or subtractive, and are thus themselves shapers of their own personal agenda. These processes may even have intensified in the digital age.

The average duration of television consumption in Germany and the number of times journalistic and editorial content is accessed on the internet suggest that the average media consumer is not only fully supplied with media, but even oversupplied.

But these figures are deceptive, especially when it comes to internet use: Among the top ten most-used journalistic websites, only three could be categorized as »quality journalism« capable of providing valid journalistic information. At first glance, user numbers of these quality offerings may seem exorbitantly high compared to traditional media usage (e.g., paid circulation or ratings of linear TV programs), but this comes at the expense of extremely low usage time. Based on excellent data by the *Crossmedia Link Panel* of the Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung (GfK), tagesschau.de has an average usage time of 20 minutes, spiegel.de records a dwell time of 18 minutes and sueddeutsche.de has 9 minutes – per month! None of these three quality offerings attains a usage time of even one minute per day for the average user (Andree/Thomsen 2020: 94ff.).

According to studies, mobile internet use, in particular, has further shortened access times to news offerings. Under this phenomenon, which has been called »news snacking«, news is no longer received consciously, but rather consumed incidentally like potato chips, for example as a pastime during commutes or while waiting in line (Costera Meijer/Groot Kormelink 2015: 6; Eimeren 2015: 3). Another study has shown that this type of news use impacts how people engage in political processes: Political participation is more likely when information is actively sought and news is received through different channels (Diehl et al. 2019; Gleich 2020: 33). A growing number of media users no longer even consciously visit journalistic websites or actively search for news online, but live their digital lives in the deceptive assumption that sooner or later, they will automatically see relevant news on their various social media channels. This attitude, which is particularly widespread among younger media users, is called »news find me«. However, precisely this attitude correlates with lesser degrees of political interest or knowledge – or even creates this negative effect (Gil de Zúñiga/Weeks 2017).

There may be good reasons to limit media and news consumption, yet inaction as a news recipient conflicts with our media-ethical obligations. As citizens of a democratic community, all media users are obligated to acquire a minimum of information about social, political, and cultural processes. And in our media society, traditionally and inevitably, this acquisition of information occurs primarily via the media. Andree and Thomsen ask the following question: »Is journalism imploding due to minuscule digital attention spans?« (Andree/Thomsen 2020: 98). This can also be called »agenda cutting from below«.

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Top 10 of forgotten news

Top Issue 1: The gradual abolition of free learning materials

Learning materials – especially textbooks and exercise books – are supposed be free of charge for all schoolchildren in Germany, because school education should not depend on one's wallet. However, in four federal states there is already no free provision of textbooks etc. and the economic pressure on the other states to restrict these funds is increasing. The issue concerns everyone in Germany with school-age children. Yet there is far too little coverage of the issue in large media outlets.

Top issue 2: The gap in the German healthcare system: Countless people are not covered by health insurance

According to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being. And yet, in Germany, some 61,000 people fall through the social net of our solidarity community. Bureaucratic hurdles and legal situations often prevent certain groups of people from being insured. As a former self-employed or privately insured person it is possible to slip into a status of being uninsured. Many of those affected are not aware of their options for medical care, and even service providers themselves are sometimes unaware of them. Even reforms, such as the possibility of insurance within an emergency insurance system, do not include undocumented migrants or other persons who are not listed in population registers. Many people are not aware of the extent of this gap in the German insurance system, also due to a lack of reporting. This important topic must be given increasing attention, both in the media and in society as a whole.

Top issue 3: Caregiving children and adolescents

In Germany, approximately 480,000 children and young people are regularly involved in caring for their relatives. Although they thus provide an enormous service to society, young caregivers hardly play a role in public discussion. After much, but short-lived, media attention in 2018 and 2019, widespread changes in age-appropriate assistance have failed to materialize. Instead, caring children and adolescents have largely disappeared from the media agenda again. However, the lack of thematization of these particular caregivers risks the collapse of the German care system, which should not be underestimated in terms of society as a whole. Moreover, the fact that children and young people do not have a lobby to represent their interests and to advocate for an improvement of their difficult

situation is overlooked, as their care duties keep them busy. A thematization is necessary to avoid overburdening minors, which, in addition to the general psychological and physical strain, can also mean a limitation of work and leisure options for them.

Top issue 4: Palliative care for the homeless

Torturous and unnoticed, that is how the death of many of the 417,000 homeless people in Germany can be described. After a struggle for survival on the streets, comes a struggle for a dignified and painless death. Hospices, which provide palliative care, can help in this process. However, no admission to a hospice can take place without a diagnosis, which is often not available, because homeless people do not seek medical treatment due to psychosocial motives or fear. The biggest hurdle, however, is a lack of health insurance for many homeless people, which precludes coverage of the costs of palliative care under the Hospice and Palliative Care Act. According to this law, the costs of treatment can only be covered for those with insurance. While reporting on this relevant topic is almost exclusively done by hospices, charitable associations, and local and trade newspapers, the fate of the homeless is hardly on the agenda of major media outlets.

Top issue 5: No power to the councils? Workers' Council Modernization Act almost unknown

In Germany, less than half of all employees work in a company with a workers' council – trending downwards. The changes brought about by the Works Council Modernization Act were intended to be the long overdue reform of the Works Constitution Act and to strengthen the establishment and co-determination of workers' councils in the changing world of work. But not only the name, also the content was significantly restricted. On June 18, 2021, the Betriebsrätemodernisierungsgesetz [Workers' Council Modernization Act] came into force and, in contrast to the previous draft bill, represents overall only a minor further development of the Works Constitution Act. Despite its importance for employees throughout Germany, the topic was only discussed and communicated in specialist circles.

Top issue 6: Sustainable highway from ashes

People have been using cement as a construction material for buildings and roads for over 2,000 years. However, its production is enormously damaging to the climate due to high CO_2 emissions. An alternative is currently being tested in several European countries: In highway construction, cement is being replaced

by fly ash. It is true that the topic of climate protection is omnipresent in the public eye. However, there are still too few concrete reports on such pilot projects in many media. More varied reporting and more positive examples could help prevent the climate crisis from being perceived as an abstract fate.

Top issue 7: Sexism in political parties

Four out of ten women politicians have experienced sexism and harassment in their everyday political work, according to a study by the European Academy for Women in Politics and Business (EAF). The study also shows that if women want to get involved in politics in small, rural communities, they have to reckon with more difficult conditions. The majority of Germans would like to see more women in positions of responsibility, such as political office. To achieve this, many parties are trying to increase the proportion of women with a self-imposed quota in order to ensure a gender balance in parliaments. The challenges of parties at the federal and state levels to achieve parity are even more evident at the local level. Sexism, non-transparent nomination processes and so-called top dog behavior ensure that women do not get access to political engagement at all and that men are overrepresented in positions and leading municipal assignments.

Although the topic of sexism has been addressed in various media contexts, reporting on sexism in political parties with a focus on local branches has so far gone largely unnoticed.

Top issue 8: The extinction of butterflies

Already one third of all butterfly species have disappeared from our planet. Reasons for this development are the lack of habitat and of butterfly food crops, the use of pesticides in agriculture and finally climate change. However, butterflies – much like bees and other insects – fulfill an elementary role for the ecosystem: They contribute to the pollination of plants and thus create an essential basis for food production; they, and especially their caterpillars, serve as a food source for many other animals; and, finally, their presence represents a visible bioindicator for the condition of natural areas and thus forms an important »early warning system« for their endangerment. The species decline of butterflies is not only regrettable as such, but it has serious implications for the ecological balance. Even though the decline of insects has repeatedly been the subject of media attention, the extinction of butterflies has so far gone largely unnoticed.

Top issue 9: Sustainable building innovation through »Lego« construction and building materials made from recycled plastics and residual materials

Housing shortages, earthquakes, flood disasters, wars ... there are many scenarios that require rapid and, if possible, sustainable reconstruction. The ecological focus here is not only on the extraction of building materials, but also on their reuse or swift recycling. The Australian non-governmental organization »Classroom of Hope«, in cooperation with the Finnish start-up »Block Solutions,« has developed a sustainable, resource-saving and constructional uncomplicated alternative to bricks. This »Eco-Block,« not unlike an oversized Lego brick, is made 50% of recycled plastic and 50% of fiber, for example from worn clothing, fibers from forestry, or leftover pulp or sawdust. The »Lego construction« allows even helpers with no building skills to achieve constructional success very quickly. If there is still a need for reconstruction or even rebuilding, the »Eco-Blocks« can usually be quickly reassembled. Initial projects in (warm) Indonesia following the 2018 earthquake disaster and in (cold) Finland have been progressing promisingly..

Top issue 10: Psychological abuse in dance sport

Dancers, unlike participants in other sports, are far more likely to be affected by eating disorders, unhealthy performance pressures, body shaming, and sexual assault. However, the willingness to report abuse and seek psychological help in the recreational and amateur dance and ballet sector is very low due to a common authoritarian teaching style. It conveys that anything deviating from perfection is weakness. This is a systematic problem that is still being fostered by many teachers. Dance and ballet sports are practiced by many children and young people, often during a difficult phase in life, especially for girls. While abuse in professional sports as well as in numerous amateur disciplines is being exposed, discussed, and partly brought to court, the reporting neglects the current conditions and their causes in dance and ballet sports.

Source: Der blinde Fleck. Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung. [The blind spot. Initiative for News Enligthenment/German sister organization to the U.S. Project Censored]. Online accessible in German at: http://www.derblindefleck.de/top-ten-der-vergessenen-nachrichten-2022-2/