

## Research Paper

Martina Thiele and Tanja Thomas

# Really?! Sophie Scholl on Instagram

An analysis of the journalistic discourse

**Abstract:** This paper examines the journalistic discourse on the Instagram project @ichbinsophiescholl, initiated by Südwestrundfunk (SWR) and Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR). The project is based on a fictional premise in which the resistance fighter Sophie Scholl uses the social media platform Instagram during the last few months before her arrest and murder in 1943. This thought experiment and its implementation in 2021 attracted a great deal of media attention and, at its peak, more than 900,000 mostly young people were following Sophie Scholl, played by Luna Wedler, on Instagram. The PR departments of SWR and BR communicated the number of followers and the extensive reporting as a major success and vindication of their approach to reaching young people. This analysis reconstructs discursive patterns, discourse strands, and discourse positions in the reporting on the project between May 1, 2021 and July 20, 2022. Based on the findings, we discuss the extent to which »the« journalism has fulfilled its public role and the various functions assigned to it.

**Keywords:** Sophie Scholl, Instagram, public service broadcasting, digitalization initiative, critical discourse analysis, historical journalism

### 1. Remembrance in 2021: The @ichbinsophiescholl project

The historic figure of Sophie Scholl has inspired myriad artistic interpretations of her as a person and inspired the question of resistance in a dictatorship. There are films and documentaries, plays, biographies, and exhibitions. Increasingly, it is in the digital realm that people occupy themselves with historical

topics – with National Socialism, the Holocaust, the Second World War, and the resistance. This is in part simply because it is technically possible, and in part because there are hardly any survivors left to report on the events directly – a fact that, in remembrance and memory research, marks the transition from communicative to cultural memory (cf. ASSMANN 1992; ERL 2017: 109f.). Recent papers on the digitalization of remembrance discuss whether other actors who do not have their own memories as contemporary witnesses – Wulf Kansteiner calls them »posthuman hybrids« (2020: 426) – privilege communicative remembrance in a way that is (more) detached from historical remembrance. After all, it is currently becoming apparent, including in connection with @ichbinsophiescholl, that »social remembrance processes are shaped more by communication than by culture (pace Jan Assmann) and are less guided by historical remembrance« (ibid.). At the same time, he goes on, these posthuman hybrids »rely on socialization on the internet« (ibid.).

To mark what would have been Sophie Scholl's 100th birthday (May 9, 1921-February 22, 1943), Südwestrundfunk (SWR) and Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR)<sup>1</sup> launched a collaborative project to great media attention. The two public service broadcasters used the platform Instagram, part of the Meta corporation, to reach mainly young people and get them interested in contemporary history. In the project, from May 2021, the last ten months of Sophie Scholl's life were portrayed as Instagram stories, with the everyday life of this young woman, who represents the resistance against National Socialism like almost no other figure in the German-speaking world, played out in »real-time fiction.« Up until February 18, 2022 – the day on which Sophie Scholl was arrested 79 years earlier – followers even had the chance to chat with Sophie Scholl as a blogger, played by Swiss actor Luna Wedler.

SWR's PR department announced the upcoming launch of the Sophie Scholl Instagram project on various channels on April 26, 2021. One advertising slogan was: »Imagine it is 1942 on Instagram ...« (Instagram 2021). On the SWR website, PR staff answered what they expected to be frequently asked questions. The question »What is @ichbinsophiescholl?,« for example, was answered with: »An innovative project by SWR and BR that brings history to life.« SWR's PR team also addressed critical questions – »Can Sophie's posts be historically verified?,« »Is there historical evidence of her feelings?,« »Can history be communicated via Instagram?« – in advance, replying on behalf of the project that everything has been considered and consciously decided. And if any questions remained unanswered, »please write to us at teamsoffer@SWR.de« (SWR, undated a).

1 Further production partners are Sommerhaus Serien and VICE Media. Unframed Productions is also responsible for the concept.

Figure 1  
 »Imagine Sophie Scholl on Instagram«



Source: Instagram, @ichbinsophiescholl

Immediately before and after the project launch on May 4, 2021, almost every newspaper featured it in texts of varying types and lengths – from the dpa report to extensive pieces. The titles indicate a broad spectrum of reactions, from enthusiasm to objective reporting to rejection. »Sophie Scholl on Instagram« (N.N., *Abendzeitung*, 6 May 2021) is a common refrain, with the Austrian daily newspaper *Die Presse* adding: »Out of place or a useful idea?« (Goldenberg, *Die Presse*, 6 May 2022). The ambivalent feelings towards the project are reflected in the way many headlines use the question form and/or use opposites: »What would you do, Sophie?« (Thomann, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 May 2021), »Well done or tasteless?« (N.N., *stern*, 5 May 2022), »Revered and monopolized« (N.N., *Die Welt*, 6 May 2021).

The diversity of ways in which Sophie Scholl is described is evidence of the range of perspectives and positions that exist, and demonstrates that the reporting debates Sophie Scholl as both a historical figure and a media figure. Sophie Scholl is described variously as a »resistance fighter« (Ruep, *Der Standard*, 5 May 2021) and the »soul of the resistance« (Dieckmann, *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 8 May 2021), as »Germany's greatest female icon« (Rodek, *Die Welt*, 6 May 2021), as »a human, not a myth« (Ufer, *Sächsische Zeitung*, 8 May 2021), as a »Hitler youth girl« (Gottschalk, *NZZ*, 7 May 2021), and, not to forget, as a »heroine with a cell phone« (Iken/Gunkel, *Der Spiegel*, 8 May 2021), an »influencer« (Weise, *Kurier*, 9 May 2021), and an »Insta friend« (Hespers, *Übermedien*, 28 May 2021).

Those more open to the project use headings like »Why we should all be following Sophie Scholl on Instagram« (Rondot, *Fudder*, 7 May 2022), »How Sophie Scholl is coming to life on Instagram« (Weyerer, *Augsburger Allgemeine*, 6 May 2021), »The potential of social media: Instagram and the others are not just superficial. The Sophie Scholl project proves it« (Kufferath, *Rheinische Post*, 17 May 2022), and »History lessons work on Instagram, too« (Stauffacher, *NZZ*, 24 May 2021).

Following the first wave of reporting, cultural scientist and publicist Georg Seeßlen wrote a deliberative, even critical piece in *Freitag*. He considers the project »rightly contentious« and asks, »Are social media suitable for preparing a culture of remembrance?« (Seeßlen, *der Freitag*, 22 May 2021). Nora Hespers voices skepticism about the »difficulty of playing with a historical figure« (Hespers, *Übermedien*, 28 May 2021), while Andreas Bernard picks up on SWR's PR slogan in his column in *Zeit*, asking sarcastically whether the project will end with »selfies from the scaffold« (Bernard, *Die Zeit*, 2 June 2022).

Having provided a first impression from the titles of the pieces at the start of the project in May 2021, this paper now goes on to explain the choice of pieces, before addressing the discursive patterns, fragments and strands of discourse, and discourse positions of the actors involved in more detail. We will end by looking at the question of how journalists have contributed to the way Germans have sought to understand themselves and their history through discourse, and how this process is represented in the media through their reporting on @ichbinsophiescholl.

## 2. Discourse analysis and text corpus

Discourse analysis is now an integral part of communication and media studies (cf. WIEDEMANN/LOHMEIER 2019; PENTZOLD 2020). Various approaches and versions, usually based around Michel Foucault's discourse theory, enrich qualitative research on discourses in and about the media. Critical discourse analysis (CDA), as advocated by Margarete and Siegfried Jäger, aims to examine how the knowledge that currently applies came about, how it is passed on, and its role in shaping society and subjects. According to the makers responsible, the media project @ichbinsophiescholl was launched in order to communicate knowledge of history and to inform young people in particular about resistance during National Socialism. The project's initiators need to be measured against this aim, just like journalists who write about historical topics and how history is updated by @ichbinsophiescholl. After all, not only those responsible for the project, but also journalists are in a powerful position. They are, as Barbie Zelizer (1992) emphasizes, »memory agents,« because they as actors and journalism as

an institution within society carry authority and communicative power when it comes to interpreting events that are relevant to society. Following calls from various sources (prominently ZELIZER 2008), remembrance and journalism research are now addressing the long-neglected relationship between journalism and societal remembrance, and the question of »what contribution journalism makes to the process of societal remembrance and the construction of collective memory« (OFFERHAUS/TRÜMPER 2023: 174).

In our view, discourse analysis that explores and critiques the connection between power and knowledge is the right method for examining the discourse on updating the past for current purposes, which currently manifests itself in journalistic reporting. The specific methodological approach taken in critical discourse analysis depends on the respective question and the object of investigation (cf. M. JÄGER 2019: 75). Critical discourse analysis is less guided by rules than content analysis, and has less of a focus on representativeness and objectivity. It is an open concept, but there are suggestions for how a discourse analysis should progress and how the material being investigated should be structured in terms of content. We have based this investigation into the journalistic discourse about @ichbinsophiescholl on Siegfried Jäger's (2001) definition of the term and his »little toolbox« of information for conducting discourse analyses.

At the heart of the investigation is the journalistic reporting on the »Sophie Scholl on Instagram« project. Discourse analysis will be used to examine 98 articles published in German-language media between May 1, 2021 and July 1, 2022 that not only mention the @ichbinsophiescholl project, but go into more detail on its intention, design, and resonance. Information gathered includes when and where the piece was published, who wrote it, the people and sources to which the authors refer, and the value statements the authors make. Also of interest are the extent to which the reporting is PR-determined, critical, homogeneous, or diverse, and the value attributed to contexts of history and politics, media ethics and media economics in the way the journalists examine the public service project.

The text corpus of 98 pieces from German-language newspapers and magazines (print and online editions) was compiled using search engines and database research (Google, APAdefacto, Nexis Uni) with the search terms Sophie Scholl + Instagram. The period of data collection covered 15 months, i.e. beyond the end of the Instagram project in February 2022. The 98 pieces came from 52 sources, including »newspapers of record« as »beacons of societal discourse« (JARREN/VOGEL 2009: 89), i.e. news magazines like *Der Spiegel*, weekly newspapers like *Die Zeit*, and national daily newspapers like *Die Welt*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and *die tageszeitung*, Austrian papers *Der Standard* and *Die Presse*, and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* from Switzerland. Also included were regional and local newspapers like the *Aargauer Zeitung*, the *Salzburger Nachrichten*, the *Rheinische Post*, the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, and the

*Berliner Zeitung*, tabloids like *Bild* and *Kronen*, and weekly papers like *Jungle World*, *Die Furche*, *Datum*, and *der Freitag*. Five blog posts completed the corpus.

There is unlikely to be a single journalistic print/online medium in the German-speaking world that did not report on the project. Most media published multiple pieces. At the start, in early May 2021, many wrote: »Sophie Scholl is now on Instagram« (Hupertz, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 May 2021). In this first wave of reporting, most are short news pieces written based on agency and PR material from swr. It was not until late May and the months that followed that more critical reports began to appear. All in all, the number of pieces fell towards the end of 2021, before increasing again significantly leading up to the end of the project in February 2022. The design and success of @ichbinsophie-scholl were once again the subject of debate, with authors reviewing the project. On the one hand, many pieces point to the follower numbers as evidence of »success« (cf. Hadler, *Kleine Zeitung*, 18 February 2022), but more critical pieces were also published, not least following broadcast of the program *ZDF Magazin Royale* on February 18, 2022, which covered @ichbinsophiescholl. As 2022 progressed, the first academic studies also emerged and were reported on in journalistic media (cf. BOHR 2022; KORSCHKE 2022).

### 3. Strands and fragments of discourse

The structural and fine analyses conducted during the research led to the identification of various discourse strands. Siegfried Jäger describes »discourse strands« (2001: 97) as topics in the overall discourse in society. In turn, discourse strands are composed of various discourse fragments. Media texts, and specifically the journalistic pieces that form the text corpus, can contain multiple discourse fragments and thus touch on various topics. Five discourse strands (3.1 to 3.5) are presented and backed up by quotes below.

Discourse strand 3.1, »Imagine it is 1942 on auf Instagram,« is all about the possibilities that Instagram offers as a video platform and microblog and how these are used in the @ichbinsophiescholl project to communicate history »in real time« and in »selfie mode« (swr, undated b). Closely linked to the technical possibilities and the image of the social media platform is the question of whether these forms of preparation are morally acceptable and appropriate for the serious subject of the resistance against the Nazi dictatorship, which ultimately ended in death.

Discourse strand 3.2 »Out of the history books and into the here and now of the Insta generation,« is formed of various interconnected discourse fragments. It focuses on the audience of young people, for whom communication via social media is much more important than the offerings of public service broadcasters,

especially on linear television and radio. The idea, according to those responsible for the project, is to »pick them up« where they prefer to spend their time: on Instagram. The number of followers is a crucial argument in favor of the project. The reporting demonstrates a clear connection between the audience, generation-specific media use, modernity, and attributions to media, and their ability, at various levels, to provide history in an informative and entertaining way. »Old« media and history lessons in schools are positioned as the opposite of @ichbinsophiescholl.

Discourse strand 3.3 »Interacting with Sophie Scholl and each other« is composed of discourse fragments that debate Sophie Scholl as a figure of identification and a »friend,« and those related to the opportunities to interact with her and others and the role of community management. Discourse strand 3.4 »Sophie Scholl of all people« contains statements on why she was chosen as a figure of identification as opposed to other resistance fighters. This is closely linked to considerations on the remembrance politics dimension of the project. Discourse strand 3.5 »Astonishingly up to date?« picks up on these considerations and asks about the manifestations of, reasons for, and consequences of updating the past for current purposes.

### 3.1 »Imagine it is 1942 on Instagram«

The fact that the life and death of resistance fighter Sophie Scholl is being communicated via Instagram is a novelty and has news value. swr explains exactly how this storytelling works on the project website. The crucial terms in the quotation below are »radically subjective« and »in real time.« The quotation also clearly shows the transition from the historical figure, »Sophie Scholl the student,« to »Insta-Sophie,« who then *is* Sophie. »On the Instagram channel @ichbinsophiescholl, the users experienced the world of the student Sophie Scholl in a radically subjective way and in real time. »Radically subjective« means that Sophie films the posts herself, usually in selfie mode, and always talks from her perspective. »In real time« means that, when Sophie decided at 11 am on Friday to skip the rest of the seminar to go to the lake, users were with her at the same time« (swr, undated b).

Journalists make use of this PR material from swr and often also use the phrases »in real time,« »in selfie mode,« and »radically subjective.« It is also explained that the focus is on »Insta-Sophie,« who holds the camera.<sup>2</sup> As a first-person narrator, they write, she reports from her everyday life and allows

2 I.e. the leading actor Luna Wedler films herself as Sophie Scholl (in selfie mode) and others and her surroundings, instructed by cameraman Johannes Louis.

viewers to share in what she feels and experiences. Some pieces go into even more detail on how the possibilities of Instagram are used. The journalists highlight and are generally positive about the fact that Sophie addresses her followers directly and that most of the videos and reenactments, which make every effort to be historically authentic, are posted in the Instastory; that there are reels, posts, captions, IGTV, as well as original recordings from the war years, films, photos, pieces of music, and excerpts from newspapers – although only a few of the journalists note that some of this is Nazi propaganda material – as well as drawings modelled on those produced by the historical Sophie Scholl; and that Instagram allows interaction and the followers are able to like her posts and add comments embellished with images, emojis, @ mentions, and hashtags (see discourse strand 3.3. for more on interaction).

Few scrutinize the thought experiment behind the project – »Imagine it is 1942 on Instagram.« But Hans-Georg Rodek in the *Welt* and Georg Seeßlen in *Freitag* highlight the contradictions: »A dictatorship like National Socialism would – if it had permitted a ›Nazigram‹ at all – have put an abrupt end to Sophie Scholl’s posts in less than a week. The admirable idea of explaining Scholl from her everyday life and showing her as the contradictory person she was in bite-sized pieces homes in on an unresolvable contradiction: The series relies on the fiction that Sophie would have been able to publish her thoughts on something like Instagram – and should explain at the same time that this would have been impossible. That demands a significant ability for abstraction« (Rodek, *Die Welt*, 6 May 2021). Georg Seeßlen continues the thought experiment to its logical conclusion and dedicates his piece to the overarching question: »Would a medium like Instagram have been able to prevent the Nazis or would it instead have been used as a means of fascization, as contemporary media are?« Anton Beck takes a similar view. He imagines »that the social media of 1942 would also have had lots of Nazis in it.« On the other hand, he argues, today’s media would have »allowed resistance to be formed and organized very differently; it would also have been easier to contact people abroad« (Beck, *Die Weltwoche*, 20 May 2021). Andreas Bernhard comments critically on the imagination of Sophie Scholl + 1942 + Instagram, arguing that it bulldozes fundamental historical differences and threatens »to dismantle any sense of her existential resistance fight« (Bernhard, *Die Zeit*, 2 June 2021).

The more critical pieces on the way @ichbinsophiescholl is made, on Instagram as a medium for communicating history, and on the thought experiment that Sophie Scholl could have used Instagram in 1942 are grounded in moral concerns. They relate to whether and how events can be presented in this way, Instagram as a channel, and the medial reconstruction using reenactments and »scenic quotes,« i.e. the »creative« filling of historical gaps. SWR PR and community management react to these few critical voices. The editors responsible, Susanne



Gebhardt, Suli Kurban, and Ulrich Herrmann, give their opinions in interviews (Serafini, *Watson*, 30 May 2021; Teige, *Der Spiegel*, 19 February 2022) and discussion panels (BpB 2021). The FAQs on the project include the following response from #teamsoffer: »Our channel @ichbinsophiescholl is fiction, but based on real events. Where there are historical gaps or uncertainty, we have ventured to fill them creatively and in consultation with experts in order to enable cohesive storytelling« (SWR, undated c). Those responsible for the project justify their lack of mention of the Holocaust by arguing that they »consciously [wanted to take] Sophie’s perspective« and »the channel only ever covers things that Sophie could have known at the time in question« (SWR, undated d).

### 3.2 »Out of the history books and into the here and now of the Insta generation«

The usually uncritical use of PR material from SWR is also seen in the passages of text that describe the project’s »innovative character,« its »modernity,« and the intended target audience of young people, i.e., »Generation Z« or »digital natives.« Many pieces (including Rathcke/Bewerunge, *Rheinische Post*, 6 May 2021; Serafini, *Watson*, 30 May 2021), for example, use the phrase about bringing »the resistance fighter out of the history books and into the here and now« (SWR, undated e) on the occasion of Sophie Scholl’s 100th birthday. Younger authors in particular see huge differences between the »old« media of books, movies, and television and the »new« media of Instagram, so popular among young people and their own generation. Illustrated magazine *stern* (N.N., 5 May 2021) writes: »This form of presentation shifts Sophie Scholl into the present and allows younger users in particular to imagine themselves in her shoes. By doing so, it achieves something that many well-meaning documentaries and films have failed to do.«

Instagram versus history lessons in schools is another discourse fragment. It is useful to hear what the 21-year-old actor playing Insta-Sophie, Luna Wedler, has to say on this and on fact and fiction in an interview: »The followers like that the story is told in a different way than at school. That it is not just facts, but that Sophie is really alive, that you are really close to her« (Wedler quoted in Schönstädt, *Berliner Morgenpost*, 9 May 2021). Vitality and emotion are also what Sarah Rondot (*Fudder*, 7 May 2021) wants to see when learning about history: »Just as we wished all our history lessons had been earlier, lively and up to date, this project makes history tangible and brings it to life.« She thinks »that we should all follow Sophie Scholl on Instagram« (ibid.).

Suli Kurban, head of the social media editorial office at SWR, also uses her own school and media socialization as an argument in a discussion panel hosted by

the Federal Agency for Civic Education (BpB), naming »fun« as a key »factor« in the success of addressing audience through media: »I think that is sometimes missing from education work: fun. When I look back on my time at school, all we had were black-and-white films on the Nazi period. We knew that what happened there was terrible. We were aware of it, but ultimately it did not matter to us enough to make us want to learn more about the Holocaust« (BpB 2021).

Alongside the modernity, the sense of closeness, and the »fun factor,« many commentators see the number of followers as proof that »it« – history and Instagram – is possible after all. The number of followers grows continuously, especially in the first few weeks. In the week after the launch of the project alone, the figure is more than 500,000. Writing in the *Berliner Morgenpost* (5 July 2021), »funky youth reporter« Michelle Müller points to its now 900,000 followers as she declares the project a success. The unusual Instagram project, she writes, communicates »political and historical knowledge with just the right amount of suspense, as one can look forward to a new post every day and even write one's own comments,« – and high school students are »taught knowledge in a refreshing way. Not the most obvious idea« (ibid.).

### 3.3 »Interacting with Sophie Scholl and each other«

In their PR material, the makers of the project refer repeatedly to the high level of interaction that Instagram enables and how successfully the interest of young people was retained over many months: »The high level of interaction over the long period is impressive; the users engaged with the storytelling concept of the series, which allows emotional closeness, and interact with Sophie Scholl and each other« (swr, undated f).

A phrase like »the users interact with Sophie Scholl« demands clarification of who is actually interacting with whom. The starting point is the real historical figure of Sophie Scholl – her life and death are verified by evidence and »sources« that historians analyze and that inspire artists and media creators. Alongside the real Sophie Scholl, there is also the media figure of Sophie Scholl, represented in various films and embodied by actors like Julia Jentsch, Liv Lisa Fries, Lena Stolze, and now on Instagram by Luna Wedler. This media figure – or »persona,« a term that originates from research on parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR) – this online person is connected to the users of @ichbinsophiescholl on Instagram, who interact with the Instagram Sophie as followers with varying levels of activity and sometimes with their real names and photos. »In real life,« they are communicating and interacting with the editors who run the @ichbinsophischoll community management, with @teamsoffer. Both the community management and all those interested in

@ichbinsophiescholl – followers and critics – use other channels for their communication in addition to Instagram, such as Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, etc. Ultimately, those who occupy themselves with @ichbinsophiescholl in a journalistic or academic capacity could also be seen as interacting, as involved in the (meta)communication process. They, too, develop a relationship with the project and the Instagram Sophie Scholl (cf. THIELE 2023, in press).

The press articles examined, however, do not reflect further on this relationship or the people interacting within it, be they real or media constructs. Instead, interaction is seen as fundamentally a good thing. For the *Augsburger Allgemeine*, it is the key to success. After all, the followers »answer ›Sophie‹ directly, as if she herself could actually answer. And that is what makes the project a success« (Weyerer, *Augsburger Allgemeine*, 6 May 2021). Reto Stauffacher, writing in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, also finds it good that the viewers can get involved, »be it through surveys or votes, so that their view can also be incorporated into the storytelling as it goes on« (Stauffacher, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 24 May 2021). But does the community management actually use the actions and reactions of the followers and critics to adapt the choice of topics and how they are handled accordingly?

Only in some cases. There are some critical comments from users who are experts in history, for example asking about Sophie Scholl's time in the girls' wing of the Hitler Youth (BDM) or discussing who would have been able, or wanted, to know what about deportations and mass extermination at what point in time. According to Nora Hespers, the community management's response to such comments is evasive, too late, or non-existent. She emphasizes that the contribution made by active users – unpaid »social work« to some extent – must not be underestimated: »It is this voluntary work in the comments that currently provides contexts that the community management has provided little of up to now – or only once relevant discussions were already underway. The real challenge of social networks is not broadcasting, but communicating. And editorial offices still do not pay enough attention to this, or value it enough« (Hespers, *Übermedien*, 28 May 2021).

Nora Hesper's pieces are an exception when it comes to the quality, depth, and breadth of her argumentation. She criticizes not only #teamsoffer for missing opportunities to provide information on how sources, reenactments, and fictionalizations are dealt with, but also the way the account talks of ›Sophie as a friend.‹ In an interview with the Swiss online magazine *Watson*, SWR editor Susanne Gebhardt, who initiated the project, speaks from the »we« perspective about how a friendship with Sophie develops: »We are there live when Sophie goes to university for the first time and when she discovers the White Rose group. We are much closer to the action and have carried her with us every day for ten months on our own phones in our pockets. We live alongside her like we would a friend« (Gebhardt, quoted in Serafini, *Watson*, 30 May 2021). Nora Hespers has

her doubts about a parasocial relationship, even a friendship, with a media figure whose existence is based on a real historical figure. »It is highly questionable whether all these users who think that they identify with her really would have wanted to be friends with the historical Sophie. After all – let us not kid ourselves – the vast majority of us would not have been Sophie Scholl or members of the White Rose group. The vast majority of us would have been part of the system that carries responsibility for her murder. I include myself in that. Would we have been Sophie’s friends? Certainly not« (Hespers, *Übermedien*, 28 May 2021).

### 3.4 »Sophie Scholl of all people«

A key discourse strand in the journalistic pieces on media critique is the fact that @ichbinsophiescholl offers identification, and how it does so. Referring to the work of historian and Scholl biographer Robert M. Zoske, Julia Encke writes in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (9 May 2021) that the Instagram project has the potential to continue Sophie Scholl’s instrumentalization as a »saint of consensus.« Encke explains the popularity of the »Munich resisters,« who »were not liberal democrats,« with the idea that they were pervaded by »a high moral attitude, a sense of responsibility, and a passion for freedom,« and argues that this is »something that is needed at the moment and in the future« (ibid.). The *Biographische Notizen* [biographical notes] of sister Inge Scholl are listed as a further explanation for the focus on Sophie Scholl. These notes formed the basis for the book *The White Rose*, which was published five years later and, argues Encke, marks »the birth of Sophie Scholl as an icon.« In addition, she continues, as the »youngest and the only woman, [Sophie Scholl] always had a special role« (ibid.).

It is undoubtedly »very emotional to show how a young student of philosophy and biology turned into a resister,« emphasizes the Chair of the White Rose Foundation, Hildegard Kronawitter, in an interview with the *Sächsische Zeitung*. She welcomes the Instagram project, as »the personification of history is always more effective than simple description« (Ufer, *Sächsische Zeitung*, 8 May 2021).

Writing in *Jungle World*, Nikolaus Lelle and Tom Uhlig take a more critical view of this personification, arguing that the invitation on Instagram to identify oneself with a German resistance fighter serves to relieve followers of guilt. They call for people to be reminded of the historical reality: »Right to the end, National Socialism was a dictatorship based on consent« (Lelle/Uhlig, *Jungle World*, 17 June 2021). Joana Nietfeld sees things in a similar way: »Exhibited as a martyr, she helped a bewildered nation to absolve itself of some of its oppressive guilt: Not everyone broke with civilization, joined in, cheered, or looked away« (Nietfeld, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 9 May 2021).

Figure 2  
Interacting with followers: Voting on handing out flyers



ZDF Magazin Royale on February 18, 2022. »Well intentioned, poorly executed: The problem with the German culture of remembrance.« Jan Böhmermann on interaction via @ichbinsophiescholl and opinion questions there. Source: YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rx8HZ0rnRxA>

For Max Czollek, too, Sophie Scholl – both the historical figure and the remediatized figure on Instagram – represents a »normalization of collaboration« (Czollek, *Die Wochenzeitung*, 20 May 2021) – an appropriation that does not do justice to her. Czollek asks why »this young woman in particular became an icon of an all-German story of resistance? And not, for example, the many communists, socialists, or Jews,« before answering it himself: »Those who want to validate the relevance of the bourgeois center as the sword and shield of pluralistic democracy, have no use for left-wing resistance. After all, that disproves exactly what they want to prove: that left and right are as bad as each other. And that only the bourgeois center is able to provide security, common sense, and continuity« (ibid.).

Czollek thus places Sophie Scholl and the Instagram project in the great context of the politics of remembrance.

### 3.5 »Astonishingly up-to-date?«

This discourse strand comprises the discourse fragments that address the way the past is brought into the present and the strategies of the project's makers for bringing history up to date. The *Augsburger Allgemeine* newspaper writes: »Suddenly, people in the year 2021 are using the *du* [casual] form with the 21-year-old resistance fighter from the year 1942« (Weyerer, *Augsburger Allgemeine*, 6 May 2021). *stern*, too, admits that Instagram allows immersion in the topic: »This form of presentation brings Sophie Scholl into the present and allows younger users in particular to imagine themselves in her shoes« (N.N., *stern*, 5 May 2021).

The programmatic title of the Instagram project @ichbinsophiescholl, the depiction of everyday situations, the invitations to introspection, and finally the depiction of her gradual development into a resistance fighter day by day – it all contains a question directed at the followers: How would you have behaved back then, and how do you behave now? Critics like Christiane Peitz pick up on the various strategies for bringing history up to date, writing in *Tagesspiegel* about the Instagram Sophie: She »talks of her longing for real coffee and pear schnapps, says astonishingly up-to-date sentences like ›I feel a bit lonely right now.‹ She would love to go to a party again without feeling guilty, without being frightened about the future« (Peitz, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 4 May 2021). »Astonishingly up-to-date« because the political context at the time – the lockdown rules during the covid-19 pandemic and the demonstrations against them – also throw up the question of protest and resistance against measures taken by the state. This point shows how easy it can be to confuse, or deliberately equate, resistance in a dictatorship with permitted protest in a democratic state, thus instrumentalizing it for political gain. Followers of the AfD [far-right political party Alternative für Deutschland] and the *Querdenker* movement of covid-19 deniers are especially likely to refer to themselves as resistance fighters and as being persecuted. The appearance by »Jana from Kassel« at a *Querdenker* demonstration in Kassel, in which she claimed to feel »like Sophie Scholl,« attracted a great deal of public attention and sent shock waves through the media. Various writers linked her speech to @ichbinsophiescholl, including Hans-Georg Rodek in *Die Welt*: »It is an attempt by ARD to use a modern method of storytelling in a modern medium to fulfil their duty to educate, so that the number of clueless in Kassel and the rest of Germany falls a little, and the difference between ›taking a stance,‹ ›courage,‹ and ›resistance‹ becomes a little clearer« (Rodek, *Die Welt*, 6 May 2021).

Figure 3  
Instrumentalization for current purposes



Querdenker speaker Jana from Kassel compares herself with Sophie Scholl at a demonstration in Hanover on November 21, 2020. Source: N.N., *stern*, 5 May 2021.

Luna Wedler is also asked about Jana from Kassel and the first-person form in an interview with *Spiegel* (Iken/Gunkel, *Der Spiegel*, 8 May 2021):

*Der Spiegel*: »Ms. Wedler, @ichbinsophiescholl is a very personified form of address that is unintentionally reminiscent of »Jana from Kassel.« Did approaching an iconic figure, who is currently also being co-opted by *Querdenker* and right-wing populists, not worry you at all? *Wedler*: »That is exactly why it is so important that we talk about Sophie Scholl and bring her to life how she really was. So that people like that can look at her and understand that they do not have the right to compare themselves with her.«

The answer shows firstly that some journalists certainly do pose critical questions and, secondly, that the interviewee has not understood, or does not want to understand, the core criticism contained in the question. She believes that @ichbinsophiescholl and her depiction of the historical Sophie Scholl makes clear *how she really was*.

#### 4. Results

The discourse strands and fragments presented in Section 3 certainly demonstrate a large diversity of topics within the way journalists covered

@ichbinsophiescholl – despite the heavy reliance of many of the pieces published immediately after the project’s launch in May 2021 on SWR’s PR material and agency material. They simply adopt the argument that the young audience can now only be accessed via social media platforms and that both the idea and the implementation of @ichbinsophiescholl are a success purely based on the number of followers. This would appear to corroborate the determination hypothesis (BAERNS 1985), by which PR work governs journalism. Much discussed and further developed in journalism studies, this hypothesis (cf. Szyszka, undated) can be corroborated for the majority of the pieces examined. Well-founded, critical examination that takes a range of aspects into account is more likely to be found in the leading high-quality national media and in blogs like *Übermedien*, supporting research findings that place »[male] bloggers as underestimated journalists« (HOFFJANN/HAIĐUKIEWICZ 2018) – or indeed female bloggers.

After all, the majority of those writing about @ichbinsophiescholl (58%) are women. Some of the phrases used also indicate that these journalists are younger, many of them seeing themselves as *digital natives* and members of *Generation Instagram*. We can assume that younger colleagues are assigned the status of experts (»You know about Instagram...«) and that interns and freelancers are more likely to be used for this topic. But the writers also include big names in historical journalism, features writing, and film critique, such as Joachim Käppner (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*), Georg Seeßlen (*der Freitag*), and Christiane Peitz (*Der Tagesspiegel*).

One point of agreement between all the journalists is the idea that @ichbinsophiescholl is an example of the changing way we deal with history and of new forms of bringing the past into the present in media cultures. Most of them are open to the project. The high level of personalization is striking. Just as the makers of @ichbinsophiescholl shine the spotlight on *one* figure and thus lose sight of the »White Rose« resistance group and the seven people who were sentenced and executed in total, the journalistic reporting shows a clear focus on the person playing Sophie Scholl: the Swiss actor Luna Wedler. This is understandable in the Swiss media, but German and Austrian media also report a great deal on her, on other films and series she has been in, and on her view of the role. She is often given the opportunity to give her opinion directly in interviews (Iken/Gunkel, *Der Spiegel*, 8 May 2021; Schönstädt, *Berliner Morgenpost*, 9 May 2021).

The critical pieces address the personalization, individualization, and subjectification and place them within the context of a wider discourse on remembering and forgetting in the politics of history (cf. 3.4 and 3.5). Closely linked to this is the question of the mediality and the possibilities of Instagram in communicating historical knowledge. The journalists are divided here. While some argue that it is possible, pointing to the number of followers and praising interactive community management, others take a more critical view of the »Instagramization of remembrance« or the specific way it is implemented in the



@ichbinsophiescholl project. Writing in the weekly newspaper *der Freitag*, Georg Seeßlen looks at other media of re-mediatization, such as movies, and asks, »Why not Instagram, too?« He discusses the advantages and disadvantages and argues that it is »more urgent than ever to free the culture of remembrance from emptying and fossilization« and that »the platform should not be left to commerce nor to populism without resistance.« An advantage of Instagram as a platform, he continues, is its »low barrier to entry« and the fact that a »new grammar of distance and closeness« can be tested. Disadvantages, on the other hand, are the threat of the »Instagramization of that which is transported,« »gamification,« and »depolarization through subjectification« (Seeßlen, *der Freitag*, 22 May 2021).

It is also Seeßlen who reminds the reader that Instagram is a commercial platform, part of the Meta corporation since 2012, that collects data and is funded by advertising. Apart from this, questions of media economics and media law are largely ignored. This omission or gap in the discourse is astonishing and triggers doubt over whether journalism is fulfilling its public duty. Hardly a single author considers the project in connection with public service broadcasting's obligation to inform, entertain, educate, and advise, as defined in the German state broadcasting treaties (since 2022 the »Medienstaatsvertrag,« State Media Treaty) and the rulings of the Federal Constitutional Court. Indeed, the new State Media Treaty expanded the role of public service broadcasters: They are now allowed to use commercial platforms to distribute their services »where this is necessary for journalistic and editorial reasons in order to reach the target audience« (MEDIENANSTALTEN 2019, quoted in Eichler 2022: 26). This change in legislation and the fact that @ichbinsophiescholl is an initial step in the new interpretation of the programming mandate is mentioned only in passing in an interview conducted by Claudia Tieschky with Heike Raab, Chair of the Broadcasting States Commission [Rundfunkländerkommission] (Tieschky, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 14 June 2021). Apart from this, there is no critique of the »cooperation« between license fee-funded broadcasters and Meta. The fact that, with formats like @ichbinsophiescholl, the broadcasters subject themselves to the business models of listed technology companies and the rules of an algorithm-driven platform economy is not an issue. The same goes for the unpaid digital work of the followers who produce content, and the license fee-funded work of the swr and BR editors. Nor is there any self-critical reflection on the part of the journalists and those responsible for the project at swr and BR and those who write about the project – or only in a handful of cases. »Mainstreaming« dominates the public discourse on @ichbinsophiescholl.

Figure 4

»The difficult German relationship to the difficult German history«



ZDF *Magazin Royale* on February 18, 2022. »Well intentioned, poorly executed: The problem with the German culture of remembrance.« Jan Böhmermann on @ichbinsophiescholl. Source: YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rx8HZ0rnRxA>

The critical voices are few in number. But they are there, and their number increases as the project progresses – for example towards the end of the project, on 18 February 2022, following the broadcast of an edition of *ZDF Magazin Royale* in which Jan Böhmermann focused exclusively on the historical Instagram project and listed various critical points: Instagram’s business mode, the mixing of fact and fiction, »emotionalization« and »gamification,« and ultimately the depoliticization of historical events and experiences. Many of the journalistic pieces published after the program reflect these critical points (cf. Rogalla, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 24 February 2022; Dieckmann, *Neu Ulmer Zeitung*, 26 February 2022).

Reports on the first academic studies were published in summer 2022. Studies on the project’s reception serve to relativize the PR narrative of its immense success, as seen by the number of followers and the interaction rate. The project reached less of the intended target audience than had been hoped (Korsche, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 5 July 2022), and the audience’s competence in distinguishing the real Sophie Scholl from the digital version was not as highly developed as expected (Bohr, *Der Spiegel*, 29 June 2022).

## 5. Summary and outlook

The fact that ›Sophie Scholl is now on Instagram‹ has news value in itself and led to almost all German-speaking media reporting on the collaborative project by swr, BR, and Instagram in 2021. But how should we feel about license fee-funded public service broadcasters conducting PR for themselves, their project, and ultimately for Instagram – a commercial, data gathering company – in the way they did in @ichbinsophiescholl? And what should we think when journalistic reporting on the collaborative project by swr and Instagram is largely homogeneous and determined by PR, rather than independent and critical?

Both public service broadcasters and the usually privately-owned, commercial print and online media can and should play a key role in the process of communicating knowledge of history. But do they meet the standards of high-quality historical journalism (PÖTTKER 2010, 2013)? Our analysis shows that, when it comes to the way the media deals with remembrance of resistance against National Socialism, the @ichbinsophiescholl project is present in multiple fields of conflict that need to be addressed as part of the role of a journalism that »creates and provides topics for public communication« (RÜHL 1980: 323). Without wanting to expand the complex debate on the quality of journalism here (cf. ARNOLD 2016), it would be good to see critical reflection on the »collaboration« between license fee-funded public service broadcasters and listed technology companies, as well as the collisions between the programming mandate and profit maximization that this brings with it.

The collaboration with Instagram is repeatedly justified with reference to the target audience of young people, for whom linear public service media are allegedly less interesting than *social media*. According to this argument, the kind of interaction and participation that the platforms enable is crucial. But most of the journalistic pieces do not go further than this statement. It is a rare writer that addresses the possibilities that Instagram offers and how the interaction actually worked, ultimately that the social media editors at #teamsoffer missed numerous opportunities to provide information on handling sources or on reenactments and fictionalization. Nora Hespers' pieces for *Übermedien* are an exception (cf. also THOMAS/THIELE in press). The same goes for the focus on Sophie Scholl and the offer of identification made by the public service broadcaster cum digital content provider. The idea of @ichbinsophiescholl is to gain the young viewers as friends. But does this friendship request work? Do the young people become friends of public service broadcasting, or does the project cement their already-close friendship with Instagram?

This throws up questions of the long-term media effects and how services like @ichbinsophiescholl are dealt with – and academia already has some of the answers. Given the gaps that we have already referred to, the first port of call

would be studies in media economics that clarify the relationship between media, intermediaries/platforms, and journalism (ALTMIPPEN/EVERS/GRECK 2023), as well as reception studies. History education expert Christian Kuchler from RWTH Aachen, for example, conducted a survey of young people on the @ichbinsophiescholl project (cf. BOHR 2022; KORSCHKE 2022). In general, they like this way of communicating history. Asked which other historical figures they would like to follow on Instagram, they named Anne Frank, Julius Caesar, and Adolf Hitler.

Recognizing what was then and what is now, being able to differentiate between fact and fiction, past and present, is what matters when it comes to using a service like @ichbinsophiescholl with media competence. Supporting the development of this competence is the role not only of schools and parents, but also of the media – both public service and privately-owned/commercial – and journalism.

## About the authors

**Dr. Martina Thiele** is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Tübingen's Institute of Media Studies, focusing on digitalization and societal responsibility. She is co-publisher of the journal *Journalistik/Journalism Research* and conducts research into theories of public spheres and journalistic controversies; stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination; and social inequality in and through media.

**Dr. Tanja Thomas** is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Tübingen's Institute of Media Studies, focusing on transformations of media culture. Her latest research projects look at media and participation, media and social movements, media practices of dissent, and media and doing memory in post-migrant societies.

*Translation: Sophie Costella*

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