

Research Paper

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Media ownership and journalism

A discourse analysis about media coverage of property ownership using the example of Kevin Kühnert's expropriation debate

Abstract: In this article, the results of a paper on the German politician Kevin Kühnert's (Social Democratic Party of Germany, SPD) expropriation debate from May 2019 are presented. Kühnert – in his function as leader of the Young Socialists in the SPD – gave an interview to the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* about his understanding of the concept *socialism*. The interview was followed by a heated media debate, which is analyzed in this paper. Employing discourse analysis, dominant discourse positions of several German newspapers within this debate were identified. Furthermore, this study examined whether a connection between the newspapers' discourse position and their form of ownership existed.

Keywords: media ownership, Kevin Kühnert, socialism, expropriation, discourse analysis

In a connected society like ours, mass media still play an important role when it comes to opinion-formation and discourse development. The interaction and convergence between heritage news media and new media add further aspects to this role. In the field of communication studies, we often analyse content of media but miss out on highlighting the underlying organizational structures and the (economic) coercion that can influence production of content as well as general coverage. The aspect of ownership is crucial in that matter: When news media report about property issues, scientific inquiry often ignores the fact that news media companies themselves have specific ownership structures as well and that this could have an influence on their news reporting. This article aims to examine the

connection between news media coverage of ownership issues and the underlying ownership structure of the reporting news medium using a specific example.

In 2019, the German SPD-politician Kevin Kühnert gave an interview to the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* in which he talked about the expropriation and collectivization of automotive company BMW (BITTNER/HILDEBRANDT 2019). His propositions on socialism, especially his view on the expropriation topic, lead to a broad debate in German news media which contained both discussions about Kühnert as a person and socialism as a concept. The debate raised the question about how news media portrait the topic of expropriation and whether there are differences in the news media's coverage of different media companies regarding their ownership model.

In 2021, a paper about the news media discourse in Germany regarding Kevin Kühnert's expropriation debate in 2019 was submitted under the title: »Media Ownership and Journalism« [»Medieneigentum und Journalismus«] (KETELS 2021). This paper focuses on identifying and describing in detail the dominant discourse positions in a predefined set of news media. The data collection contained different news media with various ownership structures, allowing to draw conclusions about a possible connection between different types of news media ownership and differing positions that news media took toward Kühnert and his argumentation.

What does socialism mean to you, Kevin Kühnert?

Since the German federal election in 2021, Kevin Kühnert has been a member of the German Bundestag. He is also board member and Secretary General of the SPD. The 33-year-old politician joined the party in 2005. In 2012 he became engaged in the Young Socialists in the SPD [Jusos] as chairman of its Berlin group. In 2017, Kühnert took over the Juso federal chairmanship from which he resigned when he became a member of the Bundestag in 2021. (see Kinkartz 2021)

Kühnert calls himself a socialist and has been committed to the core program of the SPD in which democratic socialism is a declared goal (SPD-Grundwertekommission, n. d.). He can be counted as a member of the left wing of his party. In his position as Juso Chairman in 2019, he campaigned for the dissolution of the coalition agreement between his SPD and the conservative union parties CDU and CSU. He failed to do so by a narrow margin. During the primary election of the SPD Chairman in 2019, Kühnert successfully campaigned for the left-wing outsider candidates Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans. These two candidates won against another set of candidates, current federal minister of housing, urban development and building Klara Geywitz and current German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Although Kühnert had significant political differences with Scholz,

he supported him during the Bundestag election. Today, Kühnert is a member of the 20th federal parliament under Chancellor Scholz. In his position as Secretary General of the SPD, he said he would not criticize the administration of Scholz gratuitously, but emphasized that distinguishing between the SPD as a party and a government coalition led by the SPD is necessary (see KINKARTZ 2021).

On May 1, 2019, Kühnert, who was Juso Chairman at the time, gave an interview to the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* in which he talked about his understanding of socialism. He raised the idea of collectivizing large automotive groups like BMW: »I care less whether BMW ends up with the label as a ›state-owned automobile company‹ or a ›cooperative automobile company‹, or whether the collective decides it no longer needs BMW in this form.«^[1]

He also talked about the housing market and reflected: »I don't think it's a legitimate business model to make a living from other people's living space. Consistently thought through to the end, everyone at the most should own the living space that they occupy themselves.«^[2] The interview caused many reactions both in politics and news media. At first, a heterogenous picture of opinions emerged: While some commentators predicted the upcoming downfall of the SPD (see TIEDE 2019) and the former SPD Federal Chairman Sigmar Gabriel accused Kühnert of using populist methods (see SZYMANSKI 2019), others welcomed initiating a debate around ownership issues (see MISIK 2019) or made fun of the hysterical reactions to the interview (see EXTRA3 2019). These responses by news media following Kühnert's interview as well as the resulting expropriation debate have been analysed systematically in this paper, and are presented below.

Methodical thoughts: A sociology of knowledge approach to discourse analysis

In order to more closely theorize the discourse about Kühnert's expropriation debate, a sociology of knowledge approach to discourse analysis (SKAD) offers a good fit. This approach was designed by the German sociologist Reiner Keller. Taking into account numerous approaches to discourse theory – particularly noteworthy are Michel Foucault's thoughts on discourse theory as well as the sociological theory of knowledge by Berger and Luckmann – Keller described SKAD in his book *Wissensoziologische Diskursanalyse* [A sociology of knowledge approach to discourse analysis] which he amended in later papers.

- 1 Translation by the author; original quote: »Mir ist weniger wichtig, ob am Ende auf dem Klingelschild von BMW ›staatlicher Automobilbetrieb‹ steht oder ›genossenschaftlicher Automobilbetrieb‹ oder ob das Kollektiv entscheidet, dass es BMW in dieser Form nicht mehr braucht« (BITTNER/HILDEBRANDT 2019).
- 2 Translation by the author; original quote: »Ich finde nicht, dass es ein legitimes Geschäftsmodell ist, mit dem Wohnraum anderer Menschen seinen Lebensunterhalt zu bestreiten. Konsequenz zu Ende gedacht, sollte jeder maximal den Wohnraum besitzen, in dem er selbst wohnt« (BITTNER/HILDEBRANDT 2019).

According to SKAD, discourses can be described as orders of knowledge which determine the use of signs relating to a topic discussed in society. Social and cultural frameworks influence the possibility of access to »objectivity.« In that context, discourses provide a historically evolved interpretive framework within which members of a society think and argue. As this interpretive framework provided by the order of knowledge was constructed by society, it can also be changed by it. Participants in the discourse can change the rules of it through discursive practices. Therefore, they play an important role when it comes to constructing reality (KELLER 2011: 58f).

Applying the method of SKAD, discourses can be understood as a kind of forum. Within such a forum, discursive agents position themselves towards the topic of the discourse and at the same time towards other agents in the discourse. This positioning is achieved through making statements, leading to it creating a discourse position. Depending on whether agents take a favourable or critical position toward the topic of the discourse, they can amplify or liquefy the existing order of knowledge. News media, which act as agents, are particularly relevant in a given discourse as they reach a larger part of society through their dissemination channels than private individuals. They thus yield a stronger influence on the nature of the debate. (KELLER 2019: 44) If a discourse is carried out through mass media, public relations research speaks of an arena function rather than a forum function, since these agents communicate to a broader audience rather than to each other (see Averbek-Lietz 2015: 53).

The SKAD is a suitable tool for reconstructing discourses in contemporary societies. It can be used to highlight different aspects of a discourse. The research interest of this paper was not only to examine discourse positions with regard to their content and argumentative structure, but also in regard to the decisive role played by the discursive agents. Hence, to answer the research questions an open theoretical approach, as the SKAD, lent itself to the analysis of Kühnert's debate on expropriation.

Data Collection: Private-corporate, public-service, and non-profit news media

Following Keller (2011: 86ff), first a data collection was compiled for the analysis. The data collection contained discursive practices that are crucial for the discourse analysis. In news media discourses, these discursive practices are comprised of journalistic articles, which in the following will be called texts. In order to narrow down the data collection to only include texts relevant to the discourse being examined, data was collected according to formal and content-related criteria. Further limitations were based on temporal, medial, and intra-medial criteria.

Texts were added to the data collection when they addressed the debate on expropriation of German companies initiated by Kevin Kühnert in 2019. In addition, texts were examined that reported on Kühnert as a person in this context since it can be assumed that he was portrayed differently depending on a news medium's position towards his demands.

Only texts published in May 2019 were included in the data collection. This decision was based on pre-test results which showed that the debate was widely covered by news media in this month (especially in the first few weeks). After May, however, news media coverage of the topic decreased dramatically and henceforth the topic was only reported on sporadically.

Journalistic texts from television and national online daily newspapers were added to the data collection. This selection was made based on intra-media criteria explained in the next step. For reasons of accessibility, only online content of these news media outlets was selected. Relevant articles locked behind a paywall were also included.

To ensure a balance in the selection of news media outlets according to their different ownership models, a classification of three different organizational and ownership models in Germany was developed. Two news media per model were added to the data collection to ensure that a conclusion can be drawn about a potential causal relationship between news media ownership models and directionality of coverage. The three ownership models can be described as *private-corporate*, *public-service*, and *non-profit*.

Private-corporate news media operate within the framework of a market economy. They depend on generating revenues and profits. Usually, privately organized newsrooms are backed by large media groups, which often share media ownership with other companies. Therefore it can be assumed that private-corporate news media strongly depend on their media owners – without assuming that they have any influence on reporting. The selection of private-corporate news media for this data collection was based on user shares recorded in the »Monitor of Media Diversity« [Medienvielfaltsmotor] published by the Media Authorities of Germany (MEDIENANSTALTEN 2021: 22). The two largest national daily newspapers in Germany by user share were selected: the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*³⁾ and the *Bild-Zeitung*⁴⁾.

Public service media are established in Germany in the form of public broadcasting. The purpose of public broadcasting is to inform, advise, and also entertain

3 The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* belongs to the Südwestdeutsche Medienholding, whose main owners are the Gruppe Württembergischer Verleger and Medien-Union-GmbH (see WEIDENBACH 2022).

4 The *Bild-Zeitung* belongs to the Bild-Gruppe, which is owned by Axel Springer SE (see WAHLE 2019). In turn, Axel Springer SE is owned by the private individuals Friede Springer (22.5%), Matthias Döpfner (21.9%), Axel Sven Springer (5%), and Ariane Melanie Springer (1%). Further shares are held by Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co. (KKR; 12.9%) and the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board (CPPIB; 12.9%). Another one percent is held by the Friede Springer Stiftung (see AXEL SPRINGER SE 2021).

the population. In Germany, the ARD, which is comprised of nine regional broadcasting institutions, the national broadcaster ZDF, the national radio station Deutschlandradio, and the broadcaster Deutsche Welle are organized under public service law. Additionally, these broadcasters offer digital programs, joint channels such as Phoenix and KiKA, and channels such as Arte and 3sat, in cooperation with foreign broadcasters. Public service media are characterized by three elements: They have a public mandate, they are subject to public control, and they are financed by public funds – thus they are not subject to market principles.⁵ For this data collection, content of ARD and ZDF was added.

Another variant of media ownership are non-profit media. These entities also operate within the logics of a market economy but are often organized independently of media corporations and do not have profit maximization as their primary goal. For this data collection, texts from the daily national newspapers *die tageszeitung – taz*, which is organized as a cooperative, and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which is run by the FAZIT-Stiftung [FAZIT-Foundation], were added to represent non-profit oriented news media. The FAZIT-Stiftung is structured as a public benefit publishing company with limited liability and can thus be described as an organization whose income is to be used for public benefit purposes. The extent to which these purposes are actually public benefit in the specific case of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* is debatable. For the purpose of this study, however, their non-profit media ownership model is the decisive criterion, which differs from that of both, the *Bild-Zeitung* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

Ultimately, the data collection consisted of 111 texts which were subjected to a structural discourse analysis: 27 texts from the *Bild-Zeitung* (24.32%), 17 texts from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (15.34%), 9 texts from the ARD (8.11%), 9 texts from the ZDF (8.11%), 35 texts from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (31.53%), and 14 texts from the *taz* (12.61%).

Debate predominantly negative and superficial

In the next step, this data collection was subjected to a *structural analysis* based on Siegfried Jäger's deliberations on critical discourse analysis (2012). This step allowed for identifying dominant discourse positions and correlating them to the media ownership models of news medium in which the texts were published.

5 Critics argue that the commercialization of broadcasting also has exposed public service news media to greater competition and increased pressures, which can affect the quality of news reporting. Consequently, public-service broadcasters are said to also not be immune to political influence. (see KARIDI 2018). This paper is not meant to directly contradict these hypotheses; nevertheless, it should be noted that the dependence of public service news media on market logics and the influence on them by commercial corporations is significantly lower compared to other models of news media ownership.

Subsequently, individual texts were examined by applying a *detailed analysis*, which was also based on Siegfried Jäger (2012). The aim was to obtain a detailed overview of the nature of the text and thus to be able to draw connections about the discourse position that the text represents.

This analysis resulted in finding that the news media discourse surrounding Kevin Kühnert's interview on his ideas of socialism has been predominantly negative: 37.8% of the texts had a negative tone, 38.7% were neutral, and only 23.4% were positive.⁶ This overwhelming negativity suggests an overall rather negative direction in the news coverage of Kühnert and the topic and reveals the political convictions of those responsible for publishing these texts.

In addition to the distinct negativity of the discourse, the debate was also predominantly superficial: 40.5% of the texts focused on Kühnert; only 26.1% of the texts addressed socialism as the main topic. This over-personalization of this discursive event suggests that many commentators sought to avoid addressing the factual content of the interview. Additionally, a connection to the news factor of personalization, laid out by Galtung and Ruge, can be drawn (see MAIER/RETZBACH/GLOGGER/STENGEL 2018: 36ff).

The SPD (38.7%) on the one hand and the European elections (16.2%) on the other hand were identified as frequent subtopics. Kühnert's interview was published at the beginning of the SPD's campaign for the 2019 European elections, which is why this crossover can be easily explained. Since the SPD did not score well in the polls at that time, many texts addressed and discussed the influence of Kühnert's interview on the SPD and its European election campaign.

Factual or personal, positive or negative: Positions

Overall, in the examination of the data collection, four dominant discourse positions within the debate on expropriation initiated by Kevin Kühnert could be identified.

Positive-Objectifying: This discourse position represents a positive attitude towards Kühnert's debate on expropriation. It uses his interview as an occasion to talk about the advantages of collectivization and socialist economic systems. Kühnert often plays only a subordinate role: the texts focus on the economic issues he raised in the interview. It is thus a very factual discussion of the topic and ultimately displays at a minimum an essentially positive attitude towards the idea of collectivizing companies. The texts are filled with factual arguments,

6 Neutral texts were not included in the data collection in order to identify the dominant discourse positions. Neutral texts that were excluded were mainly news reports that simply reported on events or made statements without evaluating or commenting on them. Therefore, it could not be expected that these types of text would offer a position on Kühnert or the debate.

figures, data, facts, and less with emotion. Positive-Objectifying does not primarily focus on Kühnert as a person, but on the subject of the discussion. Accordingly, the discussion is more open-minded about the right type of economy; a defamation of the opposing side is generally avoided. In the end, this position argues in favour of the usefulness of expropriation and criticises the current economic system.

Negative-Objectifying: This discourse position represents a negative attitude toward Kühnert's debate on expropriation. It uses his interview as an occasion to talk about the disadvantages of collectivization and socialist economic systems. Just like in Positive-Objectifying, Kühnert as a person is of secondary importance; the texts concentrate on the economic issues raised by him in the interview. It is therefore a factual discussion of the topic, although with an ultimately negative attitude toward Kühnert's ideas. The texts contain factual arguments, figures, data, and facts; emotional arguments are mostly avoided. Negative-Objectifying does not primarily address the debate culture or Kühnert as a person, but rather the matter at hand. In contrast to the discourse position Positive-Objectifying, these texts frequently contain historical references to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and thus at times equate the GDR with Kühnert's ideas of democratic socialism. However, these are then often based on factual grounds – for example, by referring to history. Ultimately, this position argues against the usefulness of expropriation and defends the current capitalistic economic system.

Negative-Devaluing: This discourse position opposes Kühnert's stance on expropriation, but at the same time texts that are representing this discursive position do not address the debate on expropriation very much, if at all. Rather, they focus on Kühnert as a person and try to devalue his opinions. Kevin Kühnert plays a decisive role for this discourse position. His ideas are not discussed objectively but are presented as wrong and dangerous from the outset. Negative-Devaluing works with a whole series of collective symbols, often devaluing Kühnert and his argumentation by referring to his age or his lack of expertise (for example, referring to him having dropped out of college). The socialism that Kühnert describes is equated with the structures of GDR and frequently a connection is drawn between the SPD and the Marxist-Leninist Socialist Unity Party of Germany. In addition, Negative-Devaluing often addresses the election campaign being run in Europe as well as in East Germany at the time of the interview, in which the SPD was in danger of losing. In this discursive position, Kühnert's ideas are classified as left-wing populist and considered to be harmful to the election campaign. Through these attributions, this discourse position avoids discussing the contents of the interview. Therefore, a secondary discourse that is less focused on the topic of expropriation, but more so on Kevin Kühnert as a person and the SPD as a party, can be identified.

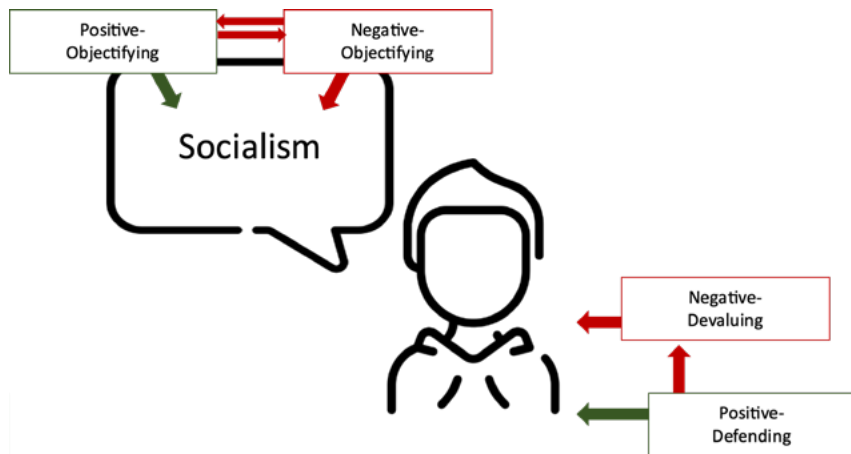
Positive-Defending: This discourse position has a positive attitude toward Kühnert's debate on expropriation. However, the topic as such is at most secondary here as well. Rather, the texts focus on the nature of the debate in particular and the debate culture in general. This discourse position represents a dismissive attitude toward the commentators and politicians who criticise Kühnert for his statements – especially toward representatives of the position Negative-Devaluing. This position argues that reactions to the interview would often be hysterical and not based on facts. A factual discussion about the topic of expropriation also rarely takes place in texts of this discourse position. This position tends to be more open to socialism and Kühnert's ideas, but does not discuss them further. Representatives of the discourse position Positive-Defending often use Kühnert's debate on expropriation as an example of a debate culture that discriminates based on young age. Therefore, they often referred to phenomena such as Fridays for Future or the person Greta Thunberg, whose age was similarly pointed out in news coverage. To illustrate the problem, this position often used stylistic elements also used by the other discourse position Negative-Devaluing, but did so in a sarcastic way to criticise the attitude of representatives of the Negative-Devaluing position. Ultimately, the discourse position of Positive-Defending can be understood as a downstream reaction, which focused less on the topic of expropriation, but rather on the reactions to the interview within the overall debate.

Two levels, two confrontations: Positioning

Kevin Kühnert's interview about his ideas on socialism marks the discursive event to which news media and the public in Germany reacted in May 2019 by taking distinct positions. This study found that this event was discussed on two discursive levels: the factual level, about the topic of socialism, and the personal level, about the politician Kevin Kühnert.

Both Positive-Objectifying and Negative-Objectifying discuss the topic of socialism, with Positive-Objectifying being in favour of this economic concept and Negative-Objectifying opposing it. The two positions are also opposed to each other. However, their discussion remains on an objective level while the personal level is left out to a great extent. Both discourse positions argue with numbers, data, and facts. While Positive-Objectifying discusses the disadvantages of capitalism and the opportunities that alternative forms of economy offer, Negative-Objectifying addresses the advantages of the social market economy and the failures of the socialist system of the GDR.

Figure 1
Structure of the discourse around Kühnert's expropriation debate



Source: Own illustration; symbols from flaticon.com

The discourse position Negative-Devaluing mainly discusses Kevin Kühnert as a person. It positions itself dismissively towards the former Chairman of the Young Socialists and does not engage in a discussion about the topic of socialism. Negative-Devaluing uses a number of collective symbols; Kühnert is declared incompetent by referring to his age or his professional and academic career. In addition, Kühnert's idea of socialism is often equated with the socialism in the GDR in order to discredit his opinion.

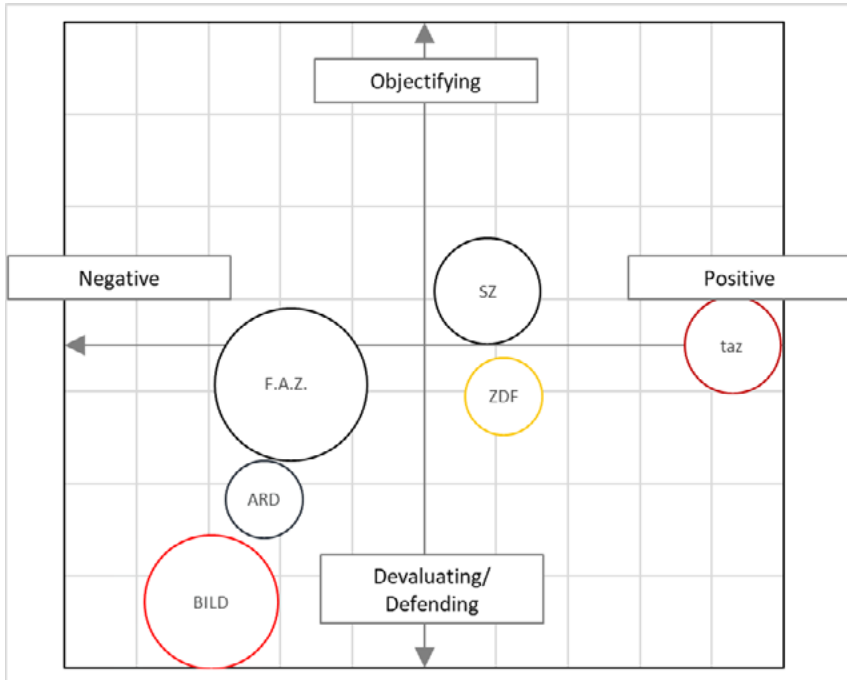
In reaction to Negative-Devaluing, the discourse position Positive-Defending emerges. It criticises the behaviour toward Kühnert and positions itself critically against Negative-Devaluing. At the same time, it takes a defending stance on Kühnert as a person. Positive-Defending criticises the debate culture regarding topics such as the expropriation debate and identifies discrimination against alternative economic ideas. Both Positive-Defending and Negative-Devaluing remain on a personal level and hardly discuss the factual issues of socialism.

Media ownership vs. political direction of a medium: Biases in reporting

After identifying the dominant discourse positions in the data collection, they were linked to news media outlets to examine whether a connection between discourse position and media ownership model could be identified. The following

illustration maps the relationship between positive and negative as well as objectifying and devaluating/defending positions in relation to the news media outlets in the data collection.

Figure 2
Average discourse position of the examined news media



The size of the bubbles indicates the number of texts per news medium; the greater the bubble the greater the number of texts (ARD: 9, Bild: 27, FAZ: 35, SZ: 17, taz: 14, ZDF: 9. Source: Own illustration.

The privately owned *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported predominantly in positive (41.2%) and objective manner (29.4%). It provided the most balanced reporting in the data collection. Articles published by the *Bild-Zeitung* contained a significant number of negative (59.3%) and devaluating texts (55.6%) and no positive articles. The public broadcaster ARD also reported predominantly in a negative (55.6%), devaluating manner (44.4%). In contrast, the other public broadcaster, ZDF, presented the topic predominantly in a neutral manner and positioned itself positively in a few texts, defending Kühnert (22.2%). The cooperatively owned newspaper *taz* reported overwhelmingly in a positive manner (85.7%), both, defending

and objectifying (42.9%) the debate. It contained no negative article. Texts from the public benefit-organized *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* predominantly featured negative connotations (48.6%), both devaluating (25.7%) and objectifying (22.9%) the debate.

These findings do not suggest a direct influence of the news media ownership model on the discourse positions or the direction of reporting. They show positive and negative positionings on Kühnert's expropriation debate, both, among newspapers owned by private corporate media groups and among papers organized by cooperatives or foundations. This can also be seen among public broadcasters. News media organized under private-corporate, public-service, and non-profit ownership models each took different discourse positions, varying by text, so that no corresponding patterns were identifiable.

These findings do not confirm the assumption of an influence of ownership on news reporting – however, some follow-up questions regarding the authorship of a position represented in the discourse were raised. Although a connection between ownership and news reporting could not be verified, other patterns became visible: For instance, the news media in the data collection reported on the topic according to their own presumed political positioning – or the so-called »Blattlinie« or »Tendenz.« News media in Germany are considered companies that are guided by the political directions embraced by their owners [Tendenzbetrieb], meaning they pursue ideological-political goals and can thus be assumed to have a certain bias toward the topics of socialism and expropriation. The politically left-oriented newspaper *taz* for instance published predominantly positive texts on the topic that was analysed in this paper. In contrast, the business-oriented *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported on the same topic much more negatively.⁷¹ The problems arising from this system in relation to the inner freedom of the press and an associated call for the abolition of the power of the publisher to set a political-ideological line [Tendenzschutz] were previously addressed for instance by Krüger et al. in *Journalistik/Journalism Research* (2022).

It would also be interesting to examine the differences between tabloids and quality news media. In this study, the *Bild-Zeitung* – as the only tabloid in this data collection – reported mostly in a negative and superficial manner. The assumption that this would be a tendency among all tabloid newspapers could be verified in further studies.

The results presented in this paper were presented in May 2022 at the conference »Media, ownership, and public sphere« [»Medien, Eigentum, Öffentlichkeit«] of the Critical Communication Science Network [Netzwerk Kritische Kommunikationswissenschaft, KriKoWi]. Following the presentation, the panel

71 Without exception, the shareholders of the FAZIT-Stiftung have economic or business backgrounds. Many are politically close to the liberal economic FDP or are members of this party. (Cf. LOBBYCONTROL, no date)

discussed the influence of media ownership on news coverage. After the other two presentations of the panel produced interestingly similar patterns and results, a thesis was put forward that the individual media ownership model does not determine a discourse position. Rather, it was theorized that the structure of a capitalist German media system, which is dominated by privately owned media, provides a (opinion) corridor in which news media position themselves in terms of their political direction – regardless of the specific ownership model. The limits of what can be said and published would thus not be determined by individual media owners, but by the structure of the media landscape. In this context, the task of public broadcasting is interesting: Here it can be argued that it cannot fulfil its legally defined function of balanced and independent reporting, since it is oriented to a corridor of opinion determined by capitalist structures. The thesis, which was put forward during the discussion at the conference, can neither be confirmed nor disproved by the present results. However, it is certainly permissible based on the findings and could be tested for plausibility in further work.

Outlook: The majority ability of socialist ideas

Since Kevin Kühnert's interview on socialism was published the issue has gained momentum in the German public sphere, already leading to initial political consequences. For instance, a proposition on the ballot in local elections in Berlin on the expropriation of housing companies was approved on September 26, 2021, with 56.4% voting in favour (see STATISTA RESEARCH DEPARTMENT 2022). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked discussions about nationalizing the healthcare system in Germany (see WIECHERN 2021). Debates about nationalization, public custody, socialism, or alternative forms of organization and ownership of companies or economic sectors become particularly loud when the so-called free market reveals its weaknesses. Crises in the free-market economy make socialist ideas more likely to gain majority support. It can be assumed that Kühnert, too, played a role in shifting the discursive framework of this debate by setting the agenda in May 2019.

Looking at Kevin Kühnert in recent years paints an objectively successful picture of the politician. After successfully supporting his favourite candidates Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans over Olaf Scholz in the election of the SPD party chairs, Kühnert is now a member of the German Bundestag and Secretary General of the SPD. However, changes in his political stance can also be seen. In 2020, Kühnert put his attitudes toward Olaf Scholz and his stance on the coalition with the conservative union parties into perspective in a television appearance on the late night talk show *Markus Lanz* (ZDFHEUTE NACHRICHTEN 2020).

In 2021, shortly before the Bundestag election, he announced that he would vote against the proposition to expropriate the German building and housing company Deutsche Wohnen & Co. because he said that the proposition was »not precise and well crafted.«^[8] In October 2022, Kühnert again defended on the television show *Markus Lanz* the German government's decision to approve the partial ownership of the Chinese state-owned company Cosco for a terminal in the port of Hamburg – and thus to relinquish control of potentially critical infrastructure (see LANG 2022). In light of these fundamental changes in Kevin Kühnert's opinions, it remains to be seen whether he will stand up for the socialist ideals he expressed in his 2019 interview as a member of parliament and secretary general of his party.

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About the author

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8 Translation by the author; original quote: »nicht präzise und handwerklich gut gemacht« (IG Metall Berlin office 2021: 1:37:10 - 1:41:03).

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