

Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung

The »Top Ten Forgotten News of 2023«

Topics that have been neglected by the media

Every year, the NGO »Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung« (INA) partners with the Deutschlandfunk editorial office to present a list of ten topics that have been neglected by the media. The objective is to make journalists aware of gaps in media coverage. For journalists, picking up such topics might even be an opportunity to land an exclusive scoop. Since major issues, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have been dominating news coverage for some time now, it is more important than ever to seek out »forgotten news«.

As every year, the topics were selected by a jury representing media science and journalism as well as other expert fields. The process starts with suggestions from the public. Neglected news can be suggested to INA by e-mail, mail, or using a web form. Students at several German universities then verify the topics and news items for accuracy and determine whether they have actually been neglected by the media. All topics that meet the criteria are then submitted to the jury. From among the proposals, the jury chooses the topics it considers particularly relevant.

Anyone can point out gaps in public coverage to INA by email, mail, or using a web form. This is an important element to ensure that INA's list of the top ten neglected topics reflect real-life experiences from the general public and not just special interests and agendas of interest groups and other institutions.

Top 1: Coastal darkening

Marine ecosystems are becoming increasingly fragile and suffer under enormous stress from human exploitation. In recent years, the oceans have darkened in several coastal regions around the world, making it difficult for sea life to find

food, which in turn threatens the food chain. The darkening of coastal marine areas, also called ›coastal darkening‹ or ›coastal ocean darkening‹, is caused by a reduction in light availability in the water column. This still largely unexplored phenomenon is driven by different factors in different regions. Human exploitation of the sea contributes to darkening directly and indirectly through fishing and marine traffic, contamination with fertilizers from agriculture, and discharge of sewage and excavated soils, but also climate change (soot deposits from forest fires). More than half of the world's population lives in coastal areas, which are among the most productive and biologically rich areas on earth, and are thus affected by this complex phenomenon. Nevertheless, the media are almost completely oblivious to coastal ocean darkening.

Top 2: Abandonment of ships and their crew

The practice of »abandoning ships« peaked in 2022 with 113 abandoned oceangoing or coastal vessels with a total of 1,555 crew on board. In this highly profitable market, shipowners and shipping companies are optimizing cost at the expense of bodies of water, the environment, and their own crews by relinquishing ownership of vessels that have become unprofitable. The ships are left in a port for a long time, often with their crews on board in a sort of hostage situation. With a total share of about 90-98 % of intercontinental and about 62 % of intra-European goods traffic, maritime and overseas trade is one of the world's largest commercial infrastructures for goods, commodities, and raw materials. A lack of transparency and a lack of binding international regulations enables the practice of »ship abandonment,« as defined by the International Maritime Organization.

Top 3: Inadequate psychotherapy services for people with intellectual disabilities.

People with intellectual disabilities are among the most vulnerable groups in our society. They require special attention because they are at increased risk of developing mental illness. Often, mental health services are hard access for people with intellectual disabilities. Treating mental illness in people with intellectual disabilities also poses greater challenges because of their communication limitations and other factors. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated this situation as existing contacts became inaccessible during this time.

Top 4: Bolivia's economic growth at the expense of the climate and the population

The Bolivian government, led by Luis Arce (Movement for Socialism), allows foreign companies to conduct harmful drilling operations in Madidi National Park, one of the most biodiverse national parks in the world. Despite the harm it causes to people, animals, and the climate, profitable drilling is not prevented, but even supported. In the south of the country, too, work is being conducted at Cerro Rico mountain under almost impossible conditions. Companies are drilling for lithium, in particular, which is needed for batteries of »green« e-cars and e-scooters.

Top 5 HHC: The new legal weed

For several years now, a potentially dangerous hype on the social networks has been targeting primarily younger people: the legal use of hexahydrocannabinol (HHC). HHC is synthesized by modifying the illegal substance cannabis at the molecular level, thus passing under the radar of narcotics law. Possession of the drug is therefore not punishable, despite the fact that its effects are similar to cannabis. Given the approximately 4.5 million cannabis users in Germany, the media do not report enough about the substance itself and the possible dangers of its use. Attention must be drawn to risks, such as mild dependence, panic attacks, and psychoses so young people don't underestimate the effects of the freely available substance.

Top 6: The HIV crisis in Russia

While HIV infection rates are declining or at least stable worldwide, a contrary trend can be observed in Eastern Europe. Russia ranks first in terms of new HIV infections. Even according to official figures reported to the World Health Organization (WHO), Russia saw more new HIV diagnoses in 2021 (58,340) than the other 52 countries in the WHO Europe region combined, despite their much larger population (48,168). However, as with the Covid-19 epidemic, the true extent of the HIV epidemic in Russia is dramatically underreported. More than 2 million people, or about 1.5 % of the total population, are HIV-positive (compared to 0.1 % in Germany). About 40 % of infections occur through heterosexual contact, making the virus spread rapidly beyond the traditional risk groups (drug addicts, homosexual men). Instead of combating this problem with medical treatment and education, the Russian government is relying on

tradition and morality. Sex and drug use, the main factors in the spread of the virus, are considered immoral and therefore, taboo. Infected individuals shun testing and don't seek treatment for fear of stigmatization. The extent of this exacerbating crisis is almost unknown in Germany, despite the fact that 1 million Russian-born people live in Germany and migration from Russia continues to be significant.

Top 7: Sexualized violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Sexualized violence is systematically weaponized in all wars and conflicts. Mass rapes of women have been taking place in the Democratic Republic of Congo for 25 years. These human rights violations, which continue to this day, are mostly perpetrated by armed militias seeking to take control of the country's raw materials. With casualty numbers in the millions, medical care is failing, and law enforcement is almost non-existent.

Top 8: Suicide in prisons

People who are incarcerated in German correctional facilities have a far greater risk of suicide than the general population. A federal work group »Suicide Prevention in Prisons« was established as early as 2006, yet the suicide rate remains high and suicide is considered the most common single cause of death in German prisons. The reasons are complex, exact numbers vary, and the percentage fluctuates across the nation. Experts say that it is often more difficult for prisoners to access mental health services. The state bears the duty of care for people in its custody.

Top 9: Restricted freedom of expression and art in Spain

In Spain, the right to freedom of expression and artistic expression is restricted by current legislation, in particular by Article 578 of the Spanish Civil Code. Spain's repressive crackdown gained international attention with the arrest of rapper Pablo Hasél, who is accused of »insulting state institutions« and »glorifying terrorism.« In addition to the European Court of Justice, the European Parliament's Commissioner for Human Rights and the human rights organization Amnesty International are exhorting the Spanish government to change these laws and continue to guarantee freedom of expression and art.

Top 10: The relationship between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence.

Seventy-five percent of domestic violence victims reported that their abuser also threatened or intentionally harmed their pet. A link between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence has been found in international studies as well as in criminological practice. Although the topics of animal cruelty and (domestic) violence are gaining importance within the media and social discourse, the media are still not adequately reporting on the connection between these two phenomena. More coverage could provide both the legal and the educational-psychological foundations to help prevent and prosecute acts of violence against humans and animals.

More information: www.derblindefleck.de

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