

# Journalism Research

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# Legal Notice

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## Editorial

Public broadcasters are subject to public criticism and scrutiny, and rightfully so. Their mission, and the fact that they are funded by contributions from the viewing public, require them to be far more transparent about and accountable for their public value than private-commercial media companies.

In this issue of *Journalism Research/Journalistik*, our debate piece as well as two other essays will address the topic of public broadcasting. Barbara Thomaß, communications scholar and second deputy chairwoman of the board of directors at German public broadcaster ZDF, wants to know the exact demands of those who are currently rehashing calls for a »reform« of public broadcasting. Other recent »reforms« in Germany, such as the overhaul of its railroad system, its armed forces, or its health care system, have ultimately failed to reduce costs and generate greater public welfare. Thomaß emphasizes the connection between democracy and media organizations and how public media contribute to democratic opinion building.

In this context, Germany's broadcasting councils are an important authority. Since they represent society, they should be made up of »representatives of socially relevant groups«, which begs the question which groups and stakeholders actually are socially relevant today. Media scientist Sabine Schiffer worked with a group of students to see who represents the general public in the broadcasting councils of ARD and the ZDF Television Council. It turned out to be no easy undertaking, because these institutions are quite stingy with information on this topic on their websites. Generally, there could be more transparency and publicity; after all, the broadcasting councils' own statutes stipulate that their meetings be public. This provision is hardly ever met at ARD broadcasting council meetings. Streaming or similar methods to make the meetings publicly accessible are barely ever used (with the exception of the BR, the Bavarian public broadcasting service).

In other arenas, on the other hand, public broadcasters are very eager to engage in PR activities, and – in the opinion of the leadership at SWR and BR – very successfully so. We are talking about the »beacon project« @ichbinsophiescholl, in which the two ARD stations used Instagram to »meet the target group where they are,« as they never tired of emphasizing. My

Tübingen-based colleague Tanja Thomas and I examined the debate on remembrance culture, resistance, and fictionalizing history. The project in question started with the thought experiment: »Imagine it's 1942 on Instagram.« As a result of our critical discourse analysis, we found an astonishing gap in the journalistic discussion of @ichbinsophiescholl: No one seemed to challenge the »collaboration« between publicly funded broadcasters with a Meta Group platform whose business model is based on data collection, personalized advertising, and unpaid »digital work«, that is, *content production* by its followers and social media editors.

Silas Ketels leveraged the sociology of knowledge to conduct a discourse analysis about business models, media financing, and ownership structures. The Kiel-based communication scientist examined a debate triggered by SPD-politician Kevin Kühnert in an interview with the weekly *Die Zeit* in May 2019. In the conversation, Kühnert, then still chairman of the SPD's youth organization Jusos, caused a great media stir by dropping terms such as »collectivization,« »expropriation,« and phrases like »overcoming capitalism«. Ketels seeks to establish a connection between discourse positions and forms of ownership of the media that facilitate this discourse. He proves that, despite all the expected, almost impulsive reactions, differentiated observations were also possible.

Gabriele Hooffacker addresses journalism and the phenomenon of dissolving boundaries in her essay on »Content Creators«. Do they represent »a new phase of journalism«? Hooffacker uses the example of »video game journalism,« which was popular in print media in the 1990s and 2000s, but then faced competition from bloggers and influencers, today's self-proclaimed »social media content creators«. She traces phases of development that may also apply to other journalistic topics and departments: A special interest topic mushrooms into something larger, it becomes popular, then social media and advertising permeate journalistic reporting, and new media forms emerge. However, the old problem of blurred lines between journalism and marketing remains, even if »social media content creators« believe that their primary function is to provide information.

Still today, we hope that the internet is a place where diversity of opinion and opportunities for participation can thrive. What we are currently observing, through, is more control, regulation, and even censorship. Wars and crises are further aggravating the situation, as Yulia Belinskaya poignantly shows with the example of Russia. Her article provides an overview of current state censorship measures, anchoring them in the long history of censorship in the Soviet Union and Tsarist Russia. The author draws on the political science concept of »securitization,« a specific form of framing that depicts certain developments as threatening. As a »solution,« it offers up state security measures, such as stricter laws, and language regulation. As a result of this sort of »security policy,« opposition media are suppressed and dissidents are labeled as agents and terrorists to then

be persecuted and even murdered. Belinskaya asks: How much counter-publicity is still possible in today's Russia?

This question is not only relevant for authoritarian systems, but also for democracies, which depend on diverging opinions and controversy. Weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* seems to see it that way, having dedicated a new section to »Dispute«. Well, dear readers, in our reviews you will find plenty divergent positions on current publications and quite controversial topics, whether it is about »Media as the Fourth Estate,« »Media Systems in Russia and in Germany,« or »Women War Reporters«. You can also devote yourself to the topics neglected by the media, which the Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung has compiled. We can only reveal this much: There is a dark threat looming near the shore.

We wish you a stimulating read and we're looking forward to your comments!

Martina Thiele

*Translation: Kerstin Trimble*

## Obituary

We mourn Kenneth Starck (5 September 1934 - 8 January 2023)

On 8 January 2023, Professor Kenneth Starck, Ph.D., died in Iowa City aged 88 after long physical infirmity. Journalism around the world mourns the loss of a highly reputed colleague who combined scientific analysis and humane convictions with a steadfast commitment to journalism as a profession. His tenure at the University of Iowa included serving as ombudsman of the daily *Gazette*, published in Cedar Rapids, IA, which regularly published his insights and commentary on reader complaints.

After attending Wartburg College in Waverly, IA, where he graduated from the journalism program at the top of his class, he obtained a Master's degree from the renowned journalism program at the University of Missouri in Columbia, MO, and went on to work as a reporter in Memphis, TN. Some of his best known pieces include his interview with Elvis Presley when the singer played soccer with a high school team, and his 1963 account of the beating of a young Black man at the hands of a White police officer. He earned his Ph.D. in 1968 from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, IL, with a study on the press in Finland, where he had previously conducted research at the University of Tampere.

From 1971, he continued his academic career, beginning with a stint at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, SC. In 1974, he was appointed Director of the Institute of Journalism at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, IA, which was founded in 1924 and which counts George Gallup among its alumni and supporters. With brief interruptions, Starck led the Institute from 1975 to 1996. Under his leadership, the Institute successfully (re)gained major national accreditations.

In addition to stints as President of the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), another notable feature of his career was his interculturalism, a rare trait in a US scholar. He taught as a Fulbright professor at Chinese (1986/87) and Romanian (1994/95) universities. After his retirement, he served as Dean of the Faculty of Journalism at Zahed University in Dubai and Abu-Dhabi from 2002 to 2009. With his Finnish wife Raija, he co-authored a book about his year in China: *The Dragon's Pupils: A China Odyssey*.

His many international commitments also included an eye-level collaboration with the comparatively small academic field of Journalism in Germany. In the context of this university partnership, he taught an enthusiastic audience of students at the Dortmund Institute of Journalism in the winter semester 1999/2000 and contributed to research projects. He also was a gracious host to Dortmund exchange students and guest lecturers in Iowa. This cooperation yielded several joint publications.<sup>[1]</sup>

He supported the founding of the bilingual German-English journal *Journalism Research/Journalistik* with a contribution on current issues with journalistic training in the USA. In this piece, he admonished:<sup>[2]</sup>

»What, after all, is the mission of education? What is the role of a university? Too often we avoid such fundamental questions, emphasizing, instead, practical knowledge at the expense of failing to educate the whole person. A journalism education blended with a liberal arts curriculum should provide opportunities that prepare men and women for lifetimes of personal and professional growth. Practical is okay. But there should be more. My experience suggests that too often we have not thought through the fundamental assumptions inherent in our beliefs and values, which, in turn, form the basis of our actions. We tend to focus on short term objectives or become preoccupied with the crisis of the day. [...] Throughout its history, journalism education has stirred mixed and sometimes hostile reactions among practitioners and those who profess to prepare practitioners. The issues range all the way from whether journalism instruction should be housed in the academy to differences between professors and professionals about curriculum. The fact that journalism education has existed in the United States for more than a century suggests something more than a fad. It suggests that there are certain knowledge and skills required of journalists that are important to a self-governing society and that universities can provide.«

His wife shared that the day of his death fell on Elvis Presley's birthday, whom Starck once interviewed, and who was one year his junior. In reminding us of this interview, she put a spotlight on Professor Ken Starck's profoundly journalistic sense for the general audience.

Kenneth Starck deserves to be remembered with honor – not least in the field of journalism, which can learn valuable lessons from his exemplary professional ethos, both in journalism and academia.

The editors

*Translation: Kerstin Trimble*

1 Cf. for example: PÖTTKER, HORST; STARCK, KENNETH (2003) Criss-crossing perspectives: Contrasting models of press self-regulation in Germany and the United States. In: *Journalism Studies* 4 (1), pp. 47–64.

2 STARCK, KENNETH (2018): What do you tell your daughter who wants to be a journalist? On the future of journalism and professional journalism education in the United States. In: *Journalism Research/Journalistik*, 1(2), pp. 29–50.



## 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 @ichbinsophie-scholl, 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 @ichbinsophiescholl 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 @ichbinsophiescholl 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 remedi-  
atized figure on Instagram – represents a »normalization of collaboration«  
(Czollek, *Die Wochenzeitung*, 20 May 2021) – an appropriation that does not do jus-  
tice 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 democra-  
cy, 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 bour-  
geois 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/HAIDUKIEWICZ 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.

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## Research Paper

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# Representativity in broadcasting and television councils

A comparative analysis of the discrepancy between council composition and demographics

**Abstract:** The crisis in public service media indicates various causes and areas in which structural reform is needed. Discussion is also needed on the dysfunctionality of the supervisory bodies. In this context, it is important to consider the composition of the broadcasting councils of the ARD broadcasters, the ZDF Television Council, and Deutschlandradio's Radio Council. Since the people of Germany fund the fulfilment of the ›programming mandate‹ – as the State Media Treaties put it – through their license fee, they need to be represented in the supervisory bodies in all their diversity in order to guarantee a full range of perspectives. Quite apart from the lack of transparency regarding the way the organizations involved appoint members to the councils, it is notable that some groups and sectors of people are disproportionately represented, while others are not represented at all. In a teaching and research project, the authors used demographic data for Germany as a whole to analyze the composition of all supervisory bodies of ARD and ZDF. Part of the background to this work is the fact that the National Integration Plan also applies in this field, and there are gaps in the representation of more than a few groups of people.

**Keywords:** broadcasting, diversity, representation, gender, public service media

## Introduction

The scandal surrounding the Director of Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (rbb), Patricia Schlesinger, has pushed the topic of public service broadcasting high up

the news agenda. Alongside the general disgust at the combination of personal enrichment on the one hand and ruinous cuts to programming on the other, it also became clear that many people are unaware of the history of the German media system. The particular role of the public service media (PSM) is often misunderstood. The idea behind their foundation was shaped by the experience with state broadcasters and propaganda during the Second World War, which led the Allies, *in persona* Hugh Greene, to found corporations modelled on the BBC.

Many people are not happy with the choice of programming and (claim that they) do not use the services – after all, many people forget the many radio stations, news apps and streaming services –, resulting in frequent calls for the PSM to be abolished and media services privatized. The license fee in particular, which is intended to guarantee the independence of the PSM, is a bone of contention for many. This is especially true when people fail to look at the media system as a whole. Many, for example, are unaware of the dimensions the change in the system of funding for broadcasting in France took on. There, the license fee was abolished and replaced by a tax-funded model, which now allows the government to allocate funds to broadcasters. The principle of self-management for PSM has therefore effectively been abolished.<sup>11</sup>

In Germany, rulings on broadcasting handed down by the Federal Constitutional Court have shown that the PSM do not always fulfil their programming mandate and that the limits on state interference set out in the Media State Treaties are not always adhered to (cf. GRASSMUCK, undated). As well as other structural weaknesses that offer potential for improvement – for example the *Intendantengesetz* [Director Act], the unequal rights of co-determination of employed and (regular) freelancers, the determination of funding requirements by the *Kommission zur Überprüfung und Ermittlung des Finanzbedarfs der Rundfunkanstalten* [Commission for Examining and Determining the Funding Requirements of Broadcasters, KEF], which examines the use of the funds in random samples at best, the richly stocked and tax-guaranteed pension fund that eats up funds for programming, the dismantling of technical standards etc. –, there is also regular criticism of the supervisory bodies: the Administrative Council, but especially the broadcasting councils and Television Council, who receive complaints about programming. Both the ARD broadcasting councils and the ZDF Television Council are accused of being too close to the directorships, being insufficiently transparent about how they do or do not work, and generally failing to fulfill their role; which does not mean that specific members are not dedicated. The Radio Council of Deutschlandradio is not the subject of such

11 It is impossible to talk of independence from the state when it is policymakers who decide the funding given to journalists. France must be said to have state media rather than a public service system. This is an enormous incursion into the freedom and independence of broadcasting, even if it is not yet particularly noticeable in the programming.

frequent scrutiny, just as the many radio services are often seen less as part of the PSM. The analysis in this piece also omits the Radio Council for reasons of space.

There have been frequent calls for a more wholesale reform of the PSM, not always for benevolent reasons. The European (EU) Constitution, for example, forces everything into a neoliberal market logic which, for example, obligates the PSM to erase content from their websites. This depublishing of content funded by license payers is considered »market conformity« in competition with private media providers (cf. ARENA et al., 2016). Some of the current criticism of rbb in particular and the PSM in general is based on publishing houses' well-known interest in weakening competition from the PSM. This, too, is in line with the logic of the »media as a market,« as has been seen at EU level since the implementation of the EU Reform Treaty in 2007. Given the media crisis being suffered as a result of digitalization, however, it would undoubtedly be worth considering whether public service funding systems should be expanded in order to safeguard independent research. With its dual broadcasting system, Germany is not in a bad position compared with other media systems internationally, yet, as a »pearl with defects,« the PSM need sustainable reform to secure their survival, their ability to work independently, and their credibility (cf. SCHIFFER 2015: 169; cf. HALLIN/MANCINI 2004).

It is not uncommon for constructive reform proposals to come from academia, including the »10 hypotheses for public service broadcasting« (zukunft-öffentlich-rechtliche.de), the Initiative Publikumsrat [Audience Council Initiative] (publikumsrat.de), and Unsere Medien [Our Media] (unsere-medien.de), the latter having been set up by people with professional experience in the media field. Employees, too, are organized in staff councils, freelancer lobbies and creative associations and make public comment on the current crisis – the catalog of demands from the Freienvertretung des rbb [rbb freelancer lobby] is just one example (cf. FREIENVERTRETUNG DES RBB 2022). Policymakers – ultimately those who decide on structural reform – have come up with contradictory proposals, as seen in the Green reform paper of October 20, 2022 (cf. KLEIN-SCHMEINK/VON NOTZ/GRUNDL/RÖSSNER 2022) and the statements on media policy made by Rainer Robra, Minister for Culture in Saxony-Anhalt (cf. ROBRA, undated). The audience is mainly interested in the programs on offer, and focuses its critique and suggestions there – such as in the listeners' debate »What do you expect from public service broadcasting?« on Deutschlandfunk (cf. BAETZ/STOPP 2022).

When somebody wants to complain about the programming or a specific program, they need to submit a program complaint to the responsible body. However, at ARD at least, it is not always easy to see which body that is (cf. SCHIFFER 2021: 234f.), and certainly not without prior knowledge. Furthermore, the complaints process often takes an extremely long time and ends with unsatisfactory answers. There is a need for reform here, too.

This teaching and research project aimed to take a closer look at the supervisory bodies for the TV services of the PSM (ARD broadcasting councils and the ZDF Television Council). It is no coincidence that their dysfunctionality – an attribute it is worth naming from the outset – gives rise to the debate on the broadcasters' credibility. Thanks to the license fee, these broadcasters have the opportunity to conduct truly independent research and to offer programming that is diverse, critical, separate from the state, and independent of viewing figures, and aims to be relevant. Adherence to the programming mandate, as set out in the state treaties of the states and the State Media Treaty, must be monitored by the supervisory bodies. The lack of monitoring by the bodies responsible in some cases gives rise to the question of how their members are appointed and which organizations contribute members. The answer is often a call for the bodies to be more representative of the population.

A pioneering ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court stated that the councils are missing precisely this representativity, found that – specifically for the ZDF Television Council – policymakers were too dominant, and called for reform (BVerfG, 1 BvF 1/11 dated 25.3.2014). But what does representativity mean and how can it be implemented? At first glance, it seems anachronistic for a group like the exiles' lobby to be sending representatives. But looking at the question from the other side – which organizations should be represented? And how can the dynamic development of society be reflected?

This results in a fundamental question: Does making the membership of a body like this more representative and diverse improve monitoring of whether the programming mandate is fulfilled? Or: Is this absolutely necessary? Diversity research shows that a diversity of perspectives, such as through differences in origin, gender, age, etc., leads to a better work result because the considerations made are more comprehensive and less stereotypical.

Particularly where guidelines are more abstract, having a rich range of perspectives benefits the configuration and implementation described above. It may therefore be worth considering more diverse options for membership of supervisory bodies. This makes it necessary to determine the status quo in relation to membership of supervisory bodies in PSM. That is the objective of the investigation below – which also unearthed various other interesting findings.

## 2. Principles and investigations into efforts to achieve diversity

Answering the fundamental research question – the extent to which the composition of the ARD broadcasting councils and the ZDF Television Council reflect the diversity of German society – requires a reference value with which the data and results collected can be compared. To make this comparison easier, the data

and results are categorized (see below). The data was collected not by the study's authors themselves, but in surveys by other bodies (e.g., Destatis).

While the (lack of) diversity in the programming offered by the broadcasters is often discussed, there is little criticism in societal discourse of the plurality and diversity of appointments at the broadcasters. As of 2022, all public service broadcasters had signed the »Diversity Charter« – although this is merely a voluntary agreement with no supervisory mechanisms (cf. <https://www.charta-der-vielfalt.de/>) and has no influence on the broadcasting councils, since the members are not appointed by the broadcasters themselves.

Marie Mualem Sultan (2011) describes the current state of research as an »interface of two [insufficiently] illuminated fields of research. [...] Questions have so far been researched en bloc only insufficiently and sometimes [...] not at all« (SULTAN 2011: 21). There have been investigations into diversity for other sectors, but these are not currently focused so comprehensively on the characteristics of all committee members (RIECK/BENDIG/HÜNNEMEYER/NITZSCHE 2012). The investigation by the group Neue deutsche Medienmacher\*innen in July 2022 looks at the supervisory bodies of the public service broadcasters. Entitled »What society is that supposed to reflect?« it establishes a lack of diversity and an imbalance in the membership of individual broadcasting councils, combining the results with interviews with experts and those affected regarding potential for improvement (GOLDMANN 2022). The study's authors are clear that the situation needs to change. But what are the methodological difficulties in categorizing committee members whose data is not available in standardized form and who are as multidimensional as any person?

### 3. Analysis and interpretation

At the time of the analysis (key date: December 28, 2021), there were 473 people in the ARD broadcasting councils and the ZDF Television Council. Any deputies of the members who entered the councils after this date were not included in the investigation. The figure includes five people who are not publicly named and positions that are not filled; these are not included in the percentages below. (Exception: where categorization was possible even without a name, for example in the case of government representatives, which were also counted as »politically organized« council members.) To allow the variety and diversity of the committees to be evaluated, investigation categories were formed, largely based on the Diversity Charter.

Table 1  
Categories

Diversity Charter	investigation categories
Deductive Categories	
Core Dimensions	
Gender & gender identity	Gender
Age	Age
Ethnicity & Nationality	Migration background
Physical & mental abilities	Disability
Religion & belief	Religion & world views
Sexual Orientation	-
Social background	-
External level	
Geographical location	Geographical location
Income	-
Habits	-
Recreational behavior	-
Work experience	-
	Sector
Education	Highest level of education
Appearance	-
Parenthood	Parenthood
Marital status	Marital status
Inductive categories	
	Political background
	Title
	Organization Representative
	Organization general category
	Occupation

Source : Authors' own illustration

The outside level of the Diversity Charter looks at company-related factors that were not relevant for the investigation into broadcasting councils. Other factors describe characteristics that cannot be determined and evaluated through objective research conducted purely digitally, without personal contact with the people in question.

In general, research into the individual council members highlighted a major problem with transparency. Very few broadcasters provide profiles or information on council members that go beyond a list of names. A lot of information and



profile data therefore had to be drawn from a wide range of sources, and some was impossible to find due to a lack of online presence.

In this investigation, council members were only categorized as having a migration background or disability where this was explicitly stated or became clear through research. The intention behind recording the »geographical location« in the investigation was to examine whether there were any hotspots (e.g., overrepresentation of Munich in Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR)'s Broadcasting Council) or an urban-rural discrepancy. As it was not possible to determine a main place of residence, this category was not included in the analysis.

Because the federal structure results in a very high number of different associations and institutions, the individual organizations are examined together in overarching categories. In many cases, it was also impossible to determine the marital and family status. Since conclusions drawn on this basis would be invalid, these two categories are omitted from further examination in the analysis. The same problem was encountered when it came to classifying political attitudes.

Further information needed in order to understand and assess the investigation can be found below. Percentages in the charts are rounded for simplicity.

### 3.1 Analysis criteria and analysis

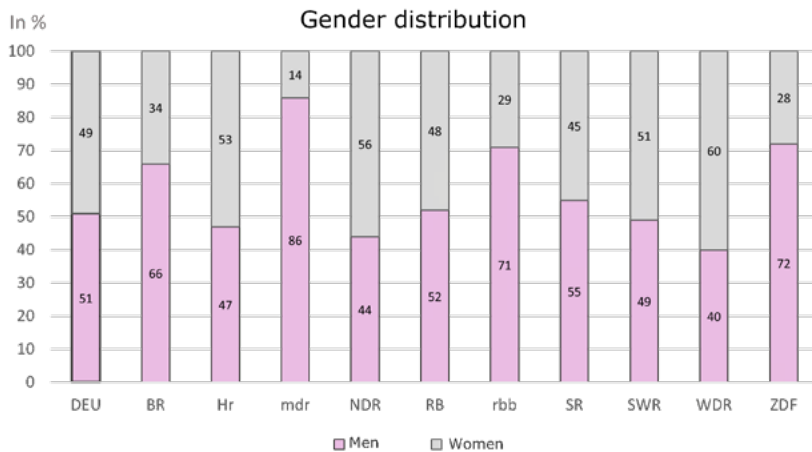
#### *Gender*

The gender distribution in Germany shows a slightly higher proportion of women: 50.68 % compared to 49.34 % men (cf. FEDERAL STATISTICAL OFFICE/DESTATIS 2022). There is no reliable data on how many people in Germany describe their gender as »diverse.«

None of the committees investigated have members who describe themselves as non-binary. The gender ratios in the broadcasting committees vary, with trends in both directions. In total, however, the gender ratios in the broadcasting councils are dominated by male members: 269 men compared to 199 women.

The queer community's interests are only visibly represented at RB, WDR, SR, and ZDF. Representation of women is better, with only the ZDF Television Council not having a women's representative. The greatest discrepancy from the demographics of society as a whole is seen in the Broadcasting Council of Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk (mdr), 86% of whose members are men. In the ZDF Television Council and the rbb Broadcasting Council, too, more than two thirds of the members are men. Only the supervisory bodies of Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR), and Hessischer Rundfunk (hr) have a female majority.

Figure 1  
Gender



Source : Authors' own illustration

### *Age distribution*

The largest group in Germany, numbering 23.07 million people (27.7%), is the 40 to 59-year-olds, followed by the 20 to 39-year olds (24.4%) and the 60 to 79-year-olds (22%). 15.43 million people, or 18.6% of the total population, are under 20 years old (cf. FEDERAL STATISTICAL OFFICE/DESTATIS 2021b). On the date in question, the mean age on the broadcasting councils was 59 years – significantly higher than the mean age of the population as a whole (44.6 years). There were 115 people for whom no age could be determined.

The investigation shows that not a single council member is younger than 21 years. Just 23 of the more than 400 representatives are in the 21 to 40-year-old category. The majority of the council members are in the age ranges 41-60 years and 61-80 years, although the representation of the individual age groups varies between the committees. However, the discrepancy in the mean ages of the councils and the population as a whole is immediately clear in all.

The Broadcasting Council of Südwestrundfunk (SWR) is the only one in which four of the five age categories are represented, albeit in different proportions from the population as a whole. The NDR committee is comprised solely of representatives of the dominant age groups, with people aged under 40 and over 80 not represented at all. The councils of Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Hessischer

Rundfunk (hr), Saarländischer Rundfunk (sr), and Südwestrundfunk (swr) all have members over 80 years old.

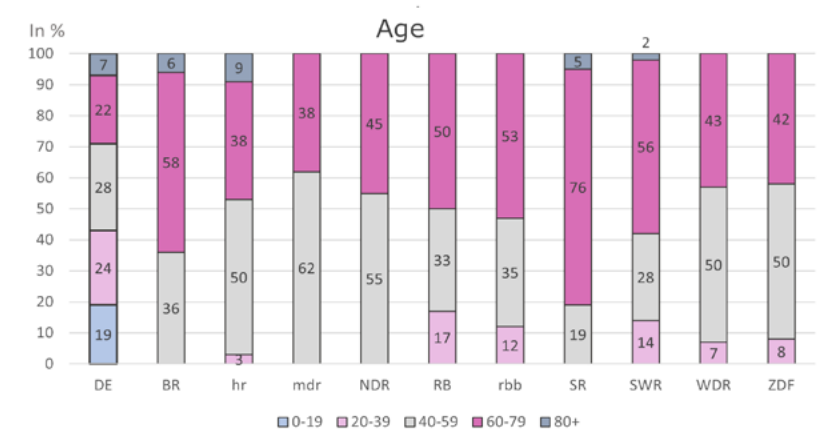
The group of 60 to 79-year-olds provides the majority in several committees, including the councils of BR (58%), rbb (53%), and swr (56%). At RB, this age group accounts for exactly half; at sr, it provides more than two thirds of the members. The 40 to 59-year-old age group provides half of the members of the ZDF Television Council, as well as of the hr and WDR Broadcasting Councils. In the mdr and NDR committees, they make up the largest age group at 62% and 55%. The two youngest representatives are 21 and 24 years old. Two of the youngest ten sit on the Broadcasting Council of swr; three on the WDR Broadcasting Council. Three of the oldest ten each belong to the committees of Hessischer and Bayerischer Rundfunk. The two oldest are 85 years old.

With a mean age of 66 years, the sr Broadcasting Council leads the table in the age analysis.

### *Migration background*

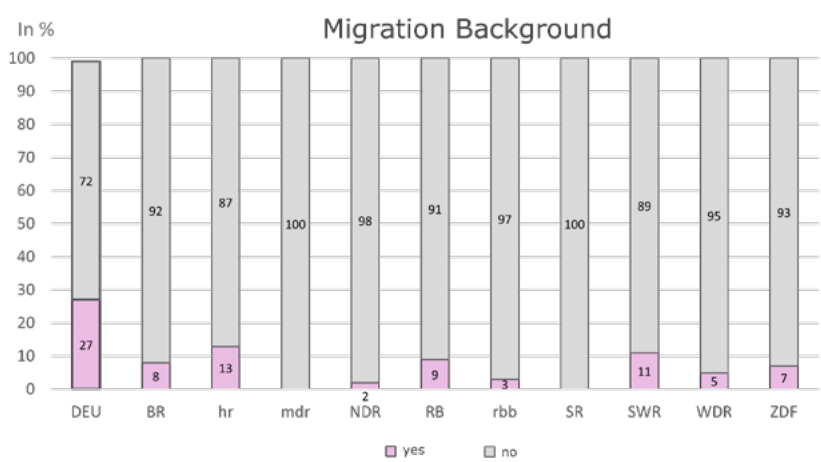
According to the Federal Statistical Office's definition, 26.7% of people in Germany have a migration background (cf. FEDERAL STATISTICAL OFFICE/DESTATIS 2021a), meaning that they or at least one parent was born with non-German citizenship. None of the councils have a rate anything like as high as this figure. The closest in terms of ethnic diversity is the hr Broadcasting Council, 13% of whose members have a migration background. It is followed by the committees of swr (11%) and BR (8%). Neither Mitteldeutscher nor Saarländischer Rundfunk provided any indication of a representative with a migration background. However, migration/integration organizations are represented in all committees apart from the mdr Broadcasting Council. More detailed differentiation (e.g., by generation, reason for migration, or country of origin) is not possible.

Figure 2  
Age



Source : Authors' own illustration

Figure 3  
Migration background

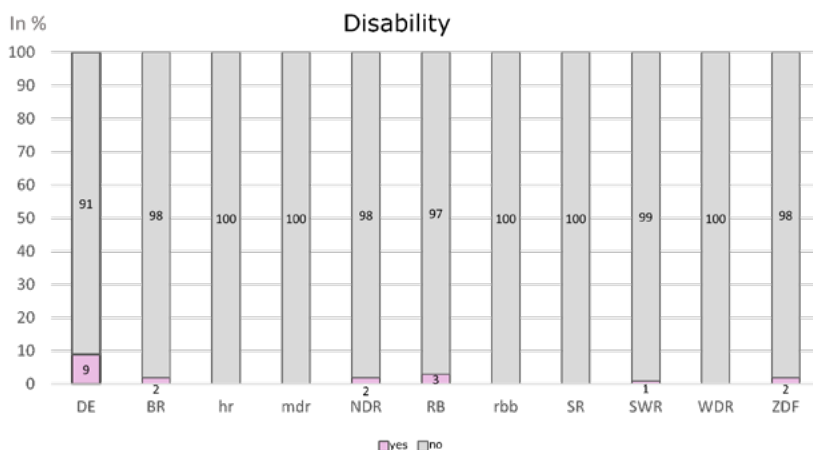


Source : Authors' own illustration

## Disability

Another relevant figure and key factor in diversity is the rate of disability. In Germany, 9.4% of people are categorized as having a disability (cf. GESUNDHEITSBERICHTERSTATTUNG DES BUNDES 2020).<sup>[2]</sup> Here, too, there is a clear discrepancy between the proportion in the broadcasting councils/Television Council and the population as a whole. Barely a single council member has a disability, or has publicly stated so. Only the councils of Bayerischer Rundfunk, Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Radio Bremen, Südwestrundfunk, and ZDF have members who provide information on impairments.

Figure 4  
Disability



Source : Authors' own illustration

At this point, it is important to note that it was not possible to check the type and severity of the disability. It is therefore not clear whether the council members in question have classified themselves as having a disability or carry an official disabled person's pass [Schwerbehindertenausweis]. In addition, there is no visible differentiation between certain types of disability, even though the type

<sup>2</sup> This refers to people who hold an official disabled person's pass [Schwerbehindertenausweis]. This must be applied for and is issued from a disability level [GdB] of at least 50. The actual proportion of people in Germany with a disability is therefore higher.

and extent have an enormous impact on the very different needs for accessible services.

Organizations for people with disabilities are represented in only half of the committees investigated. There is no congruence between broadcast area and associations. This is seen particularly clearly in the example of the ZDF Television Council, which is responsible for all of Germany – the interests of people with disabilities are represented here by the group »Inklusive Gesellschaft aus dem Land Rheinland-Pfalz« [Inclusive society from the state of Rhineland-Palatinate].

### *Religion*

According to a study on confession and religious affiliation, 26.9% of the German population consider themselves atheist or agnostic, i.e., »non-believers.« 64.3% of the population is Christian, divided into 28.6% Catholic, 25.8% Protestant, 2.2% Orthodox, and 7.6% other Christian denominations. Another 3.5% of the population consider themselves Muslim, 0.7% Buddhist, and 0.1% Jewish (cf. BUNDESZENTRALE FÜR POLITISCHE BILDUNG 2020). Since it was not possible to ascertain the religious affiliation of all council members, the statistics must be enjoyed with caution. Despite this, the category was still included in the analysis because the clear discrepancy between the demographics of Germany and those of the councils has repeatedly been the subject of discussion.

Analysis in this category is especially challenging given that here, too, many committee members have not made their religious affiliation public. In these cases, it was therefore impossible to determine with any certainty whether these people consider themselves atheists or similar, or simply prefer not to state their confession. It is also difficult to consider the Christian denominations (predominantly Catholic and Protestant in Germany) in more detail, given that there are significant differences depending on geographical location.

It is striking, however, that the percentage of Christians in the councils is lower than the mean for Germany as a whole. The proportion of Muslims in the council – 2.56% to 3.33% – is slightly lower than in the population as a whole, with five councils having no visible Muslim representation at all.

Members of the Jewish community are found on all committees (1.67% to 4.65%) except the broadcasting councils of Radio Bremen (RB) and rbb. Their percentage share is slightly higher than that of Jews in the population as a whole.

Table 2  
Religion

Religion	hr	BR	mdr	NDR	RB	SWR	WDR	rbb	SR	ZDF
Christian	10	-	1	-	1	16	8	7	2	-
Catholic	-	14	6	3	1	-	1	-	9	9
Protestant	-	3	16	10	1	-	3	-	3	6
Muslim	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	1	2
Jewish	1	1	2	1	-	1	1	-	1	1
Other	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
<i>total number of council members</i>	32	50	43	57	32	74	55	32	39	60

In absolute numbers. Source: Authors' own depiction

Religion	hr	BR	mdr	NDR	RB	SWR	WDR	rbb	SR	ZDF
Christian	31,3	-	2,3	-	3,1	21,6	14,6	21,9	5,1	-
Catholic	-	28	14	5,3	3,1	-	1,8	-	23,1	15
Protestant	-	6	3	17,5	3,1	-	5,5	-	7,7	10
Muslim	3,1	-	-	-	3,1	1,4	-	-	2,6	3,3
Jewish	3,1	2	4,7	1,8	-	1,4	1,8	-	2,6	1,7
Other	-	-	-	-	3,1	-	-	-	-	-

In percent. Source: Authors' own depiction

### *Highest educational qualification*

28.6% of the German population have achieved a lower secondary school certificate [Hauptschulabschluss], 6.5% a certificate from a polytechnic school (GDR), 23.5% a higher secondary school certificate [Realschulabschluss], and one in three (33.5%) a university entrance qualification. 4% have no school certificate at all. Formal educational qualifications are distributed as follows: 46.6% have an apprenticeship/professional training, 8.4% a qualification from a vocational college, 2.6% a bachelor's degree, and 1.8% a master's degree. University diplomas »[including] a teaching qualification, a state examination, Magister, artistic qualification, or comparable qualification« are held by 12.86% of the German population (FEDERAL STATISTICAL OFFICE/DESTATIS, 2019, p. 22). 25.2% have no professional qualification.

The investigation into broadcasting councils always shows only the highest educational qualification. This means that, for example, the value Abitur [university entrance qualification] was only assigned if no further education or training could be found for the person in question. Council members with

degrees were assigned the value of their qualification, rather than Abitur, as this is generally a requirement for a degree program. The value Degree includes those who did not provide more precise information,<sup>[3]</sup> while the number of bachelor's degrees etc. is not taken into account, but listed separately.

21 council members stated that their highest educational attainment was a school certificate (of these, seven a higher school certificate, 13 a German Abitur, and one a university entrance qualification attained outside Germany). Nine had completed a (professional) apprenticeship. 112 members went to university, but did not provide the subject or type of qualification. There are also numerous council members with a bachelor's or master's degree, Diplom, Magister, or state examination. 63 council members have a doctorate, and 22 have completed post-doctoral studies. All in all, that totals 303 people with an academic career, making up a 47% share – rising to 65% when doctorates and postdocs are included. That is a major difference compared to the proportion of people with degrees in the population as a whole, which is just 17.3%.<sup>[4]</sup>

Table 3  
Professional/educational qualification

	No German qualification	Higher secondary school certificate	University entrance qualification	Vocational training/apprenticeship	Degree	Bachelor	Master	Diplom degree	Magister degree	1st state examination	2st state examination	Ph.D.	Postdoctoral qualification	Academ. Education
hr	-	2	1	-	10	-	-	5	-	1	3	7	1	27
BR	1	-	2	-	15	-	1	3	1	-	2	10	3	35
mdr	-	1	-	-	11	-	2	6	1	-	-	5	2	27
NDR	-	-	1	-	14	-	1	6	-	1	2	8	3	35
RB	-	-	-	1	5	1	3	1	-	-	-	2	-	12
SWR	-	-	7	1	22	1	1	3	-	-	3	6	4	40
WDR	-	-	-	4	9	1	3	11	4	2	11	6	2	49
rbb	-	-	-	1	16	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	1	20
SR	-	1	2	1	1	-	-	1	1	1	1	3	1	9
ZDF	-	3	-	1	9	1	-	11	1	1	8	13	5	49
Ges.	1	7	13	9	112	4	11	47	8	6	30	63	22	303

In absolute numbers. Source: Authors' own depiction

3 The poor data available made it impossible to state whether the degree was completed successfully.

4 In addition, in describing and classifying his own experiences in Switzerland, Roger Blum clearly highlights the opportunities not exploited in the supervisory bodies, for example due to the failure to integrate communication studies expertise (cf. *Journalistik/Journalism Research*, 5(3), pp. 290-298. <https://journalistik.online/en/essay-en/an-ideal-hobby-garden-for-me/>).



	No German qualification	Higher secondary school certificate	University entrance qualification	Vocational training/apprenticeship	Degree	Bachelor	Master	Diplom degree	Magister degree	1st state examination	2nd state examination	Ph.D.	Postdoctoral qualification	Academ. Education
hr	-	6	3	-	31	-	-	16	-	3	9	22	3	84
BR	2	-	4	-	30	-	2	6	2	-	4	20	6	70
mdr	-	2	-	-	26	-	5	14	2	-	-	12	5	63
NDR	-	-	2	-	25	-	2	11	-	2	4	14	5	61
RB	-	-	-	3	16	3	9	3	-	-	-	3	-	38
SWR	-	-	9	1	30	1	1	4	-	-	4	8	5	54
WDR	-	-	-	7	16	2	5	20	7	4	20	11	4	98
rbb	-	-	-	3	50	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	3	63
SR	-	3	5	3	3	-	-	3	3	3	3	7	3	23
ZDF	-	5	-	2	15	2	-	18	2	2	13	22	8	82
Ge-samt	0,2	1	3	2	24	1	2	10	2	1	6	13	5	65

In percent. Source: Authors' own depiction

### *Political background*

The PSM and their committees are often criticized for being too close to the state (see various rulings on broadcasting by the Federal Constitutional Court in the past, e.g., BVerfG, 1 BvF 1/11 dated 25.3.2014). This has resulted in rules on the maximum number of government ministers, employees, and parliamentarians. Because political affiliation and therefore influence is not always tied to one of these functions, however, the council members were investigated for possible political connections. In this investigation, »politically organized« refers to any person who is or has been a member of a party. Again, only official and public information could be taken into account.

In total, the councils contain 131 people with a clear political background, making up a 28% share. Information on the party affiliations of individual members can be found in the analysis of individual council members (see Excel sheet). Clear classification was not possible in all cases (due to a lack of information or a change in party, or because a party affiliation is unrelated to the reason for appointment to the supervisory body).

## Associations

Germany's federal system means that groups with the same interests and agendas are often found in a huge variety of organizations and under different names. It is therefore impossible to examine every association, but a detailed list can be found in the analysis of the investigation (see Excel sheet).

In order to still draw conclusions from the data set, the associations were divided into overarching categories. It is clear that political organizations are the group most commonly represented, followed by culture-related associations, unions, and social organizations. The Christian congregations are found in fourth and fifth place in the list (without taking their political lobbies into account). Although media professionals (e.g., journalists) also sit on the decision-making committees, association representation by, for example, the Deutscher Journalistenverband (DJV) or the Deutsche Journalistenunion (dju) (part of the Verdi union) is rare.

As the disability category showed, there is no comprehensive, nationwide lobby for people with disabilities in the broadcasting councils or the ZDF Television Council. People with a migration background have organized representation in all broadcasting councils apart from that of mdr. hr, BR, SWR, and rbb all have a lobby for exiles, although many of these associations cater only to exiles from Eastern Silesia – there are no lobbies for other resettlers, such as those from German-speaking areas of Transylvania in Romania, most of whom came to Germany after 1990). While rbb and mdr jointly offer Sorbian programming, only rbb appears to have an organized lobby for this group. The Broadcasting Council of Radio Bremen also has a representative of the »Bundesrat für Nedderdüütsch« [Federal Council for Low German].

Table 4

### Affiliation to organizations

Top 10 w/o politics		Politics in general		Political parties	
Cultural	32	Political party	84	CDU	23
Trade union	26	State	26	SPD	20
Social	23	Local level	8	Greens	12
Protestant Church	20	Politics (not affiliated with any party)	4	AfD	7
Catholic Church	18	Europe	3	FDP	7

Top 10 w/o politics		Politics in general		Political parties	
Women's representation	17	Government	1	CSU	6
Sports	16			Left	6
Education	16			Freie Wähler	3
Youth	15				
Environment	15				

In absolute numbers. Source: Authors' own depiction

### 3.2 Interpretation of the investigation results

There is no discernable proportionality between the number of members in a council and the area or population of the respective broadcast area. The Broadcasting Council of swr is the largest with 74 members, even though it is only responsible for two states (Baden-Wuerttemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate). Even the ZDF Television Council, whose role is nationwide, has only 60 members. The smallest Broadcasting Council is rbb's with 31 representatives.

When it comes to gender distribution, the councils vary widely in their representativity. While the Broadcasting Councils of hr, BR, and swr have balanced representation of men and women, in line with the demographics of men and women in Germany, NDR and WDR have a higher proportion of women, with seven and eleven women more respectively. The opposite applies to the ZDF Television Council, which has 42 male members, accounting for a 72% share, compared to just 17 female members – a share of just 28% or less than a third. The average age for both male and female members of broadcasting councils is 59 years. In the demographics for Germany as a whole, 43% of citizens are less than 41 years old. However, this age group makes up just 2.1% of the councils (10 people). Most of the council members are in the 61 to 80-year-old age group, making up 34.7% of the committees, even though their share of the total German population is much lower, at 22%. One possible reason for this is that membership of a broadcasting council is a voluntary position that may not always fit in with paid work. Yet it is still striking that neither NDR nor mdw has a single member who is younger than 41 years old (see also Fig. 2).

While 26.7% of people in Germany have a migration background, the same can be said of just 5.7% of broadcasting council members. The discrepancy in the representation of people with disabilities is even greater, with just three council members stating that they have a disability. Where associations are included, there is at least representation for disabled people in six of the ten committees investigated: BR, RB, rbb, SR, swr, and WDR. Given that just under one in ten people in Germany has a disabled person's pass, this level of representation is

difficult to justify from a quantitative point of view. It is made worse by the wide range of different types of disability – after all, a person with a hearing disability has entirely different requirements of public service broadcasting than someone with autism. The lack of perspectives of a wide range of groups in need of assistance must be viewed particularly critically, because a lack of accessibility cannot be detected by those not affected to the same extent as by those affected.

Some other groups of people also appear underrepresented. Although 8% of Germans consider themselves queer, for example, their proportion in the broadcasting councils is just 0.63% with three organizations represented (in RBB, MDR, and the ZDF Television Council) – many times lower than the value/share for the population as a whole.

25% of council members stated that they had Christian beliefs, with a clear majority in all councils. This is a deviation of 39 percentage points from the figures for the population as a whole. There are two potential reasons for this phenomenon: Firstly, many members of broadcasting councils did not publicly state their religion; secondly, a difference can be expected between those who belong to a church in the statistics and those who actively consider themselves believers. Although only four council members stated Islamic beliefs, the percentage across all committee members is largely consistent with that of the population. However, there are some committees in which Islam is not represented at all. It is a different picture when it comes to Judaism: The councils have a total of 10 Jewish members, making up a share of 2.1%, while Jews make up just a 0.1% share of the population as a whole. No other religions are represented, with the exception of one Alevite.

One striking feature is the high percentage of politicians compared to other professional groups, with 28% having close links to politics or a political party. People with a connection to the church or other religious groups (9.3%) are also strongly represented, followed by media professionals and members of the legal professions. When it comes to how the politicians are spread across the parties, the picture is largely consistent with the (longer-term) political situation in Germany. The largest group is the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) and CSU (Christian-Social Union in Bavaria), with 50 and 13 council members respectively. This is followed by the SPD (Social-democratic Party of Germany) with 50 members, and Greens with 20 council members, and then Die Linke and the FDP (Free Democratic Party). The AfD (Alternative for Germany) comes in sixth place, with six representatives.

The large proportion of council members with a university entrance qualification and academic career is also striking. Only a handful can be categorized as »working class,« although trades unions are certainly also represented.

It is not possible to evaluate how many council members are parents. This is due to the problem that demographic figures assume current parenthood, but do not count the total percentage of citizens who have children. The data available for research on this point was also insufficient, as many did not provide this

information. As a result, it is impossible to prove definitively whether they actually have no children or simply do not want the information in the public domain. It is a similar story when it comes to information on marital status. 183 council members are known to be married, making up a 40% share of all committee members. The lack of public availability of information – not to mention the importance of maintaining the privacy of members of broadcasting councils – also made it impossible to investigate other interesting categories in the Diversity Charter (such as sexual orientation). More detailed differentiation was also impossible for the same reason. Figures on characteristics like single parenthood, receipt of out-of-work benefits, urban or rural residence, BGO activities etc., could provide information on how diverse the perspectives in the councils are.

### 3.3 Methodological critique

Quantitative content analysis is essentially a useful way to determine the diversity of the councils of public service broadcasting, allowing individual members of the respective committees to be investigated for diversity characteristics. Qualitative evaluation can also be reasonably conducted based on categorization in order to provide comparability, although the choice of categorization demands classification. On its various levels, the Diversity Charter names criteria intended to create a staff that is as diverse as possible. The problem is that, since there is no precise definition of how the categories should be defined, there is room for interpretation.

Another point of criticism relates to the object of research itself. All of the information categorized and analyzed is the result of extensive online research; much of it could not be found as a primary source. It is therefore impossible to guarantee that the data is absolutely up to date, as the information provided may be out of date. Neither is the data complete. Although it was possible to research data on many of the council members, information on those council members who are less well known and not public figures was harder to come by. Given these gaps in the data set, it is possible that individual figures and evaluations may not be correct. In a repeat investigation, this inaccuracy could be minimized by using different methods of procuring information (for example a questionnaire).

## 4. Summary

Public service broadcasting is an integral part of the German media landscape and a key factor in our democracy. Yet this ideal is confronted with the finding that the work of the supervisory bodies is frequently inadequate. There are various structural reasons for this. As the recent debate about internal press

freedom, extending to NDR, mdr, and WDR, shows, there is a need for reform in the Director Act (Intendantengesetz), the rights of co-determination of employed staff and freelancers, the pension fund that eats up funds for programming, the restructuring and synergy formation at the individual institutions, the digitalization and work of the supervisory bodies, and their facilities in the committee offices. The diversity of perspectives in the broadcasting councils undoubtedly plays a role when it comes to the programming mandate and the diversity of programming. This work focused exclusively on the broadcasting councils of the individual ARD institutions and the ZDF Television Council, as these are intended to guarantee that these broadcasters fulfil the role they are assigned in the state treaties and the quality standards expected. Firstly, it is important to note that, for a long time, very little research was conducted in relation to the broadcasting councils. Even after this work, it is impossible to provide a simple answer to the question of how diverse and representative these committees are compared to the population as a whole. This investigation is only a fraction of the possible research and shows that there are sometimes enormous differences between the individual councils, and therefore both positive and negative examples, when it comes to diversity. What is obvious, however, is that there is a clear discrepancy from the population in the age, migration background, and disability categories especially, as well as overrepresentation of politics, and that the representation of interests is therefore neither sufficient nor balanced.

This investigation can be seen as a key part of research on the current status and opportunities for improvement in this regard, while also offering plenty of scope for more detailed questions and more precise investigations. One option would be to conduct a more sophisticated analysis of the entry requirements, so that groups that are underrepresented or not represented at all are given more opportunities to participate. It is also worth asking how the dynamics of society can be reflected in committees like this. In this context, one option would be to include audience representation on the councils – individuals elected by the public who are also appointed to the broadcasting committees and contribute to greater transparency, discussion, and debate on media issues. This would also give citizens who are not associated with particular groups the chance to help decide on the committee membership and ultimately, to some extent, to be involved in decisions made regarding directorships and other points, such as quality criteria for program critique. The respective state media treaties would have to be amended accordingly.

It is clear that this field of research is still not taken seriously enough. All public service broadcasters have signed the Diversity Charter. Effectively implementing these criteria in the staff and therefore also in the membership of the councils would be another step towards greater diversity, including of opinion and perspective. Despite having a different concept for research work and a different period of investigation, the study by Neue Deutsche Medienmacher\*innen

came to similar results and confirms the major trends in these results – focusing on the lack of diversity in the dimension of »migration background« –, thus reinforcing the finding that there is an enormous need for reform when it comes to diversity mainstreaming in the supervisory bodies of the PSM.

The context of digitalization presents all media with enormous challenges that can only be successfully tackled with a large number of ideas and solution approaches. Studies on the world of work (cf. Diversity Charter) show that diversity leads to better results at all levels. Public service media should make sure to use this advantage – indeed they must, given that their programming mandate relates to the entire population and must be free from discrimination. Diversity is not only a relevant factor in credible, high-quality media, but is also crucial to encouraging loyalty among the audience, who now have a great deal of choice and must make a conscious decision to choose a PSM program. Needless to say, it is essential that the bodies supervising the PSM's services also demonstrate this inviting diversity of perspectives.

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## Research Paper

Silas Ketels

# 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.«<sup>[1]</sup>

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.«<sup>[2]</sup> 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*<sup>3)</sup> and the *Bild-Zeitung*<sup>4)</sup>.

*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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.

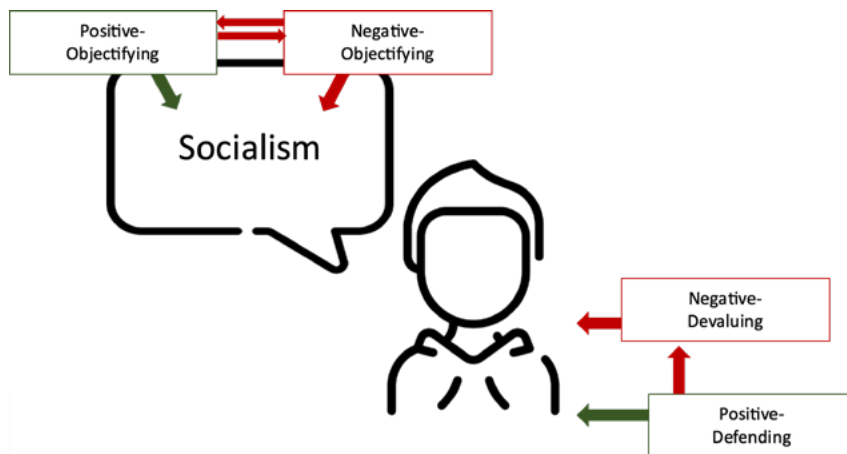
*Positive-Defending:* This discourse position has a positive attitude toward Kühnert's debate on expropriation. However, the topic as such is at most secondary here as well. Rather, the texts focus on the nature of the debate in particular and the debate culture in general. This discourse position represents 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.

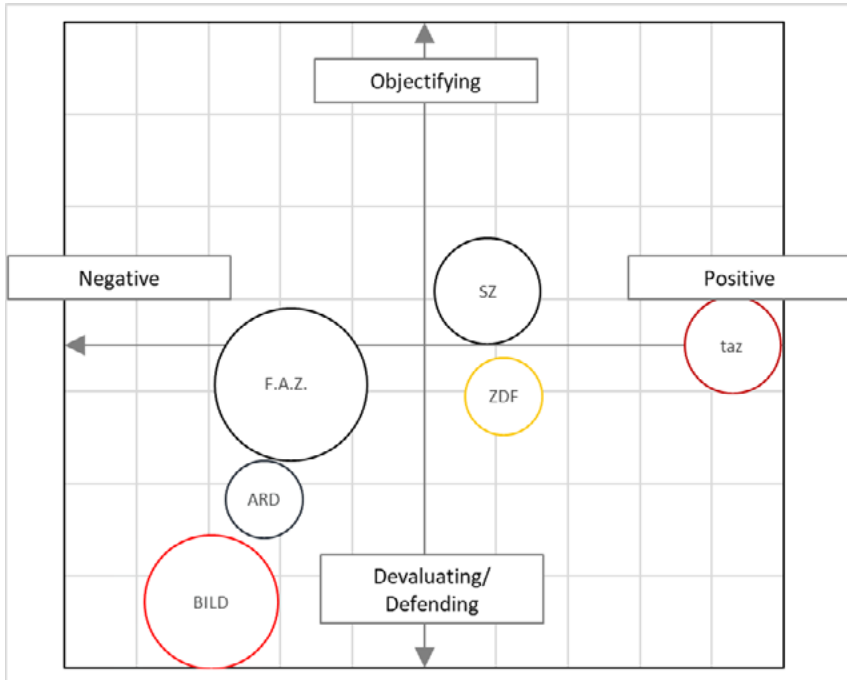
In reaction to Negative-Devaluing, the discourse position Positive-Defending emerges. It criticises the behaviour toward Kühnert and positions itself critically against Negative-Devaluing. At the same time, it takes a defending stance on Kühnert as a person. Positive-Defending criticises the debate culture 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.<sup>71</sup> 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.«<sup>[8]</sup> 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.

*Translation: Silas Ketels*

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Silas Ketels (1999) studied applied communication sciences at the University of Applied Sciences in Kiel and is currently preparing for his PhD. He wrote his master's thesis on »The Concept of Power in Theories of the Political Digital Economy: On the Digitization of Power« [Der Machtbegriff in Theorien der politischen Digitalökonomie: Zur Digitalisierung der Macht]. Contact: silas.ketels@posteo.de

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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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## Research Paper

Yulia Belinskaya

# How the internet is being tamed in Russia

Chronicle of state securitization measures

**Abstract:** As a communicative space, the Russian public sphere is dramatically prosecuted, and it suffers from pathologic efforts to have it systematically shut down. This article looks back into the history of the new restrictive media laws and their framing in the state media. The analysis is disclosing how, or through which instruments and conditions, the state enabled, justified, and legitimized the act of securitization. It seeks to answer if there is a space left for dissident voices to be heard and for digital activism and resistance to exist or if the Russian media system has become a place solely defined by constant manipulation, censorship, and restrictions.

**Keywords:** securitization, Russian media, media laws, internet, Russian invasion of Ukraine

## Introduction

On February 24, 2022, the world woke up with news about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, addressed the nation and announced his decision to start a »special military operation« in order to »protect people who have been subjected to humiliation and genocide by the Kyiv regime for the last eight years« (RIA NOVOSTI 2022). In March 2023, the war still cannot be called »the war« in the open media discourse in Russia, and censorship is assured through even tougher media laws. Those independent media outlets that up to that day have survived the constantly increasing regulatory pressure, had to interrupt their services, close their offices, and relocate their staff.

In the very first sentences of the aforementioned speech, Putin described the security threats for the Russian Federation that were created by the expansion of NATO. Putin also mentioned the ability of Russia to fight terrorism and protect its neighboring countries. The speech further appealed to traditional values, »recognized norms of morality and ethics«, and truth as opposed to lies and hypocrisy as well as to attempts to solve the conflict with peaceful diplomatic tools as opposed to the »war machinery of the West.« Russia was clearly put into opposition to the »collective West« and the USA, which was described as an »empire of lies«.

This was not a new development, and the Anti-Western or anti-American frame is not an innovation in the elitist discourse. As described by Zimmerman et al. (2020), the public in Russia has been holding strong anti-American attitudes, which have constantly increased since the beginning of the 1990s. The newest surveys confirmed this trend, indicating that anti-American attitudes reached their historical peak in January 2015 after the annexation of Crimea (LEVADA 2022). After a certain fluctuation period, it rose again significantly in 2022.

Putin's speech clearly represented the prevailing frame in the Russian media discourse. The war is addressed as a »special operation« which is supposed to bring peace to the »historically Russian« territories »terrorized by the Ukrainian government.« The military action was legitimized through the perceived threat coming from the West, in line with what Buzan, Wæver and Wilde (1998) from the Copenhagen School of security studies describe in their securitization theory. Balzacq (2005) claimed that the central role in the process of securitization belongs to the audience, as that it first has to widely accept the effectiveness of this type of justification.

In the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the question arises: Why did the public in Russia accept the military intervention? One of the most straightforward answers lays in the current state of the Russian media ecosystem. The state media deliver the state-driven discourse. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new media and online spaces were seen as a remedy for these restricted systems: The extensive development of technology brought all available information to the mobile devices in our pockets while being constantly connected to the internet. The censorship machinery, however, also continued to develop. For instance, the internet can be turned off during a protest, in addition to several other innovative practices that are executed by the Russian and other regimes.

The Russian media system went through several waves of increasing restrictions on the freedom of expression. Various authors claim that there has never been any »decade of democracy« after the failure of the Soviet Union and up to the nationalization of the private TV channel NTV in 2001 (REGIONS 2001).

This article looks back into the history of restrictive media laws and their framing in the texts of the laws and in the state media. It seeks to answer if there

is a space left for dissident voices to be heard and for digital activism and resistance to exist or if the Russian media system has become a place solely defined by constant manipulation, censorship, and restrictions.

## Securitization Theory

The notion of security, described by Putin in his speech, is not objective: it is constructed through social practices. According to Buzan (1983), different issues could be presented as issues of security when they are called »alarming,« »dangerous,« and »threatening« in public discourse. Securitization theory explains how security policies are not merely provided by a state to a society but are carefully designed and transmitted by politicians and decision-makers.

The referent object for security could be any entity or even idea that was framed as existentially threatened and in need of protection. In the classical tradition of security studies, the focus was on the survival of the state, which normally justified the logic of war and military interventions (WILLIAMS 2003). The immediate danger, however, could be associated with national identity, society, or, for example, a specific tangible place such as a lake or forest. The issues that are being securitized, such as the »refugee crisis,« are not threatening by nature, they are rhetorically constructed to seem threatening (BUZAN/WÆVER/DE WILDE 1998).

Securitization theory postulates that to constitute a given issue as extreme and elevate it above politics as »usual,« decision-makers and persons with the power of social and institutional change clearly articulate that an issue has high priority. The process of framing an issue as threatening is referred to as a speech act. The groups or individuals that perform the security speech act aiming to frame the issue as a security one are called securitizing actors. Overall, the security landscape is formed by numerous actors that can go beyond politicians and include also police, military, and immigration services. The acts of securitization are, in fact, the processes of discursive legitimation of governmental actions.

The conceptual framework of securitization is also tied to »othering«, the process of determining who is the other, opposing »the other« to »us« (BUZAN/WÆVER 2003), and moving the »other« beyond the legal field. The securitization of a constructed or perceived danger inevitably leads to the withdrawal of the danger from the normal political discourse, which is a convenient premise for dealing with security problems through the insertion of extraordinary measures.

Deibert (2008) underlined the importance of a medium that affects fundamentally the reception of speech acts. Media are defining the landscape and forming the discourse, even if they are not necessarily bound to the institutions that are involved in the process of securitization (DEIBERT 2008). Media are traditionally

seen as functional actors – these actors do not choose an object but have a significant influence on the process securitization (BALCI/KARDAS 2012).

Security theory then posits that in turn a targeted audience in turn will agree and accept a constructed threat – to securitize an issue therefore means to persuade the public through the means of a speech act. »Conceptualising securitisation as a speech act is important as it shows that words do not merely describe reality, but constitute reality, which in turn triggers certain responses« (EROUKHMANNOFF 2017: 106). At the same time, Wæver (2015) writes that audiences in democratic societies are not speechless either and are equipped with agency and social responsibility.

However, if the targeted audience rejects a securitizing actor's speech act, securitization has failed, according to the Copenhagen School. Thus, securitization is understood here as a process of negotiations between the decision-makers and audiences. This premise, however, could be approached differently in authoritarian societies: »Domestic demand for rights may behave differently under authoritarian regimes and may have different consequences in states where the public does not have a direct check on the government« (DIETRICH/CRABTREE 2019: 352). In such cases, the state as the main securitizing actor has the power to decide at which point democratic practices could be interrupted due to certain issues to manipulate the population. A group of authoritarian decision-makers is then able to adopt extraordinary measures and policies without seeking the support of the general public, as explained by Wæver (2015), although other relevant audiences still need to be persuaded, such as the military.

Securitization theory, according to Wæver (2015), is not aimed to answer *why* an issue became a question of national security, but rather *how*, meaning through which instruments and conditions the state enabled or legitimized the act of securitization. In order to observe modern instruments and securitization strategies, this article will first look at censorship practices employed in the communist system of Soviet Russia.

## Censorship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

Over the past decade, the Russian independent press has faced numerous challenges that came in the form of restrictive legislation and the state's co-optation of media, prompting severe self-censorship. These more recent practices have played out differently in comparison to the censorship of the 20th century, which had more direct and straightforward tools and implications.

Journalism in general had quite a different trajectory in Russia in comparison to the West. The first regular state-owned newspaper *Sankt-Peterburg's Vedomosti*

appeared in 1702: in the Soviet Union there was *Iskra*, later replaced by *Pravda*. There was only a short time between the 1860s and 1917 when Russia was free of a state monopoly on news making. At the same time, in 1895 the censors were ordered not to »admit for publication works whose contents would not be unconditionally considered harmless for the people's reading« (as cited in BLUM 1998): Thousands of books were prohibited »as per the circular of 8 May 1895.«

In October 1917, the Council of People's Commissars signed a Decree on the Press, which suppressed dissident newspapers and claimed that any outlet calling for »open resistance or disobedience to the workers' government; sowing confusion through a clearly slanderous distortion of facts; calling for deeds that are clearly criminal, i.e. have criminally punishable character« (Decree on the Press 1917) was subject to closure. On this basis, 470 newspapers were closed by June 1918.

In 1921, the Soviet government founded Glavlit<sup>[1]</sup> which became the main institutionalized organ of state-imposed censorship. This involved a system of pre-publication control when censors decided whether a book could be published and also post-publication censorship when an already printed edition could be destroyed before it reached stores or books already in circulation could be seized (FOX 1992). Similarly to the *Index of Repudiated Books* (KOBJAL, n. a.), a »List of Information Constituting State Secrets« including banned authors and texts existed; it was distributed by the Glavlit in Moscow to its regional branches (PLAMPER 2014).

Throughout the entire Soviet period, censorship practices were aimed at eliminating dissent, hiding negative information about the state of affairs in the country, and destroying so-called »anti-Soviet propaganda;« censors also tried to eradicate the possibility of unintentional unorthodox interpretations of materials (PLAMPER 2014). During the Second World War, any information that did not confirm the official narrative, was forbidden; the punishment »for spreading false rumors in wartime« was up to five years in prison (Decree No. 32 1941).

After Stalin's death in 1953, during the so-called »Khrushchev Thaw,« several censorship restrictions were lifted, however, after 1964-1966, bans were reinstated. During this period, Glavlit protected state and military secrets to a lesser extent, but rather implemented ideological decisions.

One of the ways to oppose state censorship became *Samizdat* – the parallel, unofficial, illegal, and, therefore, uncensored production and distribution of various kinds of texts. At the very end of the Soviet era, in 1989, there were more than 300 alternative media working as *Samizdat* (MJALO/SOKOLOV/SVERDLOV 1990). A new censorship theory claims that censorship is not a foreign and repressive act that restricts freedom, but rather a necessary instrument to shape the discourse

1 Main Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press

and, in some cases, appears as a productive and emancipatory tool (Bunn 2015). Furthermore, the simple omitting or banning of content is juxtaposed with self-censorship that takes its roots in social norms, rules of the industry, and also economic conditions. Following this line of thought, literary scholars stated that censorship »fostered the development of literary forms, especially irony and allusion, as well as forced authors into more figurative and challenging forms of expression that prolong the interpretive process to positive aesthetic effect« (BUNN 2015: 42).

It is believed that at the end of the Soviet era, between the 1980s and 1990s, objective conditions for the development of the public sphere existed, which then was further liberated and de-communized between the 1990s and 2000s (GLUKHIH/ELISEEV 2018), as the Constitution of Russia from 1993 included the freedom of expression as a core constitutional law. It is, however, a debatable question if the public sphere existed in the Soviet Union in general. All internal official channels of distribution, including newspapers, radio, television, cinema, theater, and literature as well as external channels such as foreign radio stations or printed materials, were controlled, and self-censorship was also widespread. In such a repressive environment, meaningful public debate seems to be simply not possible (cf. BEYRAU 2014).

Atnashev and Velizhev (2020) argue that the classical model of the public sphere cannot be applied to the USSR. They present the concept of different modes of publicity, which describe different sets of rules and sociopolitical and cultural contexts, that are accepted by the participants of discussions in a given genre. These genres may include newspapers, open letters, art exhibitions, TV talk shows, but also kitchen debates and feature different characteristics, such as barriers to entry and audiences (ATNASHEV/VELIZHEV 2020). These fragmented modes of publicity could be seen as alternative channels, where »grassroots« strategies for an appropriation of public spaces were implicitly enacted, even in an over-administrated, manipulated, and controlled public sphere.

## The new restrictive laws

As a communicative space, the Russian public sphere is dramatically prosecuted, and it suffers from pathologic efforts to have it systematically shut down. The Sixth Convocation (2011–2016) of the Russian State Duma – called »mad printer« due to the speed with which laws were passed – imposed new kinds of restrictions on the internet after a series of protests in 2011–2012. The first major attack on the freedom of expression was executed in 2012 after »The Bolotnaya Square Case« when a peaceful rally in Moscow escalated into a confrontation with police forces and ended with mass arrests of public activists. A report by a commission

by Amnesty International claimed the Bolotnaya case was »the mass violation of the Constitution of the Russian Federation and Russian laws, planned by authorities in advance, consciously, purposefully, with particular cruelty and cynicism« (2014). With record-setting speed, the law on rallies and the Code on Administrative Offenses were changed and another new wave of restrictive laws were passed.

Already in 2012, a first version of the legislation on »Foreign agents«<sup>[2]</sup> was adopted in Russia. According to these amendments, organizations that receive funding from abroad and are engaged in political activities could be assigned the status of a foreign agent. Contrary to Putin's later statements, the threat of imprisonment for up to two years for »foreign agents« existed in the very first version of the law (FZ-121). In 2017, the Russian State Duma adopted amendments to the law »On the Mass Media«, allowing the Ministry of Justice to include media outlets in the register of foreign agents. In 2019, the law was amended so that any individual who reposted information from a media-foreign agent and has at any point received funding from abroad could be assigned the status of »foreign agent« as well. The law directly targeted individual journalists, oppositionists, and activists. Finally, in December 2022, the new law on »On control over the activities of persons under foreign influence« came into force. Foreign agents received a set of discriminating norms: among others, they are forbidden to teach or work in the civil service, to be members of election commissions, and to organize any public events, including protests.

A year after the first version of the law on foreign agents was passed, the State Duma passed another law that established administrative liability for »Propaganda of non-traditional relations among children«. This law established fines for individuals and suspension of activities for up to ninety days for organizations. In June 2017, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) found this Russian law on »LGBT propaganda« discriminatory, and also pointed out that it violates articles of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights. Furthermore, in December 2021, Vladimir Putin instructed the government to submit proposals for updating the Concept of Information Security of Children. The updated concept preceded the new edition of the law<sup>[3]</sup> that was approved and signed by the president a year later, in December 2022. Article 6.21 of the Code of Administrative Offenses, that earlier prohibited the propaganda among minors, was amended, to forbid »propaganda« of gender reassignment and pedophilia, without specifying the age. The law also distinguishes in a very vague manner between »propaganda,« »imposing of information,« and »demonstration.« The

2 Amendments were made into federal laws »On public associations« (82-FZ) and »On non-profit organizations« (7-FZ).

3 Amendments are proposed to the federal laws »On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection«, »On the Media«, »On the Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development«, »On Advertising« and »On State Support for Cinematography of the Russian Federation«.



punishments for all these violations have become stricter, reaching the maximum in the code across all the articles. The law aimed to control cultural production, including books, providing licenses to movies given by the Ministry of Culture, only if scenes with LGBT+ heroes are cut. This involves online and offline cinema, social media with a big audience, theaters, online and offline bookshops, and news aggregators. This has led to censorship within the industry. For instance, one online book subscription service asked its authors to »change the content« so that books can be returned to the shelves (MEDUZA 2022a). This sets a precedent for censorship that is not exercised by a special governmental body but comes directly from within a media industry.

Moreover, in 2016, several amendments known as the »*Law on news aggregators*«<sup>[4]</sup> were passed, which became one of the most critical steps that the Russian government has ever taken with the goal to restrict access to online information for millions of citizens. According to this law, news aggregator websites with an audience of more than one million users a day were obliged to check the accuracy of the cited information, in case it would come from unlicensed media outlets. News aggregators, as noted by the author of the law, representative Aleksey Kazakov, are the most popular sources of news. For instance, in 2021, the service *Yandex.news* was visited by the 70 million people monthly (according to *Meduza*, in 2016 the audience was 6.5 million users daily). The news disappeared from the page in September 2022, when vk holding closed the deal for the purchase of Zen and News services from Yandex.

At the same time, in June 2016, an anti-terrorism law or so-called »*Yarovaya package*« or »*Yarovaya law*«,<sup>[5]</sup> named after its author, Irina Yarovaya, was adopted. The law contains a number of proposals to fight extremism and terrorism online. In particular, it strengthens the responsibility for »public justification of terrorist acts.« It meant that citizens were supposed to be judged by the same rules as media and could be punished with imprisonment of up to seven years. All »organizers of information distribution online« were obliged to store all the user-generated content. Intelligence agencies were given the right to access these data without a court decision if it was required for an investigation or public security. In addition, the law stipulated that companies are obliged to provide government agencies with tools for decrypting secure services. The law clearly violated the right of Russian citizens to confidentiality guaranteed by the Constitution. The law returned the political police to the Russian reality: by legalizing unlimited access of law enforcement agencies to information about the private life of citizens, the state, using the information received, will be even more careful to »clean up«

4 Amendments to the federal law »On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection« (149-FZ)

5 Bill »On amendments to the Federal law« on counterterrorism« (No. 374-FZ of 06.07.2016); and »On amendments to the criminal code of the Russian Federation and the code of Criminal procedure of the Russian Federation regarding the establishment of additional measures to counter terrorism and ensure public safety« (No. 375-FZ of 06.07.2015).

the political field, suppress civil activity, and monitor all those whom it deems objectionable. In this regard, the Russian state's struggle with mythical »foreign agents« became one of the new stages in the suppression of civil initiative.

More recently, the so-called law »*On fakes*« passed with a new record-setting speed in March 2022 immediately after the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine. It demarcated a new borderline that divided pseudo-democratic legislative practices from de facto authoritarian war censorship. The law was described in the press as a »complete defeat of independent journalism« (MEDUZA 2022b). The law entails criminal punishment for the dissemination of »fakes« about the Russian army, anti-war appeals, and calls for sanctions against Russia with a prison term of up to 15 years. The law was prepared among other measures that ensure the implementation of a federal law from 2018 »*On measures to influence (counter) unfriendly actions of the United States of America and (or) other foreign states.*« The law describes the necessity to protect the »security of the Russian Federation, its sovereignty and territorial integrity« or that are »aimed at the economic and political destabilization of the Russian Federation« (FZ-127). On March 25, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a new law criminalizing the dissemination of fake news about the activities of Russian state bodies abroad. The punishment is similar to the law »*On fakes*«, with prison time of up to 15 years.

## Securitizing discourses in the news

In order to explore how governmental actors legitimize the restrictive laws in the state media, the news archive of the biggest Russian state-owned domestic news agency, *Ria Novosti*, was chosen as a case study. The archive is freely accessible and contains news articles from as early as 2001. All news items containing a word combination that includes the term »law,« for example, »Yarovaya Law« or »Yarovaya Package,« in a headline or within the first three paragraphs of an article during the given timeframe for each law (Table 1) were included in the sample. Also, the author included articles from a week before the introduction of the amendments and one week after the signing. The collected sample for each law was then qualitatively analyzed, following the procedures of thematic analysis (BRAUN/CLARKE 2006). The news articles were first interpreted as neutral, critical, or supportive, then the main points of critique and main legitimization narratives were distinguished. Additionally, the actors that performed the »speech acts« were differentiated.

Table 1

## Timeline of the laws

The title under which the law is known	Law No.	Intro-duced	Readings			Signed by the president
			1.	2.	3.	
On foreign agents (2012)	121-FZ	29.06.2012	6.07. 2012	13.07.2012	13.07.2012	20.07.2012
On foreign agents (2017)	327-FZ	29.09.2017	26.10.2017	15.11.2017	15.11.2017	25.11.2017
On foreign agents (2019)	426-FZ	19.12.2017	12.01.2018	19.11.2019	21.11.2019	2.12.2019
On foreign agents (2022)	255-FZ	26.04.2022	7.06.2022	28.06.2022	29.06.2022	14.07.2022
On LGBT propa- ganda (2013)	135-FZ	22.03.2012	25.01.2013	11.06.2013	11.06.2013	29.06.2013
On LGBT propa- ganda (2022)	479-FZ	20.10.2022	27.10.2022	23.11.2022	24.11.2022	5.12.2022
On news aggre- gators (2016)	208-FZ	25.02.2016	19.04.2016	8.06.2016	11.06.2016	23.06.2016
Yarowaya law (2016)	374-FZ; 375-FZ	7.04.2016	13.05.2016	24.06.2016	24.06.2016	06.07.2016
On fakes (2022)	32-FZ	14.05. 2018[6]	15.05.2018	4.03.2022	4.03.2022	04.03.2022
On fakes (2022, new redaction)	63-FZ	18.03.2022	25.01.[7] 2022	22.03.2022	22.03.2022	25.03.2022

Source: Legislative support system, <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/>

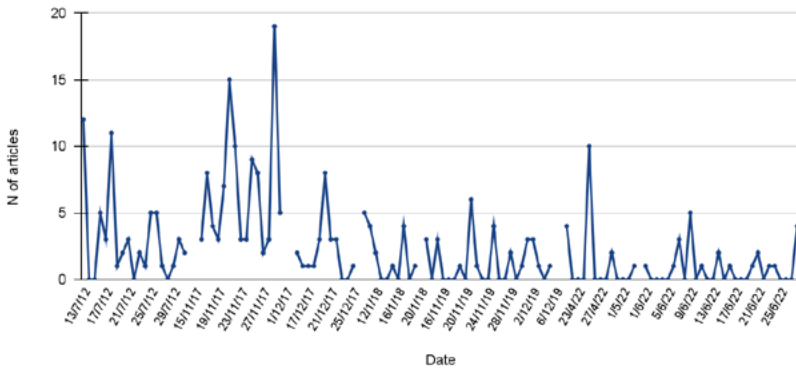
### *Law on foreign agents*

In sum, 275 articles covering all the editions of the law were identified (Graph 1). The first law, passed in 2012, received critique from various actors, including international ones: the US ambassador, the EU commissioner, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Britain. Additionally, 24 of 64 (38%) articles contained critical statements from various experts, political scientists, NGOs, volunteers, human rights activists, Human Rights Council (HRC), and governmental officials, such as a prime minister. The law was described as raw, not specific, and potentially turning all NGOs and media into foreign agents and leading to their closure. As a response to the critique, the law was described as being consistent with other similar legislations around the world.

6 Amendments were added to bill No. 464757-7 that proposed to establish criminal liability for assistance in the implementation and introduction of anti-Russian sanctions.

7 Amendments were added to law 304-FZ to toughen penalties for deforestation.

Figure 1  
Law on foreign agents, all editions (July 2012-June 2022)



One of the authors of the bill, Vasily Piskarev, stated that this initiative would be critically important because foreign organizations would be trying to actively influence the internal political situation in Russia, shape the outcome of elections, and persuade young people. As new committees were formed, such as the Commission for Investigating Interference by Foreign States in Russia's Internal Affairs and the Council of Federation Commission for the Protection of State Sovereignty, they became the most vocal actors of the securitization frame. The commissioners stated that it was necessary to strengthen the protection of society and the state from threats caused by the »total hybrid war unleashed by the West against Russia.«

### *Law on LGBT propaganda*

The first law, proposed in 2012 and enacted in 2013, was referred to in the state press as the »law on gay propaganda.« Towards 2022 this terminology was replaced by »LGBT propaganda,« however, it was usually placed alongside propaganda against pedophilia, making »non-traditional relationships« a threatening and criminalized issue. Both laws received moderate coverage, with 42 pieces in 2013, and 68 in 2022, with peaks around the second and third readings (Graph 2).

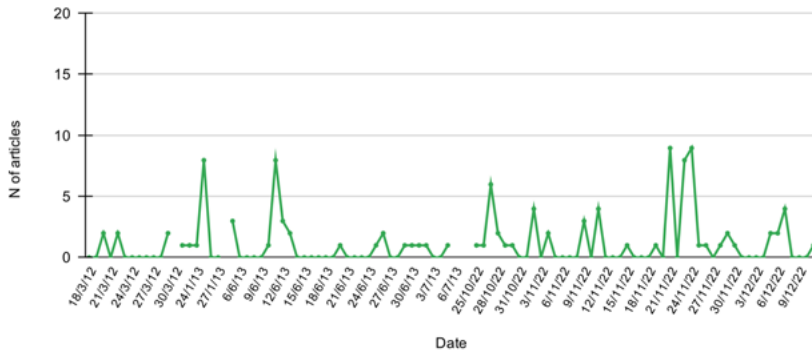
There are several interesting developments that differ in the framing of a new law. In 2022, there was clear »othering« and juxtaposition of European or Western values to Russian »traditional values.« In 2013, the official with whom the law is associated, Elena Mizulina, justified the amendments by referring to the decision of the European Court that »clearly states that among children we can prohibit both the promotion and dissemination of homosexual practices.« Concerns voiced by various international actors were presented in the press: The European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the US ambassador, and the German ombudsman. In 2022, critique from the US received the following response: »US criticism of LGBT law is a gross interference in Russia's affairs.« Furthermore, the Russian ambassador discussed the »tolerance problem in Europe,« and the State Duma speaker referred to »the actions of countries that impose non-traditional values.«

The criminal liability was not discussed in 2013, but in 2022 was present in eight pieces, however, as it was not supported by officials and also criticized by the church, the final edition did not contain such an amendment. The church increasingly became a more vocal actor: While in 2013 only one article presented the opinion of the Russian Orthodox Church, in 2022 six (8%) articles did so.

Another legitimization trope often used by the Russian government has been to present the results of surveys that show that the majority supports the decision to pass a new law. The same principle underpins the essence of astroturfers – to give an impression that a certain opinion is much more widespread in

Figure 2

Law on LGBT propaganda, two editions (March 2011-May 2013;  
October-November 2022)



Source: Own illustration

society than it may actually be (BELINSKAYA 2020). One of the articles stated: »the vast majority of Russians (88%) support the introduction of a ban on the promotion of homosexuality in the country, more than 40% of respondents believe that non-traditional sexual orientation should be criminalized.«

The main goal of the first law was to »protect the children from the dangerous information.« The explanatory note to the law that is cited in the articles stated: »It is especially dangerous for children and young people who are not yet able to critically consider the avalanche of information.« As the new law prohibited propaganda in general, among the new referent objects under threat, were named: »the normal world,« Russian society, traditional or family values, »the natural continuation of life,« and also »the demographic situation in the country.«

### *Law on news aggregators*

The sample concerning the law on news aggregators contained 28 articles; the timeline distribution is presented in Graph 3. As shown by the graph, the law did not receive wide coverage in the state press.

Ten (36%) articles contained a rather neutral explanation of the law, 14 (51%) expressed critique from the industry, experts, Ministry of Communications, and internet ombudsmen, who called the law »a surreal proposal that kills technological progress.« Also, the Electronic Communications Association voiced the concern that amendments will restrict access to »scientific, technical,

Figure 3  
Law on news aggregators (February-July 2016)



Source: Own illustration

educational, cultural, and sports information.« In only one article the necessity of the law is explained, based on the responsibility for the authenticity of the information that the aggregators should bear alongside media outlets. In a short explanatory note to the law (bill No. 570420-7), it was claimed that the restrictions were proposed »in order to prevent a threat to public order in Russia.« Another goal involved »ensuring the independence of the dissemination of news information in Russia from foreign political forces,« pointing to the threat from international interference.

### *Yarowaya law*

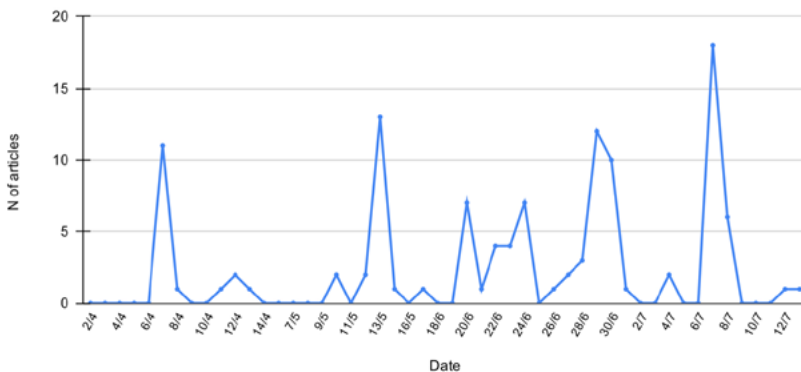
In sum, 115 articles containing the relevant terms were found. Graph 4 illustrates the distribution of the articles over the discussed period of time. Eighteen (16%) articles were updates containing neutral explanations about the law, possible fines, and criminal liability. At the same time, 25 articles (22%) characterized the law as a necessary tool to fight terrorism and extremism: It was presented as an important and inevitable reaction to the questions of national security or an indispensable move to secure the well-being of the citizens. The three main referent objects mentioned were: society, state, and citizens. The justification of the law is performed by framing terrorism as an existential threat. It was described as the most dangerous form of crime or »crime against peace and security of humanity.« As the Senate speaker in Russia explained: »additional measures to ensure security must be taken – this is required by the situation in the world today – the growth of terrorist manifestations.« To legitimize the strict norms,

the authors of the law underlined that similar anti-terroristic laws contain even tougher punishments in other countries, and several officials emphasized »the inevitability of punishment.« According to the State Duma, all countries should be involved in a »relentless fight against terrorism.«

Several points of critique were voiced by the industry, and by the Supreme Court or Russia. In one of the articles, the Association of Electronic Communications noted that the proposal to decode correspondence on the internet would threaten to leak personal data. Additionally, the Supreme Court pointed to a violation of the principles of proportionality and fairness of punishment. The opinion of the HRC was also reflected, as it was underlined in five different articles that the law was passed in a hurry, contradicts the Constitution, and contains many inaccuracies; moreover, the violation of human rights was mentioned: »these are issues are related to human rights, here we need maximum accuracy and delicacy.« However, the strongest criticism of the law came from the telecommunication industry and not from civil society: Of 115 news articles in the sample, 35 (30%) addressed the high costs of the implementation for the telecommunication industry.

The answers to the critique voiced by the authors or various committees of the State Duma or Senate indicated that there should be a severe punishment for terrorists, however, the law was supposed to be safe for Russian citizens. It was stated by several actors, such as the Federation Council Committee on Defense and Security and by the State Duma speaker, that the law was fair, »based solely on legal grounds and procedures,« thought through, and was written together with external experts.

Figure 4  
Yarowaya law (April-July 2016)



Source: Own illustration



*Law on fakes*

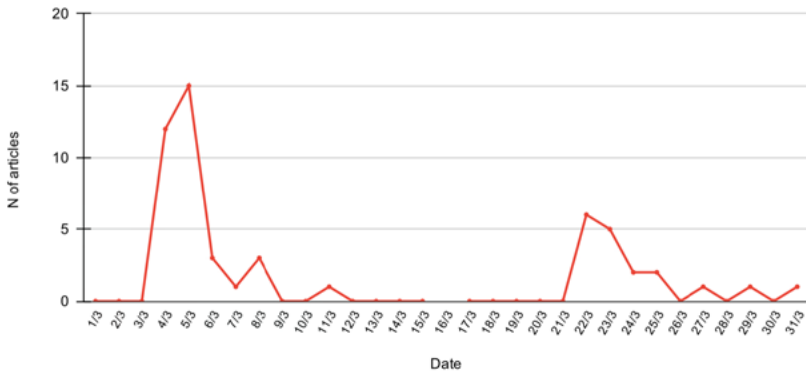
The law on fakes and its second edition were passed by the State Duma in a record-setting time. Both of the laws were introduced for readings as amendments to the different laws that had already passed the first reading, one in May 2018 and another one in January 2022. Such an approach allowed the State Duma to pass the law through the second and third readings, receive the approval of the Federation Council (or Senate), and the signature of the president on the very same day. The new edition of the law required four days. As shown by Graph 5, the law on fakes was not mentioned in the state press before the peak that happened on January 4th. The new edition did not receive the same attention from the press as the original law.

Sixteen of 35 (46%) articles devoted to the original law on fakes repeated almost the same paragraph with several iterations, stating that the »special military operation« was aimed at »demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine,« and at the protection of people »who have been subjected to genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years.« It was emphasized that the armed forces would only strike military infrastructure, but nothing would threaten the civilian population of Ukraine, and as the President of Russia emphasized, »there is no question of the occupation of Ukraine.« Therefore, the citizens of another country as well as citizens of Russia, the Russian troops, and the country as a whole were named as referent objects under threat. One of the most popular arguments justifying the strict punishments was voiced by the press secretary of the president, the heads of the regions, and by secretary of the Union of Journalists of Russia – all of these actors stated that an information war was declared to Russia and there was necessity to protect the country.

The Chairman of the State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, insisted: »If we succumb to the influence of those who make such statements, our country may not exist.« Moreover, various articles underlined that the truth should be protected at all costs, and »those who tell the truth may not be afraid in this case for anything. At the same time, the involvement of foreign intelligence services supposedly coordinated by NATO was also mentioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The coverage of the second edition also involved a justification of the invasion (in 3 of 18 articles). However, this coverage struck a rather neutral tone describing the new amendments, the fines, and criminal punishment, and no discussion about the law was reflected. The necessity to »strengthen the fight against fakes and all unlawful activities« was used as a formal justification.

Figure 5  
Law on fakes, with amendments (March 2022)



Source: Own illustration

## Conclusions

New technological developments have transformed the public sphere in modern societies in remarkable ways. The utopian belief was voiced that the internet can become the new barrier-free forum where active and open participation of citizens in the discussion of socially significant issues is granted. Nevertheless, already in the beginning of the online era, scholars raised concerns about the fragmentation of audiences (HABERMAS 2006).

Nowadays, it is increasingly difficult to establish a monopoly on information as there are countless sources available online without paywall, in various languages, representing discourses that differ from the official one. In order to justify the legitimacy of government actions, the propaganda machinery had to create a new media environment, where undesirable sources were not so immediately visible due to the law on news aggregators, or simply not accessible without a VPN. Simultaneously, in this media ecosystem, different state-affiliated media have complemented and repeated the narratives translated by the state television – as was visible in the example with the framing of the law on foreign agents or the law on fakes; the same justification was repeated in almost all the articles on the topic. As a result, readers came across the same information multiple times, which created an impression of greater credibility. Moreover, astroturfers were entering alternative channels and, by posting multiple messages, repeated the same ideas.

In such a context, platforms such as Telegram became an important tool for independent outlets, for journalists to reach their audiences without restrictions, and for the organizations that fight misinformation and censorship (KOUPEL 2022). But those same affordances of Telegram that grant anonymity can also be used as a powerful instrument of state propaganda by reproducing the same state-approved discourse.

These are the new types of censorship compared to the Soviet model: a flooding of the discourse, penetration of alternative channels, and repetitiveness of arguments. At the same time, the legislative framework became tougher and much more complex, however, repeating the Soviet tropes. For instance, two new laws have been forming a new »war censorship:« the so-called »law on fakes« and »law on »disinformation« are line with the decree on rumors from 1941 and the anti-American or anti-Western rhetoric which is also not in any way innovative.

Such rhetoric was identified across all the laws. In the case of foreign agents and LGBT propaganda, the clear »othering« of the actors and displacement of them, beyond the normal legal field, is in line with the securitization premises described by Buzan and Waever (2003). The same logic applies to actors who are receiving findings from abroad, or to those spreading narratives foreign to traditional Russian values. Members of elites often addressed the new edition on the LGBT propaganda as legislation that would protect traditional or family values, after the frame of aiming for the protection of children that was relevant for the first edition, had been abolished. However, the first edition of the law on the protection of children created a precedent and gave Roskomnadzor the scheme, and the tools to restrict access without a court decision and to impose censorship in this new era.

In the discussion concerning the laws on foreign agents after 2017, the us was blamed multiple times for initiating the conflict concerning the television station RT and was also mentioned in the context of »whataboutism« – shifting attention to unlawful practices of other countries. Towards 2022 and the laws on fakes, the anti-American frame and the idea of foreign interference were becoming even more strongly tied to the immediate danger of war. In the case of Yarowaya law, the anti-terrorist frame was widely used to justify strict measures. State security concerns and the fight against terrorist threats were used by governments all over the world to justify limitations on freedom of expression online. Even in media outlets that had criticized the law, the dangers were framed around the industry, the high costs of the implementation, and threats to the telecom companies.

In sum, any of the restrictive Russian laws of recent years were justified by the necessity to protect one of the following three pillars or variations of them – children, traditional or family values, or national security. Interestingly enough, the law on fakes also added the protection of truth as a security goal.

The Russian virtual public sphere is, in fact, securitized. The analysis has shown how various legislative initiatives, officially aimed at the protection of the state, society as a whole, or certain parts of it, served to securitize the online media system. The oppression of the freedom of expression was accompanied by the state capture of media, eradication of the free press, and recently by securitization processes, which were reflected, among others, in an acceptance of »anti-terroristic« laws. The legitimization of the laws, which have mitigated surveillance practices and violations of privacy, has been carried out through state media which imposed a positive framing of the law and through silencing of the intellectual elites and limiting the public discourse.

A legitimate question arises if there is any possibility for a public discussion in such over-restricted public sphere. Perrin and Vaisey (2008) apply the concept of a parallel public sphere, according to which the official discourse does not cross with the discourse proposed by the alternative channels. Atnashev and Velizhev (2020) proposed that modes of publicity describe the available public debates in the Soviet Union better than the classical theory of Habermas. The existence of different alternative channels in form of social media that are still out of official legislative control such as YouTube, TikTok, and Telegram, or in form of various Russian-speaking media and investigative projects in exile, show that the dissident political discourse still exists. In order to access the audiences under conditions of new censorship, several independent media united to create a common platform in a form of a smartphone application. This makes it impossible for the Russian authorities to block access to a video or to remove an article. This block-protected aggregator is called *Samizdat* and clearly creates a parallel with the Soviet practice. Such virtual public sphere is, however, highly fragmented.

This analysis has certain limitations, as it was not possible to know how many news articles had already been deleted from the database used to create the sample. Also, the analysis covered exclusively the official state discourse; alternative channels and media outlets were not considered in this study. It is, however, highly important to analyze the official discourse and its metamorphoses throughout time, as on the one hand it shows the issues that are perceived by elites in Russia as threatening and on the other hand also objects that are presented as being threatened.

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*Translation by Yulia Belinskaya*

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## Debate

Barbara Thomaß

### »Defend the institutions!«

Public service media safeguard democracy

**Abstract:** Expectations for the reform of public service broadcasting in Germany are enormous. Just as great, if not greater, is the need to meet these expectations – and the motivation to achieve this is more than high. There is a real danger of failing to meet these excessive expectations and a process of ailing setting in, with changes in political majorities in the states possible. So far, only two minister presidents have publicly stated their support for considering a merger of ARD and ZDF, while others advocate a reduction in the license fee (given current rates of inflation, a freeze would have the same effect) on an almost daily basis. When even an ARD director states that public service broadcasting does not need to »continue in its current constitution and scope« (BUHROW 2022), it becomes imperative that we scrutinize what exactly reform would mean. It has become commonplace for discussion of reform to mean budget cuts. Other areas of society (infrastructure, railways, health, social care) have shown us how spending cuts dressed up as discourse on reform have led to a wide range of problems. If reforms are to do more than just produce ideas for savings, the background to the calls for and will to reform needs to be examined.

**Keywords:** public service media, democracy, funding, independence, platformization

Since it has become common practice – sometimes ironically – to state the position or role from which an opinion on the aforementioned reform debate is given, the same will be done here: I write as an academic with expertise based on more than 30 years of research into public service media in international comparison



and experience as a member first of the Television Council and then of the Administrative Council of ZDF.

Among the many voices that have spoken in this ongoing debate, I would like to mention the calls by Carsten Brosda, Hamburg's Senator of Culture and Media, for a future concept that would answer the fundamental questions on what the broadcasters contribute to our democratic society and form the basis for deriving specific steps in the reform process (HARTUNG 2023b).

It is impossible to answer the question of what public service media does without making normative reference to the democratic quality of our society. The Federal Constitutional Court has repeated and updated this multiple times with regard to the communication landscape of today and tomorrow. One clear and highly topical recent example is its reasoning for the ruling on the State Treaty on Funding for Broadcasting [Rundfunkfinanzierungsstaatsvertrag], in which it noted the recent uncertainty regarding the credibility of sources and valuations, writing: »Given this development, the significance of the mandate assigned to license fee-funded broadcasting – to present reality in an unadulterated way through authentic, carefully researched information that differentiates between facts and opinions and not to place the sensational in the foreground, but instead to form a counterweight that safeguards diversity and offers guidance – is growing« (BVerfG 2021).

A comparison with other European countries is a useful way to judge the performance of public service media with regard to these requirements in Germany. The Media for Democracy Monitor (TRAPPEL/TOMAZ 2021) compares the state of democracy in connection with the performance and strength of public service media in eighteen countries based on numerous indicators. We can conclude that countries in which the public service media have a comparably strong position in the media landscape perform better with regard to the overarching dimensions of freedom/information, equality/interest mediation, and control/watchdog than countries in which public service media reach only a small proportion of viewers and hold a weaker position (THOMASS et al. 2022).<sup>11</sup> The data puts Germany among the group of leading nations, along with Denmark, Finland, the United Kingdom, and Sweden (HORZ-ISHAK/THOMASS 2022).

If we take as our starting point this finding that public service media provide the service expected of them by the Federal Constitutional Court at least comparatively satisfactorily, we can ask the question of which conditions and structures allow them to do this. Where deficits and problems are identified, that also means that these should not be remedied by destroying the structures that safeguarded the services up to this point.

11 For more information on the methods and indicators of the Media for Democracy Monitor, cf. TRAPPEL/TOMAZ 2022.

The public service media in Germany are a strong system – both in terms of viewer acceptance and regarding how they are funded. The license fee is one of the highest in the EU, both per household and, given the large number of fee-paying households, in total. Often seen as a problem – »too expensive« –, this can also be seen from the other perspective as a strength: There is enough money in the system for productions, cultural activities, qualified staff, a global network of correspondents, good working conditions, etc., which all together can create an attractive program.

When it comes to viewer acceptance, public service broadcasters in Germany also rank in the top third in a comparison of European countries (THOMASS et al. 2022: 192). The main news programs of ARD and ZDF are regularly quoted as the most-trusted news brands (HÖLIG et al. 2022). Comparing this strong positioning with the relevant democracy indices shows at least a correlation that we can also interpret as causality in the study named above.

Another strength of public service media in Germany is the way its independence is secured through its structures. With several layers of legal safeguards protecting its independence, public service broadcasting is in a unique position in Europe. Hardly any other EU country has a construct of public broadcasting that is so consistently designed to create distance from the state and business. This is also safeguarded by the multi-stage process of determining funding by the Kommission zur Überprüfung und Ermittlung des Finanzbedarfs der Rundfunkanstalten [Commission for Examining and Determining the Funding Needs of Broadcasters] (KEF) and the state parliaments, which is the only one of its kind in the world. Combining expertise and federal structures, the process also carries with it a certain risk of blockage, as was seen in the controversy surrounding the latest increase in the license fee. Yet the federal system of broadcasters, which is currently coming under harsh criticism regarding its multiple structures, is also unique in the world in its ability to provide such a unique diversity of content and perspectives that meets the normative imperative of a diverse media landscape. Yet within this diversity, there is also unwanted replication.

The construct of representing »groups relevant in society« in the media means that program monitoring also depicts a diversity of perspectives and societal points of view that is not seen in other systems to such an extent.

All this could and should be improved in order to ensure more efficient use of resources, more competent monitoring, depiction of a more diverse range of societal points of view, the involvement of staff and creative minds, innovation, and many other aspects that need to be developed through debate in society. And, in the last few weeks and months especially, various problems have become apparent that could impede better fulfilment of this function.

The events at rbb in particular uncovered a lack of supervision – an impression that was only consolidated over the weeks and months that followed.

Problems at the broadcasters are faced with deficits in supervision. Key examples of these problems at broadcasters include resources being wasted through multiple structures, a lack of financial sensitivity, and accusations of biased reporting, a lack of journalistic independence, excessive political influence, possible business transactions with relatives, salaries, side income and pension reserve, an excessive number of directors, too much centrality (Degeto), too little centrality (human resources), too many (radio) channels, too many repeats, cost-cutting measures in the schedule, not enough services that appeal to every group in the population, too many online activities, too little appeal to the young population who predominantly use online media, too little innovation, too much gender politics and woke programming...

If one were to dissect all these suggested problems and accusations, one would find a large number of contradictions. With different interests at work, the various actors all enter the heated debate with criticism that has been building up for years. The accusations made of the committee supervision can be summarized more briefly with the words ›failure of monitoring‹ and ›lack of expertise‹.

More detailed consideration reveals a problem with the actors: The deficiencies in the committee supervision are no different or greater than those at other large organizations (one notable example being the exhaust scandal at vw) – they are merely, entirely justifiably, the subject of fiercer debate. The central question is, who can organize the change process to improve the situation? The committees depend on policymakers; the directors cannot organize their own supervision; the states defend their own competencies, despite their limited options for exercising them; the federal government is unable to act. Who can untangle this Gordian knot? Given the impenetrability, it is no wonder that so much buck-passing goes on. Now, the Future Council is supposed to cut the knot.

All sides tend to quote the necessity of a stable license fee as a core requirement for any changes in the system of public service media. The many and diverse contributions and opinions in this vein mean that one option for securing the institution becomes taboo from the offset: an appropriate and modest increase in the license fee that, given inflation, wage increases and television-specific price rises, becomes necessary if the role assigned by the states is to be fulfilled. The funding debate is held ahead of the content-related debate – before there is even a hint of a consensus on how the public service media of the future should look.

From the point of view of these efforts to reduce the license fee – and freezing it amounts to the same thing given the conditions described –, the proposals to close small channels like SR and RB, or thinking aloud about »merging« ARD and ZDF, are certainly logical. Yet there must be some doubt about whether this would solve the aforementioned problems in the system.

The reform proposals made in the past can be divided into process-related and material solutions. Does the focus lie on the procedure for potential reform

(round table, commission of experts, etc.) or are specific suggestions made for the problems named? In addition, it is also important to distinguish whether the spotlight is on the immediate crisis, which needs to be combatted with new rules and standards, or whether future-oriented solutions for safeguarding public service media are the focus.

Optimizing administrative structures, as presented by mdr Director Karola Wille, aims to streamline processes within ARD (they had already been initiated before the rbb scandal) and targets the myriad calls to minimize costs and prevent duplicate structures. ARD is currently conducting comprehensive administrative reform that involves harmonizing and standardizing all nine ARD branches, as well as Deutschlandradio and Deutsche Welle, with SAP-supported business processes (HARTUNG 2023a). By no fault of its own, ARD is an unwieldy construct due to the necessity of working consensually. The harsh public debate has now provided a great deal of pressure and motivation to drive the aforementioned processes forward.

A lot has been written about how to improve supervision and its structures. This now needs to be developed further: more experts in the committees (HAIN/RÖSNER 2022), more advanced training and expertise for the committees, strengthening committee monitoring with better-equipped committee offices and their options for buying in external expertise, harmonization of standards for committee monitoring.

If we focus reforms and therefore solutions not only on the issues named above, but also on problems of democratic communication that emerge from a media landscape that results from the unrestrained globalization of media communication, this presents different questions.

The lack of regulation is the key factor that has presented us with a communication landscape that Pfetsch et al. once described as »dissonant public spheres« (PFETSCH et al. 2018). It is this dissonance – more than mere disharmony, but instead the danger of a democracy-threatening inability to conduct discourse in society and a heterogenization that dissolves societal cohesion – that motivated the Federal Constitutional Court to issue the warning above.

It is important to note that the causes of the poor quality of democratic discourse and the apparently unbridgeable differences in opinion are too deep-seated to be resolved by a working media system alone. Yet it is just as important to note here that – see above – media that are the responsibility of society, publicly financed, and publicly monitored play an essential role in maintaining these qualities.

Furthermore, it must be considered that, in recent years, we have observed a constant increase in the media time budget and the proportion of the household budget spent on media on an individual level, as well as an increase in turnover on the media market. This makes the media market a growth market on both

the supply and demand sides. Yet is it said that a key pillar of the media system is shrinking?

We know that the platformization of media communication brings with it the threat of further developments and dangers, such as manipulated digital election campaign communication, algorithm-controlled polarization and aggressive communication behavior in the digital communication infrastructures, and the way that algorithms that serve the corporate goals of commercially active intermediaries like Facebook and Google influence the selection and processing of information.

Taking the position that public service media is more important than ever for maintaining democratic discourses, I believe that two things need to happen first and foremost: Public acceptance of the broadcasters needs to be increased, and the taboo that states that the license fee must not be increased needs to be broken. In the first case, all political actors carry a great responsibility – including the broadcasters themselves, of course. But while protective fire is still holding off all unjustified accusations, all acknowledgements that we need public service broadcasting are trite. We need diverse voices to emphasize how we benefit from public service media and why it is important. The previous arguments count here, and new ones are welcome.

In analyzing what is driving the de-democratization observed in many countries, the renowned Carnegie Institute comes to the conclusion that democracies are also being hollowed out because conservative (not anti-democratic!) forces are undermining the democratic institutions (CAROTHERS/PRESS 2022). In his polemic »On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century,« written against the background of the rise of Trumpism, Timothy Snyder calls on people to »Defend institutions! ... Institutions don't protect themselves. They go down like dominoes unless each is defended from the beginning« (SNYDER 2021: 13). It is not possible to both defend and work on shrinkage processes at the same time.

Defending public service media also means equipping them with the funding they need. The Federal Constitutional Court has spelled out their highly diverse role. With society increasingly fragmented, citizens and media users need a more diverse range of services. These services, which need to account for the required democratic, social, and cultural needs, must be able to assert themselves in competition with other services. Otherwise, they will become marginalized in the long term. This competition also benefits those who do not receive the public service programming, as these services serve as benchmarks for the commercial broadcasters and prevent their services from falling to an unacceptable level (EISENEGGER/UDRIS 2018).

The role that the institutions must play if they are to enhance their relevance and acceptance in democratic society is large and challenging. Information services must once again reach younger people and groups who have no real contact

with public service broadcasters; debates in society need to be reflected from all fields, as well as culture, education, and science; presence on all platforms must be increased and the platform strategy expanded. This, in turn, demands strong, Europe-wide partners, including from civil society, allowing transparency, communication, and participation to be organized. The difference between the services of public service broadcasters and private, commercial providers needs to become clearly visible. All these activities and attractive services require competent, qualified staff who, given the current shortage of specialist staff, will only be attracted by good pay.

Given the debate about reforming the system of public service media and efforts to maintain it in an effective form, it is vital that consensus is reached on the following questions: Which functions should public service media fulfil? What are the problems that are currently preventing them from fulfilling these functions? What is causing this? How can these causes be remedied?

Actors in media policymaking must not be put off by the funding required. Reducing the funding provided for these enormous communicative tasks might resolve the acceptance problem in the short term, but it will exacerbate it in the long term. And the problem will become impossible to solve if the political pressure is permanently maintained or even increased through rhetorical delegitimization of the broadcasters.

Society as a whole benefits from public service media services that are essential for public discourse in our democracy. Media policymakers therefore need to fulfil the funding guarantee decided by the Federal Constitutional Court and ensure that there are sufficient funds to fulfill and further develop the mandate. Before the reforming zeal that the media policymakers in the state chancelleries display in pursuing their cost-cutting agenda gets out of hand, it is crucial that the roadmap for the future called for by Carsten Brosda is in place, responding to fundamental questions on the contribution the broadcasters make to our democratic society.

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## Essay

Gabriele Hooffacker

# Content creation

## A new phase of journalism?

**Abstract:** Conventional providers of news and journalism have now been joined by a new group of actors, known by terms like ›influencer‹ and ›content creator.‹ While the job description ›content creator‹ usually describes professions from the world of content marketing, some successful content creators also adhere to journalistic standards and are received accordingly. This essay uses games journalism as an example to present a model for the way a segment of journalistic functions, such as communicating knowledge and providing information that allows people to form their own opinions, is shifting onto new actors and channels.

**Keywords:** journalism, content creator, games journalism, special interest, let's play

A small company from the Allgäu region of Germany recently published an advertisement on LinkedIn for a vacancy as a content creator. But what does someone with this job title actually do? According to the advert, the person is responsible for »providing content in line with our marketing goals« and for »visualizing and planning content that reflects the brand style and corporate values« (CONTENT CREATOR 2022). So far, so clear – the job profile is all about marketing. Ten or fifteen years ago, it might have been called ›PR editor.‹ The requirements asked for in the advert, however, are more interesting:

- »You have a degree in a creative field and/or enjoy writing, photography and filming
- You have basic technical understanding and experience of a production environment
- You are curious about innovative product technologies

- You speak German and English well, and are a team player with good communication skills«

The salary is not mentioned, but the advert does make the statement: »We have a ›Chief Happiness Officer.««

Private institutions offer relevant courses and degree programs. At the SAE Institute, students can study content such as storytelling, visual language and social media in the faculty of »Content Creation & Online Marketing.« Their requirements for the job profile are »professional networking, multimedia competence and, of course, journalistic expertise« (SAE INSTITUTE 2022).

The job profile is part of the field of content marketing – a field that by definition is based on journalism and its tools, but is subordinate to marketing objectives (cf. FRÜHBRODT 2016).

## Is content creation journalism?

The distinction is not so easy to make in practice. The latest user research in communication sciences confirms the private findings of the author, who regularly presents her students with examples from both fields: These students, and people in general, are essentially able to differentiate between journalistic content and marketing-led content, but this ability needs to be honed and trained. ›Content‹ is often more attractive to a young audience than journalistic output.

When asked specifically, young adults are certainly aware and conscious of the differences. The question of the extent to which the content creators' social media channels can be considered journalism regularly leads to intensive discussions in seminars: What is journalism?

Leonie Wunderlich and Sascha Hölig from the Hans Bredow Institute have examined the ›new‹ actors in the journalistic field. They describe the subject objectively: »With the establishment of social network platforms as a source of information, conventional providers of news and journalism have been joined by a large number of private individuals and non-professional communicators who spread their content via their accounts« (WUNDERLICH/HÖLIG 2022: 12). The authors also use the term ›content creation‹ to describe this phenomenon: »These providers and actors are referred to hereinafter as ›social media content creators‹ (SMCCs). This appears appropriate particularly with regard to journalism in social media, as the term ›influencer‹ implies influencing the users in a targeted way« (WUNDERLICH/HÖLIG 2022: 13).

The good news from the study is that young people (aged 14-17 years) and young adults (aged 18-24 years) are aware of the economic conditions under which SMCCs work. Furthermore, they certainly differentiate between people who focus primarily on beauty, fashion, lifestyle, and fitness (›real, real

influencers« and those like Tilo Jung, Ole Nymoen, and Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim, whose content they use to gain information (WUNDERLICH/HÖLIG 2022: 20).

This audience of young people states that »knowledge and information« play a key role as a reason to use social media, alongside »entertainment and fun,« »social closeness and insight,« »inspiration and motivation,« and »orientation and values.« The study's authors then took a closer look at the young people's relationship with journalism. They found »that journalism and journalistic providers and actors are granted a special position in the sense that they are associated with certain evaluations and expectations that are also applied as criteria to differentiate them from other social media content creators« (WUNDERLICH/HÖLIG 2022: 33).

These expectations include impartiality and objectivity, especially showing »no personal opinion« (WUNDERLICH/HÖLIG 2022: 35). In connection with this, the young people surveyed classify the SMCCs in a sophisticated way by function, for example those that help them form their own opinion.

## Games journalism as an example

Surprisingly, none of the young people in Leonie Wunderlich's survey mentioned the topic of games and the associated actors on social media platforms. It is impossible to say whether this is due to the choice of interviewees or the way in which the question was asked.

Yet games journalism or »computer game journalism« (WIKIPEDIA AUTHORS 2021) can serve as an example of a classic special interest topic whose forms, formats, and channels can represent a model for the shift of journalistic functions to new actors and channels.

Sociodemographic data shows why the field of video and computer games is such a useful example: More than 37 million people in Germany aged 16 years and over play computer games regularly, with the players relatively evenly divided between women and men. A lot of gamers are more than 50 years old; 11 percent are over 60 (cf. STATISTA 2022b). Sales of computer and video games and games hardware were worth around EUR 4.4 billion in Germany in 2018 (cf. HOOFFACKER/BIGL 2020). Another argument is that the games journalism audience has an above-average affinity with IT, making them likely to be among the first to apply future developments to their usage behavior.

Games journalism has its roots in tech journalism, but today is a classic special interest topic (cf. HOOFFACKER 2012). With the advent of home computers in the 1980s, numerous magazines emerged aimed at a lay audience interested in computers. Following their heyday in the 1990s, both the number of print titles and their print runs continued to fall until 2015 (cf. KOHLICK 2016).

Games have now entered the mass media. Journalistic pieces on the topic can be found in sections as diverse as business (economic significance of the games sector), culture (pop culture classification of games as a mass phenomenon), sport (professional e-sports), politics (significance of a particular region as a games location), technology (growing demands on hardware, software, and internet connection), and, of course, media (reviews, game tips) (cf. HOOFFACKER/KOHLICK 2023, not yet published).

With its stars, the »let's play« format achieves access figures on social media platforms like YouTube and Twitch that even established online platforms of conventional media can only dream of. The lists of the most successful channels are all topped by content creators from the gaming sector. Gronkh, for example, has around 4.89 million subscribers to his YouTube channel (STATISTA 2022a). The 2022 ranking of German Twitch streamers was led by MontanaBlack88 with around 4.7 million followers, followed by Trymacs with 3.15 million followers, and TheRealKnossi with 2.06 million followers (TWITCHMETRICS 2022). The »let's play« format has long been the subject of research in communication sciences. The book *Phänomen Let's play-Video*, published by Judith Ackermann (2017), is also fundamental to user research.

Games journalist Robert Kohlick, who today runs the news desk at *spieletipps.de*, wrote his bachelor's thesis on the shift in computer game journalism from print to online (cf. KOHLICK 2016). He found that the online sector had grown more and more, in parallel to the dramatic fall in print runs. Yet this trend, too, had begun to slow even during the period of the study.

The sales figures for the period 2007 to 2015 show a significant drop in sales on average across all the selected magazines. The biggest fall over the nine years, in both absolute and percentage terms, was suffered by *Computer BILD Spiele*, which sold just under 291,000 fewer copies in 2015 than in 2007 – a fall of 81.25%.

Sales at shops and kiosks have suffered particularly dramatic falls since then. Although the absolute number of subscriptions also continues to fall, it is not dropping anywhere near as quickly as the total sales figures. This phenomenon is seen across the magazine sector. As a result, subscriptions make up an ever-increasing percentage of total sales and are thus becoming ever more important.

However, the number of subscriptions also fell for all magazines within the selected period. Just as in the overall sales figures, *PC Games* and *Computer BILD Spiele* suffered most, with both magazines losing around 60% of their subscribers over the nine years. *Computer BILD Spiele* then ceased publishing.

## Stagnation and decrease in online reach, too

According to its own figures, the main GameStar site had more than four million unique users per month in 2015. Those interested gained free access to news and tests related to gaming. Today, GameStar keeps its test reports behind a paywall (GameStar Plus). The operating company no longer publishes online access figures individually, but merely across all five portals together. The figure for June 2022 was 4.82 million unique users according to agof (cf. HOOFFACKER/KOHLICK 2023, not yet published).

The IVW's data for the period 2007-2014 was used as the basis for estimating how the reach of the selected magazines' online portals developed. All the magazines saw an average annual rise in visits up to 2012 or 2010 (GamePro). While the ratio of page impressions (PI) and visits varies between the magazines, the average values for all magazines do show a pattern. In 2007, the average is still 5.69 page impressions per visit. The year after, this average rises to 6.32. In the years that follow that, the value falls to 6.04 by 2011, but remains relatively constant.

From that time, however, the value falls significantly until 2014. Even in 2012, the figure is only 5.34 page impressions per visit, followed by just 4.81 in 2013 and 4.34 in 2014. It is a clear and rapid drop.

Users appear to access fewer subpages each time they visit the website. More and more people are accessing the site via search engines or news aggregators and then leaving it again quickly – the complete opposite of regular readers who generate many more PIs per visit.

All in all, the comparison between print and online clearly shows that the magazines' range continues to shrink, while that of the websites continues to rise. Yet here, too, it is clear that the increase in range becomes smaller and smaller from 2012, before turning into a decrease in 2014. Despite this, the increase in range of the online segment exceeds the loss of range of the magazines significantly, both in percentage terms and in absolute figures.

»It looks a little as though the future of games journalism lies with YouTubers, influencers and content creators on Instagram, TikTok and Twitch« (HOOFFACKER/KOHLICK 2023, not yet published).

## Games journalism as a model?

Why does the author believe that games journalism is suitable as a model for the way actors and channels shift in journalism? Games journalism began in the conventional print sector, before the internet became significant as a medium. Its heyday was the 1990s, when the advertising markets in the sector exploded. The fall in print runs and sales figures for conventional computer magazines began

in around 2007, accompanied initially by an increase in access figures online. Yet this development, too, stagnated as early as 2012 – at just the same time as the topic became dramatically more relevant.

Although more people are playing computer games than ever before, conventional games journalism has become a niche product once again. In contrast, social media content creators are a mass phenomenon for which monetarization is working.

What hypotheses could emerge from this for a model of the development of journalism – as bold as this may be? In the author's view, the following distinct phases can be observed (cf. Fig. 1):

The rise of print journalism begins as a niche market where advertising revenue is secured from a growth market. While the topic develops into a mass phenomenon, however, the advertising markets begin to disappear due to the shift to online platforms.

First, the print ranges and print runs fall, while online advertising revenue rises. But this development and the increasing importance of subscriptions are not able to compensate for the drop in revenue.

The editorial offices try to counteract the fall by using audiovisual forms such as podcasts and live streams – but they are unable to match the success and the revenue of the new actors. The advertising market has shifted to influencers and SMCC.

To qualify this, it is important to note that games journalism is a topic trend in the special interest segment. The findings could best be transferred to other special interest topics, such as the popular rural living craze (the key example is the rise and fall of the magazine *Landlust* – shift of the use value-oriented topic to platforms like YouTube or Pinterest). Despite this, a thought experiment does not hurt here: What if the special interest field of games journalism in nuce describes a possible path for local journalism, for example?

One can only speculate on how the story continues, how long the content creation boom will last, and what might come next.

»For journalism, it raises the question of what we can learn from the success of social media content and how we can better serve the usage motivation of young people and young adults with our own services,« Meinolf Ellers is quoted as saying on the website of the Hans Bredow Institute, about the Wunderlich and Hölzig study quoted above (HANS BREDOW INSTITUTE 2022). One goal of the overall project, he continues, is to work with media partners to design options for collaboration between influencers and editorial offices and test these in pilot projects – something that is done regularly at *funk*, the website from ARD and ZDF, for example.

Figure 1  
Shifts of actors and channels occurring in journalism



Source: Own illustration

Which functions of conventional journalism can be adopted by which variety of social media content creators, and which cannot? The obvious functions verifiably include communicating knowledge and providing information for people to form their own opinions. The study by Wunderlich and Hölzig provides starting points for this from user research. But there is still no answer to the fundamental question.

## About the author

**Gabriele Hooffacker**, Prof. Dr. phil., (\*1959), is co-editor of *Journalistik* and teaches at HTWK in Leipzig in the field of »media-compatible content preparation.« During her career as a professional journalist in the 1990s, she wrote for computer magazines such as *Happy Computer*, *Computer Welt*, *Chip*, and *c't*. Gabriele Hooffacker edits the textbook series »Journalistische Praxis,« founded by Walther von La Roche (1936-2010) and published by Springer vs, and the »Leipziger Beiträge zur Computerspielekultur« series. She is a judge for the Alternative Media Prize.

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## 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.

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## Reviews

**Richard David Precht und Harald Welzer: *Die Vierte Gewalt. Wie Mehrheitsmeinung gemacht wird, auch wenn sie keine ist.* [The Fourth Estate. How majority opinion is formed, even if it isn't one.] Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer 2022, 288 pages, EUR 22.**

*Reviewed by Beatrice Dernbach*

What an uproar. In fall 2022, the media sector was hit by a hurricane: Richard David Precht and Harald Welzer's book *Die Vierte Gewalt. Wie die Mehrheitsmeinung gemacht wird, auch wenn sie keine ist* made waves. In my three decades of teaching and research in media and communication studies and many years working as a journalist in newspaper editorial offices – long before digitalization and the establishment of »direct media« –, I cannot remember another book on media ever having spent months on the bestseller lists or having triggered such outrage in the sector. Having watched various interviews and talk show appearances by the authors, and read many (mainly) negative reviews, I bought the book in mid-October. Philosopher Precht (*Wer bin ich – und wenn ja, wie viele?*) and sociologist, social psychologist, and future researcher Welzer have remained true to the attitude I had perceived in them: The feeling that their sometimes maudlin (especially Precht) and often arrogant (especially Welzer) style evokes in me (and not just me) is more defensive than sympathetic. Yet I still wanted to get to the bottom of the storm without these feelings clouding my judgment. Given my own practical experience and my academic knowledge, the (new) findings are far outweighed by the sense of déjà-vu. The text is neither distinctive nor particularly original. The authors frequently use showy language that is very similar to the subjects of their critique. They describe the increasing tabloidization of the serious newspapers of record (which has been proven to exist and is referred to as convergence) as a »culture of assholery« (p. 10), lament the »collective narrowing of plurality« (p. 65), are amazed at the »peculiar placelessness of the newspapers of record« (p. 99), and, in the chapter on »Gala journalism studies,« attack the Deputy Chief Editor of *Welt*, Robin Alexander. His tweets from the coalition negotiations in October 2019 are »read with great excitement in the meetings

[...], which appears to trigger informational diarrhea among the participants and now everything has to come out« (p. 115). And they create the term »cursor journalism,« which I do not understand to this day.

More impressive are Precht and Welzer's conclusions. Although the very first sentence contains a glaring grammatical error, I agree with the main premise of the book: »Germany, one of the freest countries [error in the German original] in the world, has a problem with the sense of free speech« (p. 7). In terms of content, a lot reminds me of Siegfried Weischenberg's book *Medienkrise und Medienkrieg* [Media crisis and media war] (2018). An academic in journalism studies and (former) practitioner, he is also highly critical in addressing the »crisis of modern journalism.« But his work is harder to read and (sadly) never achieved the public attention that the topic deserves.

Many practitioners reacted with poison;<sup>1</sup> academics in media and communication studies took a more moderate tone, albeit some with a hefty dose of sarcasm. Bernhard Pörksen analyzes Precht and Welzer's work as a »lesson in four acts that reveals the mechanisms and deficits of the public discourse as if under a magnifying glass:« The first act builds suspense – the fire is lit, and scandal implied; the second act attacks and disparages; the third act is dominated by »hyperventilation« and »excesses of attention;« the scene of the final act is defined by »new hostility« and »false balance.« Pörksen does admit that there needs to be more »hard-hitting investigative media journalism« – not least in order to reach the »editorial society« that he himself has created. Yet he also expounds the view (shared by other academics) that Precht and Welzer have discredited themselves, arguing that although they are »certainly no hooligans from the lying press, [they are] left-wing liberals with strong opinions whose book now feeds into the typical talk show script for the role of dazzling protester against political correctness.« But so much »media-critical populism« is impossible.

Do Precht and Welzer really paint a »distorted image free from empirical evidence« (Pörksen)? I don't think so. It is more like free from theory – but they never claimed to want to reflect on or ground what they have observed scientifically. They call for more pluralism in media debates on politics, less personalization in the tonality of defamation, more listening, and less hitting out. As a philosopher and a social psychologist, in my view both of them know what they are talking about at a meta level: the state of society in general and the loss of freedom of speech in particular – not how it is suppressed in autocracies and dictatorships by domination, power, and violence, but how it is influenced by ratings, mainstreaming, and echo chambers. Their central question is therefore:

1 To name just two examples: Stefan Niggemeier at <https://uebermedien.de/77737/das-buch-von-precht-und-welzer-ist-fast-so-richtig-wie-die-bahn-puenktlich/> and Stephan-Götz Richter at [https://www.focus.de/politik/meinung/gastbeitrag-von-stephan-goetz-richter-precht-und-welzer-der-irrig-weg-von-deutschlands-anderen-beleidigten-leberwuersten\\_id\\_158924519.html](https://www.focus.de/politik/meinung/gastbeitrag-von-stephan-goetz-richter-precht-und-welzer-der-irrig-weg-von-deutschlands-anderen-beleidigten-leberwuersten_id_158924519.html)



»How can a liberal democracy with a plural media landscape endanger itself?« In the eleven chapters, they provide experiences, examples (focused on the three topics of the war in Ukraine, migration, and the pandemic), and evidence, refer to studies and surveys, and analyze causes and effects. None of it is new. But it seems to be triggering when compressed in this way.

Yes, Precht and Welzer are exploiting their fame. In doing so, they are in the company of other critical intellectuals including, for example, Juli Zeh (lawyer and author). She, too, thinks about the present and future of society, albeit in a different style. She takes clear positions, writes popular books, but does not enjoy making public appearances as much as some of her male colleagues do (cf. SIMON 2023).

Richard David Precht and Harald Welzer know how media work. It is cheap to accuse them of using exactly these mechanisms to become (even more?) famous. Not least because the media themselves – from *NDR-Talkshow* to *SPIEGEL* to *Medium Magazin* – seem to have been keen to invite the pair on in order to gain attention and increase ratings.

What are we left with? The *knowledge* that the fundamental debate on the role of the media in society is far from over and needs to be continued – but that the current tone is all wrong. The *memory* of the time as a deskman, when journalism by official statement and opinion-driven reporting existed even decades ago and was not fought by everyone. The *insight* as a journalism researcher that the demands on the German media system are rightly very tough. Although there is room for improvement, overall the balance is positive compared to the many worse systems around the world. I follow the example of one of my journalistic heroes, Theo Sommer, who died in August 2022 at the age of 92 and always held fast to *three principles*: Say what is. Say what it means. Monitor those with power. Journalists need to protect themselves against three other variants: enactment journalism, unrestrained attack journalism, and »bookmaker journalism that treats political processes like horse races: All that matters is who is in front and who is trailing.« Sommer demonstrated an opinion, Precht and Welzer a pugnacious position. They have every right to do so. And it is good that they use that right.

About the reviewer

**Dr. Beatrice Dernbach** is Professor of Practical Journalism in the program Technical Journalism/Technical PR at TH Nuremberg. She has held a research professorship in sustainability and science communication since October 2021. Her focus areas include specialized journalism, sustainability, and ecology in journalism, narration and trust in journalism, and science communication.

*Translation: Sophie Costella*

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**Alla G. Bepalova, Horst Pöttker (eds.) (2022): *Mediensysteme in Deutschland und Russland. Handbuch*. [Media Systems in Germany and Russia. Handbook.] From the series: Journalism International, vol. 9. Cologne: Herbert von Halem, 364 pages, 34,- EUR.**

*Reviewed by Jürg Häusermann*

Alla Grigor'evna Bepalova was born in 1956. I imagine that she grew up reading *Komsomol'skaja Pravda*, listening to songs on *Radio Mayak*, and watching Soviet television shows. Horst Pöttker, born in 1944, was just learning to read when the first editions of the newspaper *Bild* appeared. He grew up in a media world that included the *International Frühschoppen* as well as *Radio Luxemburg*. In 2003, the two of them launched a joint project whose goals included a »German-Russian Dictionary of Journalism« (12). Following the *Manual of Journalistic Genres*, they are now presenting the result of their collaboration, a collection of essays and materials entitled *Media Systems in Germany and Russia*. The book is divided into the sections Media Systems, Print Media, Radio, Television, Online Media, and Agencies. Almost a third of the volume is taken up by a comparison of statistical data on the market and consumption of journalistic media in the two countries (as of 2015).

The articles in this book begin with definitions, providing a historical overview of each media format. Most of the sections also reference research. Thus, many of the contributions make great introductions to their topic. Overall, the books gives Russian and German readers an insight into the other country's media system and its formats.

This manual is about journalistic media. As such, it does not include dedicated sections on entertainment, advertising and non-public communication, but features these topics in the sections Print Media, Radio, Television, Online Media, and Agencies. Current issues of press freedom are only addressed in passing (with the exception of a detailed article on »Media Regulation« by Marcel Machill, Nikolai Buslenko, and Anna Kapustina, see pp. 40-47).

To me, the book's greatest value is that it constitutes a document of scholarly collaboration across cultural and political boundaries. Some sections juxtapose texts on the same topic, written from different perspectives by authors with different academic biographies. Some of the texts are joint products by Russian-German teams, offering alternating perspectives and insightful comparisons. Throughout the volume, it is evident how fruitful and creative, but also how makeshift and tedious a collaboration between these two scientific traditions and cultures can be.

That's also what makes the six-page preface such an interesting read. As far as I'm concerned, it could have been ten times as long, because it's not about media systems, but about the enterprise of ›intercultural scientific collaboration‹. It explains that each article required seven laborious editorial steps, which took so long that by the time a section was done, an eighth step was needed to add and update new content and data. It also offers a glimpse into the many linguistic and cultural communication issues that riddled the authors' interactions, from e-mail and telephone conversations and shared dinners to cab rides, which gave the project a ›rather rare quality of interculturality« (16) between the two countries. Brief references to ›occasional misunderstandings« make the readers eager to hear more details, stories, and anecdotes to illustrate these differences in ›languages, traditions, and mentalities« (12). It would make outside parties appreciate the value of this undertaking even more. We might learn more about the different academic traditions of the two countries, which have brought forth such very different fruits – at least in the social sciences and humanities. The book was published when Russia, once again, attacked Ukraine, starting a war that is still ongoing, and bringing academic cooperation to an abrupt halt. It not only disrupted scientific exchange on research in physics, but also hybrid fruits of mutual understanding like the present volume.

The introductions to the first part (Media Systems) address the basic concepts of media, the media system, media typology, media regulation, and media companies. This created insightful textbook pieces, such as ›Media, Mass Media« by Horst Pöttker and Evgenij Achmadulin (pp. 24-29), where they address issues with the concept of media, summarize the development of information media in cultural history, and point out current usage of the term in everyday life and academia. Similarly, the article ›Media System« by Marcel Machill and Evgenij Achmadulin works with common concepts of systems theory, outlining political and economic problems that are taken up again in later articles. Equally informative, and using a shared didactic approach, the contribution on ›Media Companies« by Jürgen Heinrich and Julija Naumova (pp. 48-55) is focused on Russian examples, yet meets the overarching claim of establishing a connection with the economic and political system. The topic ›Media Regulation« (by Marcel Machill, Nikolaj Buslenko, and Anna Kapustina, cf. pp. 40-47) is also presented as a systematic comparison, first contrasting the conditions in which the various media operate in Russia and in Germany, then discussing current issues regarding possibilities and limits of regulation.

In this chapter, you really get the feeling that people sat down together, compared their ideas, and then crafted them into a joint text. We won't find out how this process took place (and which media they used) and what else they may have discussed; but since the piece does, for example, contain critical references to

the ownership of Russian media, signed off by both the German and the Russian author, one can imagine how some of this process may have gone down.

The reader is also led into lesser-known gardens of the other culture and its media science, for example in Alla Bepalova's text »Media Typology« (pp. 34-40). The classification of periodicals according to publisher, target audience, functions, tasks, and depiction of reality (topics) is reminiscent of the meticulous efforts to classify objects in other domains of the humanities, such as linguistics. The article »Types of Newspapers and Magazines,« for example, makes a distinction between »supranational (global), pan-Russian, regional, and local newspapers and magazines« according to their area of distribution (p. 68). Even the word »pan-Russian,« which Western Europeans would just call »national,« speaks volumes, reminding us that in Russia, »national« would refer to ethnicity and thus also imply centuries of struggles. The classification is further divided, not only into »country, city, district, and village publications,« but also »corporate publications,« such as magazines published by farming collectives and other large enterprises – another hint at the worlds of difference that lie between the two media systems.

Some of the essays on individual media were written in teams, while others are juxtapositions of a German and a Russian text on the same topic. For example, all contributions on the topic of »Radio« are collaborations (by Bernd-Peter Arnold, Vladislav Smirnov and Tatjana Lebedeva, cf. pp. 110-145). These texts alternate between presentations of German and Russian conditions and their history, even if the comparison may not be entirely complete (for example, under the title »Radio Program,« cf. 116-123, the topic of »format radio« only addresses Germany). The section on »Online Media« (cf. pp. 186-211) was also written by a team (Klaus Meier and Vitalij Viničenko), which is why a cohesive concept of public communication is apparent throughout the piece, guided by the question of how various actors interact in the information process.

In the sections that feature two consecutive articles which merely share the same title, it is not always apparent whether the authors coordinated. For example, Mike Kortsch wrote a very clear piece on the various genres of »Television Journalism« (cf. pp. 176-178), also citing examples, while Roman Černov (cf. pp. 180-184) writes mainly about journalistic television jobs. In this and certain other cases, I would have liked to see at least some form of facilitation to reveal the overarching objective of the two texts.

All articles are printed in both German and Russian. The editors emphasize that their goal was to preserve the unique style of each language in the translation. That endeavor, however, sometimes turned out to be too much of a good thing – for example, when a German sentence has no verb just because Russian grammar allows it. Word choice could also have used the critical eye of a proofreader. For example, on page 156f. a »rough distinction« is translated into

Russian as a »fundamental difference« (glubokoe različie). Even some of the headlines leave the reader perplexed. Why would you use »Technical Terms« for the German title of a chapter whose Russian counterpart is entitled »Key Words« (ključevye ponjatija)? Why are the German language titles »Distribution and Dissemination« translated into Russian with the same term twice (rasprostranenie – »dissemination«)?

Of course, this also highlights the pitfalls of cooperation across geographical and linguistic borders. But some it could have been avoided by a little more careful editing – especially since throughout the book, the authors' efforts to reach a mutual understanding beyond cultural and political differences are so apparent.

It may be a long time before Russians and Germans find a common approach to the topic of »Media Systems«. But this is exactly why it is so exciting to have a book that shows us how such mutual rapprochement might look – and proves that, despite everything, collaborative work is possible.

About the reviewer

**Jürg Häusermann**, Dr. phil., studied German and Russian language and literature in Zurich and Moscow (USSR). He has worked as a radio and print journalist and served as Professor of Media Studies at the University of Tübingen from 1993 to 2017. In addition to journalistic textbooks, he has published texts on media language and media rhetoric, among other things.

*Translation: Kerstin Trimble*

*This review first appeared in *rezensionen:kommunikation:medien*, 28 February 2023, accessible at <https://www.rkm-journal.de/archives/23706>*

**Rita Kohlmaier (2022): *Kriegsreporterinnen. Im Einsatz für Wahrheit und Frieden.* [Female war reporters. On active service for truth and peace.] Munich: Elisabeth Sandmann Verlag, 176 pages, EUR 28.**

*Reviewed by Martina Thiele*

What particular characteristics do people who report on wars and crises have? How do they differ from other journalists who are not on the front line? And how do female war reporters differ from their male colleagues? In that they are still a minority? In that they still stand out, indeed because they are women? What are the reasons for devoting a book to »female war reporters« and their »active service for truth and peace« in 2022? One is indisputable: the depressing reality of the many wars and crises in the world.

Plenty of authors have written about the connection between the media, war, and gender, and about the way war both affirms and disrupts social orders (cf. BIRON/DUCKOWITSCH/LAMPRECHT 2020; VON DER LIPPE/OTTOSEN 2016; KLAUS/WISCHERMANN 2013; THIELE/THOMAS/VIRCHOW 2010). The theorizations of gender, heteronormativity, and (un)doing gender aim to counteract incorrect attributions of peaceableness and violence, courage and a sense of responsibility along lines of the two-gender construct or nationality. However, it is studies that argue based on difference theory, which states that women *are* different and (must) act differently from men, that have proved more popular and offered more opportunity for connection. Rita Kohlmaier, too, uses a different, female point of view and specific access to people as reasons for her focus on female war reporters: »Yet it is undisputed that the female view of the wars is a particular one. It is also a view of the silent victims, of the people who are so often referred to generally as »the civilian population.« But every one of them, male or female, has their own fate that needs to be told« (8).

Kohlmaier profiles 30 female war reporters in a volume that immediately enchants the reader with its layout, density of information, choice of images, historical perspective, and distressing topicality. Why wars? Why do people put themselves in mortal danger in order to report on them? »The world needs to see this« is the reason that all female journalists ultimately give and justifies the book's subtitle: »On active service for truth and peace.«

Although all are based on extensive research, the profiles differ widely in both length and form. There is an extensive profile of the photographer Anja Niedringhaus, who was killed in Afghanistan in 2014, yet only a small excerpt from a speech given by Antonia Rados to journalism studies students in Vienna in 2011. Kohlmaier's profiles cover a period that extends from the First World War

to Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine – although she has chosen to order them by topic, rather than chronologically.

Each of the five chapters presents between four and seven female war reporters. Chapter 1 is entitled »Live from...« and depicts the work of Christiane Amanpour, Katrin Eigendorf, Catherine Jentile, Clarissa Ward, and Antonia Rados. Chapter 2 is about »The power of images,« profiling Margaret Bourke-White, Lynsey Addario, Lee Miller, and Nicole Tung. Entitled »Reports from the front and literature,« Chapter 3 uses profiles of Martha Gellhorn, Carolin Emcke, Oriana Fallaci, Marguerite Higgins, Janine di Giovanni, Erika Mann, and Åsne Seierstad to demonstrate the overlap between journalistic forms of presentation and literary genres, as well as the enormous extent to which journalism and literature complement and feed into one another when dealing with war. Chapter 4 is dedicated to those female journalists who have lost their lives in pursuing their profession: Anja Niedringhaus, Dicky Chapelle, Marie Colvin, Gerta Taro, and Anna Politkovskaja. Featuring profiles of Nataliya Gumenyuk, Alice Schalek, Yevgenia Belorusets, Anisa Shaheed, Gisèle Kahimbani, Lyliane Safi, and Judith Raupp, Chapter 5 reflects a particular level of involvement. It is entitled »My country under fire.«

Ordering the book in this way and presenting both well-known and (thus far) less well-known journalists offers up new insights and interconnections. It becomes clear how specific the respective circumstances of a war and regional conflict are, as well as what defines »war.« According to Nicole Tunc, war is »a place of extremes – it is about how humans lose their humanity, but also how they acquire it« (9).

Kohlmaier's protagonists report on how the experience of war changes them and their view of people. They discuss what professionalism means and emphasize the particular role and responsibility of journalism. Christiane Amanpour attests to the increasing relevance of social media and social networking, for example, but also focuses attention on journalists as those who »have a duty to verify their sources, check facts, research interconnections, and pursue the stories themselves on the ground« (15). Without trained reporters who pursue a professional ethos and code of conduct, she continues, independent war reporting that fights for the truth would be impossible. But do female journalists worldwide have access to that training? Judith Raupp, who lives in the Democratic Republic of Congo and works as a freelance journalist, media coach, and media consultant in journalist training, impressively describes the adversity and the violence to which all women are constantly subjected, and the way their gender makes it all the more difficult for female journalists to learn and practice the profession.

The Elisabeth Sandmann Verlag, which has already published four other »women's books« by Rita Kohlmaier, has come up with an appealing design for this work. Each profile contains at least one image of the protagonist, usually in



her professional capacity, as well as meaningful quotes and information boxes with the key data on the person. The appendix brings together the sources used, most of which are press articles and biographical information. Kohlmaier has chosen not to review communication and media studies literature on the topic, even though – or perhaps because? – she studied Modern German Literature, Political Science and Communication Studies in Munich and is a graduate of the Deutsche Journalistenschule. Instead she takes a different approach: Although war is unfortunately always a topical theme, it appears to be attracting a particularly high level of attention from German readers at the moment due to the war in Ukraine. Topicality is crucial. Speed. And good contacts. The profile of Katrin Eigendorf, for example, is based on an interview that Kohlmaier herself conducted in June 2022 with the ZDF reporter, who had become more famous as a result of her dedicated reporting from Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Although Kohlmaier concentrates on women as war reporters, she takes a broad approach, presenting both historical and current female journalists and photographers working for an enormous range of media. She even includes a more global perspective, focusing not only on female reporters with »Western socialization« reporting on wars in far-off countries, but also hearing the voices of actors on the ground and younger female journalists. The writer does not reveal the criteria she used to choose the subjects of her profiles, nor why the profiles differ so widely in both their length and form.

Those looking for an examination of the professional self-image of war reporters based on gender theory, or of cultures of journalism from the objectivity standard to partiality, will not find it here. Yet those who want to know more about individual women who enable us to gain our own impression of war will be grateful for these thirty profiles of brave female journalists.

### About the reviewer

**Martina Thiele** (\*1967), Dr. disc. pol., is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Tübingen. Her research and teaching focuses on digitalization and social responsibility, media and public sphere theories, gender media studies, and stereotype and prejudice research.

*Translation: Sophie Costella*

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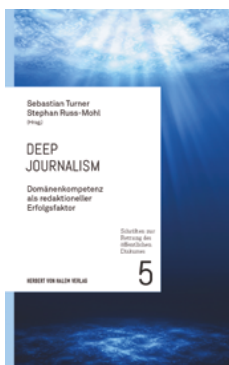
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