

Research Paper

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Separating advertising business from journalism

How pertinent is Karl Bücher's 1919 concept for press reform today?

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to raise awareness for fundamental problems of journalistic quality assurance. To do this, we analyzed Karl Bücher's largely forgotten reform concept of 1919 against the backdrop of current media developments for its sociopolitical relevance, its merits and flaws compared to other concepts of journalistic quality assurance (most of which Bücher himself already mentioned at the time), its applicability to various media, and its political, legal, and economic viability. Our hypothesis is that the most promising and viable approach is to extend the principle of public broadcasting to other media.

Keywords: Karl Bücher, journalistic quality, local media, public media, ideology of economic growth, ad free

During World War I, the press largely forfeited the achievements in journalistic-professional qualities that it had attained by the end of the 19th century in certain places, especially in the U.S. and Scandinavia (cf. HOYER/PÖTTKER 2014: 7-136). In every country involved in the conflict, the press was reduced to little more than a propaganda tool of the warring governments and militaries. Moreover, in a capitalist structure, »a newspaper [is] a profit-making enterprise that produces and sells advertising space and whose selling point is the editorial section« (BÜCHER 1926: 397). It had become clear that in this situation it was difficult, indeed impossible, for the press to guarantee a thorough political discourse. Now that digitization has plunged advertising revenues into a dangerous

demise, many would be thrilled if they still could cross-finance journalistic media through advertising. Yet back then, when military defeat and the November Revolution in Germany had exposed the urgency of fundamental reforms in many areas of social life (cf. e.g. GEIGER 1920), Karl Bücher, a world-renowned economist with proximity to the Social Democrats, founder of newspaper studies as well as of university-based journalists' training in Germany, presented a concept for a »press reform« with the objective of limiting the harmful influence of the advertising business on journalistic media. His concept did not entail a »fundamental transformation of private capitalist production into social production« (BÜCHER 1926: 394), but instead, merely meant to solve »a pure question of expediency« which »the old state should have solved already if it had understood what was its own best interest« (BÜCHER 1926: 394).

1. Karl Bücher's 1919 Concept of a Sweeping Press Reform

Bücher, who mocked Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' »wisdom [...] as dark and ambiguous as the Delphic oracle in antiquity« (BÜCHER 1926: 394), took his cue from Ferdinand Lassalle's 1862 program »A Concept for a Daily Press in a Democratic State« (BÜCHER 1926: 395), a work which had also already sunk into oblivion at the time. He agreed with Lassalle that the economic interconnection of advertising business and journalism in the newspaper industry was the »true root of the problem« (BÜCHER 1926: 404). Even if the ad section and the editorial section are separated in the physical paper, as professional ethics prescribe, the press is unlikely to represent the »interests of mankind« (BÜCHER 1926: 397), not least those of workers and wage earners, but will instead prioritize the interests of capital and its owners. That is because the editorial section, »by default, would have to exclude anything« that might »damage the advertising section, the economic lifeblood of the newspaper« (BÜCHER 1926: 397). In order to free journalism from this economic constraint and empower it to fully pursue its task of unbiased, accurate, and fearless reporting, Lassalle and Bücher called for a separation of the advertising business and journalism in a way that was ethically sound as well as legally, economically, and organizationally sustainable.

Bücher quotes from Lassalle's 1863 speech »Die Feste, die Presse und der Frankfurter Abgeordnetentag«:

»A social democratic state needs to legally prohibit any newspaper from advertising and make it the exclusive purview of official gazettes published by the state or the municipalities. [...]. From that moment on, newspapers will cease to be a lucrative monetary speculation. [...]. From that moment on, journalist will no longer be a job, it will be a vocation. [...]. This [...] measure will benefit all, and in a social democratic state, it would bring about a total transformation of the press in its innermost essence.« (BÜCHER 1926: 409)

Bücher first mentions that Lassalle's basic idea of a state monopoly on advertising had been discussed several times before, including by Heinrich von Treitschke and Eduard von Hartmann (cf. BÜCHER 1926: 411). Since Bücher deemed these previous proposals unrealistic and therefore impracticable (cf. BÜCHER 1926: 410-416), he formulated his own legislative proposal based on Lassalle's basic ideas on behalf of the current Bavarian Finance Minister Jaffé in early 1919. He was under no illusions regarding its media-political feasibility. Even though his draft ran aground and was largely forgotten, Bücher's concept of a public monopoly on advertising in order to separate advertising and journalism is worth a closer look.

Lassalle already stated that ads should be allowed »only in the official gazettes published by the state or the municipalities«. This was a continuation of an earlier mandate to post certain information in state-run »intelligence papers,« which had been abolished 13 years earlier (1850) (cf. PÜRER/RAABE 2007: 64). The fact that the mandate had been dropped suggests that it could not have been all too vital a source of public revenue. In his proposal, Bücher sought to create

»an advertising monopoly that should not be operated [...] by the state, but by the municipalities. This is based on the fact that the German press has always tended to be a local press« (BÜCHER 1926: 418),

which is still true today compared to France or England. The concept practical-mindedly also called for municipal gazettes, which were delivered free of charge to all households, to appear more frequently in larger municipalities than in smaller ones, according to the number of inhabitants; ad pricing was to be based on print runs, as was customary; and in addition to »private, locally relevant ads« and »state and municipal announcements,« these municipal gazettes were to feature an »editorial section« limited to »the latest news as well as instructive and entertaining articles« (BÜCHER 1926: 421). Experience had shown that »it was impossible to run a profitable business with advertisements alone« (BÜCHER 1926: 421), because ads-only papers would not be appealing »without an instructive and entertaining section« (BÜCHER 1926: 417), and consequently attract no or not enough advertisers. According to Bücher's concept, these editorial sections of the local and regional gazettes, which several municipalities could publish jointly, were to contain notices, preferably with »the news of the telegraph bureau,« but also be open to »pieces of instructional and entertaining content,« for which »the state [...] must maintain a uniform correspondence bureau« (BÜCHER 1926: 422).

»The entire political press,« on the other hand, by which Bücher meant private-sector and, above all, national newspapers, was to be »prohibited from taking out any kind of advertisement« (BÜCHER 1926: 420). According to Section 9 of his draft, these newspapers would have to »pay an appropriate fee« in order to be »permitted to print official announcements« (BÜCHER 1926: 424). His

explanation of this point reveals the renowned national economist's unconventional mindset:

»This is virtually a reversal of the present situation, because right now, authorities have to pay to place such notices in the newspapers. But it should be obvious that such notices are, as a rule, matters of public interest, and it is indicative of an unhealthy development that state and local governments aren't even able to publicize their own announcements for free in the same way they secured free carriage of letter mail on the railroad trains.«
(BÜCHER 1926: 424)

Bücher then elaborates on how the existing private press would evolve under his concept, which once again shows that the ultimate goal of his reform proposal was to liberate the journalistic profession, and thus public discourse, from the influence of powerful, primarily economic, special interests.

The press will be »freed from the pressures of the publisher's interests, which are tied to the advertising section. Lassalle already spelled out what this means for editorial work. Certain types of material will be unavailable to it, but with regard to instructive and entertaining content and local news, it will be able to compete with the municipal gazettes, and with regard to political matters, discourse will have to take the place of mere news reporting. [...]. Public opinion will still be able to express itself in periodical publications, unfettered by the considerations that restrain it today.« (BÜCHER 1926: 424f.)

2. Socio-political relevance

Without any claim to completeness, I will focus on three problem areas that illustrate the socio-political relevance of a stricter separation of professional journalism and advertising in or similar to the way Karl Bücher envisioned it in 1919: *the ideology of growth*, *the loss of credibility*, especially in politics, and *the precarious future of the journalistic profession*.

In Western industrialized countries, we have been living in material abundance for a century, which means that the needs of the population have to be adapted to the profit-oriented production of goods and services, and not vice versa. This phenomenon has long been the subject of critical social analysis and social philosophy. In an economy and a society of abundance, advertising becomes a system-relevant factor that drives the inevitable growth of consumption and production that is the declared tenet of capitalism, as social science classicist Theodor Geiger soberly noted and analyzed in his 1940 »Critique of Advertising« (Danish: Kritik af Reklamen) (cf. GEISLER/PÖTTKER 1987). Criticism of advertising was a core point of the Frankfurt School's system critique (cf. MARCUSE 1969).

Considering the historically evolved systemic relevance of advertising, we might initially assume that municipal advertising monopolies would be financially worthwhile for the public sector. In 1850, when mandatory posting of ads

and information seemed to have become obsolete, Germany was still ruled by a demand-based economy in which goods were scarce. The transition to an advertising-driven economy of abundance, which brought with it a highly lucrative private advertising business, did not begin until the second half of the 19th century.

Since the late 1960s^[1], a new concern has arisen: the conservation of Earth's limited natural resources. A movement against the destruction of natural resources is on the rise, still obscure in Germany's political spectrum, but growing around the world, which ultimately also endangers the capitalist economy. The proponents of this movement voice compelling doubt about the delusion of compatibility of environmental and climate protection and unbridled economic growth (which the parties of the German governing coalition still share, albeit *cum grano salis*) (cf. JACKSON 2011, 2021):

»The relentless pursuit of perpetual growth has brought us ecological destruction, financial frailty, and social instability. Did this myth ever serve its purpose at all? That is not entirely clear. Its fatal fallacy lies in the assumption that more is always better. In a world of scarcity, this may be justified to a certain extent. But in a world of abundance, it is categorically wrong.«^[2]

Similar sentiments are now also being voiced in Germany, at least from an economic and climate science perspective, among others by renowned authors such as Ulrike Herrmann or Toralf Staud (cf. HERRMANN 2022; REIMER/STAUD 2021).

One step away from growth mania and towards truly reining in superfluous, ecologically destructive growth could be to contain and isolate the blind, unfettered, interest-driven force of advertising. While it should not be banned from the public sphere, since that would conflict with the principle of free expression, it should be governed and set apart in a way that the public can better gauge its questionable promises. If, as Bücher suggested, advertising were confined to community-based media only, communities would not only enjoy a lucrative new source of revenue, but readers, listeners, and viewers could be more conscious and methodical about their media consumption and how they satisfy their own information needs. This may foster more cautious, economical consumption patterns.

There might be similar effects on the credibility crisis suffered by the ruling classes in politics, the media, or the economy, which threatens to grow into an outright rejection of liberal democracy and the social market economy. For decades, communication scholars have been pointing out, rather inconsequentially, that the creeping loss of legitimacy has also been caused by the media system itself and its entangled mesh of private and public interests, advertising, and journalism (see, for example, PÖTTKER 1988). Its inherent problem is that the public has come to measure political and economic reality against an unrealistic

1 On St. Patrick's Day in 1968, Robert F. Kennedy gave a groundbreaking speech on the subject. In 1972, the Club of Rome issued its cautionary report »The Limits to Growth«.

2 Tim Jackson, economist, University of Surrey, speaking on the radio.

benchmark: an embellished reality created by persuasive public communication – advertising and corporate or political PR (»propaganda«). This creates overblown expectations which our experienced reality can hardly meet, and even less so the world that the media construct (and have good reason to do so): a world focused on grievances, problems, and failures (cf. PÖTTKER 2021).

The legitimacy of political, corporate, and media elites (cf. PÖTTKER 1996) is dwindling, and significant, expanding sections of the population now mistrust the system as such. This can be attributed, among other things, to excessive credulity vis-à-vis advertising versus the poor credibility of journalism, as the two are entrenched in an economic and organizational mesh that is difficult to unravel. So perhaps we must take legal and economic reform steps to disentangle the two spheres in the way that Karl Bücher envisioned, and thus counteract further delegitimization of the political-economic system – in our case in Germany and the EU, liberal democracy in conjunction with a social market economy – since people could better assess information values and better discern the illusory nature of persuasive communication.

A third area in which the current sociopolitical relevance of Bücher's concept is particularly evident, if only indirectly, is the future of journalism as a profession, which has been made precarious by digitization and the resulting collapse of the profession's economic foundations. If advertising were the exclusive domain of community-based media, as Bücher spelt out in detail, the advertising industry would reap no economic advantages, but rather be disadvantaged because ads would be distributed to everyone free of charge, which would cause the advertisers considerable, and perhaps even greater than normal, scatter losses. This is an opportunity to reduce advertising and its associated overproduction, which is an urgent imperative from an ecological perspective. Above all, however, an ad-free press system is an opportunity for the journalistic profession to better focus on its task of generating a public sphere, uninfluenced by private interests, which is essential for modern societies to perceive and regulate their problems (cf. PÖTTKER 2010). This would not mean abandoning the objective of increasing circulation, ratings, and clicks; the objective of publicity would still be to provide as much correct and essential information as possible to as many people as possible. It would merely mean that journalists could strive for this goal unconstrained by the demands of advertisers, driven only by benchmarks of journalistic qualities, such as accuracy, relevance, and clarity, even when sharing inconvenient information (cf. PÖTTKER 2000). Bücher's concept is thus a proposal to strengthen quality journalism.

For some time now, journalism scholars, in their critical support of the journalism profession, have been emphasizing the changing role of journalism in a flood of digitized news that is swamping media users unsolicited and free of charge. Today, they argue, quality journalism must be less about communicating

facts and more about explaining, classifying, and assessing them, which could be called explanatory or guiding journalism. Mitchell Stephens speaks of »wisdom journalism« (cf. STEPHENS 2014; PÖTTKER 2018). Karl Bücher recognized these connections a century ago when he wrote, in support of his own reform concept:

»It seemed expedient to create a monopoly for all the latest news [...] and to make their publication [...] the exclusive purview of the municipal gazettes. This would relieve the [...] free daily press of the need to feature such news in their own media. They could still obtain »private telegrams« and keep correspondents in foreign capitals, as some larger newspapers have been doing. But primarily, privately published newspapers would be limited to discussing topical political issues, and they would look more like magazines. Regarding instructional content, entertainment, and local news, they would be free to compete with the community gazettes.« (BÜCHER 1926: 422)

Concentration and a reduction of vast amounts of repetitive news on the one hand, and deeper research, more background, better versed correspondent reports on the other hand: Bücher outlines the very direction where the profession might still find its future today. The fact that weekly newspapers like *Die Zeit* tend to struggle less with (circulation) problems than the daily press proves that this is no illusion.

3. Comparison with other media policy reform concepts

In our search for other, and perhaps better media policy reform concepts, Karl Bücher very helpfully identifies, examines, and criticizes alternatives in his essay before presenting and justifying his own concept. I will limit myself to four concepts, which have been tested in varying degrees in the century since Bücher's proposition: *nationalization of the media*; *separation of non-political and political media*, with political media being published by political parties only, possibly with an obligation to correct errors; and *controlling access to the profession* by way of institutionalized training. I will also discuss one other model Bücher did not mention: the *public media model*, the one with which we have the most real-life experience.

Bücher is very clear on nationalization:

»It has been suggested by other parties that the publication of newspapers by private individuals be banned altogether. The press should be nationalized, just like the railroads. I don't need to enter into a lengthy argumentation to say that this would place the tremendous power of the newspapers entirely in the hands of the government. Editors and journalists would become state officials who would have to reign in their expressions of opinion and follow the directives of the supreme power of the state. There is no doubt that all the advantages of freedom of the press would be destroyed in one fell swoop and that all freedom of expression would be suppressed. Of course, such a press would also immediately lose the confidence of the public [...]« (BÜCHER 1926: 399)

We fully agree with this, and it is almost superfluous to mention that nationalization could also be passed off and legitimized as »socialization« by the powers that be, as Bücher discusses elsewhere. The potential counterargument that scientists in state-run universities, for example, don't (have to) say what the ruling class wants is invalid because scientific statements in specialist organs do not carry nearly as much political weight as journalistic headlines that reach a wide audience.

There are only few counterexamples that would speak for media nationalization as an alternative to a capitalist media structure. One is the *Wiener Zeitung*, now discontinued after three centuries. This paper showed that even when a medium is in the hands of the state, its editorial staff can safeguard its relative independence if appropriate legal and economic organizational precautions are taken.

Bücher is also no proponent of Wilhelm Feilinger's concept, offered in 1915 in the journal *Die Tat* entitled »The Problem of the Newspaper«. He proposes a strict »separation between political and non-political newspapers«. Under this concept, non-political papers would be private companies and not allowed to publish anything political. Political media »are only published by the political parties« (BÜCHER 1926: 400). Bücher's main problem with this approach is the threat to internal freedom of the press *visa-vis* media owners and their controlling bodies. Feilinger did not go into any detail about the »internal organization« of his »exclusively political party press,« but he seems to presume that

»following the pattern of social democratic papers, the newspapers in each community would be placed under the control of a press committee. The editorial offices would depend on and be controlled by this committee. However, it is clear that this would not improve their situation much, since such supervisory committees would ensure that newspapers toe the party line. Anything that makes the party appear in a good light would be favored, anything that might harm it would be suppressed. Personal opinions would be given just as little space as with a private publisher who demands protection of his business interests.« (BÜCHER 1926: 400)

On this, Bücher was in line with Friedrich Engels, who told August Bebel that he and Marx had always agreed that they wanted newspapers to be financially independent of the (socialist, communist, social democratic) party so they could serve as a critical corrective (cf. MARX/ENGELS 1969: 234).

Bücher also considered this concept incompatible with the parties' limited representativeness of the population and the legitimate information needs of the many citizens who do not align with any party:

»Like the proportional representation system that has since been introduced, Feilinger's proposition completely disregards the fact that the population of a country cannot be fully aligned with its political parties and that there are countless people who want to read newspapers without aligning with any party.« (BÜCHER 1926: 401)

A third reform option that Bücher critically examined is access control to the journalistic profession by requiring aspiring journalists to complete institutionalized courses and to be aware of and consent to a sanctioned professional standard of conduct. The state could sponsor such journalistic degree programs and codes of conduct as well as act as the instance that verifies proof of professional competence. Alternatively, or in addition to this, journalists could have their own professional associations and chambers, similar to doctors, lawyers, or architects. This latter point is a key aspect for Gustav Maier, whose proposals Bücher is quoting here (cf. MAIER 1915/16). Nonetheless, Bücher remains skeptical, pointing out that

»one [might] conclude that the state should set the standards for initial training and prescribe examinations for admission to the profession. Anyone who fails the exam would not be allowed to be employed as an editor or journalist.« (BÜCHER 1926: 402)

Although he had already created a concept for university-based journalistic training prior to World War I (cf. KUTSCH 2010), Bücher also makes a plea for journalism as a talent-based profession:

»Also, exams alone do not guarantee good journalistic quality. We definitely should not fall into Chinese Mandarinism here. Rather, we should be pleased to have a profession that values personalities according to their achievements, and where the gifted can rise to well-respected positions, even as autodidacts.« (BÜCHER 1926: 403)

While I understand Bücher's sensitivity to the risks, especially of state-imposed, mandatory access conditions for the journalistic profession, as implemented in the National Socialist Schriftleitergesetz of 1933 (cf. BUNDESZENTRALE FÜR POLITISCHE BILDUNG 2018) or in the quasi-monopoly held by the department of journalism at the Karl Marx University of Leipzig in the GDR, it is legitimate and, in liberal democracies, also productive for the public sector to provide journalistic training opportunities, e.g., at universities, as long as they are not a mandatory prerequisite to enter the profession. In the U.S., a large proportion of journalists have been trained at public universities since the 1920s (cf. HARNISCHMACHER 2010), and it shows in the quality of U.S. journalism³. In Germany, too, free access to the journalism profession, as guaranteed by the German Supreme Court, has not prevented quite a few federal states from establishing training and continuing education opportunities for journalists at public universities since the 1970s.

But Bücher is undoubtedly right about one thing. He expected newspaper publishers would »find it difficult to agree to such a change« (BÜCHER 1926: 403) towards mandatory training and thus a narrower selection of journalistic staff. German publishers of his time, who were closely tied to party politics, were also

3 Even U.S. tabloids like *USA Today* observe the rules for presenting poll results prescribed in the German Press Code of Guideline 2.1, which are largely ignored by the German media. It was journalists, along with members of the legal profession, who stood up against the de-democratization tendencies of the Trump era.

reluctant to accept even voluntary public educational opportunities, while in the U.S., publishers such as Joseph Pulitzer even championed Journalism Studies at universities (cf. PÖTTKER 2020). The comparative averseness towards academic journalistic training in Germany in contrast to the United States has historical reasons. Media policy in German-speaking countries should take further steps to promote it. Expert vocational training and talent are not contradictory; as in other professions, only the combination of both elements unlocks true professional excellence. Who would want to be treated by a doctor who was an untalented healer, even if they met all the academic requirements? Talent and inclination alone are not enough to be a professional, neither in journalism nor in medicine.

Another alternative to an exclusively private-sector capitalist press, which Bücher does not mention, is a public-law structure, as was established in the UK in the 1920s and in Germany after 1945: A statutory mandate regarding content; supervisory bodies that are not appointed by the state, but instead represent society and which monitor compliance with the statutory programming mandate; not financed from tax revenue, but by fees paid by all households (allowing for an income-based fee structure akin to tax brackets). Public media, especially if they remain ad-free, can also help educate the public about what constitutes high-quality, credible journalism (cf. PÖTTKER 1991). An interesting, but rarely asked question is whether the public media concept with its wealth of practical experience can be transferred from broadcasting to other media?

4. Which kinds of media lend themselves to Bücher's reform model?

First, let me ask whether Bücher's concept of reserving advertising to community media is even an option in the age of worldwide digital communication and global corporations distributing branded goods. Such corporations and products did exist in Bücher's time already. As far as digital networks are concerned, the communication they convey can also be spatially limited and differentiated, both organizationally and structurally. The Internet can only be considered a medium under a technical-material definition of public communication, which is associated with specific possibilities as well as risks, just like the complex of printing, transport, telegraphy, and telephone technology that journalism harnessed during Bücher's time, or radio and television technology, which was also not yet available as a journalistic vehicle back when Bücher was exploring reform concepts.

Digital platforms are not media organizations like publishers or broadcasters. However, companies like Facebook, Twitter, Google, or Amazon, which have developed and make use of this technology, could, in principle, be regulated politically and legally at the national and international level, just like any other

media organization. When we fail to see this, it may be because we are not using a precise concept of what constitutes »media,« and we fail to distinguish between the technical-material conditions of (public) communication and the corporate organizations that use them. As digitization progresses, however, there seems to be a cultural learning process towards a more differentiated and precise concept of media. This is evident, among other things, in the numerous and increasingly vigorous media and economic policy efforts to enforce legal requirements upon Google and others.

Companies such as Coca Cola, Mercedes, or Gazprom don't depend on world-wide advertising; they could run their ads in many community-based media in parallel. So there is, in principle, no reason why Karl Bücher's ideas from a century ago should not also be applicable to the digital sphere or broadcasting, just as media-policy organizational models that first developed in these novel media-technological spheres are also worth considering for the print media sphere. It is quite possible that municipalities, or alliances of municipalities, could operate media organizations in all three of these technological areas – press, broadcasting, Internet – to disseminate paid advertising. It is also quite conceivable that a municipal media organization could do this in all three areas at once, which would yield production synergies.

Likewise, private media companies might focus on using one, two, or all three media technologies to produce relevant, reliable, and comprehensible informational content of high journalistic quality and distribute it ad-free on a supra-regional, national, or even global scale for profit. We know such content from public media evening programs on radio and television, which is financed not by sales, but by mandatory fees collected from households.

Karl Bücher understood that if his concept were implemented, the number of private newspapers would dwindle considerably compared to ad-financed press, because »Of course, newspapers will become significantly more expensive than they are now, since their entire production costs will have to be covered by subscribers. And these will necessarily be much fewer than today.« (BÜCHER 1926: 425)

This would likely also apply to private broadcasting programs and online media with journalistic content if they can no longer carry advertising and generate revenue from it. That would make the development of payment models for purchasing journalistic content even more relevant than it is today.

To counter the concern that journalistic media would become more expensive if they couldn't be cross-financed by advertising revenues, one could point out that the cost for advertising is hidden elsewhere, namely in the advertised goods and services, paid for by the audience while media are cross-financed by advertising revenues. Theodor Geiger compellingly deconstructed the illusion that journalistic content is made cheaper by advertising in his detailed »Critique of Advertising« (cf. GEIGER 1988; PÖTTKER 2019: 450-452).

But we can assume that a concept such as Bücher's would drastically decrease the total revenues of private media while the revenues of local authorities would rise due to their monopoly on advertising. This would disrupt the entire media economy and would have to be enforced against the interests of private press, broadcasting, and online companies, including diagonal corporations operating in all three sectors.

But what we're trying to do here as we consider Karl Bücher's concept is explore alternatives to the socio-culturally harmful media structure and its delegitimizing and corrosive long-term effects on democracy and social market economy while also preserving freedom of opinion and freedom of the press. To achieve this, sweeping change would probably be inevitable. Karl Marx famously wrote in the *Rheinische Zeitung* that the paramount freedom of the press is not to be a commerce (cf. MARX 2001: 49). Bücher did not go that far; to him, a press that offers informational content, verified for accuracy, relevance, and comprehensibility according to journalistic practice, remains a trade with the commercial objective of reaching as many buyers and readers as possible. This commercial objective is the driving force to create publicity. Since the same applies to the objective of reaching the greatest possible number of listeners and viewers, broadcast and online media would also remain commercial operations, even if they become ad-free.

Since it is more in line with real developments than Bücher's disruptive concept, it would probably be easier to extend the principle of public media, which already exists in broadcasting, to the other two media sectors with their diverse (inter)national, regional, and local journalistic product offerings. This would first require reforming public broadcasters, which have come under political pressure for scandals and legitimacy problems, especially their supervisory bodies and the structure of their funding sources.

Due to the decline in advertising and circulation, today's private-sector press is struggling greatly to generate revenues or even profits with its traditional mix of journalism and advertising. Some companies are gradually withdrawing from the journalistic newspaper market, including their online versions, and instead focusing on business with digital ad portals without expensive editorial »frill«; others buy up ailing traditional papers, slash costs by merging editorial teams and centralizing editorial work, and then strengthen the online versions of the traditional papers.

Overall, the press and its online offshoots have an enormous need for consolidation (cf. WELLBROCK 2020). In this context, it does not seem all that absurd that a public platform for conventional printed and digital press, ad-free just like a reformed public broadcaster, could help ailing publishers meet this need for consolidation. Publishers might even like the notion of outsourcing at least part of their precarious journalistic operations, in return for benefits that they

would have to negotiate, and devote themselves more to their digital advertising business.

The result would be a structure complementary to the one presented by Bücher: Advertising revenues would continue to remain private, while the public would bear more of the cost for additional media production. Just like Bücher's concept, this would disentangle journalism from advertising, with similar effects on democracy and the social market economy. From an economic view of profit and cost distribution, however, the common good would lose out to private special interests, as it often does. Considering the influence of the media lobby on media policy, the economic factor would also lessen the prospects of implementation of Lassalle's and Bücher's concept.

5. Legitimacy and viability of Karl Bücher's model

It is therefore clear that a monopolization of advertising and its associated earning potential for the state, whether at the national or the community level, is not very likely to be viable. We could just shrug, declare such a project impracticable due to systemic constraints, and instead turn to radical systemic change as the way forward. This is how Karl Marx and his followers felt.

In my opinion, that is the wrong way, because all our historical experience shows – to use Bücher's terminology – that while post-revolutionary governments could monopolize the advertising business for themselves and the state, they are unlikely to tolerate a private press that is not only ad-free, but also ideology-free, a prime hallmark of quality journalism.

Our ample historical experience may lead us to swiftly conclude that models such as Karl Bücher's are incompatible with freedom of the press. But that would also be wrong. A law monopolizing the advertising business in the hands of municipalities, taking it away from private media, would not mean their expropriation. And even an expropriation of media companies, if properly compensated, would not put the entire state, but rather individual municipalities in the place of private company owners. That would not be an absolute negation of freedom of the press.

The German Constitution protects private property, but Articles 14 and 15 generally permit expropriation of private property for the common good:

»Art. 14

[...]

(2) Property entails obligations. Its use shall also serve the public good.

(3) Expropriation shall only be permissible for the public good. It may only be ordered by or pursuant to a law that determines the nature and extent of compensation. Such compensation shall be determined by establishing an equitable balance between the public interest

and the interests of those affected. In case of dispute concerning the amount of compensation, recourse may be had to the ordinary courts.

Art. 15

Land, natural resources and means of production may for the purpose of socialization be transferred to public ownership or other forms of public enterprise by a law that determines the nature and extent of compensation.«

These options are used all the time in transport planning and other public works. After their expropriation, media entrepreneurs would continue to enjoy freedom of expression, just like other citizens who don't own media; and a certain freedom of information of the public at large would also be preserved because the community-based media would contain editorial sections provided by many diverse communities. Even before digitization caused public expression to proliferate, media policy showed little concern for the press concentration that was occurring, leaving more and more districts with only one newspaper.¹⁴

The chances of achieving a stronger separation of journalism and advertising business at the economic and organizational level is therefore not so much a question of legality and legitimacy. It is rather about (media) politicians understanding the delegitimizing, democracy-destroying dysfunction of the current media order for the long term, and voters understanding the many economic, ecological, and cultural opportunities that would be associated with such a reform.

For the reasons mentioned above, it would make more sense to gradually expand the public media principle from broadcasting to the other media sectors. This would likely have better chances of implementation than the reform proposed by Karl Bücher a hundred years ago. However, transferring the principle of public media to the press would require that newspaper publishers and public broadcasters drop their dispute over copyrights to digital news offerings, which has led to a legal arrangement with which neither side is satisfied¹⁵. Instead, they would have to cooperate and embrace a more foresightful perspective for the future.

It is up to communication science and journalism to promote this long-term perspective and to offer insights into the harmful consequences of our existing media order, which Karl Bücher and others recognized a century ago. They must muster more media-critical and media-political ambition and be more proactive than they currently are. But in the interest of democracy, resource protection, and other aspects of the common good, we can no longer delay. We must act on this now. Karl Bücher's reform concept of 1919 is helpful because its author did indeed give thought to the viability of his proposals: »The path I propose here is not as far removed from the present state of affairs as it might appear at first sight.« (BÜCHER 1926: 425)

4 On the topic of media concentration, cf. KNOCHÉ 2005; 2013.

5 This is evident, among other things, in the establishment of an arbitration board specifically for this purpose, which is, however, barely used. Cf. MÜLLER-LANCÉ 2021; FRIES/BEHME 2022.

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