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Debate

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A lack of critical corrective

Expectation-led distortions in reporting on the welfare state in Germany

Abstract: **However valid their empirical basis, the images commonly distributed on the social situation and welfare policy in Germany have consequences for reporting – they shape the developments that are considered worthy of reporting on and how they are interpreted. As a result, reporting serves to reinforce hardened opinions. This often negatively impacts a solution-oriented debate on reform, as problems are not considered in a sophisticated way for specific target groups. The media frequently fail to provide a critical corrective, especially when press releases from social organizations are in line with preconceived perceptions and the demands that the organizations derive from them appear to be for a good cause. Even where depictions are extremely distorted, politicians are often reluctant to take a contrasting position, as this carries the risk of being accused of wanting to ›talk down‹ social problems. A lack of statistical skills for handling complex social statistics also plays a role.**

Keywords: welfare state, welfare policy, poverty, pension policy, attention economy; UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Social conditions and the welfare state in Germany are often characterized as being in decline. Many people to whom a good safety net in the form of the welfare state is important, are convinced that the welfare state has been dismantled over recent decades; sometimes gradually, sometimes rapidly. Comparing the services provided by the welfare state with Germany's economic strength, however, shows that this simplified image is not in line with the true development of the welfare state. The welfare expenditure ratio – the proportion of gross domestic product accounted for by the welfare budget – has risen consistently over the decades. This is also true for the period following reunification, with the welfare expenditure ratio rising from 25 % in 1991 to 30 % in 2019 (BMAS 2022:7). The welfare state has grown in line with the country's wealth, and often even faster. The fact that many people still believe that the welfare state is shrinking comes down to the myriad conflicts in social policy that have accompanied the further expansion of the welfare state. Its overall development has two themes: the expansion of many promised benefits of the welfare state, and limits on benefits introduced to slow the increase in costs (CREMER 2018: 91-180).

However valid their empirical basis, the images distributed on the development of the welfare state have consequences for how the welfare state is reported on. They shape the developments that are considered worthy of reporting and how they are interpreted. This paper aims to explain this using various examples, before presenting some requirements for the work of journalists.

Is poverty expanding rapidly among the elderly?

On January 22, 2023, Deutschlandfunk issued the following news item, published on its homepage under the heading »Poverty among the elderly. More and more pensioners rely on basic state pension.«

> »Figures from the Federal Statistical Office show that 647,515 claimed the basic state pension in September last year. This was almost 19,000 more than in June. Compared to the previous year, the number of claimants rose by more than 68,000.
> The parliamentary leader of far-left party Die Linke, Dietmar Bartsch, told Redaktions-Netzwerk Deutschland that poverty among the elderly is breaking record after record. [...] Bartsch also proposed holding a pensions summit in the Chancellor's Office, arguing that it is high time for a major pension reform in Germany.«[1]

The item draws on a press release from Dietmar Bartsch[2] and, in line with his arguments, links the rise in the number of basic state pension claimants to deficits in the German pension system. Yet breaking down the figures from the Federal Statistical Office by citizenship shows that, in the three-month period from June to September 2022, the number of basic state pension claimants with German citizenship fell by more than 2,000 – the rise was entirely due to the increased number of claimants with foreign citizenship. Looking at the year September 2021 to September 2022, 50,000 of the total 68,000 additional recipients did not hold German citizenship (FEDERAL STATISTICAL OFFICE, Tab. 22151-0001).

1 Accessed on the website of Deutschlandfunk January 22, 2023. The item is no longer available there, but is documented on https://de.knews.media/nachrichten/altersarmut-bericht-immer-mehr-rentner-auf-grundsicherung-angewiesen-2/ (21 April 2023).

2 https://www.linksfraktion.de/themen/nachrichten/detail/altersarmut-immer-mehr-rentner-muessen-sozialhilfe-beantragen/ (21 April 2023).

The data does not back up Bartsch's claim that poverty among the elderly is breaking record after record – at least not if poverty in old age is taken to mean claiming the basic state pension, as is the case in the Deutschlandfunk item. Since 2015, the proportion of those of pensionable age who claim the basic state pension has remained relatively constant at 3.5 % in the former West Germany and 2.2 % in the former East Germany (FEDERAL STATISTICAL OFFICE, Tab. 22151-0013). Given that the number of people of pensionable age is growing all the time, the number of basic state pension claimants increases even if the percentage remains constant.

The rise in the number of basic state pension claimants quoted in the news item is striking. Yet it is just as astonishing that the editorial office did not think to mention the attack on Ukraine as a possible explanation for the rise, even though Deutschlandfunk has reported in great detail on the social consequences of the war and the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Germany. Since June 1, 2022, refugees from Ukraine have been eligible to claim benefits including job seekers' allowance, social security, disability benefits, and the basic state pension. This means that refugees from Ukraine are in a privileged position compared to other refugees when it comes to accessing the welfare state in Germany – a fact that must be reflected in the claimant figures. If this link is ignored, a welfare state rule that strengthens the position of Ukrainian refugees is transformed into evidence of the supposed failure of the welfare state. The editors appear to have been so convinced by the way in which Bartsch framed the situation that they failed to conduct any further checks, or even to look at the data from the Federal Statistical Office that is freely accessible online.

It is also worth mentioning that equating claiming the basic state pension with poverty, as the Deutschlandfunk item does, is problematic, as it is considered that there is a large number of unreported cases of hidden poverty is not included in the statistics on the basic state pension (BUSLEI et al. 2019). It is estimated that around half of those eligible for assistance do not claim the benefits, primarily people with very low pensions who would be eligible for an additional basic pension. If all those eligible were to receive the assistance to which they are entitled, the amount claimed would increase – not because poverty was increasing, but because it was being tackled more effectively.

More help, more poverty?

On August 22, 2018, the Federal Association of the Child Protection Associations in Germany (DKSB) achieved a media coup. They stated that 4.4 million children are living in poverty, with the DKSB's calculation showing under-recording by 1.4 million children in poverty whom, the accusation goes, the government is covering up. This news item shaped the reporting for a whole day, featuring prominently in the major daily television news program *Tagesschau* and in almost all major media. It would have been a huge success for the public relations of any charity.

The DKSB's calculation was based on equating claiming assistance with poverty, although they did also attempt to look for the unreported cases, i.e., the children in families who are eligible for assistance but whom the welfare state does not reach. If claiming assistance is used as an indicator of poverty, it makes sense to consider those listed in the statistics as claiming assistance together with those who are eligible for assistance but do not claim it. Otherwise, the problem indicator is lower if the welfare state and the assistance it offers does not reach those eligible at all.

Yet equating the number of people claiming basic social security with the number in poverty can also be an intellectual trap – as noted in the early 1980s by Amartya Sen, who would later go on to win a Nobel prize. He described the »perverseness« of this measure of poverty: If the government attempts to fight poverty by raising the basic social security, the number of people receiving it increases. Poverty therefore appears to rise, even though it is actually being tackled better. Conversely, reducing the basic social security would reduce the number of people claiming and thus give the impression that poverty had fallen, i.e., assistance for those in poverty was becoming less important (SEN 1983).

The DKSB's calculation reinforced this problem, since it also included children living in families who receive (or are eligible for) child tax credit or housing benefit. This expansion of the definition of poverty resulted in the figure of an unreported 1.4 million children living in poverty.

Child tax credit is aimed at those on low incomes and is intended to prevent people who are able to earn a living for themselves from their work but need assistance in covering their children's needs from having to move onto unemployment benefit. When combined with housing benefit, child tax credit generally means that families are better off than they would be if they were to receive only additional unemployment benefits. Housing benefit is an essential social policy instrument in securing the material livelihoods of people on low incomes without claiming unemployment benefits.

If the definition of poverty is then extended as the DKSB specifies – by equating claiming child tax credit and housing benefit with poverty – targeted improvement of the aid system becomes seen as proof of greater child poverty. The ›Strong Families‹ Act of 2019 increased child tax credit and improved the claim conditions, thus increasing the number of people eligible. By the logic of the DKSB's calculation, this serves to disclose growing social problems. The calculation gave the DKSB a day of headlines, but the charity is no longer pursuing the method. The news dissipated and failed to trigger a critical debate on the DKSB's method of measuring poverty.

Drawing incorrect conclusions can have political consequences. Whenever attempts are made to make the welfare system more effective, this triggers a »fear of statistical effects« among politicians, as described by FDP social policy specialist Johannes Vogel (DEUTSCHER BUNDESTAG, 20. Wahlperiode, 66. Sitzung, 10. November 2022: 7478f.). As a young member of parliament at the time of the last CDU-FDP coalition (2009-2013), Vogel campaigned to enable Hartz-IV [unemployment benefit] claimants to earn more in addition to their benefits – but was unsuccessful. Mathematically, the necessary effect of this would have been to increase the number of people receiving benefits (Arbeitslosengeld II, now Bürgergeld) on top of their wages, which could have been turned into a scandal of an increase in the working poor. His idea had no chance. Although rarely discussed in public, this fear of statistical effects is tangible when talking to politicians involved in social affairs about how to develop welfare systems.

A quarter of children can't afford breakfast?

In May 2011, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights published its routine state report on Germany, stating the following on the social situation under Section 39:

> »The Committee notes with concern that as many as 25 per cent of pupils go to school without breakfast and are thereby at risk of malnutrition as lunch is not yet provided in all schools. The Committee urges the State party to take concrete measures to ensure that children, especially from poor families, are provided with proper meals.« (UNITED NATIONS 2011, Section 28)

The report did not initially attract a great deal of attention, until a report in *Der Tagesspiegel*, »United Nations slams German social policy« on July 5, 2011,[3] drew interest across Germany. However, the *Tagesspiegel* report missed out the small phrase »up to,« which clearly demonstrates that the Committee was unable to reliably quantify the scale of the problem. »One in four children go to school without breakfast,« claimed the report in *Der Tagesspiegel*. All other media that picked up on the report then used this figure. »Up to« disappeared in papers from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (07.07.2011: 4) to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (06 July 2011).[4]

As would be expected, charities were quick to pick up on the report, claiming that the United Nations had now officially established how unjust the situation in Germany was. The Deutsche Kinderhilfswerk expressed this sentiment on

3 https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/vereinte-nationen-rugen-deutsche-sozialpolitik-4564546.html (22 April 2023).

4 https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/bericht-der-vereinten-nationen-un-tief-besorgt-ueber-soziale-misss-taende-in-deutschland-1.1116605 (22 April 2022).

July 6, 2011, in a press release entitled »UN state report is slap in the face for Federal Government,« demanding that the Federal Government »finally implement specific measures to ensure that all children regularly receive breakfast.«

What the media did not address was the obvious question of how the UN Committee had come to this finding, given that there had been no representative survey in Germany at the time on the number of children who go to school without breakfast, from which such a claim could have been derived. The Committee's only source was the public discourse in Germany. It can be presumed that the »up to« claim in the report expresses the response from a respondent interviewed by the Committee. The experience basis for the statement remains unclear. The Committee's next report in 2018 also notes that many children go to school without breakfast, but does not attempt to quantify the problem (UNITED NATIONS 2018: 8).

If the figure of a quarter of children going to school without breakfast were true – a figure that the Committee did not quote in this form – that would make hunger and neglect among children a mass phenomenon in Germany. Any doubt about whether this could be true was clearly not great enough to cause the media representatives who picked up on the *Tagesspiegel* report to take a look at the original report, which is easy to find online, themselves.

It goes without saying that some children do go to school without breakfast and that, for some of them, this is due to poverty and/or neglect. A survey of primary school parents conducted by the Allensbach Institute (2019: 13-18) shows that 10 % of children do not usually have breakfast at home. The reasons behind this are not necessarily material: The parents named a hectic routine and lack of time as the most significant reasons.

Data on material provision for children in households claiming jobseekers' allowance highlights a lack of or insufficient provision in mobility, leisure and social and cultural participation, but only to a tiny degree in nutrition. An analysis by the Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung shows that around one percent of households on unemployment benefits with children do not have a warm meal every day (LIETZMANN/WENZIG 2020: 6, 14-16, 32).

Campaigning to achieve a better material position for families on low incomes is commendable. But it does not mean that Germany has to be declared a land of hunger.

More and more pensioners need to work?

On February 14, 2022, Deutschlandfunk broadcast the following news item:

> »The number of working pensioners is rising, reports RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland, quoting figures from the Federal Government. These show that more than one million

people aged 67 years or older were employed last year. In 2010, that figure was around 685,000. Member of parliament for Die Linke, Sören Pellmann, spoke of a sad development. He argued that the figures are the consequence of a pension system that is barely able to safeguard the living standard of citizens.«

Here, too, a quote from a politician clearly and unambiguously frames a statistical development in the context of falling social standards. The proportion of those working among the population over 65 has indeed risen significantly, from around 5 % in 2001 to around 10 % in 2021 (FITZENBERGER et al. 2023). Naturally, this proportion is higher in the years immediately after pensionable age (17 % in the 65-69 age group, BUNDESAGENTUR FÜR ARBEIT 2022). Pensioners who continue to work are therefore still only a minority.

The figures tell us little about the background. In times of high unemployment, it was much more difficult for pensioners to find a job than it is today. Life expectancy is rising, and many pensioners today are in good physical health for many years after retirement. The majority of those working work just a few hours in a ›mini job,‹ which also carries with it the suspicion of precarious employment. Yet mini jobs are attractive for pensioners, most of whom do not want to work a lot of hours, let alone full time. Mini jobs are not subject to health insurance contributions and allow pensioners in higher tax bands to avoid paying additional taxes on that income. Pensioners in employment are significantly more likely to hold academic qualifications than those who do not work (GORDO et al. 2022: 4f.). This is no surprise, given that good education makes it easier to find employment, even after pensionable age.

This data must not necessarily lead to the conclusion that all pensioners who work do so purely because they enjoy working. Some people with low pensions deliver newspapers or stack shelves purely because it is the only way they can afford to live. When the labor market is booming, they have a better chance of finding work. Needless to say, a system of old-age pensions must not depend on additional employment, not least because many of those in most urgent need of additional earnings are unable to work due to health reasons.

Are 80 percent of students living independently poor?

To accompany the debate on the reform to Germany's system of student grants and loans (BAföG), the charity Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband (2022) published a brief comment piece on poverty among students in Germany. The key findings from the accompanying press release on May 17, 2022: 30 % of all students live in poverty; the figure for students living alone is almost 80 %. The student funding and the increase in BAföG planned at the time are absolutely insufficient, given that 45 % of students receiving BAföG are affected by poverty. The item was picked up by a wide range of media, including the websites of FAZ, *Die Zeit*, *Spiegel* and TAZ.[5] Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband was in the spotlight for a day. Student representatives spoke of shocking figures.

The comment piece was based on data collected in 2020 by the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) on the income situation in 2019, with the figures analyzed in 2022. In line with the statistical convention established by the European Union, the definition of persons living ›at risk of poverty‹ is those who live in households with incomes of less than 60 % of the median income of all households. For comparability, the household income is converted using equivalence figures (net equivalent income). On this basis, the SOEP calculated that, in 2019, a single person with an income of less than EUR 1,266 per month was at risk of poverty. Whether one considers students with less than this to be poor is a question of perspective.

The European Union's (EU) method of measuring the risk of poverty has now become dominant. Yet since the EU has never defined where the ›risk of poverty‹ ends and ›poverty‹ begins, it has created communicative chaos. ›Risk of poverty‹ and ›poverty‹ are now used synonymously in both the media and public perceptions. If one accepts this equivalence, the data in the charity's press release is correct.

FAZ, *Die Zeit*, *Der Spiegel* and TAZ were almost unanimous in their online reports, which were based on a news item from the DPA. None of the media mention the poverty risk threshold of EUR 1,266; the press release by Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband did not quote it directly either, although it did provide the basis for calculating it: by adding the median value for the income of students classed as poor and the value for the ›poverty gap,‹ i.e., the difference between this and the poverty risk threshold. Only zeit.de quoted both values. None of the aforementioned media supported readers in assessing what exactly is meant by poverty among students.

It is also astonishing that the large discrepancy between the poverty risk rate among all students and that of students living alone is not addressed. This discrepancy arises from the calculation method used for income equivalence. Students who live with their parents are recorded as being part of their parents' household. As a result, those students who are in a position to leave their parents' house and do not look for a course close to home for financial reasons appear particularly poor. Neither was there any critical examination of whether EUR 1,266 is a suitable standard for measuring whether a student is poor. If 80 % of students living alone are ›poor,‹ there must be a lot of upper middle class parents who are

5 *Der Spiegel*: https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/bildung/paritaetischer-wohlfahrtsverband-fast-jeder-dritte-student-lebt-in-armut-a-df4f9be8-f46f-4ea8-9480-e2d4ad02dc19; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: https://www.faz.net/aktuell/karriere-hochschule/buero-co/paritaetischer-gesamtverband-ein-drittel-der-studenten-von-armut-betroffen-18036893.html; *Die Zeit*: https://www.zeit.de/campus/2022-05/studierende-armut-paritaetischer-wohlfahrtsverband; *Die Tageszeitung*: https://taz.de/Studie-des-Paritaetischen-Wohlfahrtsverbands/!5855448/ (08 May 2023).

not willing to protect their children against this kind of poverty, despite being financially able to do so.

To avoid misunderstanding: Some students are undoubtedly in a difficult financial position, and it is essential that there is a debate on a (targeted!) reform of the BAföG system. Yet the media hype surrounding the Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband did nothing to contribute to this. After all, raising the level of BAföG to EUR 1,266 was never discussed. Why should BAföG be higher than the amount parents on high incomes are willing to pay to their student children? While BAföG remains below this threshold, however, the rate of poverty measured will remain unchanged. The hype triggered outrage for a while, but did nothing to focus attention on the problem groups among students in order to find a solution. The Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband's brief comment piece itself would have provided some input on this, had anyone actually read it.

What is (not) reported?

Media reporting on social developments in Germany often draws on studies by academic institutes. These institutes conduct professional PR work and often publish teasers of their results in such a way as to attract media attention. Sometimes this is done in a way that stretches the scientific findings a little. Even in academic circles, media presence has been a valuable currency for some time now, and was included alongside political consultancy and research performance as criteria for the list of »most influential economists« compiled by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* until 2021. Studies by academic institutes are also quoted in questions by the Opposition in parliament, receiving attention accordingly, together with the responses from the federal government. This is ultimately a positive development, as the academic institutes are generally transparent about their data and methods and their work therefore serves as a basis for well-founded debate – as long as it is used.

Here, too, however, selection is guided by expectation. It is harder for academic studies to gain attention if they do not correspond to popular expectations. One example of a study that was ignored by the media is an analysis of the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) by the Deutsche Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (DIW) for the period 1995 to 2019, i.e., up to the start of the pandemic (GRABKA 2022). The SOEP is one of the most important, if not *the* most important data source on economic and social development in Germany. A long-term evaluation by the SOEP is not just a study among many others, but a central data source for recording trends in social development. Yet apart from a few small news items, the study was ignored. This is particularly noteworthy given the extensive media resonance otherwise enjoyed by the DIW.

We can only speculate on the reasons. The long-term evaluation of the SOEP data showed a generally positive development that contradicts the narrative of decline. The key findings: Hourly wages have risen significantly in real terms since 2013 after having stagnated with slight fluctuations up to 2005, i.e., in a phase of constantly rising mass unemployment, and then falling by around 4% up to 2013. Looking at the entire period 1995 to 2020, gross monthly pay rose by more than 10% in real terms across all workers, and that of full-time workers by 22%. The low-wage sector is shrinking, having grown until 2007 and then remained consistent. Inequality in gross hourly wages has fallen. Available net household income is higher than in 1995 in real terms across all deciles, and up 25% for those in the middle. Inequality in net household income, which rose significantly until 2005, has remained largely stable since then, with only slight fluctuations.

This study, which takes an objective look at the social situation without glossing over its problems, deserved attention – especially in a period of great uncertainty triggered by the attack on Ukraine and its social consequences in Germany. That uncertainty led to high expectations of compensation among the middle classes, resulting in expensive packages of relief measures that failed to reach their targets effectively (DIERMEIER et al. 2022). Greater awareness of the DIW study could have helped to correct the idea that, even before covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, the middle classes were among the victims.

Is there a lack of statistical skills?

Statistical data serves to back up political statements, including in many of the examples selected here. The idea that statistics are a particularly good way to lie is commonly repeated. A counterargument against this critical attitude towards empirical approaches is attributed to Frederick Mosteller, the founding director of the Statistics Department of Harvard University: »While it is easy to lie with statistics, it is even easier to lie without them« (CHIVERS/CHIVERS 2021:7). Selective everyday experiences cannot be used as the basis for valid statements on whether income distribution is becoming less equal, whether poverty in Germany is increasing or decreasing, which at-risk groups are affected, etc. Without statistics, it is impossible to say. Teaching basic knowledge of statistical methods has taken a back seat in schools today, even in advanced mathematics classes. It is with this lack of knowledge that journalists begin their training. On the other hand, better knowledge of methods would not necessarily mean that news was not selected and interpreted in line with established narratives. Preventing this also demands a critical professional attitude. Knowledge of methods can help this kind of attitude to gain traction in everyday professional practice.

There is no doubt that many journalists have excellent training and a broad range of theoretical tools that allow them to get to grips with the methodological concepts of studies and social statistics in the necessary depth – as long as the everyday routine of an editorial office allows them the time. It will presumably not be possible for the wider majority of journalists to become experts in statistical methods, but they should at least be familiar with the most important pitfalls in order to assess whether the material they are using is legitimate – an aspect that should unquestionably be part of their training. A few examples: When an enormous rise in a variable is quoted, is the starting point also stated? (If the starting point is very small, even small changes create impressive percentage increases.) When conducting a comparison over time from a period of fluctuating values, has the base year been deliberately selected in order to create the desired effect – be it an increase or decrease? Various media frequently report on random samples. It is important to scrutinize whether the sample is representative and thus enables conclusions to be drawn on a whole population, such as the population of Germany, or whether it is distorted. Are differences found between groups statistically significant, or could they be the consequence of an unavoidable sampling error? Journalists should understand that they ought to steer clear of studies that make no mention of statistical significance, however new and interesting the results appear. Care must also be taken with studies that interpret a statistical link as causal without discussing this carefully (CHIVERS/CHIVERS 2021 provide an overview of statistical pitfalls closely related to media).

A critical attitude must also be adopted when organizations publish their own studies. If such studies are produced with the collaboration of researchers who have the appropriate methodological tools, they can bring forth valuable results. Yet there are also unprofessional studies whose sole aim is to generate media attention. It costs little to add one or two questions to a telephone survey by a polling institute and inflate the responses into a study. A press release then announces that a study has shown that a large majority of the population shares the organization's concern and that the government therefore has a democratic obligation to act on it. Without knowing the precise formulation of the question – which may be suggestive – the data is completely worthless. In one case, I requested the precise formulation, only to be told that this was an operating secret of the polling institute. Moreover, even if valid methods have found that a broad majority of those surveyed advocate higher welfare payments, people often give generous responses in surveys, as long as they are not directly asked about the costs that this would incur for them as tax payers. Reputable studies check this information. In addition, the data collected by the organization's ›study‹ may already be well known, or may be determined far more effectively by analyzing data sets gathered in a scientific context. But this would have much less chance of becoming news.

A press release announcing that an organization is aware of the results of the SOEP would go straight in the trash at any editorial office.

A lack of critical corrective

I have quoted just a few examples here to demonstrate my theory that the common narrative of decline in social policy has a major influence on the selection and framing of news and reports on the situation in society and social policy. It would be worthwhile to investigate this more thoroughly in (quantitative) media analyses. The effect of pre-expectations on journalistic work is likely to be something that media studies experts would confirm, rather than deny.

Below I set out some considerations on how perception and reporting can be differentiated. Sophisticated perception of the development of the welfare state is essential if the debate is to sound out options for reform, rather than merely exhausting itself with inconsequential outrage. I am not a media studies expert – my remarks are based on my media contacts and my observation of reporting on the welfare state in association with my professional role leading a charity.

The most important thing is to encourage openness and curiosity among trainee journalists, so that they develop an interest in exploring whether the development of the situation in society might be different, more complex or more contradictory than they had previously imagined. This is likely the most difficult aspect of the change that needs to be made, as it has a bearing on fundamental questions of attitude. Needless to say, what matters is not only the attitude, but also the conditions under which journalists work at media houses. The economic pressure that managers and chief editors pass on to their employees is sometimes so high that journalists have no benefit from being thorough. After all, research can destroy the best – i.e., most sensational – stories.

A journalist's professional attitude includes the ability to take a distanced view, including of political opinions close to their own and of institutions to which they feel connected. The impression I have gained from my work with the charity is that journalists are generally very sympathetic towards charities, as they are benevolent towards the causes that the organizations represent. There are some striking exceptions, however, such as articles – usually in business papers – that present charities as clandestine networks enriching themselves at the cost of society. Even if some of these articles do pick up on problems that would be worthy of further investigation, they are sometimes so overexaggerated that it is easy to reject them as malicious, especially when they are associated with general opposition to a well-developed system of welfare state safeguards. Charities then perceive them as expressions of opinion from an opposing camp that need to be rejected harshly and provide no incentive for them to rethink their own positions.

The vast majority of journalists have a benevolent attitude. Yet this in itself can become problematic if it turns into an uncritical attitude and a failure to examine claims about and interpretations of the situation in society. The media coup achieved by the Deutscher Kinderschutzbund [Federal Association of the Child Protection Association in Germany] is one example. This phenomenon results in a lack of the critical corrective that is so urgently needed. After all, charities themselves are not entirely innocent when it comes to their media work, either; they are also competing for the limited public attention available. Members often see media presence as proof that their charity is effective, however misguided this perception may be. When members see their own charity as having less public presence than other charities, this creates an expectation that the charity's leadership should also use shrill, exaggerated statements to gain attention over the competition.

This kind of exaggeration can only be achieved by dramatically reducing the complexity of a story – which, as the handful of examples shows, can lead to contradiction of the facts or at least to a highly one-sided interpretation of social developments. Given the unavoidable complexity of the welfare state – only complex systems are at all fair while also being manageable from a fiscal point of view –, social policy (and presumably many other political fields) is especially susceptible to this. Scandalization is a way to decrease complexity and reduce complex phenomena to simple patterns.

Journalists would be providing an important service if they were to subject statements from charities to critical examination – even if they generally serve, or appear to serve, a good cause. If charities had to factor in this ›risk‹ in their media work, changes in behavior could be expected. The majority of charities certainly have the staff and resources to work in a way that reflects the complexity of the content. Supported by significant public funding, larger charities have numerous staff at federal headquarters whose size can compete with some state ministries of social affairs. I am absolutely convinced that these specialist resources are often used insufficiently (or not at all) to back up media statements, as they tend to get in the way of the kind of radical exaggeration that ensures media presence. Staff in press offices are at a greater distance from the expert discourse and find exaggeration easier. Those experts at charities with whom I come into contact are certainly often embarrassed when I ask about their charities' press releases.

»Lost in the ether« – on the lack of reaction from policymakers and authorities

Journalism is of course not the only authority that needs to step up and provide a critical corrective. As I have demonstrated, the decision to give refugees from Ukraine immediate access to basic welfare payments unavoidably led to a rise in the number of claimants. If this is then misinterpreted as an indicator of growing social inequality, it would be up to ministries of social affairs and the policymakers in them to contradict this. But they usually do not. Asking those responsible in politics throws up two reasons why they do not often speak up. The first is the risk of creating a media storm. Someone who tries to counter scandalization with sophisticated arguments is easily accused of trying to sugarcoat the situation and deny the state of affairs in society. This risk is indisputable. But the fewer social policymakers are brave enough to take a stand, the greater the risk for those that do.

The other argument for not reacting is that a reaction adds value to the news item and increases its public impact further. But this is a weak argument. The individual news item is indeed quickly forgotten, and this may happen even more quickly when there is no public contradiction. Yet it still helps to firm up the perception of failure of the welfare state that bears no relation to the reality of German society. When a constant stream of expectation-led selection and one-sided interpretation of news gives rise to the impression that everything in Germany is screamingly unjust, this must have consequences for the perception of the social situation.

Representative surveys clearly show this. Surveys conducted in 2009 and 2020 asked respondents to state which of five ideal forms of society best reflected the situation in Germany at the time. More than half of those surveyed saw the largest group of people at the bottom, rather than in the middle of society, i.e., imagined the kind of social structure typical of agricultural societies or societies in early phases of industrialization (NIEHUES 2019; BELLANI u.a. 2021: 7f.). A perception like this can have negative consequences. Someone who sees themselves in the middle of society but most people at the bottom risks developing excessive fear of losing status. Surveys on the subjective perception of unemployment show that, in large sections of the population, perception has become detached from actual developments on the labor market. Both in 2008 and in 2016, around 40% of the population estimated the rate of unemployment as at least 20% – the actual figures were 7.8% and 6.1% respectively. It was also found that the more that people overestimate unemployment, the less trust they have in the democratic system and its institutions (DIERMEIER/NIEHUES 2019).

The individual news item may be ›lost in the ether,‹ but the constant stream of items that are selected because they appear to fit with the narrative of constant worsening of the situation in society, and interpreted accordingly, has consequences. At least when charities fuel this discourse of decline with their media work, they do so – apart from their own charity policy interest in securing their own media presence – with the intention of promoting the safeguarding and expansion of the welfare state. It is for a good cause and, so a widely held view goes, it is legitimate to use broader brush strokes. Yet it is questionable whether this kind of approach is useful. Ritual outrage does nothing to aid a more sophisticated look at groups at risk, nor to analyze chains of effects between political action and the living situations and prospects of people threatened by poverty or exclusion, nor to explore solutions, let alone make them happen.

Furthermore, there is nothing to say that outrage contributes to political support for the welfare state. After all, it also sends the message that the welfare state is constantly failing, despite the fact that almost one third of GDP is used for the various aspects of the welfare state safety net. If the welfare state has such little effect as is claimed in scandalizing exaggeration, it would be plausible to draw the conclusion that conditions with a smaller welfare state would not be much worse than today. Scandalization can also promote another position that is just as poisonous for solidarity-based systems: the idea that taxes and social security contributions are a loss of income for which nothing is received in return. A discourse of decline that is detached from empirical data can play into the hands of the trend towards desolidarization in the middle classes, who already see themselves at risk of a loss of status – a fear which in turn also has a negative impact on acceptance of marginalized groups.

A contentious public debate on the social safety net and the fundamental principles of the welfare state is essential. After all, at stake are existential questions like material safeguarding in precarious living situations, preventing poverty, security in old age, and health – and how society can successfully ensure inclusion for people with severe impairments.

There is good reason to hope that a public debate on social issues, held in a rational way, could achieve a better effect and thus be political in a real sense. This would require journalism that sees itself as a critical corrective, rather than a sounding board for widely held fears.

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