Journalism Research

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Legal Notice

Editorial

Dear reader,

Do you like to watch television or listen to radio produced by public service broadcasters – especially when you are looking for trustworthy information in perilous situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East? Perhaps, in the face of the kind of shortcomings revealed by the scandal surrounding wasteful Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (rbb) Executive Director and ARD Chair Patricia Schlesinger, you have begun to doubt the trustworthiness of this traditional media institution. In extreme cases, such doubts can develop into demands for the abolition of public service broadcasting and with it the annoying, flat-rate license fee that every German household is required to pay. Our focus topic in this issue looks at what needs to be done in order to retain and further develop public service broadcasting as a source of reliable information.

The three papers look at these questions from different viewpoints. Peter Welchering is necessarily forthright in his criticism of working conditions in public service broadcasting, from the internal point of view of an experienced journalist in its employ. My own paper takes the external point of view of a sympathetic observer in social sciences and a constant radio listener, and gives suggestions for deep-rooted reform. Hans Peter Bull provides an analysis that includes both external and internal perspectives by conducting an independent examination of an attempt by Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR) to learn about internal problems and the need for reform.

In this, the journal's sixth year, this focus topic is an attempt to counteract the problem of journals' shorter shelf life compared to, for example, academic book literature. By focusing on a specific topic and combining multiple articles on that topic in one place, we hope to achieve greater reception and remain in the memory for longer than we would with disparate individual papers. The fact that our focus topic fits in with a debate currently being conducted elsewhere may also be productive in terms of attracting attention. Public service broadcasting is not short of attention at the moment.

Our original idea, as announced in the call for papers in Issue 2/2023, was to put together a focus on the organization of broadcasting in general. Over time, the subject of the discourse naturally narrowed – in part due to the interest concentrated on public service broadcasting. We would be delighted to be offered analyses of other forms and examples of broadcasting organization in the near future.

The other papers in this issue certainly do not suffer from the narrow focus of attention. On the contrary: They indicate gaps in the attention paid by journalism and journalism studies in relation to certain topics and sources. Nora Hespers investigates the question of why media criticism, which does not usually suffer from a lack of subjects, has shown so little interest in digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and the effects of their interests and activities on journalism. Katja Schmidt, Tanjev Schultz and Gert G. Wagner demonstrate the significance of general statistics on the population and professions, which have previously seen little use, as a source for journalism research. Maryna Grytsai calls to mind people whose dangerous work receives little attention, despite its vital importance to reporting on conflicts and wars. Foreign correspondents do not report based (only) on what they themselves see, but rely on local informants known as stringers or fixers. T. J. Thomson and Ryan J. Thomas examine the opportunities and hazards presented by a phenomenon that risks being overshadowed in the growing discussion on artificial intelligence (AI): Not only texts, but also (moving) images can be technically generated to look strikingly genuine.

The section with which we began the 2/2022 issue can also be considered from the point of view of neglect. Journalism is usually taken to mean news and other transitory information products, and the ways of working behind them. But there are also books that deserve to be called journalism on account of their topical themes and inspiring forms of presentation. Vienna-based colleagues Fritz Hausjell und Wolfgang R. Langenbucher present some of these books here, based on an original concept by Hannes Haas. In an age in which news thrusts itself upon its audience free of charge and sometimes unsolicited, journalistic books may be especially important for the future of journalism as a profession.

In this issue, we thus attempt to meet both requirements of a journal in journalism studies: both engaging in a topical debate in a profound, indeed scientific, way, and analyzing topics and subjects that receive little attention elsewhere.

Regardless of which of these two goals more closely matches your ideal for this journal, we hope you enjoy reading it.

Horst Pöttker

Focus: Public broadcasting in Germany

Peter Welchering

Reform or repair

A distress call from the engine rooms of public broadcasters

Abstract: **Public broadcasting is under fire. That is not new. Too closely aligned with governments, political bias towards one party or another, unbalanced programming, red tape and high-handed executives, some of them remarkably self-serving – I have been hearing these points of criticism ever since I produced my first piece for West German public broadcaster WDR 40 years ago.[1] But in the past, at least until the Schlesinger affair, there was a general truth, encapsulated in a quote by Johannes Ludwig, speaking in the voice of a public broadcasting executive in February 2009: »It's like water off a duck's back.« And: »Public broadcasters think they can get away with it.« (LUDWIG 2009:6) The Schlesinger case, however, has rattled the smugness of public broadcasting bigwigs. Now at least, they could no longer refuse to engage in a reform debate, as they had before. One group, however, has hardly been heard at all in this debate so far: freelancers, with or without contracts. In other words, the very people who produce most of the broadcasters' daily programming, who work in a legally sanctioned form of sham self-employment, who often live in precarious conditions. And it's not for lack of eloquence. No, the distress calls from the engine room are ignored because broadcasting policymakers and executives would actually have to muster the courage to reinvent public broadcasting if they took the S.O.S. seriously. Many don't want to go there.**

Keywords: **reform of public broadcasting, hierarchy failure, buzzfeedization, journalism crisis, reform proposals**

Translation: Kerstin Trimble

A colleague from Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (rbb), who wished to remain anonymous, painted a terrible picture in a *Medienmagazin* podcast episode on 1 July 2023. It is very unflattering to executives or public broadcasting policy-makers, but many colleagues feel that it is an accurate rendering of the realities of many contracted or uncontracted freelancers at the ÖPR.

> »Public broadcasting is like a giant vessel. They keep adding new decks at the top, yet another sun deck, and then another one. And up there, they are sipping champagne, eating canapés, and feeling very important. And below, the galley slaves are toiling, rowing for their lives. They are given some bread and water now and then. And when the vessel does not move, they say: Oh, we need to shed a little weight. So they toss some of their galley slaves overboard. Before long, the whole ship will sink. They've resisted genuine reform and real structural change for so long that they'd rather let the ship go down than change anything about their privileges.« (WAGNER 2023: from 35'30")

This metaphor has been the subject of intense discussion among freelance journalists.[2] At numerous trade union events, many colleagues expressed that their colleague at the rbb had painted a very apt picture. The rbb journalist herself says she drew it back in 2021, prior to the Schlesinger affair, but has received a great deal of encouragement since, and not only from other journalists.

Some small momentum towards reform in the fall of 2022

In fact, many media researchers and communication scholars deem the current situation in public broadcasting as critical. This is what media researcher Lutz Hachmeister had to say about public broadcasting executives in *Handelsblatt* on 26 November 2022: »Today, the media are ruled by power-conscious technocrats who grew up entirely in an incestuous system« (JAKOBS 2022).

Even WDR Director-General Tom Buhrow, previously considered extremely resistant to criticism, called for »a debate on our direction and on a new social contract« for public broadcasting that is »free from taboos« in his speech to the Hamburg Übersee-Club on 2 November 2022 (BUHROW 2022). This set a new tone. Many executives were in shock. Some tentatively opened up to discussion of reform. Others retreated even deeper into their trenches. Since then, media policymakers have been trying to cover their bases, but some of them still don't even know where to run to.

A frequent accusation from the engine room is that far too many broadcasting executives don't even care about programming anymore, but only about their paychecks, which they are trying to maximize with a passionate grifting mindset.

These accusations are harsh. And they are often based on the experience that executives have turned their backs on journalism and only pursue their own economic and political interests. They are often based on the experience that

something like a journalistic leadership culture has been irretrievably lost. NDR Director Joachim Knuth, who is not exactly known for welcoming participation in his sphere of control, let alone for a pronounced interest in a functioning management culture, even felt compelled to commission a study on the working atmosphere at NDR (REIMERS et al. 2023).

Loss of trust in executives

The results were, and still are, alarming. »Many employees don't trust their management,« Stephan Reimers said right out of the gate when he presented the results of the study (REIMERS et al 2023:7). The system is referred to as a »two-tier society«. »NDR is a government-owned broadcasting company,« and senior officials seem to have strayed far from journalistic standards. »Employees often despair over this.« (REIMERS et al 2023:7) The working atmosphere is one of mis-trust and conflict. Incompetent and overwhelmed executives are making life difficult for the engine room crew.

Many of the hard-working engine room crews are no longer able to meet the mandate of public broadcasters as laid down in media-state treaties because a large part of the management staff no longer pursues a journalistic mission, but entirely different objectives. That is why the journalistic engine room is opera-ting without any support.

Targets play a key role in this, as longtime ZDF editor Wolfgang Herles notes: »Editorial managers are degenerating into mere product managers. At ZDF, they sign annual target agreements. And the mighty boss of the main programming department assigns grades.« (HERLES 2020: 34). These target agreements vary according to each broadcaster. At rbb, for example, during the Schlesinger era, there were targets for saving personnel costs and fees. Executives who saved a lot of money on fees received generous bonuses. This created a devastating situation in some sub-sub-companies of rbb with no collective bargaining standards whatsoever.[3]

Other companies concluded target agreements on digitization without having a clear digitization strategy. Other target agreements were about social media reach. The more likes on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or TikTok, the better the target score. Journalistic standards and quality reporting no longer played a role in these target agreements.

Intransparent, meshed structures prevent good journalism

Such target agreements often resulted in editing and production being out-sourced, and not only in the talk show sector. Broadcasters usually end up

spending more money on outsourcing than on in-house production because talk show hosts' production companies are asking a pretty penny, but since some of that money comes from other pots, the »target budget« was still met. Such accounting tricks not only come at great cost to us, the fee-paying public, but above all the freelance journalists whose working conditions at many outsourced production companies can only be described as precarious.

In an interview with broadcaster WDR (which is, after all, a member of the service-industry union ver.di), Sabine Rollberg, long-time editor-in-chief at European public service channel arte, pointed out that this kind of outsourcing contradicts the principle of independent journalism »because actually, WDR editors are permanent employees so that they may have the material security to be creative, innovative, and immune to blackmail« (VER.DI-SENDERVERBAND WDR 2021).

But those days are over. More and more editors work as precariously employed freelancers, often under fixed-term contracts that expire after a year or two.

»It makes them more gullible, more compliant,« an ARD executive told me on the sidelines of an event about the future of journalism.[4] Of course, such management policies don't exactly foster journalistic debate about pieces and program elements in newsrooms and at broadcasting companies. This has led to a creeping decline of the culture of error that is naturally associated with such discussions, and of journalistic quality standards (cf. WELCHERING 2018).

Sabine Rollberg pointed out a second important development in this context, namely »that people no longer wanted specialist editors, but generalists. A specialist editor is in a far better position to resist hierarchical interference or paternalism, and that is vital for quality programming.« (ver.di-Senderverband WDR 2021) The general disdain for specialized journalism at the C-levels of public broadcasting is probably part of this development.

Of course, the hierarchy has always argued that specialized journalism is far more expensive than generalist daily journalism. For example, fee agreements for specialist articles stipulate slightly higher fees than agreements for general articles that do not require a great deal of research.

A general journalist working on a flat rate is more likely to spawn a few quick articles on a specialist topic without spending much time researching the subject. They don't have the time to do that. And it is also irrelevant for their evaluation. This is why hierarchs keep using the famous »savings argument« as they dismantle specialist journalism.

In any case, »saving« has become the hierarchy's universal argument. »We will keep saving until everything is broken. That's the mantra I've been hearing constantly for over 25 years,« the anonymous rbb journalist states in the Medienmagazin podcast (WAGNER 2023: from 34'11").

They cut fees for freelancers, research resources, per diems, travel expenses, and equipment. »But in doing so, they also cut the editors capability to create

a good piece.« Nothing has changed about that, quite the opposite.« (WAGNER 2023, from 43'11")

The chopping block hits freelancers particularly hard. Cutting them has been, and continues to be justified either by saying that the income from fees is too low (which, after all, flushes more than eight billion euros into the system), that restructuring is necessary to enable digitization, or that the cuts are a strategy to position the broadcasters for the future.

In addition to outsourcing, new intermediate cross-media structures or digitization actually cost an enormous amount of money. The journalistic engine room often wonders how these very expensive structures contribute to the program mission. So far, the hierarchy has been pretending not to even hear this question.

Consultants with slide decks, rather than space for journalistic work

Consulting costs are another argument for cutting freelancers in the journalistic engine room. In fact, directors, heads of departments and other executives are apparently being advised into the ground. On the »sundecks« of almost any media vessel, fancy slide shows on digitization – whatever that means – or on »investigation« are used as a smokescreen to obscure the fact that research capabilities have been cut across the board.

Up on the deck, executives are punch-drunk with their own medial importance and societal significance. It clouds their perception. Meanwhile, down in the machine room, people wonder what these fancy graphics on the slides actually have to do with the program mission that everyone down here is slaving away to fulfill for a pittance.

In other words, the mood in the engine room is getting bitter. In part, it has boiled into anger. The »climate report« on the working climate at NDR mentions a »disconnect« and an immense »loss of trust between managers and employees«. Here are the employees' grievances: »Our editor-in-chief is dodging issues related to content and instead, is focused only on the broad strokes. We are supposed to fill them with content. We feel abandoned because the conditions are paralyzing and we are overworked to the point that we have zero elbow room.« (REIMERS et al 2023:11).

The authors of the study concluded: »Many employees distrust their top leadership. They feel the executives have no objective view of the problems on the ground.« (17) The authors led interviews with employees who described their everyday work for a public broadcaster in rather drastic terms: »I don't trust this leadership team to handle this. They speak in platitudes. I feel that these people

are unaware of the seriousness of the situation. I feel that none of them have the big picture in mind.« (17)

At ARD-*aktuell*, such problems have been simmering for some time.[5] »The editors-in-chief consider their position a mere rung on their career ladder. Neither one of the three knows how we work and why we work the way we do,« the report on ARD-*aktuell* states. (REIMERS et al 2023:51)

The general sentiment is: »The mood at ARD-*aktuell* is at an all-time low. The chasm between the editor-in-chief and all the other editors is huge.« (REIMERS et al 2023: 50) The general verdict goes: »There is no more trust on either side« (ibid 51).

The lousy mood in the engine room of ARD-*aktuell* is not a new phenomenon. It was already building up under Kai Gniffke as editor-in-chief. Conflicts intensified as cross-media offerings were expanded. The management devalued journalistic standards for news coverage. They no longer played a major role.

Buzzfeedization wreaks havoc

In addition, there was no discernible journalistic strategy behind the expansion of cross-media offerings. The conflicts thus came out into the open. »The editorial team at ARD-*aktuell* is growing enormously. However, many of the new, young colleagues still lack experience. They've never done a TV segment before, which means the veterans' workload is not alleviated at all,« the Reimers study summarizes the conflicts within the team (REIMERS et al: 50).

At first glance, this could easily be interpreted as a generational problem. Upon closer analysis, it turns out to be a suppressed dispute about journalistic standards that goes far beyond ARD-*aktuell*. The debate is held between the following poles: Should we adhere to the ideal of objectivity or emotionalize the news to boost our reach? Should we conduct in-depth research or optimize production with shallow content? Is our tone geared towards news or entertainment?[6]

Some colleagues who left the editorial department of ARD-*aktuell* »are still being badmouthed« (ibid, 51). And, one may add: This negative talk is coming mainly from executives and is addressed at employees who refused to accept, and then quit over, cutbacks on quality in the news division.

It was made extremely difficult for some critics of the NDR to find employment with other editorial departments at other public broadcasters. Such developments obviously put a considerable strain on the working atmosphere, cause a massive drop in performance, and dampen journalistic commitment.

But lamenting the conditions does not help, either. We need solutions. We need a public broadcasting system that remains capable of fulfilling its programming mandate in the future. We need to move away from trench warfare, which ties up unnecessary resources that are needed elsewhere in quality

journalism. Quality journalism does not belong in the institutions' trench-warfare or close-quarter combat.

Ten demands towards a solution

This applies not only to NDR, but to all public broadcasters. The state-level chapter of dju at the service-industry trade union ver.di in Lower Saxony/Bremen has led a very intense debate on it. They brought a motion and wrote a policy paper »for a reasonable reform of public broadcasting«.[7] The paper was discussed at the ver.di national conference from 17 to 22 September and incorporated into the main motion of the national conference of media, journalism, and film. By passing the main motion, the positions of the motion and policy paper have also been adopted.

We demand a fundamental reform of public broadcasting. Public broadcasting is mired in a deep crisis, from which it can only emerge by way of comprehensive reform.

> »This reform must start from our fundamental mandate of providing information and and basic news services, and it is geared towards media policy and a collective bargaining. ver.di acknowledges its responsibility both in terms of collective bargaining and media policy. On this basis, we formulate 10 demands for a sweeping reform of public broadcasting, which must be preserved as a pillar of democratic decision-making (participatory function) and social control (watchdog function).«

From this, we derive ten demands, which are being discussed very intensively, not only among freelancers. These ten demands come straight from the journalistic engine room. And this is probably also why they are so easily ignored by the executives on the commando bridge, and by media policymakers on the shore.

Implementing these ten demands would mean a profound reform of public broadcasting, which would deprive its executives of many a comfort. The control bodies would have their work cut out for them. Broadcasting policymakers would be dealing with a broadcasting service that is very much distanced from government. That notion does not necessarily sit well with many media policymakers who consider themselves primarily footsoldiers of their political party.

These are our ten specific reform proposals, which essentially stem from the journalistic engine room:

1. Eliminate uncontrolled power in the hierarchies of the ÖRR by way of greater participation.
2. Adjust salary and fee structures and reduce exuberant salaries at the executive and leadership levels.
3. Abolish party representation at the executive level, and instead, enable participation of all social groups.

4. Strengthen those who actually make the programs, especially freelancers (creator-driven broadcasting).
5. Liquidate subcontractors and stop outsourcing entire shows and programs to production companies. Institutions must adhere to collective bargaining agreements and stop the tariff-dodging and fee dumping that has been practiced by production companies and subcontractors.
6. Reduce exorbitant consultant costs, instead make greater use of employees' skills.
7. Harmonize retirement benefits for all employees (statutory pension insurance, ARD-ZDF pension scheme, instead of excessive corporate retirement benefits).
8. Establish broadcasting councils as genuine supervisory bodies. To achieve this, it would be helpful to elect council members instead of appointing them.
9. Check structures for redundancies and eliminate them.
10. Make committee work in broadcasting companies transparent.

Now, we must actively inject these demands into the reform debate and implement them with employees at broadcasting companies. Media policymakers and broadcasting council members will also have to respond to these reform demands and express their views. In addition to the »Climate Report,« which describes situations at public broadcasters far beyond the NDR, the »Broadcasting Council Letter«-initiative, launched by the task force »Information Quality in Germany« could provide another empirical basis for this discussion with their long-term media analysis, which highlights how some of the issues mentioned here impact programming (BROADCASTING COUNCIL LETTER 2023). Further empirical research on this complex of issues will certainly be initiated and conducted as the debate continues.

Endnoten

1   I have been working in and for public broadcasting since 1983. From 1990 to 2001, my main focus was on the publishing industry, first as managing editor and trainer for young editors at Heise-Verlag, then as editor-in-chief of *Computer-Zeitung*. During this time, I also produced the odd piece for public broadcasting. Since 1994, my employer granted me permission to pursue side gigs, which I did regularly for the show *Computers and Communication* on Deutschlandfunk. From 2001, I had my own media office. I was fortunate to experience the good days, when you had two or three weeks to really do a deep-dive and thoroughly research a topic, you could travel and speak to sources, and your article would undergo some tough, but fair scrutiny and debate at your editorial office. I experienced the times when the results of my research were discussed and broadcast across several editorial offices and even on multiple channels, for instance, a piece I did on the Ministry of the Interior and its plans to sell biometric data in 2006. Even back then, public broadcasting was subject to sometimes massive criticism. But this criticism had an impact on the broadcasting companies. Even under a super tough, conservative-leaning program director, I was able to push through a piece that was critical of the conservative CDU, albeit after intense discussion. These debates were tough, but there was space to have them. Today, we are facing a completely different situation. This type of discussion is made ever more

difficult, even impossible, by entrenched positions, partially ideologized journalism, and a need to swim with the mainstream (cf. WELCHERING 2020). They do still take place, even with executives, but they are the exception nowadays. This type of debate must return as a natural part of everyday journalism at broadcasting companies.

2   In conversation with colleagues, I was warned not to use this metaphor. They said that while it was apt, it was also very harsh, and could harden the fronts further. I was also warned and admonished about writing this piece. Most of these warnings were well-intentioned and meant to protect me. I thank you all for that. I did consider all of your admonitions and warnings very carefully. And I wrote the piece anyway. On the one hand, this is owed to my conviction that it is still possible to have such debates in public broadcasting, even if the guardrails for them are narrowed by various executives. Secondly, at the age of 63, I am nearing the end of my professional career. To cite a comment by Düsseldorf-based criminal defense lawyer Udo Vetter on humorist Harald Schmidt, I benefit from the »blessings of a finished nest egg«. »That is, a sense that you are un-cancellable.« (Tweet from 22 September 2023) And that gives me a certain degree of freedom when I write such a piece. Yes, the picture of the public service broadcasting, as drawn by our anonymous colleague, is a shocking one. But it is accurate, and it sums up the structural problems well. I can only keep reiterating that. So perhaps it can be a starting point for a debate on reform, in which we, the ones who make the program, the contracted and uncontracted freelancers, can also be a major voice and assert our interests. We, down there in the journalistic engine room, have to finally drive this reform debate forward and bring change to the often-untenable state of affairs at our broadcasting companies. If we fail, the ship of public broadcasting will sink in a matter of a few years. We must stop that from happening. It is up to us to make a critical analysis and actually push through reforms. We can only do this together. We need to identify problems and approaches to reform, no matter how much certain hierarchs may moan and groan about it. And most importantly, we must not be discouraged from having this vital debate. We cannot allow others to dismiss this debate as »hully gully«. Neither are our debate contributions »howling« or »squealing«. We must not put up with a chairman of the ARD, or certain directors, or other ARD executives disparaging our calls for reform (cf. RAINER/BUSS 2022).

3   This is why I feel that massage chairs and pre-oiled hardwood floors are just the tip of the iceberg at the rbb. The real scandal lies in overvaluing the commando bridge and undervaluing the engine room, as is reflected in the many hierarchy levels and the financing structures: All these subsidiaries and their subcontractors practicing fee dumping and tariff evasion has resulted in many journalists being underpaid and undervalued.

4   This assessment is not an isolated opinion. Broadcasting executives have told me about this kind of »leadership directives« dozens of times

5   After a massive dispute with then editor-in-chief of ARD-aktuell in 2013, I stopped working for this editorial office entirely. The issues raised in the NDR climate report were similar to the ones back in 2013. It is not just a complete failure of individual executives and their severe lack of journalistic qualifications, but above all, it is a structural problem.

6   As a union representative, I have spoken to many colleagues about precisely these points and poles of contention, not only at the NDR. Some speak of a veritable »culture war,« which shows how difficult it is to mediate between the parties here. In a seminar paper, I described a tendency in this debate at the NDR as »buzzfeedization« (WELCHERING 2021). By this, I am referring to a trend that former employees of the portal *Buzzfeed* brought with them when they switched to executive positions at the NDR or its affiliates and research alliances. Without trying to reproduce the entire seminar paper here, let me just give you one example: On 1 August 2015, Juliane Leopold, who worked for *Buzzfeed* before she joined ARD-aktuell, told the newspaper *die tageszeitung* (taz): This is all about creating content that people love to share.« And a little later in the taz interview, she admits: »Sure it's trivial, sure it's entertainment.« She also advocates for a less sober, even enthusiastic approach to topics, because »for us, it is crucial that our articles appeal to emotions.« (FROMM 2015) Clearly, this publicity-based outlook is at odds with the journalistic orientation of veteran news journalists. And Daniel Drepper, who also worked for *Buzzfeed* before joining the NDR, WDR, and SZ research network, sums up his publicity-based outlook in an interview with the Tagesspiegel on 21 September 2017: »If users would rather see a foreign minister reading 21 lame jokes instead of talking about German foreign policy, then I have to take note of that.« This is, of course, quite different from the content orientation of veteran NDR investigators, such as Patrick Baab, who exposed the Barschel case a few years ago. Patrick Baab is still a point of reference for many NDR editors (despite the debate regarding behavior during his last research trip to the Donetsk region). I heard this in numerous conversations. This is how an NDR colleague summed up the conflict of this publicity-based buzzfeed outlook with traditional news orientation: »I create specialized journalistic content in business reporting. For example, I report on the background behind rising raw material prices and the implications for consumers. This is very different in method and style than a buzzfeedized post about »eight problems all women have with body hair«. This perhaps shows the main fault line of the

conflict and why a ceasefire between the antagonists on this »main battle front« is difficult to mediate, and has yet to be mediated successfully.

7   I was involved in writing the paper and the demands for a reform of public broadcasting. I would especially like to thank Annette Rose, my colleague on the board of the Lower Saxony-Bremen chapter of the dju at ver. di, for intense discussions and for her useful suggestions.

About the author

Peter Welchering has been working as a radio, television, and print journalist (including Deutschlandradio, ZDF, and various ARD stations, *Frankfurter Allgmeine Zeitung*) since 1983. He has held various teaching positions at journalism schools in Germany and in other countries. Since 2001, he has been running his own media office. One of his main focus areas is journalistic training and further education.

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Focus: Public broadcasting in Germany

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Provision of information

Thoughts on an overdue reform of public service broadcasting in Germany

Abstract: **Public service broadcasting in Germany has entered a crisis of legitimation that puts its very future in jeopardy. Taking an external view, this paper reminds the reader of public service broadcasting's statutory purpose: as a source of reliable information and of relevant advice, education and entertainment. It is a crisis born of the ossification of its structures and the difficulty of recognizing its public service profile. This forms the background for this discussion of a potential reform comprising four measures: composing the supervisory committees based on competence and independence; a means-based scale for the license fee; keeping programming free from advertising; and reducing the number of channels. To finish, the paper considers how such reforms could be implemented and the opportunities and risks this would present for society.**

Translation: Sophie Costella

Public service broadcasting is increasingly caught in the crossfire of criticism that even extends to calls for its abolition – and has been for some time now. Policymakers are especially likely to voice tough criticism, apparently believing that public service broadcasting could stand in the way of their election. That cannot be a reason not to voice justified criticism – but such criticism is often triggered merely by missteps on the part of its leading figures or gaffes in programming

(cf. DEUTSCHER BUNDESTAG 2022). As a result, discourse based in solidarity rarely moves beyond day-to-day issues.

This paper thus begins with a reminder of the fundamental principles of public service broadcasting – its original idea, the realization of which determines its legitimacy. When and why was public service broadcasting established in Germany? What makes it different from other forms of broadcasting organization? What is its purpose and under which conditions can this best be fulfilled? The paper then goes on to discuss what needs to change in the state of public service broadcasting if it is to achieve its goal and secure its legitimacy. This discussion will be based around four key aspects: *supervisory committees*, *license fees*, *advertising*, and *scope of programming*. I will then consider how such changes can be implemented and the opportunities and risks a deep-rooted reform of public service broadcasting would bring with it.

1. Basic principles

In the period 1933 to 1945, the National Socialist regime abused broadcasting as a tool of racist and war-mongering propaganda. This was made easier by the *Gleichschaltung* [coordination] of the commercial radio companies in the hands of the state, which was established as a form of organization during the Weimar Republic. To counter this, after 1945, the Western occupying powers introduced public service broadcasting in their zones modelled on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). German media policymakers like Hans Bredow also played a role in adapting the centralist BBC model to Germany's federal structures.[1] The key difference between public service broadcasting and private/commercial media – alongside the funding model of a mandatory license fee for all – is the programming mandate set out in law:

>»The role of public service broadcasting is to promote the formation of opinion and to serve democracy. This mandate under constitutional law gives public service broadcasting a direction, against which the broadcasters must allow their programming to be measured. The basic provision mandate comprises information, education and culture, as well as entertainment and sport. In addition, public service broadcasting must do justice to the principle of internal pluralism.« (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2009: 4)

Although broadcasting in Germany is the responsibility of the individual states and the laws regarding it (may) vary between the 16 states, they largely agree on the programming mandate:

>»The specifications on programming design include an obligation to provide the truth, taking different views into account in a balanced and appropriate way across the

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1 Cf. detailed depiction in BAUSCH 1980: 9-238.

programming as a whole, ensuring that programming does not one-sidedly serve one party or worldview, adhering to the requirement for journalistic fairness, diversity of opinion throughout programming [...] etc.« (DONGES 2013)

Key terms like *public service mandate*, *internal pluralism*, *duty of truth*, and *fairness* indicate the purpose of this form of media organization, on the implementation of which the long-term legitimacy and existence of public service broadcasting depends.

The duty of *fairness* and *truth* (more precisely: *truthfulness* or *accuracy*, cf. Pöttker 2017) relates to qualities of the information distributed by public service broadcasters in itself; to legal limits on the freedom of the press. Fairness corresponds to the »right to personal honor,« as set out as a limit by Art. 5 of the German Basic Law, while accuracy is a limit under civil law in the sense that the distribution of false information about people or institutions can lead to sanctions backed by the state monopoly on the use of force. Both are quality attributes of journalistic information that can be ensured by rules of the trade, such as those set out in the German Press Council's Code of Conduct, Sections 4 (»Limits of research«) and 8 (»Protection of rights of personality«) (Deutscher Presserat).

In addition to ensuring the accuracy and fairness of all the information it provides, public service broadcasting also has a legal obligation to provide *internal pluralism* across all its programming. This relates both to the *selection* of subjects on which information is provided or not provided, and to *how* it is reported on. Both are linked to the subjective experiences, interests, and perspectives of those selecting the topics and forms of presentation and, given the infinite possibilities, cannot be ensured by professional rules of the trade alone. Internal pluralism is intended to ensure that the greatest possible range of experiences, interests, and perspectives is shown, so that as little as possible remains hidden from the public: another prerequisite for the ability of highly complex societies, riddled with myriad barriers to communication, to self-regulate.

The key term *basic service* ultimately defines public service broadcasting's responsibility for ensuring that the population can rely on access to an extensive diversity of relevant and fair information – including information about possible opinions – at all times. The purpose of organizing media in a public service model is the *provision of information* as part of the general provision of public services, just like those provided by the state for other areas of life in the form of public schools, hospitals, transport links etc., regardless of their current use. It corresponds to the right of everyone, guaranteed in Art. 5 of the German Basic Law, »to inform [themselves] from generally accessible sources without impediment.«

Taking all these aspects into account, the core role of public service broadcasting is to ensure that the general public can always access a basis of reliable information that is created and offered exclusively with the professional intention

of making the world as transparent as it actually is. The fact that public service broadcasting is funded by mandatory license fees, rather than by selling products, is in line with the objective of preventing commercial influences. The principle of retaining distance from the state when it comes to funding and supervisory committees is intended to prevent (party) political influence.

What matters is that the audience can be sure that the reliable basis of information is always available, especially in situations where uncertainty is rife. Survey data from 2021, for example, shows that people really do expect public service broadcasting to fulfil this function: Across all age groups, two thirds of Germans believe that reliable sources of information will become more important in future (BREUNIG et al: 401). Two thirds also believe that reliable information is more likely to be found in public service broadcasting, while private media providers offer more entertainment (Breunig et al: 404f.). In the COVID-19 pandemic, both trust in the credibility of ARD and ZDF and levels of use (cf. ARLT et al. 2023: 4) rose significantly at the start (cf. VAN EIMEREN et al 2020) and during particularly critical phases.

This shows that viewing figures, however desirable, cannot be a key measure of the quality of public service broadcasting.[2] In addition, since public service broadcasting is funded by license fees that have to be paid by everyone, it cannot waste resources in order to serve myriad special requirements. Instead, it must concentrate effectively on its core role: providing information for the common good. Alongside the principle of reliable information, the principle of provision can also be applied to other roles of public service broadcasting, such as reliable education and advice, or high-quality entertainment.

In the discourse on the legitimacy and existence of public service broadcasters, it is essential to understand that they are not competing for the same commodity with commercial broadcasters aiming for the highest possible sales of their products. The future of public service broadcasting must not be made dependent on its current usage. What matters is that it is recognizable for its reliability, fairness, and inner diversity – that it is distinguishable from commercial channels and platforms.

2. Committees

Statutory requirements, especially when they are associated with limits on the freedom of speech and information guaranteed in Art. 5 of the German Basic Law, must be monitored to ensure that they are applied legitimately. In public service broadcasting, this role is played by the Executive Directors and by

2 Cf. also the article by Hans Peter Bull in this edition.

supervisory committees, which should be composed to reflect the plurality in society. Recent disputes have also often examined specialist expertise and commitment, which have not played a significant role as selection criteria up to now.

Looking at the existing supervisory committees, it is doubtful whether they (can) fulfil the expectations for what they can achieve. When it comes to the principle of plurality, there are complaints that the committees do not reflect society in terms of diversity of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, East/West German origin, etc., and that it is impossible to check for representativeness because relevant demographic data on committee members is not reliably available (cf. SCHIFFER et al. 2023). But there is another plurality deficit that is even more problematic than the lack of demographic proportionality: The lists of broadcasting council members include a strikingly high number of people for whom digital addresses of other institutions are provided as sources of information. The way the supervisory committees are put together explains this: Each of the »groups in society« – including the federal and state governments, political parties, churches, associations, and trade unions – are entitled to a defined number of seats on the committees, which are usually taken by leading representatives of the organization in question. The ZDF Television Council currently includes the chairs or presidents of the following institutions, among others: Kirchenamt der EKD [ecclesiastical office of the protestant church], Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Diakonie Deutschland, Deutscher Caritasverband [all charities], Vereinigung der Opfer des Stalinismus [association of the victims of Stalinism], Deutsches Rotes Kreuz [German Red Cross], Arbeiterwohlfahrt Bundesverband [Workers' Welfare Association], Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Immigrantenverbände [Federal Working Group of Immigrant Associations], NABU Naturschutzstiftung [Nature And Biodiversity Conservation Union], and the service sector union ver.di. They are joined by around 20 current or former representatives of the executives of the federal and state governments, such as Federal Minister for Families Lisa Paus and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania's Finance Minister Heiko Geue; the chair is Marlehn Thieme, President of the Welthungerhilfe charity.[3]

This corporatist make-up may have reflected the plurality of society in the early days of public service broadcasting but, since Roberto Michels' classic work (MICHELS 1957), we have observed how parties and other organizations[4] become set in their ways over time, increasingly focusing on their own concerns and those of their leading staff, rather than those of their members or people outside the organization. This process of *oligarchization* is currently particularly pronounced in the major churches, whose membership is shrinking rapidly. The

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3   For more detail, see: https://www.zdf.de/zdfunternehmen/zdf-fernsehrat-mitglieder-100.html, 11 August 2023.
4   For information on trades unions in the Federal Republic of Germany, see PIRKER 1960.

student movement of the 1960s referred to the privileged class of powerful people in parties, corporations, churches etc. as the »establishment.«

Another reason why the supervisory committees of public service broadcasters do not reflect the plurality of society is that the unorganized majority of the population is not represented. The grassroots members of the organizations also play a minimal role. The functionaries in the supervisory committees are often not only out of touch, but also lack specialist expertise and commitment, because they are often required to conduct other tasks, too, and see their position on a broadcasting council as merely another prestigious form of »volunteering.« The full assembly of the ZDF Television Council is held just four times a year, with the committees responsible held directly before.[5] The supervisory committees thus have very limited scope to observe whether and ensure that public service broadcasting is guided by the common good and providing high-quality programming in line with its mandate.

A central media institution that is responsible for the reliable availability of relevant and comprehensive information for the entire population is controlled by an elite of functionaries who also have power in many other fields. This necessarily feeds into the anti-elite aggressivity that goes hand in hand with latent anti-pluralism to form the core of populist propaganda (cf. MÜLLER 2016: 26). Considering the closed nature of the functional elite – clear to see in the broadcasting committees and is embedded in Germany's corporatist tradition (cf. VON ALEMANN/HEINZE 1979) – to be the main cause of the growing strength of populist groups is more likely to downplay the problem than explain it sufficiently. Populist movements are also on the rise in countries with a less corporatist tradition. But the conflict-averse unified voice of the German establishment, often dressed up as a principle of collegiality, does feed a populism that, combined with its critical attitude towards elites, pretends to be particularly democratic.

Not least in order to counteract these bubbles and take the wind out of the sails of populist demands for public service broadcasting to be dismantled, its supervisory committees should no longer be recruited in line with the weighting of other organizations. Instead, they should be composed not by the criteria of proportional plurality, but based on specialist expertise and personal independence. The protective claim that this is prohibitively difficult to organize can be countered, for example, by referring to the process for appointing court juries. This process in Germany is based on lists of proposals compiled by local districts, who include on them people who are interested in acting as jurors and who appear suitable for the role. Under certain conditions, these lists can be amended or rejected by either qualified majorities of the district representatives or by

5   Cf. https://www.zdf.de/zdfunternehmen/zdf-fernsehrat-ausschuesse-100.html, 20 August 2023.

people proposed on them. It is active professional judges who ultimately decide who makes up a jury.[6]

A reform like this would demand high levels of creativity and care in terms of organizational sociology. Given the goal of securing the provision of information as the basis for societal self-regulation, however, this difficulty cannot be a reason not to tackle it. To take a more general perspective, what is at stake is the retention of an institution that has become fossilized, yet is still essential for the existence of democracy, which basic social processes left untouched (cf. TRAPPE 1973).

3. License fees

Public service broadcasting is not the only institution in the provision of public services that provides its services on a statutory basis and largely funded by the general public. Roads, swimming pools, theaters, hospitals, universities, and many other facilities work on the same principles. Their purpose, too, is to meet urgent needs and be available for use as needed. We call facilities like this »public« because they are open to all potential users. With the exception of school, which is compulsory in Germany, these facilities are used on a voluntary basis. But those who do not use them still contribute to their upkeep. The contribution made does not, or not significantly, depend on whether or how much the facilities are used. When referring to the facilities operated by the state, we call this contribution *tax*.

People's willingness to pay, even if they do not use the services provided much or at all, is not least due to the fact that much of the tax is means-based. The idea that citizens with a high income contribute more to general public services in areas like transport, administration, education, health, justice, and culture than those on lower incomes is perceived as fair and therefore accepted. Questions are not asked about whether or how much an individual uses the services that are available to all. Every tax-payer helps to fund criminal justice, even if they never come into contact with it themselves. Every tax-payer contributes to building and maintaining highways, even if they do not own a car with which to drive on them. Every tax-payer contributes to state funding for opera, even if they never set foot in an opera house in their lives. If, however, income tax were *not* based on economic assets – if every household, from unemployed to millionaire, had to pay the same amount of tax – agreement with compulsory fees for public services could not be taken for granted.

It is a different story when it comes to public service broadcasting. Here, the provision of reliable information, regardless of use, is enabled by license fees that

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6 Cf. for more detail: GVG (https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/gvg/BJNR005130950.html#BJNR005130950B-JNG000400666, 6 November 2023), §28 – 58, »Schöffengerichte.«

are essentially the same for all households: currently EUR 55.08 per quarter. Some exemptions and discounts are available, but subject to complex requirements.[7] In principle, a single parent with three children and a part-time job pays the same license fee as a childless, high-income graduate couple or even a millionaire. It is obvious that this leads to dissatisfaction, especially among voters on low incomes who rarely use public service broadcasting.

Varying the license fee based on income would be one way to counteract this legitimacy deficit. An easy way to do this would be by accessing people's tax returns. This is not quite the same as state tax collection, which would need to be backed by a system of sanctions based on the executive and judiciary's monopoly on the use of force. The next logical step, however, would be the introduction of a broadcasting tax in order to secure the provision of information. Given the history of broadcasting in Germany up to 1945, this is taboo in media policy.[8] But funding public service broadcasting from general taxation need not be taboo. There is already a tax-funded (foreign) broadcasting institution that belongs to the Federal Republic of Germany's ARD group of public service broadcasters: Deutsche Welle. Another point to consider is that state universities are parallel facilities whose staff are guaranteed similar rights to journalists (freedom of arts and sciences in Article 5, Para. 3; freedom of the press in Article 5, Para. 1 of the German Basic Law). Although the impact of freedom of arts and sciences has little effect beyond a specialist audience, does the independence of university teaching staff working in tax-funded institutions not deserve at least the same scrutiny as the independence of media producers in tax-funded public service broadcasters would?

Doubts about whether public service broadcasters are sufficiently distant from the state are easier to justify based on the influence of governments and parties in the supervisory bodies than they would be based on using a small part of the total tax revenue to fund them. Today, each federal state's consent to the level of the license fee can already be used as an instrument of state influence on broadcasting – as Saxony-Anhalt's decision to break rank from the recommendations of the KEF in KEF 2020 showed.[9] If political disputes over the license fee were no longer held in isolation, but as an aspect of general tax policy, this could actually be more effective at counteracting the (party) political influence of the federal states than the current funding model.

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7   The explanatory leaflet lists 16 such requirements and the evidence required to claim them (www.rundfunk-beitrag.de, 3 August 2023). A case of hardship that exempts a household from the license fee is when the household income exceeds its social requirements by less than the amount of the monthly license fee.
8   This is expressed, for example, in the fact that the »Commission to Determine the Financial Requirements of the Broadcasters« (KEF), which comprises 16 experts sent by the federal states, merely issues recommendations and sets up working groups regarding the level and distribution of the license fee, but not on the collection process itself.
9   ARD, ZDF, and Deutschlandradio successfully turned to the Federal Constitutional Court in order to defend against this attempted influence (cf. ARD 2021).

When this complex model was introduced in the post-war years in order to keep the state at arm's length, ideas about the state were still shaped by experiences under the Nazi regime, including among politicians (both with and without links to broadcasting). The same can be said of how the nascent democracy dealt with freedom of the media (cf. BUCHLOH 2002), which was to be actively defended and protected. After almost 75 years of productive development of press freedom in Germany (cf. PÖTTKER 2016), broadcasting policy can now take a more sophisticated view of the situation: Germany is no longer a brutal and violent regime, but a democratic constitutional state with a separation of powers embedded in its culture (cf. GERLACH 2010).

It would also be possible, however, to vary the license fee by income without integrating it into general taxation. The fact that this is so little discussed despite its importance for the legitimation basis of public service broadcasting is another sign of the ossification of its existing structure, the core of which is now seventy years old. The role and purpose of public service broadcasting can only be met if this outdated structure is modified in order to defend its vanishing legitimacy. In relation to collecting license fees, this means exploring and adopting ways to vary the license fee based on the payer's income.

If the proper financial care is taken in its design, this need not mean a loss in the amount of license fee received by public service broadcasting. Quite the opposite: Boosting its legitimacy could potentially lead to the audience being more willing to pay and thus to an increase in resources. At the moment, the scarce resources make advertising revenue appear necessary.

4. Advertising

Together with contributions from sponsors, income from the sale of advertising slots makes up around six percent of the total budget of public service broadcasters and the state media authorities. Most of their budget of around EUR 7 billion (85%) comes from license fees from private households (ARD 2023).

Yet the relative insignificance of advertising is not reflected in the programming. Significant portions of the programming are intended to be free from advertising. For example, in line with the state media treaty, the three national radio stations have no external advertising or sponsorship – a fact that contributes significantly to their profile as reliable sources. Public service television is also free from persuasive messages after 8 pm.

However, evening programming and sports broadcasts with high viewing figures have a less serious image than they intend, as they are permeated by self-praise from sponsors. And public service programming before 8 pm is filled with advertising to the very last second – a fact that makes it appear very

untrustworthy, with almost as many messages from sponsors linked to the topics covered in journalistic programming.

Advertising breaks and sponsorship in public service programming erode its profile as a reliable provider of information. They blur the distinction between public service and commercial channels, which rely on selling as much advertising as possible at the highest possible prices and therefore cannot survive without persuasive interruptions to programming and high viewing figures. The convergence of public service and commercial programming was the subject of intense discussion in the first few years of the dual broadcasting system.[10] Another contributing factor is that private channels competing with public service broadcasters, such as RTL, often also make efforts to include professional news and other professional information segments in their programming (cf. RTL 2020).

This mixing of journalistic and advertising segments in both television systems is fertile ground for skepticism over whether the persuasive style of the advertising programming environment rubs off on the journalistic segments in the audience's perception, with these journalistic segments then also being considered persuasive. The legitimacy of public service broadcasting as a guaranteed fundamental source of information depends on it being clearly and recognizably free from political and commercial special interests. Every impression of persuasive messages in the programming throws this recognizability into doubt.

A fundamental reform of public service broadcasting should therefore eliminate advertising and sponsorship in programming. This presents the question of whether and how any losses in income this would cause could be compensated – regardless of the options for varying the license fee.

5.   Scope of programming

Around 70 radio stations and 20 television channels are currently squeezed out of the ARD budget (WIKIPEDIA 2023).[11] The large number of repeats with which these many channels are filled is just one aspect that shows how justified this disparaging phrase is. Repeats cost less than new productions, but begin to bore regular viewers in particular after a while. This is not only the case for fictional shows, such as the crime series *Tatort*, which has run for more than half a century, or series like *Großstadtrevier, Um Himmels Willen* or *Lindenstraße*, whose enormous back-catalogs can fill huge stretches of programming – it also goes for reportages and features, which generally become outdated more quickly than films.

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10   There were initiators of the convergence hypothesis (cf. SCHATZ e.g., 1989) and critics (cf. KRÜGER 1991).
11   Ten years ago, there were just 60 radio stations (cf. STATISTA 2022).

Older products in both radio and television programming only become relevant again when they are of historical interest. Before this, regular viewers and listeners – on whom public service broadcasters rely – often see frequent repeats as a waste of time. A long interview with a former contract worker from Mozambique who, together with others from that country, is still fighting for the pay he earned and was cheated of in the DDR,[12] was available to hear at least four times within a week in the Deutschlandfunk schedule in summer 2023. That strikes a lecturing tone and ignores the fact that the program can still be found on the broadcaster's website, together with others on the same important topic.[13]

Tedious repeats are just one example of the quality deficiencies in the service offered by public service broadcasters, indicating how difficult it is to fund such an excess of programming. More serious are deficiencies in professional care and depth of research, which are not least linked to a lack of time on the part of the journalists involved. Even Deutschlandfunk, in contrast to its serious image, has been known to fall back on inaccurate socio-political cliches that reveal an excessively casual handling of official statistics (cf. CREMER 2023). The practice of public service broadcasters picking up on news from other media without conducting their own research, in order to save costs, is diametrically opposed to its mandate to provide information.

One way to overcome this funding issue would be to reduce the number of stations/channels and thus the administrative costs incurred. In radio in particular, the large number of specialist stations tailored to specific audiences contradicts the mandate for a general public service. In television, the competition between two general public service channels might make sense if they were to offer two alternative types of content at the same broadcast time.[14] In addition, it would be sufficient if each public service broadcaster were to provide television programming with a regional flavor. In radio, half of the stations currently broadcasting would be sufficient. The key is fewer stations/channels, but better, e.g., when it comes to repeats, depth of research, and plurality.

6.   Implementation

In assessing whether and how these reform steps can be realized, it is useful to be aware that the development of broadcasting results from the interwoven actions

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12 https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/zeitzeugen-im-gespraech-david-macou-ehem-vertragsarbeiter-in-der-ddr-dlf-f4f172c3-100.html, 9 August 2023.

13 https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/gastarbeiter-in-der-ddr-eine-frage-der-verantwortung-100.html; https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/ddr-vertragsarbeiter-aus-mosambik-ich-wollte-was-von-der-100.html, 9 August 2023.

14 There is no pluralism to be seen when both ARD and ZDF broadcast multiple similar crime series in parallel in the evening – something that happens all too often.

of three stakeholders: *media policymakers*, *broadcast journalists*, and the (potential) *audience* (cf. PÖTTKER 1991).

In the first few years after the market was opened to commercial providers, many skeptical observers feared that public service broadcasting's legitimacy would drop. Its decline has not been as fast as predicted, but it is undoubtedly there, and is now becoming an existential crisis – not least because all three stakeholders are blind to the long-term effects that their own actions have on each of the other stakeholders.

The (broadcasting) policymakers do not see that their efforts to use public service broadcasting as an instrument for image-building is more likely to lead to a loss of trust in politics and journalism; the *audience*, potentially the most powerful of the three stakeholders, has little sense that its overriding interest in entertainment will eventually lead not only to an exodus to commercial services but also to a loss in the quality of information provided by public service channels; and those responsible at the public service broadcasters often choose to ignore the fact that submitting to the assumed interests of the other two stakeholders leads to the disappearance of their own basis of legitimacy in the long term. Because the three actors act in a way that is receptive rather than reflecting on the consequences, and they therefore lack the self-regulative power of real interactions (cf. PÖTTKER 1997: 73-100), they push one another into a spiral that eventually leads public service broadcasting into legitimacy problems, against the interests of everyone involved.

Solving these problems for the long term will require self-critical insight on the part of the stakeholders into the counterproductive effects of their actions. The least action in this regard can be expected from the audience – a diffuse population that is barely aware of the power that viewing figures have to change things. The media usage behavior of many people – anchored in anthropology and caused by drives for self-preservation and propagation – appears to be dominated by attention preferences for threatening and erotic content, as reflected in the relatively consistent lists of news value factors first empirically investigated by peace researchers in the 1960s (cf. GALTUNG/RUGE 1965) and criticized to little effect. Considerations that reflect on consequences appear to play a less significant role, especially when the latter relate to the effects of an individual's own actions that are hard to understand and can only occur in connection with similar actions by many others (cf. PÖTTKER 1997).

Policymakers are more likely to have insight into reform measures that affect the provision of information and thus an essential requirement for the ability of complex democratic societies to self-regulate and thus for their stability (at least when they have the clever foresight to avoid populistic demands and look beyond the next election). Structural decisions based on prudence and rationality are part of their role, within the logic of which they (can) think and develop

self-confidence. In contrast, journalists do not need to make structural decisions, but instead merely contribute to their appropriateness by communicating a great deal of accurate and important information in a comprehensible way to as many people as possible, not least those active in politics (cf. PÖTTKER 2010). Their professional self-image and self-confidence can develop accordingly.

In order to implement reform measures, it is therefore necessary to work towards collaboration between (broadcasting) policymaking, which makes the necessary decisions and creates obligations, and (media) journalism independent of this. This collaboration ensures that such decisions – including with regard to informed voters, i.e., the media audience – can be/are made transparently and in the public interest. The balance between self-confidence and understanding of others in both professions can be fundamental to this (cf. PÖTTKER 2004).

How realistic these requirements for implementation are also depends on whether public service broadcasting is willing and able to be public about its problems boldly, without obscuring them with self-adulation, while maintaining a professional distance from themselves. This is conceivable if public service broadcasting takes the professional role of providing information, of basic provision with comprehensive transparency – essential for the way individuals organize their lives and for how society self-regulates – seriously for itself as an object of its reporting.

7.   Opportunities and risks

How can the reform measures discussed help to solve the problems that society currently faces? And are there any obvious risks of exacerbating these problems?

The most threatening problem in the long term, because it cannot be solved in the short term, is the environmental crisis, spearheaded by the processes of global warming and species loss. These universal problems are linked with the capitalist economy of excess, in which production is no longer dictated by what people need but, conversely, the stimulation of consumption results in growth in production that exceeds all natural limits (cf. JACKSON 2011; 2021). The realization of this puts advertising as a driver of excessive production in a negative light. Consistently ad-free public service broadcasting would not put an end to excessive and destructive production, but it would send a clear signal that there are livable alternatives to the ideology of the growth of production and opportunities for production, which was criticized by Herbert Marcuse as early as the 1960s (cf. MARCUSE 1969) but has now become largely accepted. Reducing the glut of production need not mean a loss of prosperity (cf. HERRMANN 2022).

Another serious problem in society is the falling trust in the elites that set the agenda in politics, media, the churches, sport, and other fields. Populist

movements and parties are exploiting this skepticism with anti-elite rhetoric, threatening the way parliamentary democracy works (cf. MÜLLER 2016). This could be counteracted by the provision of information cleansed of any persuasive communication, as this tempers unrealistic expectations of what the elites can achieve. Putting together supervisory committees in public service broadcasting that are less dominated by corporatist claims to power, and varying the license fee more fairly based on income, would also go further towards tackling the loss of trust in the establishment.

The third problem in this list – which does not claim to be exhaustive – is the threat to the cohesion of a society that is growing ever further apart and, as a result of immigration necessary for both economic and humanitarian reasons, more diverse and more fragmented. It is not possible, nor should it be desirable, to imagine this threatened cohesion as cultural homogeneity, in which everyone thinks and feels the same. A useful image is that of a core of unity at the heart of respected difference, as denoted by the term *intercultural integration* (cf. GEISSLER 2005). This unified core is formed by the authority of the constitution and human rights, mutual understanding with the help of language mastered to a sufficient level, and knowledge of one another that traverses differences (cf. PÖTTKER 2002). The respected diversity corresponds to the target group-specific differentiation of private media in particular, e.g., by age group, level of education, musical taste, or, in the case of diaspora media in the language of origin (cf. WEBER-MENGES 2005), ethnic origin.

The task of providing information, for which public service broadcasting is responsible, is not least an *integration task* that includes supporting the necessary core of unity amongst respected diversity. It is obvious that this integration function could be fulfilled all the better if the public service production and distribution of information, as well as entertainment, education, and advice, were concentrated on fewer channels obligated to internal pluralism. Reducing the number of channels could therefore benefit the task of integration in that the license fee collected could be concentrated on those fewer channels, whose quality, including in regard to the internal pluralism of the editorial staff (cf. PÖTTKER et al. 2016), would thus be enhanced.

Which *risks* do the proposed reform measures bring with them? Given the current strategy of competing with commercial providers for viewers, there could be a fear that a drop in viewing figures would herald a loss of attention in society and thus legitimacy. Legitimacy born from the mandate to provide information does not depend on current viewing figures, however, but on the quality of the programming. As mentioned above, the competition for viewing figures results in similarity between the public service and commercial channels – the subject of discussion since the very start of the dual system (cf. SCHATZ et al. 1989). The crisis of legitimacy in public service broadcasting is crystallized in the question

of why people have to pay a license fee for something that they can get elsewhere for free.[15] Given that this argument appears convincing when public service broadcasting is similar to private providers, it can be invalidated by honing the profile of the public service channels, as can be expected from the proposed reform measures.

Another risk is the loss of journalistic jobs in public service broadcasting. The reform measures mentioned do not necessarily need to cause this, but could be used as justification. Just as the stability of the license fee received must be strictly ensured if the amount paid were varied, it would be vital to ensure that, if the number of channels were reduced, the journalistic and artistic staff of the remaining programs increased, including better pay for freelancers. Supervisory boards appointed more on the basis of competence, independence, and commitment than today could monitor whether the increase in quality and clearer profile this enables actually occurred.

Whether this can be implemented is a question of determination in broadcasting policy. Where it is given a choice between clear concepts, the audience, consisting of voters, is also responsible for this. Allowing public service broadcasting to slide further into a crisis of legitimacy endangers the provision of information and thus democracy and the cohesion of society. If nothing else, what matters is strengthening an institution that enables the profession of journalism, which is system-relevant but has been thrown into crisis by digitalization, to continue to develop with as little influence as possible from political and commercial particular interests.

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15 Strictly speaking this is not the case, as the audience also pays for the commercial programming through advertising costs that are passed on in the prices of the goods they buy (cf. GEIGER 1988).

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Focus: Public broadcasting in Germany

Hans Peter Bull

The »climate crisis« in public service broadcasting

Communication processes, management culture, and what they mean for output – On the latest discussion of broadcasting policy triggered by the NDR »Climate Report«

Abstract: **A survey of staff at Norddeutscher Rundfunk, which gathered the opinions of more than one thousand employees at all levels, revealed a poor working climate and painted a predominantly negative picture of the broadcaster's management bodies. In particular, the respondents expect a better »management culture« at all levels, claiming that many managers are overwhelmed by the major processes of change currently underway in public service broadcasting and therefore unable to develop clear guidelines for the change needed in the organization. This article analyzes this criticism in more detail. In particular, it asks what »management« can realistically achieve at a broadcaster, given the external constraints involved. The insights gained are placed in the context of the general discussion on broadcasting policy and specifically the competition between public service broadcasters and print media.**

The quality and costs of public service broadcasting have repeatedly been the subject of debate for decades. Recently, however, criticism of the alleged wastefulness of public service broadcasters and the allegedly poor quality of their

television programming has once again triggered calls not for reform, but for »revolution.«[1] The outrage was preceded by revelations of the scandalously luxurious benefits received by an Executive Director and the »climate crisis« at two regional broadcasters.[2] Conflict between the private press and license fee-funded broadcasting is nothing new, but the fronts have shifted once again; public service broadcasters must do more to boost acceptance.

It is reasonable to assume that, since then, all broadcasters have held intensive discussions on routes out of the crisis and developed internal strategies to resolve the deficiencies found. The Executive Director of Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR), Joachim Knuth, set up a commission to examine the broadcaster's »corporate culture« and develop proposals to improve it. Addressing NDR employees, Knuth explained the process as follows:

> »In order to produce the best possible programming, we need a good climate and a culture of mutual respect – recent weeks and events at NDR in Hamburg and Kiel have demonstrated this to me more than clearly. These conditions were clearly not in place there. We want to get to the bottom of this finding. I see appreciation and trust as the basis for working together appropriately.«[3]

The investigation team was made up of theologist Stephan Reimers as the »commissioner« and five organizational and management consultants, some of whom are listed as having additional qualifications in psychology, journalism studies, coaching, mediation, team development, etc.

The result of the investigations is wide-ranging and sophisticated, with content worthy of note. Reporting, however, often reduces this content to the finding that the »management culture« at NDR is poor. Interviews with employees – more than one thousand in total – showed the Commission in particular that »many managers at NDR [...] are overwhelmed with the force of the changes and [are] often unable to manage the change processes effectively« (p. 7). »Many employees« did not trust the Executive Board (ibid.). The Executive Director demonstrated his concern over the criticism, and there was speculation in the press about his removal (FISCHER 2023). This could allow the discussion on the fundamental questions of broadcasting development to be reduced to an

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1   An example: Opinion piece by Lars Haider (Editor in Chief of the *Hamburger Abendblatt*) (Haider 2022) on statements made by WDR Director and ARD Chair Tom Buhrow (»as a private individual«). Strong criticism of Buhrow e.g., WINKLER 2022 and MISCHKE 2022; see also HULVERSCHEIDT/TIESCHKY 2022; DI LORENZO 2022 and BROSDA 2022.

2   Information on the accusations against Patricia Schlesinger (rbb) (including breach of trust and accepting bribes) and Sabine Rossbach (NDR) (»nepotism«) can be found in Wikipedia articles under their names (both last accessed on 3 July 2023), and on further »affairs« (corruption, false documentation etc.) in the article on »Norddeutscher Rundfunk.« The latter Wikipedia article (last accessed 3 July 2023) states that no evidence was found of a »political filter« at regional broadcaster NDR in Kiel.

3   NDR press release, dated 29 September 2022, printed in: REIMERS/CYRIAX/BRAUCK/MIELKE/PROX/RISSLER 2023: 99. The report was largely compiled by Hans-Ulrich Cyriax (cf. p. 4f.). Where page numbers are provided in the text below, these refer to the »climate report.«

ultimately marginal personnel issue – certainly not resolving the real or alleged weaknesses of the current organization.

It is useful to put the large number of claims and proposals in order. One objective of the considerations below is to achieve greater clarity on the meaning of a change in the *management* of the broadcasters. In particular, it is important to ask whether the quality of the work produced really does depend crucially on the *leadership* of the organization, or which other factors cause a negative assessment of the result. The mood at the broadcaster and the complaints about the current leadership and administration are therefore described in more detail below, and their significance critically analyzed. Finally, perspectives for further development – beyond the analysis of the climate report – are outlined.

What matters in all these deliberations is to carve out the differences between the perspectives, to examine the claims made, and to compare the arguments of the various groups in terms of how reasonable they are, both legally and politically. A summary at this point:

- Some of the complaints from the employees relate to questions of correct organization, which can be resolved by applying practical rules of art (e.g., by clarifying responsibilities) once the usefulness has been considered.

- Some complaints relate to the difficulties of adapting the organization to new developments, be they developments in work organization, or technical or media policy developments caused by digitalization in general and changing audience tastes. Transitional phases in any organization cause uncertainty and discontent, fears over vested rights and crises of conscience; management theory has long provided concepts and instruction manuals for handling these circumstances (»change management«) (see e.g., SCHRIDDE 2011).

- Other complaints are the result of fundamental differences of opinion; disagreements over the role and effects of broadcasting (and thus over the way the political course is set) and over the right method for asserting the legal specifications, and the rules for appropriate leadership that can be derived from this. Fundamental conflicts like this cannot be resolved with a »better leadership style« or other changes in the form of communication; instead, it takes clarifying decisions by the broadcasters' leading bodies. In some cases, the state may need to boost the independence of broadcasters through mandatory standards and assert the standards internally with supervisory measures. Policymakers therefore come into play here despite the requirement for »limited state interference.«

The internal climate at NDR from the perspective of the »climate report«

The »climate report« by Stephan Reimers et al. paints a sophisticated picture of the internal situation of a broadcaster. The Commission put together its findings in twelve assertions that reflect the diversity of voices and opinions (p. 6f.). On the one hand, they found that employees stand »behind public service broadcasting and ›their‹ NDR with conviction and passion,« that they have »high standards for professionalism and good work,« and that there are certainly »people [at NDR] with fears and concerns, but not a general climate of fear« (assertions 1 and 2), as had been claimed by some.

According to the assertions, NDR is »a broadcasting company organized like a public body,« with »immense internal complexity,« »rigid structures, bureaucratic processes, and a lot of rules« (assertion 4). There is doubt not about the necessity of change resulting from the digitalization of the programming offered – »cross-media use« of the communication channels and formats, but about the ability of many managers to adapt the organization to the new requirements (assertions 3 and 5). Although »numerous employees [are] satisfied with their manager,« and there are »departments that work together efficiently,« this is down to the personal dedication and competence of the relevant manager. There is »good leadership not because of the structures at NDR, but astonishingly despite them« (assertion 5). The lack of trust that many employees have in the »Executive Board« is explained by a lack of »orientation and clear decisions regarding the strategic orientation of NDR.« Communication with the Executive Board is often described as a »one-way street«; employees want »more contact and real listening from the top down« (assertion 6).

A section of the further findings relates to the situation under *employment law*. The dual structure of employment relationships, i.e., the fact that employees are divided into those with fixed contracts and freelancers (»two-tier society,« assertion 7) creates discontent, as does an outdated system in the structure of positions and compensation, leading to excessively high or unclear performance expectations on the employees (assertion 8). The workload is very high for many people. Employees who work a lot want to see »not just praise, but more time, more attention, real listening and honest feedback, a clear strategy and prospects for change and improvement« from their managers (assertion 9).

Assertions 10 and 11 also deal with the communication processes at NDR. On the one hand, »the colleague relationships at NDR [are] significantly shaped by mutual distrust and conflicts in places«; employees would like to see »true resonance and real dialog« (assertion 10). On the other, the entire »communication company NDR« is criticized for finding it difficult »to apply its own profession internally and to establish a lively culture of communication and feedback.« Instead, there is

»a culture of avoiding critique and conflict« (assertion 11). Finally, the report sums up that »human resources work is of little importance at NDR.« It is »understood largely as personnel administration,« with a lack of »mandatory programs for expanding competencies.« »Reflection processes, individual and organizational learning« are underdeveloped in places (assertion 12).

The employees are divided

As early as the introduction, Stephan Reimers states that there are »contradictions and paradoxes,« summarizing them in three points (p. 8):

- »Change is absolutely necessary. At the same time, there are strong forces of inertia.«
- »Leadership is crucial. At the same time, many are striving for autonomy and participation.«
- »Dealing openly with one another is the order of the day. At the same time, many isolate themselves.«

Many of the Climate Commission's findings clearly demonstrate the great extent to which NDR employees are divided. Whichever the specific topic under discussion, there are constant reports that some individuals take a very positive view of their working environment and the upcoming changes, while others express criticism that ranges from the moderate to the fierce or even insulting. It is noticeable – as always in anonymous surveys – that people who are unsatisfied are more likely to break cover. One participant generalizes about the »culture of griping« at NDR, while the Commission uses more reserved language, speaking of »some people« who are in a »negative spiral« and »cling, whine and moan« (p. 35). In a separate section »One broadcaster – many climate zones« (p. 51ff.), the Commission explains that the mood differs widely between different units, employee groups, and areas of responsibility – as well as describing significant tension between the units (p. 51ff.). It is difficult to determine how large a proportion these disgruntled employees make up, but their views are worthy of note regardless of whether or not the group is representative.

Most of the desire for change is directed at the broadcaster's leadership, with repeated calls for a *new management culture*. In connection with a particularly dramatic crisis, this desire is illustrated by references to an incorrect, especially »robust,« »authoritarian and dictatorial« management style, »radically strategic command behavior, a lack of ability to take criticism, self-righteousness and irrationality« in a line manager, namely the Director of the Landesfunkhaus Hamburg branch of NDR. Respondents speak of intimidation, injury (of feelings) and poisoning (of the climate within the company) (p. 12f.). The Commission does not examine the extent to which these accusations are justified – presumably

due to the prospect of a legal dispute and because its focus was on employee perceptions. According to the analyses of the Climate Commission, the sharply critical judgements »certainly do not apply to all managers at NDR« – there are also employees »who are satisfied with their managers« (p. 13).

Criticism of the management practice of the *Executive Board* – consisting of the Executive Director, the Directors, and the heads of the *Landesfunkhäuser* [state broadcasting offices] – is particularly detailed (p. 15ff.). The Board is accused of a lack of »clarity of language and actions.« Communication and rhetoric are »often [perceived] as smooth and lacking empathy,« without »real appreciation« (p. 17). »There is no real listening. The Directors think they are listening, because they have learned in training courses how important it is. But it is not real. Rhetorically brilliant, but not real« (ibid.). Furthermore, the respondents continue, there is a lack of »business thinking« at the top of the »business« (ibid.). Members of the Executive Board take a positive view of their collaboration, although the majority of the Directors »makes careful criticism of the collaboration in the committee.« For example, one says, »We do not work together well in the Executive Board. Each person only looks at their own field« (p. 17f.).

Causes mentioned for the high level of discontent include sometimes inappropriate behavior by individuals, sometimes obsolete and hardened »structures« regardless of people, and especially an incorrect »management culture« – as well as the incorrect and opaque way in which management positions are filled. Respondents claimed that leading positions in programming are filled »based on journalistic skills and less based on suitability for management and social behavior.« »In order to improve the climate [...] a fundamental change in the recruitment practice for managers [is] essential,« they state (p. 18f.).

It is notable that the employees surveyed seem to have said nothing about the role played by the staff council and the Editorial Committee required by the NDR state treaty (§§ 41f.). Nor is the role of the *Rundfunkrat* [Broadcasting Council] mentioned.

The situation of the freelancers, employees on fixed-term contracts, and agency workers under employment law is covered in some detail (pp. 20-29). They suffer from great uncertainty and unfair practices in their day-to-day work; it is obvious that the work climate suffers as a result. Other framework conditions of the work, such as unfair pay systems, effective dependencies, and overwork are also covered. There are multiple complaints of overwork, including from employees on permanent contracts (p. 41ff.). One employee calls the workload »inhumane« (p. 42; where there are also further drastic statements).

Has the shift to »cross-media« production already failed?

An entire chapter is dedicated to the debate on the future of broadcasting and the right transformation strategy (pp. 30-34); the chapter that follows then looks at the framework conditions for the changes that are underway (pp. 35-44). Needless to say, the criticism of public service broadcasting expressed by policymakers and the media is also reflected in the broadcaster's internal discussions – as another factor causing discontent and uncertainty among staff. What they want is »an overall strategy for NDR,« »a new vision,« or (to quote Hamburg's Senator for Culture and Media Carsten Brosda) »an ambitious blueprint for the future, from which the concrete steps for reform are derived« (p. 31). Admittedly, the Senator's call is directed primarily at policymakers rather than the broadcasters themselves, but he also states that the broadcasters need to »contribute even more and more passionately« to the debate on fundamental principles (p. 31).

NDR has already initiated a comprehensive reform of the organization in the form of the »cross-media business model,« which combines the previously separate broadcast channels of radio, television and online into a single network divided into topic areas. This reorganization caused stress for employees, who say they feel overwhelmed (p. 33). If individual respondents are to be believed, »cross-mediality« has already failed (p. 39, see also p. 46f. on the »One Direction« concept).

»A lot of communication, but little understanding«

The report frequently mentions that internal communication is unsatisfactory, and indeed dedicates an entire chapter to providing more detail on this (pp. 62-68). There is »a lot of communication, but little understanding« between people; »little personal contact or real listening« (p. 62). The report states that meetings available with managers are »often designed in a one-dimensional way, with a structure in which the hierarchy speaks and the team asks (critical) questions.« Rounds of communication are perceived as »too smooth, out of touch, and insincere.« The same colleagues speak every time; there should be an effort to »motivate the non-speakers« (p. 65). There are complaints about »the loss of a culture of disagreement and discussion,« but also about »an excess of disagreement.« What the employees do agree on is that tolerance of other opinions should be boosted, mistrust reduced, errors tolerated« (p. 66). The feedback culture and error culture at NDR are deficient (p. 66ff.). One positive example mentioned is that the production directorate had held »360-degree management feedback« (p. 67); one negative is the tone of many (!) line managers at NDR. Strong criticism is sometimes even expressed with a »degrading,« »humiliating« choice of words (p. 64).

Some complaints are clearly justified...

Some of the complaints from the employees are clearly justified and can be resolved by legal and organizational changes. For example, attempts must be made urgently to end the system that puts freelancers and employees on fixed-term contracts in a worse position, to adapt the compensation rules to changed performance requirements, and to clarify imprecise responsibilities. This will require changes both to various rules and to the practice of applying them.

The Climate Report's criticism of the broadcaster's *personnel administration* is also largely plausible (p. 69ff.). An organization that is as large and as vulnerable to criticism as a broadcaster needs a human resources department that does more than just concluding and processing contracts, authorizing payments, deducting taxes and social security contributions, and setting up reserves for the pensions of departing staff. Today, the role of »personnel management« also includes planning and conducting staff selection with the necessary care, continuously supporting employment relationships by offering advanced training, individual career planning, transfers, and promotions. The staff in the department responsible at NDR does not appear sufficient for this role. Incidentally, there is a possibility that this situation is the result of a strategy that sees cutting jobs in administration as the first step in implementing the unavoidable calls for savings, since any saving in the production and distribution of programming is rejected.

The anger at the excessive *internal complexity* is also understandable. Responsibilities are evidently divided between many levels and units; decision-making processes are long and lack transparency. Unclear rules on responsibilities lead to »wrangling« and errors (p. 38). The call for flatter hierarchies and greater transparency in decision-making is thus presumably justified. Changing an organization like this effectively is one of the most difficult tasks facing any management body. Where there are also calls for greater participation for those affected, it becomes even more difficult. To tackle the challenge, company management regularly turns to external experts, with public bodies also having repeatedly commissioned management consultants to come up with this kind of new concept in recent years. Their experience certainly shows that it is a good idea to base key steps in a desired process of change on one's own investigation of the weak points and considerations of the change, and especially to involve employee representatives in the process. External consultants have the benefit of an objective view, but they first need to develop a concrete image of the organization to be changed and the internal climate, while insiders are (or may be) already very familiar with the characteristics of the organization being examined.

… others are inexplicable or in need of clarification

Other complaints are at least unclear, if not entirely contradictory. For example, there are both complaints of weak leadership and claims that decisions are »pushed through, imposed« (p. 13). As reported, the »hierarchical system at NDR« is criticized, but there is no explanation of which organizational units are superfluous or problematic. Respondents note that »not all employees with management responsibility feel like managers« and that middle managers feel like they are merely proxies of higher bodies (p. 11). These are criticisms not of incorrect organization, however, but of poor practice in the perception of competencies.

One complaint that is difficult to understand regards the seating and standing arrangements at an event intended for the Executive Director to answer questions from employees. At an »Open Talk« discussion event in the production directorate, the »top and bottom« at NDR was apparently clear to see: »The Executive Director stands, the audience sits. The audience asks, the Executive Director answers« (p. 66). But how else should an event like this be organized? The sense of everyone – those asking and those answering the questions – being »on an equal footing« with one another, as some participants clearly would have wanted, would have been very impractical given the large number of people in attendance.

The unease over the Executive Director's perceived superordination remains even when the Executive Director, Directors and editors sit together at one large table. This is because the superordination has its roots in the laws and state treaties on broadcasting, and in the charters that set out the bodies of each institution. »The Executive Director leads NDR« and »must ensure that the service offered by NDR corresponds to the service requirements« (§ 30 Para. 1 and 6 NDR-StV). The person in the leadership role is obligated to consult their deputy and the Directors, is subject to oversight by the Broadcasting Council (in »general programming matters«) (§ 19 Para. 2 NDR-StV), but remains superordinate to the employees – even if they rarely or never use this legal position. »On an equal footing« is a good prerequisite for successful discourse free from domination, but not for making binding decisions on controversial questions. Wherever the constitution includes decision-making by representatives and their officers, this necessarily creates inequality in the positions of power, which equal seating arrangements will not be able to cover for long. Line managers need to fulfil their oversight role, even if it makes them unpopular.[4]

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4   In Niklas Luhmann's theory of organization, the application of the image of »above« and »below« to human relationships is considered one of the »intellectual feats of mankind,« the »most magnificent inventions of culture«; it appears to be the fundamental condition for every »higher« order of human coexistence (LUHMANN 1964/1999: 162 note 14 with further references). Admittedly, Luhmann does not look at the rebellion of the »below« against the domination of this order, which would also be relevant in this context.

What can »management« achieve?

The closer one looks at the criticism, the more questionable the hypothesis becomes that poor management is key to the internal climate of the organization and the quality of the programming.[5] The success of management depends »for example on the personality, the *management behavior* (such as the management style [...]), and the *management situation* in question; but also on those being managed: where those being managed do not see the threat of sanctions as significant, for example, such sanctions are no longer a source of power that is relevant to management« (RIDDER/SCHIRMER 2011: 207).

Some of the Reimers Commission's suggestions are taken from management theory, which was initially developed for private businesses. Expertise from business economics can be applied to public service entities in the sense that many of the insights of management theory can be applied to any organization in which people work together on a shared »mission.« Regardless of the organizational form, members of the organization need to be motivated, »human resources« maintained and developed further. As stated above, this is the role of personnel management; management can contribute by displaying exemplary behavior.

However, »management« of a public service organization is always different from the »business management« of a private company. A broadcaster is a »company« in a figurative sense at most. Because it is not run in pursuit of profit, it necessarily acts differently from a private company. It does not have obligations towards shareholders to ensure the profitability of business operations, but instead (like all public service organizations) needs to act »economically,« i.e., use the mandatory license fees paid by citizens carefully and frugally (cf. § 32 Para. 2 NDR-StV). The Executive Directors are not (just) CEOs, i.e., legal representatives of the broadcasters in concluding contracts and other legal business, but also provide a guarantee that the broadcasters' role under the constitution is adhered to (cf. § 30 Para. 6 NDR-StV). As a result, »management culture« at broadcasters means more than the (unwritten) style in which employees are treated and the focus on the organization's profitability – it is also an element of internal supervision in the interests of the »stakeholders,« i.e., the general public.

The »features of good management,« as compiled by management consultants, therefore have limited applicability to public service broadcasters. For example, the theory says that line managers should be »coaches not bosses« and check employees work as little as possible.[6] »Results orientation« is also called for – at

5   For the theoretical foundation of management culture, management style etc., see RIDDER/SCHIRMER 2011: 206-217).

6   Found, for example, in: ABC-Personal-Strategie. Die 10 Merkmale einer guten Führungskultur, www.abc-personal-strategie.de (accessed 20 April 2023). This also includes other keywords such as »flat hierarchy and discussion instead of commands from above,« »commitment to the team,« »honest, prompt and open« communication, and »feedback for managers.

the very least ambiguous for a communications factory that is asked to impress not by profit, but by the quality of its services. Incidentally, according to management theory, a good manager should »themselves be productive and hard-working« – undoubtedly an important benchmark, although some respondents told the Climate Commission that some managers at NDR have too much journalistic involvement in programming. This throws into doubt the demand for more attention to be paid to journalistic qualifications than other skills when selecting managers. Journalists have proved to be outstanding Executive Directors in the past; some were not only the highest organizational body at their broadcaster, but also acted as examples of journalistic excellence and thus figureheads for their institutions. Conversely, a »pure bureaucrat« would probably not enjoy a positive image among the journalist-dominated employees of a broadcaster.

The Reimers report confirms that management is constantly subjected to a large number of sometimes contradictory expectations. It not only has to meet the formal obligations of line managers, but must also take into account the unspoken expectations of the employees, which are impossible to formalize.[7] From this point of view, exercising legal powers does not seem a high priority (LUHMANN 1964/1999: 215, note 25). Under certain conditions, consolidating a position of influence requires »significant skill, a complex morality and, above all, the ability to behave in a sophisticated, even contradictory, way« (LUHMANN 1964/1999: 213f.).

Are managers and those they manage »on an equal footing?«

In line with the assigned role of the Commission, the Climate Report contains little criticism of the conduct or views of employees, with the exception of a few remarks referring to their own group or perhaps even the individual interviewee in a more or less self-critical way. This one-sided critique corresponds to experience in everyday life, in which managers are regularly referred to as »incompetent,« »authoritarian,« or »dumb,« simply because they are managers. Fortunately, it is now largely out of fashion for managers to display the same disparaging behavior towards their »subordinates.«

All this individual criticism of the communication and decision-making processes at the broadcaster gives the impression that some of the employees fail to develop the level of self-confidence, initiative, and principles that are so essential for working together and dealing with one another »on an equal footing.« Surely this is the only explanation for even the seating arrangements at a

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7 On the formal status system, see LUHMANN 1964/1999: 156ff. (162ff.) and, on the role of the leader and line managers 206ff. (212ff.). Luhmann's position may appear conservative today, but his description of the management dilemma is anything but unworldly.

question-and-answer session with the Executive Director being seen as oppressive? How can it be that editors with fixed contracts and respected expertise unquestioningly accept orders from managers that they consider wrong, indeed that they feel »forgotten about« as members of middle management, rather than using the freedom of discretion they have been granted (p. 11)? And above all: These journalists have the courage to exercise decisive critique of external experts and especially politicians in their programming – so why do they not develop the same creativity when it comes to internal debates about the appropriate internal culture and the strategy for the future? If the upper level of management really is »often uncertain« in its actions, if it is »indecisive,« if it »maneuvers and uses tactics,« this could provide plenty of wriggle room for confident employees, who would not have to explain that they were assuming »responsibility for the unreliability of a boss« (as statements quoted on p. 11 indicate).

Of course the management of a broadcaster still needs to take employees seriously where they find internal communication inappropriate, and suggestions for how to rectify matters should be taken into account wherever possible. For example, employees say that they would like to see various initiatives at management level, such as »productive critique in meetings« (p. 66) and »structured feedback.« This kind of change in communication practices can lift the mood of the employees for a while and allow a certain level of mutual trust to form. A friendly, cooperative climate at work is also a good basis for successful products.

But there are other factors involved in guaranteeing high-quality output, too. The organization's management cannot command all these factors themselves – there are some that they must simply be aware of and adapt to. The way freelancers (among others) are treated under labor law, for example, is shaped by financial constraints, which in turn depend on income trends and therefore on political decisions, which the broadcasters are affected by but not involved in. Nor is it possible to be in control of the psychosocial requirements for successful leadership – the emotions of those being led (see also RIDDER/SCHIRMER 2011: 213).

Mistrust of the leadership sits deep in some employees. Even if it ebbs temporarily, there is no guarantee that the mood will not change for the worse again when triggered by events (such as the suspicion of corruption). In some cases, all it takes is criticism from a few insiders to devalue trust-building measures. Furthermore, the internal climate of an organization can also be negatively impacted by public opinion, which cannot be predicted and for which no-one is responsible. All the leadership can do is try to take proactive measures to eliminate certain elements of the criticism (in this example, by defending against or punishing corruption).

The »soft« factors in the internal climate come from many different sources, predominantly from the uncontrollable flow of public opinion, and ultimately of the zeitgeist. Journalists have a great deal of practice at picking up on these

currents in the public consciousness – for example those formed in the depths of electronic networks – in their work and using newly-accentuated values as the basis even of their own conduct. In addition, they are confronted every day with the polarization of society, which results from the over-moralization and aggression of activist groups, and often find it difficult to deal with fundamental conflicts in society in their journalistic work (insight on this in statements from NDR employees: p. 31f.). Some employees, on the other hand, receive fame and public recognition that tempts them to mentally raise themselves above their colleagues and even their managers, and thus to place less value on internal collaboration. There can be no question that these kinds of problems of consciousness have an effect on productions.

The stark social and political contrasts that media producers have to deal with make internal communication and decision-making more difficult (as the Reimers Commission also found: p. 31f.). It is therefore not enough for the leadership simply to communicate with the employees in a non-authoritarian way, to show interest and warmth, to inform them of collegiate decisions as clearly and early as possible, etc. The leadership can only announce clear decisions on the future of broadcasting if it is able to assess the framework conditions with some accuracy – but there are currently myriad (external) reasons that make this difficult. Neither the Executive Directors nor the editors know whether the broadcasting landscape is about to be reconfigured and how important their own institution will be in future. When planning ›cross-media‹ links between their various channels and formats, they largely have to rely on trial and error. The Buhrow case showed what happens when an Executive Director ignores this insight and instead attempts to predict the future of the broadcasting system and announce far-reaching reforms to both organization and programming: Policymakers and the press tore his intervention apart before he had the chance to flesh it out.

The competitive relationship with commercial media...

To circle back to the question at the start of this paper: Public service broadcasting undoubtedly finds itself in a critical situation, but this is not because some observers consider its services too extensive, too poor or too highly diversified, nor because of the scandalous greed at executive level. The radical criticism and »revolutionary« proposals to reduce broadcasters' programming and staffing levels are essentially a reaction to their success over many years. When commercial broadcasting was first permitted in the 1960s and newspaper publishers invested heavily in the sector, many expected the public service broadcasters to quickly collapse in the face of the competition – that they would be pushed out

of the market and remain active only in niche areas. This did not come to pass: Public service broadcasting retains undisputed popularity among a large part of the public and makes a significant contribution. The situation for the press, on the other hand, has worsened, with competition for advertising revenue intensifying as the switch from print production to digital services picks up speed. It seems that many publishers would now like to transition their services entirely onto the digital market. In competition with public service broadcasters, commercial providers bring up the same old arguments as always: The broadcasters are excessively large, wasteful and create a dictatorship of taste; their employees are one-sided, »left wing« or arrogant.[8] Assessments like this contain not only a significant amount of generalized outrage, but also a decent portion of veiled assertion of their own interests.

Now that the younger generation meets its needs for news largely on digital devices, independent from the »linear« services of broadcasters, there has also been concern from many who are personally affected by the new wave of criticism – be it those responsible, like Tom Buhrow, or employees of broadcasters – and from those who have observed the change with amazement. The only recommendation for a citizen who values public service broadcasting can be to take the justified elements of the criticism very seriously and to ignore simple complaining, from both inside and outside, as far as possible.

… and the mission of public service broadcasting under constitutional law

However important it might be to improve the internal climate and the legal and social situation of broadcasting staff, a much greater factor in the fate of public service broadcasting is how its output – its programming – is accepted by the audience, other media, and policymakers. There is no way to order or conjure up appreciation – it must be gained through the service provided. But the quality of the services will always be disputed, simply because the benchmarks are disputed. Many television viewers prefer the programming from commercial broadcasters because it is generally more entertaining, does not demand much from the recipient, and is easier to consume. Commercial broadcasters are guided by

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8   The Climate Commission report summarizes the external criticism as »too expensive, close to the state, and uncontrollable« (p. 30). In a recent comment piece regarding the dispute over the level of the license fee, a newspaper editor claims that there are some »bosses, for example at NDR, for whom external experts have attested great incompetence« (TIESCHKY 2023: 44). She does not mention which external experts these might be. The piece might be referring to the climate report discussed here, which reflects the opinions and voices of the NDR employees (contentious in themselves). Yet the Commission did not examine whether these statements were justified; that was not part of its remit.

the audience's tastes as expressed by the market;[9] viewing figures play a key role. Someone who is satisfied with the commercial broadcasters is also likely to be unhappy about paying the license fee. If public service broadcasting is to enjoy general acceptance, broadcasters cannot ignore the fact that audience tastes sometimes differ vastly from the editorial offices' and authors' concept of quality. Concessions need to be made. But viewing figures alone do not tell us whether public service broadcasters are fulfilling their mission appropriately or how high the journalistic quality of the programming is.

The »functional mission« of public service broadcasting is well known, and largely excellently met. NDR, for example, »organizes and distributes [...] broadcasting as a medium and factor in the process of free, individual and public opinion-forming and as a matter for society in general.«[10] »It must give broadcasting participants an objective and comprehensive overview of international, European, national and state-level events in all key areas of life. Its services must serve to inform, educate, advise and entertain. It must offer contributions to culture in particular and is authorized to invest in film subsidies. It can also provide specialty media.«[11]

The current wording of this mission is not set out in constitutional law; not all the channels and portals that NDR has set up are sacrosanct. The idea that broadcasters may be forced to make cuts, such as by combining local stations, can therefore not be ruled out. Preventing this will depend on gaining political allies against excessively radical plans that are currently under discussion – and securing the best possible programming quality will become ever more important.

The quality of the programming is what counts

A high level of discipline and sincerity in the design of programming is needed. Services that are designed entirely to entertain a mass audience are not enough. Crime films and live sporting events do have their place in public service broadcasters' schedules in order to make the programming as a whole more attractive, but the dominant feature should ideally be well-founded, well-structured reporting on all events, developments and living situations that interest the public. Broadcasters should provide extensive, content-driven reporting with information that is explained, evaluated, put into context, and commented on. »The need for orientation and contextualization is growing [...]. With increasing uncertainty about the foundation on which we should talk to one another, what

9   For example BVerfGE 119, 181 (217 f. with further references); 149, 222 (260 Rn. 7f.); 158, 389 (417 Rn. 78).
10 § 4 Clause 1 NDR-StV based on BVerfGE 12, 205 (260). Cf. a. BVerfGE 57, 295 (320); 83, 238 (321); 119, 181 (218) and 158, 389 (416 Rn. 75ff.).
11 NDR has its own guidelines on the design of the »functional mission«: § 5 Para. 3 Clause 1 NDR-StV.

is needed is less opinion and more research [...]. We need investment in in-depth background reporting and good explanatory formats« (BROSDA 2022).[12]

What we refer to today as »public opinion« is actually a conglomeration of correct and incorrect observations, assessments and surveys: some have proliferated from the depths of the »ethnic soul;« some are organized in a targeted and interest-related way; many are contradictory; few are sophisticated enough to provide precise orientation (BULL 2023, esp. p. 136ff.). In this situation, the most important appeal to the media in terms of social ethics and the law is that they have an obligation to provide truth. Working to achieve truthfulness is the first professional obligation of any journalist, and applies not only to reporting, but also to comment pieces – out of respect for the people being written about (BULL 2021: 120). Even a hint of the increasing intensification of reporting based on suspicion is difficult, as it necessarily means working with unproven claims, but »something always sticks.« A correct understanding of truth in reporting also means taking the »other side« into account – »audiatur et altera pars« and working to ensure that the reporting is complete and sufficiently sophisticated; certainly not reducing reports to headlines, as tabloid newspapers do in order to attract attention. (A negative historical example from the world of politics is the »Ems Dispatch,« where Bismarck's government exaggerated a diplomatic text in order to whip up emotions and trigger a war.)

There is no question that public service reporting should be characterized by objectivity and party-political neutrality. But the requirement for objectivity is often misunderstood and equated with the also-necessary »distance from the state« – especially when this is intended to mean that state bodies or leading politicians should not be included in reporting to the same extent as other participants in the public discourse. Indeed, the Federal Constitutional Court has drawn closer to this viewpoint by judging statements by a Federal President, a Federal Chancellor, and multiple Federal Ministers to be unconstitutional or »almost« unconstitutional.[13] But if reporting on political controversies and differences of opinion only or largely covered attackers that were »distant from the state,« broadcasting would not be the desired medium and would certainly be lost as a factor in public opinion-forming.

From outside, it is difficult to determine how easy or difficult it is for program makers to adhere to the principles of objectivity and neutrality, diversity and distance from the state in the face of all possible resistance. Many have confronted the influence of party politics, and the Federal Constitutional Court ultimately

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12 This aspect is strongly emphasized e.g., by KEIM 1992: 129. See also my media critique pieces: BULL 2020 and 2023.

13 Cf. The series of rulings BVerfGE 136,323 (Gauck); 138, 102 (Schwesig); 148, 11 (Wanka); 154, 320 (Seehofer), 162, 207 (Merkel); see also BVerwGE 159,327 (»Dügida«); applicable however the dissenting opinion from Judge Wallrabenstein in BVerfGE 162, 271 with the limitation of the neutrality requirements to the administration. See also the decisive contradiction from Meinel 2023.

helped to reduce this influence in the selection of top positions.[14] Friedrich Nowottny, Executive Director of WDR at the time, noted: »The real danger of the public service organizational model lies in its vulnerability to group egoism. The internal pluralism of the supervisory committees presents a constant challenge for Executive Directors, programming directors and journalists who work hard to assert themselves over the influence of antagonistic forces in society« (NOWOTTNY 1992: 101). Yet the quality of services demanded can also be threatened by internal deficits or counter-forces, above all by insufficient qualifications on the part of individual authors or editors, and by »missionary zeal,« »by deliberate moralizing,« »by pointing fingers« in order to make clear »what sort of viewer, of listener« is desirable (NOWOTTNY 1992: 110).[15] This insider observation from 1992 appears particularly relevant once again today.

The »serving freedom« of journalists

The journalists that use the institutional freedom of broadcasting are themselves bearers of individual freedom of expression and reporting yet, as employees of a broadcaster, they have a duty to obey the programming principles when making use of these rights. The binding interpretation of these principles is ultimately the role of the Executive Directors with their responsibility to the outside. The Executive Director thus theoretically has the right to issue directives in this regard (although this is practically replaced by other, less formal means of influence).

Freedom of broadcasting is »primarily a freedom that serves the freedom of opinion-forming in its elements of objective and subjective standards.«[16] The loss of individual personal fulfilment is compensated by the opportunity to collaborate in a shared product. Legislation in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia describes the particular legal position of broadcasting editors – between the freedom of fundamental rights and their incorporation into the organization they work for – as follows (this applies to all broadcasters, including private ones):

> »Those working in editorial roles must fulfil the programming tasks assigned to them within the framework of the broadcaster's overall responsibility under their own journalistic responsibility, taking the programming principles [...] into account. This does

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14 BVerfGE 136, 9 (ZDF ruling).
15 The then WDR Executive Director instead recommended »disclosing facts that speak for themselves bluntly and, where appropriate, with ironic distance and otherwise leaving the thinking and evaluating to the people themselves.«
16 BVerfGE 57, 295 (320 – emphasis in original).

not affect contractual agreements and rights to issue directives on the part of the broadcaster.«[17]

Before this, the Federal Constitutional Court explicitly declared it permissible for programming staff to be granted this kind of participation right.[18] This »strengthens the professional group within the specialized enterprise of broadcasting that directly fulfils broadcasting's mandate to be a medium and factor of opinion-forming.« As a result, »editor involvement [is] not the granting of external influence, but internal participation in the exercise of the role protected by Art. 5 Para. 1 Clause 2 of the German Basic Law. As such it is not granted to the editors in the interest of their personal fulfilment in their profession, but in order to fulfil their communication role.«[19]

The Climate Report does not mention the involvement of editors at NDR, nor the role of the staff council. There appears to be a need for clarification here.

Public service broadcasting's freedom from and dependence on the state

The report on the climate at NDR does not mention the state oversight of NDR, either. Limited to legal supervision, responsibility for this lies with the state governments that formed NDR, but appears to play little role. The state governments who are to exercise this legal supervision are prohibited from supervising programming; this falls to the internal bodies of the Executive Director and the Broadcasting Council (§ 39 NDR-StV).

The state does, however, have a duty to ensure that public service broadcasting is maintained, appropriately equipped, and providing correct programming. In established case law, the Federal Constitutional Court has emphasized that the state must guarantee the existence and further development of public service broadcasting.[20] Conversely, public service broadcasting could not exist in this form, nor collect mandatory license fees, without its connection to the democratic state and its resulting dependence on the state's legislative power. The institutions' dependence on state framework regulations is the price of their freedom in

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17 As occurred through § 32 Landesmediengesetz NRW, dated 2 July 2002 (LMG) in the version, dated 1.6.2022. The NDR state treaty does not contain any provision in this regard except the reference to the editorial statute (§ 41).

18 BVerfGE 83, 238 (250, 321) on § 13 Rundfunkgesetz für das Land Nordrhein-Westfalen (LRG) [State Broadcasting Act] in the version, dated 11.1.1988. The LRG was later replaced by the State Media Act (LMG). The WDR act (in the version, dated 25 April 1998) now stipulates editor representation (as »professional group representation«) and a mediation committee (§ 30).

19 BVerfGE 83, 238 (321).

20 BVerfGE 74, 297 (374 f., 350 f.); 83, 238 (298); 90, 60 (91); 119, 181 (218); 136, 9 (30); from the literature: Grabenwarter 2015 Rn. 818 with further references. The existence of public service broadcasters is protected under constitutional law, but not each individual broadcaster (BVerfGE 89, 144 [153]; Grabenwarter Rn. 820).

terms of broadcasting content, which state law protects against the state itself. The framework itself can only be defined in political argument.

No-one has yet come up with an alternative model that would make public service broadcasting independent of the state, including financially. One could consider setting up a broadcasting parliament, elected by the population, that would replace the broadcasting councils. This is the type of solution that Tom Buhrow must have been thinking of when he mooted the idea of »a kind of constitutional convention for our new, charitable broadcasting« (quoted in büscher/debes 2022). Such a »parliament« would also be needed for further standardization and monitoring, however, in addition to the broadcasting »constitution.« Specific popular representation like this could certainly broker stronger democratic legitimation than the existing broadcasting bodies, but it would still be unable to ensure a more solid basis for funding and organizing broadcasting in the future. In addition, even in new representative bodies like this, it would still be impossible to prevent political parties from playing a crucial role.

The allegory of the old greenhouse

The Climate Report commissioned by NDR finishes by depicting the broadcaster's development in an allegory (pp. 93-95). In it, the report's author, Uli Cyriax, compares NDR with a state-run greenhouse that has changed over time: The gardeners became more lax; thick, unkempt greenhouse forests grew up; the ivy climbed the old trees and strangled exotic flowers. Other, smaller greenhouses lured visitors away, and soon many were calling for the entire greenhouse to be torn down or at least radically reduced. Then, a new head gardener arrived and asked an expert to examine the state of the greenhouse. The expert's report was »sobering and tough.« »There were questions upon questions and with them came little shoots of hope. We do not know what the answers will be. Yet.«

Hopefully they will be found soon.[21]

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21 The Administrative Council of NDR has now given an initial response. According to a report in the FAZ on May 6, 2023, the committee's chair, Karola Schneider, stated that »the 'Climate Report' has been attended to in detail. The Administrative Council recommends designing the proposed processes in such a way that relief and changes in the corporate culture become noticeable in the short to medium term.' The abolition of the 15-year limit for freelancers is a step in the right direction. But a broad approach needs to be taken to the topic 'by the cultural circle that is to be newly formed and is to address the proposals of the Reimers team.' Staff development will be given greater significance in particular with regard to managers.« The number of women in leadership positions at NDR fell slightly last year to 46 percent; »efforts must be made to achieve gender parity here.« To stay with the allegory: There are hopes for new cultures – without being able to define them – and for new head gardeners (although the leadership style itself was also criticized).

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Research Paper

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How do journalists view the world?

A comparative empirical analysis of personality traits and political views, based on the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP)

Abstract: How different are the characteristics and views of journalists from those of the population on which they report? What are the predominant political opinions among these professionals? Which political features do they share? Which personality traits, such as a willingness to take risks, do they display? In this paper, we examine these questions based on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), using this large representative sample to identify the journalists it contains based on the information they provide on their work (while still preserving their anonymity). Multivariate analyses allow these data to be compared with data for the adult population as a whole, the electorate, and the group of people intensively engaged in politics. The results corroborate earlier studies that show that journalists do not reflect the population; their characteristics and views only match the diversity of society to a certain extent. Although the proportion of journalists with a history of migration is now around the same as that for the population as a whole, the journalists' countries of origin are mostly European states. Furthermore, these professionals are more likely than average to have parents who went to university, tend to be politically slightly left of center, and are significantly more likely to vote Green. Journalists consider themselves more creative, more curious, and more imaginative than the reference groups; according to their self-perception journalists are also more willing to take risks and have an above-average level of trust in other people.

Keywords: SOEP, panel survey, social characteristics, personality traits of journalists, diversity, political views, history of migration

1.   Introduction

Both academic and political circles have repeatedly discussed how representative journalism is of society and the extent to which the characteristics and views of journalists differ from those of the adult population as a whole. Which political opinions dominate among these professionals, and which social characteristics? This is relevant in view of the vital role that journalism plays in public communication and the way opinions are formed in a democracy – even, or perhaps especially, in an age of digitalization and structural change (cf. SCHUDSON 2018: 107-112, 190-194; HABERMAS 2022: 38-67, 96-103).

The links between characteristics of journalists, such as their political preferences, and their reporting are not immediately clear, and undoubtedly controversial (cf. KEPPLINGER 1979; WEISCHENBERG et al. 2006: 98-101; REINEMANN/BAUGUT 2014). After all, factors relating to organization and systems arguably have a more significant impact on media content than individual views (cf. SHOEMAKER/ REESE 2014). But the idea that personal characteristics could be totally irrelevant appears implausible, not least given the existence of editorials in which the authors explicitly express their opinions. In addition, opinions, attitudes and trust relationships can influence news selection and other journalistic decisions (cf. PATTERSON/DONSBACH 1996; KEPPLINGER 2011: 101-128; STEINDL 2021: 299-301).

As complex as these relationships may be on an individual level, the idea that journalists' views and social background, either alongside or in connection with other factors, can be significant for reporting is one of the standard assumptions of journalism research (cf. MCQUAIL 1994: 201-204; WEAVER 1998: 456; PEISER 2000; SHOEMAKER/REESE 2014: 204-238), and is also the starting point for the debate on »diversity« (cf. LÜCK et al. 2022; HARUNA-OELKER 2023; HOFFMANN 2023). Is journalism dominated by male views? Are experiences and viewpoints from East Germany sufficiently represented in the German media (cf. MÜKKE 2021; BLUHM/JACOBS 2016)? Do people with a history of migration also get to write editorials? Can children from working class families make it in influential media houses (cf. ATAMAN 2021; BEER 2022: 24; FRIEDRICHS 2023)? All these questions imply an expectation that topics and perspectives in reporting are influenced by the composition of an editorial office. Regardless of any effects this may have on content, it is also reasonable to demand, in the interests of justice and equality of opportunity, that those people who were previously largely denied it should now be given access to key journalistic positions.[1]

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1   The taz cooperative, for example, explicitly states the importance of personal biographies when writing to its members (on February 13, 2023): »Editorial offices in Germany and also at taz are very homogeneous: The journalists come from university-educated families; most grew up in urban milieus. Their view of the world shapes their questions, their reporting, and their critique. The taz Panter Stiftung is therefore looking for people with different experiences [for a scholarship program for trainees]. The program brings

This paper does not, and indeed cannot, go into the theoretical and normative background to these demands. Instead, its focus is on answering the empirical question of similarities and differences between journalists and the population in Germany. Researchers have long been aware that journalists do not reflect the population in general (cf. WEISCHENBERG et al. 2006: 69-72), but few major studies have been conducted on how and where exactly they differ.

Within the framework of a large representative population sample in Germany (SOEP; cf. Section 3 below) that allows comparisons between various groups and an analysis of professions (professional groups) (cf. DETER/VAN HOORN 2023), the socio-economic background (which is especially relevant for diversity), political views, general personality traits, and subjective judgments of journalists, are considered below. As the questions in the SOEP are targeted at the general population and at all professional groups, it is impossible to learn from these data anything about how journalists in Germany see their professional role or about the specific working conditions in the media. Nor is it possible to analyze journalistic sub-groups, such as data journalism (cf. WEINACHT/SPILLER 2022) or »constructive journalism« (cf. STEINIGEWEG 2022) here. Instead, we can compare the socio-demographic features of journalists in Germany with those of the general population and further comparison groups, and extend this comparison to personality traits, worries, trust, satisfaction, and the opportunities for influence that journalists feel they have.

The paper thus follows on from established survey studies in journalism research, but uses a different data base. It uses the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), which is representative of people in Germany aged 17 and over, to compare the features of journalists with those of the population as a whole. Some of the results corroborate older findings from previous research, such as a higher-than-average preference among professional journalists for the Green political party »Bündnis 90/Die Grünen.« In places, the analysis throws up new and unexpected empirical findings, such as those on the willingness to take risks. It is also surprising to see that, in our analysis, the proportion of journalists with a family history of migration is similar to that of the population as a whole.

2.   Empirical studies on the social structure and views of journalists in Germany

Following the investigations set out by Siegfried Weischenberg and his team in the 1990s and early 2000s (cf. WEISCHENBERG et al. 1993, 1994, 2006), the

into editorial offices people who are underrepresented there – such as women with a history of migration, or people who have not been to university.«

international »Worlds of Journalism« study is the most recent to provide extensive data on the social structure, working situation, and views of journalists (cf. Hanitzsch et al. 2019a). A new wave of surveys began in 2022, which in Germany was launched under the leadership of a team headed by Wiebke Loosen from the Leibniz Institute for Media Research (Hans Bredow Institute) (cf. LOOSEN et al. 2023). In previous years, a group led by Thomas Hanitzsch (University of Munich) had coordinated the »Worlds of Journalism« study and published results for Germany from surveys conducted in 2014/15 (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017; HANITZSCH et al. 2019b).

Based on representative samples (n = 775 and n = 1.221), the analyses for 2014/15 and 2022/23 provided up to now the best overview of central features of professional journalists in Germany (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 406-413; LOOSEN et al. 2023). The research groups used various sources in order to determine the basic population of journalists, which is not easy to pin down. The data used includes information from journalistic associations and media company websites.

Given that ›journalist‹ is not a protected title in western societies, it is notoriously difficult to define and delineate journalism as a profession. This was already a problem in the early American survey studies (cf. WEAVER/WILHOIT 1986, 1996), from which both German and international investigations would later follow. Just like the pioneer studies from the USA, »Worlds of Journalism« only includes professional journalists for whom journalism is their main job. Work in press offices or public relations does not count as journalistic work (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 407). In contrast, the statistics from German's Federal Labour Office (Bundesagentur für Arbeit) also include people for whom journalism is not their main job and those who do not provide core journalistic services, such as »technical editors.« This may cause information on the size and social profile of journalists as a professional group to vary (cf. STEINDL et al. 2019: 37).[2] These investigations provide the following profile of journalists in Germany (taking the variables that we analyze below on the basis of the SOEP into account):

2.1   Socio-demographic features

The average age of journalists in Germany in 2022/23 was 45 years (LOOSEN et al. 2023: 8). Making up 44 percent of journalists (2014/15: 40 percent), women are

2   »The Federal Labour Office (2017) states that around 200,000 people in Germany currently work in journalistic professions, of whom around 150,000 work directly in journalism. However, it is important to note that the Federal Labour Office (2010) also counts as journalists people who neither work in journalism as their main job nor are assigned predominantly journalistic tasks. For example, technical editors, editorial assistants, and people who work with fictional storytelling are all counted as journalists. It is therefore no wonder that the figures for journalists in Germany vary, often widely. Other sources, for example, quote a figure of more than 100,000 freelance journalists – this ignores the journalists in regular employment, however« (STEINDL et al. 2019: 37).

less well represented than men, and account for an even smaller proportion in higher positions (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 413-417; LOOSEN et al. 2023: 8). Figures from »ProQuote Medien« on the proportion of women in leading positions in national newspapers corroborate this, showing that there are few women in the German daily newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, *Welt* and *Bild* and the weekly magazine *Focus* in particular, while at the left-leaning newspaper *taz* there are more women in leading positions than men (cf. PROQUOTE 2022).

On the political desk of German media, the proportion of women is generally below average (cf. LÜNENBORG/BERGHOFER 2010: 9; DINGERKUS/KEEL 2021: 411). An older investigation found that women were also clearly underrepresented as authors of editorials and comment pieces in newspapers, as were East Germans and younger people aged under 40 (cf. PFETSCH et al. 2004: 56-57). From an intersectional point of view, women from West Germany are most likely to have benefited from initiatives like ProQuote and the increasing proportion of women in some leading editorial positions, while East Germans benefit less (cf. ECKERT/ASSMANN 2021, 2023).

Around a quarter of journalists earned a net monthly income of between EUR 1,801 and EUR 2,400 in 2014/15; a fifth earned between EUR 2,401 and EUR 3,000 (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 415). Many journalists, especially women and freelancers, work in economically precarious circumstances (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 417; STEINDL et al. 2018; SCHNEDLER 2017; HANITZSCH/RICK 2021).

Most journalists in Germany have a university degree. The proportion of those with a degree has risen over the decades, recently reaching around 70 to 75 percent (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 414; LOOSEN et al. 2023: 8). The »Worlds of Journalism« study cannot currently provide information on family background (cf. the survey in HANITZSCH et al. 2019: 257-268). In the Weischenberg team's study in 2005, 67 percent of the journalists questioned had fathers who were civil servants or white-collar workers, while just nine percent were the children of blue-collar workers. Just three percent of the mothers were blue-collar workers (more than half were white-collar, and around a fifth of the mothers did not work outside of the home at all) (cf. WEISCHENBERG et al. 2006: 69).

A study at three professional schools of journalism in Germany also found that most of those undergoing training there came from middle class families (cf. ZIEGLER 2008: 14). A study on the sociology of elites suggests that top journalistic positions – especially in Germany's private media companies – are mainly filled with people whose family is in a good or very good economic position (cf. HARTMANN 2013: 73-74).

Few data is available on the question of how many journalists come from families with a history of migration. Older estimates produce a figure of just 1.2 percent for German daily newspapers (cf. GEISSLER et al. 2009: 92), or between four and five percent for all media (cf. PÖTTKER 2016: 15). A more recent survey

by the organization »Neue deutsche Medienmacher:innen« found that 118 of 126 editors-in-chief (94 percent) at the media in Germany with the widest reach are German with no history of migration; none are people of color (cf. NdM 2020).

2.2   Personality traits

We are not aware of any systematically collected data on the general personality traits and mental condition of journalists. Largely on the basis of anecdotal evidence, journalists are said to be curious with a thirst for knowledge, flexible, open, and spontaneous. Attributes like these are also demanded or recommended in practical guides: »There are a few fundamental traits that somebody who wants to become a journalist should bring with them – above all strong nerves, a disciplined approach to work and a quantum of self-confidence. [...] People who are slow, shy or sensitive should probably not choose this profession« (SCHNEIDER/RAUE 2012: 15). According to this, curiosity, belligerence, a backbone, and mistrust are important. Others write of communication skills, resilience, and creativity (cf. MAST 2018: 486-488). It is far from certain, however, whether journalists really are especially likely to display these attributes.

2.3   Trust, worries, and satisfaction

No doubt as a result of their profession, journalists working in Germany have comparatively low trust in parties and politicians. Their trust in the judiciary and the police, however, is much higher (cf. STEINDL 2021: 215). In international comparison, trust in political institutions, such as the parliament and the government, is high (cf. HANITZSCH/BERGANZA 2012: 803). We are not aware of any current data on how high journalists' trust in other people is in general, although interpersonal trust can be a key factor in other forms of trust (cf. GRANOW et al. 2020; JAKOBS et al. 2021: 474-480).

Looking at the worries and satisfaction of journalists, there is clear information on the profession's workload, which is often considered high. Thus studies indicate that younger journalists in particular are thinking more about switching professions (cf. SCHMIDT et al. 2022: 67-69), and that the media sector should fear a brain drain (cf. SCHNEDLER 2017). All in all, however, journalists consider that they enjoy a high degree of freedom in decision-making (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 418), which can be important for the attractiveness of the profession and the satisfaction of those working in it. In an online survey of more than 1,000 journalists conducted in 2020, 43 percent stated that they were »more satisfied than dissatisfied« with their profession, while 26 percent were »very satisfied.« At the same time, 43 of those journalists for whom journalism was their main job saw their working situation as »precarious« (HANITZSCH/RICK 2021: 2). And women

are more likely to view their situation in this way than men (48% vs. 40%), more often stated that they work part-time, and are more likely to choose a freelance model in order to balance their work with family life. As a result, female journalists take home just 83 percent of the mean income of men working in journalism (HANITZSCH/RICK 2021: 5-7, 13).

As far as we are aware, there are no current studies on German journalists regarding general satisfaction with life and worries that are not directly associated with professional activities, but that are included in the data base analyzed by us (SOEP).

2.4   Political views

In terms of their political views, journalists in Germany in 2014/15 are slightly to the left of center on average, with a mean of 3.96 on a scale from 0 (»left«) to 10 (»right«) (cf. STEINDL et al. 2017: 414). Those who work on the politics desk are actually slightly further left, with a value of 3.6 (cf. DINGERKUS/KEEL 2021: 414). The higher the professional position (leading journalists) and the higher the journalists' income, the closer they are likely to be to the political center (cf. DIETRICH-GSENGER/SEETHALER 2019: 65; also based on the »Worlds of Journalism« survey).

Although preference for a political party was included in earlier investigations, it was not asked in the 2014/15 »Worlds of Journalism« study. In 2005, the Greens led with 36 percent, with just nine percent for the CDU/CSU; 20 percent of those surveyed stated that they have no party preference (cf. WEISCHENBERG et al. 2006: 71). A 2009 online survey of more than 900 political journalists also put the Greens in first place with 27 percent, and 36 percent responded with »no party preference« (cf. LÜNENBORG/BERGHOFER 2010: 13). In general, journalists in Germany set great store by professional non-partisanship, seeing themselves predominantly in a »neutral disseminator role« and as »impartial observers« (STEINDL et al. 2017: 419; LOOSEN et al. 2023: 9-11).

We will examine how the professional group of journalists looks in the aforementioned profile areas when a large representative sample, based on a different methodology as the specialized studies, is used: the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP). We expect the findings to corroborate the information from older studies. However, since the methods and times of the surveys vary, there may also be differences for whose direction we have no hypotheses. And the SOEP data also includes personality traits that have not been included in surveys in journalism research before.

3.   Method

The representative population survey in the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) makes it possible to analyze individual professional groups in Germany. For example, Deter and van Hoorn (2023) used the SOEP as the basis for investigating features of those employed in the financial industry. We are exploiting the possibilities offered by the large sample by identifying the journalists contained within this annual data set based on the information they provide on their work (in anonymized form with regard to their personal identity, which is not contained in the data set). We then compare this group with Germany's adult population as a whole, the electorate, and the group of those people in Germany who are intensively engaged in politics (defined as persons who state that they are active in political parties, local politics, or citizens' initiatives at least once a week). It is important to note that the group of those intensively engaged in politics is very small – just 1.5 percent of the adult population.

3.1   Distinguishing journalists in the SOEP data set

A representative sample like the SOEP is an interesting alternative to the studies outlined above, as a large sample of the population automatically includes persons active in journalism. And the large sample size implies that the sample size of journalists included is sufficient to draw statistically relevant conclusions.

Like the studies quoted in Section 2, our investigation includes only those people who state that they work as journalists as their main job, regardless of whether this is in traditional or new media (for the questionnaire, cf. for example for 2019: KANTAR PUBLIC 2020: 11-12). The starting point was all observations for which »journalist« was coded in the data set (cf. HARTMANN/SCHÜTZ 2002).

The coding of the journalists is based on the SOEP respondents' statement of their precise job description in plain language. However, we had access not only to the codes, but also to the plain language entered for the job description and in addition the economic sector in which the respondents work. This allowed us to exclude people who worked in fields such as public relations, marketing, and publishing (e.g., »head of editorial office at a school textbook publisher«). The exclusion process was based on independent »nominations« made by the three of us authors. Using the plain language descriptions, we unanimously excluded eleven respondents that we do not count as journalists.

Given that people working as journalists as their main job make up – as an estimate – only around 0.2 percent of the adult population and 0.3 percent of the working population (cf. Section 2 above), the sample size for journalists in the SOEP is so small that we have pooled the observations from the years 2013 to 2020. This gives us a population of 129 journalists, who were surveyed 415 times between 2013

and 2020. As we will see, this sample size is sufficient to find statistically relevant differences between journalists and the comparison groups. Small differences are not significant due to the large confidence intervals for journalists – but one can assume that such small differences are not very relevant in life, either.

In addition, we distinguished 41 people with leading roles from the group of journalists in the SOEP. We can assume that these people are especially influential in terms of not just editorial policy, but also media content, given that they have the opportunity to select topics and, for example, write journalistic comment pieces and editorials themselves. This method allows us to examine whether this presumably particularly influential group differs even more significantly from the remaining population. We call this group »leading journalists,« while others consider their prominence and strength of opinion and choose terms such as »alphas« (WEISCHENBERG et al. 2006: 52-56), »influential journalists« (MEYER 2015: 7), or an elitist »commentariat« (PFETSCH et al. 2004) . As well as the population as a whole, we also compare journalists with the electorate and with people engaged in politics.

The leading journalists are distinguished by at least one of three survey characteristics, while always maintaining their anonymity. First, when asked to state their job description, they respond that they are employees conducting highly qualified activities or in a leadership function, including employees who report extensive leadership tasks. Second, they work full time. And third, the plain language they use in their responses indicates that they work as journalists, (chief) editors, or heads of department. We deliberately distinguish this group as little as possible in order to avoid the risk of accidentally revealing their identities through additional characteristics (such as age or place of residence).

The number of 41 leading journalists is at the lower limit for a sample size that can be used as the basis for statistically relevant conclusions. As would be expected, the uncertainty range (confidence interval) for many of the examined characteristics of this group is very large (cf. also Section 4.1. below). Nevertheless, there are some statistically significant differences between all journalists and the leading journalists. Although we name these in the text, we have not included them in the printed results charts in order to make the charts easier to read (the results can be found in the online appendix). Given the total of 129 journalists in the data set, the proportion of those who see themselves as leaders is very high – although it is worth remembering that our analysis does not include the large number of journalists for whom journalism is a side job.

3.2   Dimensions of the investigation

Our analysis begins by comparing the (usual) socio-demographic features of journalists with the comparison groups investigated here. Some of these results

are also compared with the older studies on the professional situation of journalists quoted in Section 2.

The second thematic block is divided into three sub-sections. The first looks at the personality traits based on the »Big Five« personality traits and the willingness to take risks (for a summary of the concepts, cf. LECKELT et al. 2022; HESS et al. 2018; RICHTER et al. 2017). On a scale from one (does not apply at all) to seven (applies fully), respondents state the extent to which the following statements apply to them regarding the Big Five: I work thoroughly; I am communicative; I am sometimes too coarse with others; I am original; I often worry; I can forgive; I tend to be lazy; I am sociable; I appreciate artistic experience; I am a little nervous; I complete tasks effectively and efficiently; I am reserved; I am friendly towards others; I have a lively imagination; I handle stress well; I am curious. On a scale from one to ten, respondents also state how willing they are to take risks, both in general and in specific areas of their lives (zero = not at all willing to take risks; ten = very willing to take risks).

We do not condense the 16 questions and answers on individual personality traits in the SOEP into the five traits of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Instead, we consider the individual items separately, as this tells us more and can be statistically valid thanks to the large number of cases in the SOEP data base (compared with many psychological studies, even the case number of just 129 for journalists can be considered large).

The second thematic block looks at satisfaction and worries. On a scale from zero (not satisfied at all) to ten (very satisfied), the respondents state how satisfied they are with the various areas of their lives: general satisfaction with life; health; sleep; work: household income; personal income; leisure; and family life (cf. PRIEM et al. 2015).

When it comes to their worries, the SOEP respondents are asked to enter »not worried,« »somewhat worried,« or »very worried« on a scale for the following fields: general economic development; their own economic situation; their own health; environmental protection; climate change; maintaining peace; development of criminality in Germany; job security; immigration; and xenophobia (cf. ROHRER et al. 2021).

The third thematic block centers around party preference and other views. The respondents state which political party they prefer and place themselves on a left-right political scale, where zero is far left and ten is far right.

A question developed by Lauterbach et al. (2016: 62ff., esp. 65) relates to the political influence that respondents believe that they have. The question is: »How do you personally see your opportunity to influence public decisions at the following levels: district level, regional level, state level, national level, international level?« Respondents can answer on a scale from one (no opportunity at all) to seven (huge opportunity).

In order to highlight the similarities and differences between the journalists and all adults and voters in Germany as comparison groups, the pooled SOEP data from 2013 to 2020 is used as the basis for conducting multiple linear regression analyses containing two variable categories. As well as a 0,1 dummy variable that indexes journalists, six 0,1 dummy variables are also used to control for the year of data collection in order to prevent any purely temporal effects (e.g., the consequences of refugee immigration) which could distorte the results for the journalist effect. No additional control variables are used for the comparison groups »electorate« and »total population«; this allows us to draw conclusions on the extent to which journalists (aggregated) differ from these groups in general.

In the regression analyses for the comparison group »intensively engaged in politics,« statistical control is conducted not just for the survey year but also for gender, age (and age squared), and education, in order to reveal specific properties and life circumstances that go beyond gender, age, and level of education. The regressions are conducted based on weighted data.

4.   Results

4.1   Socio-demographic features

Figure 1 shows characteristic socio-demographic features of the populations analyzed. The results for the journalists (n=129) and leading journalists (n=41) are based on the pooled data from 2013 to 2020. This data pooling means that, when repeat surveys are conducted, as is the case for the SOEP, some journalists are included in the data set multiple times. In order to prevent repeat respondents from being overrepresented in the sample, only the most recent observation is included in each case.[3] The results for the comparison groups are based on data from 2019.

The distributions of gender and East/West region (current place of residence, rather than region of origin) among all journalists do not differ significantly from those of the comparison groups. Unlike in other journalism research studies, there is no significant gap in representation here. But this is not the case when it comes to leading roles: Men are much more strongly represented among leading journalists than in the population as a whole; the same goes when comparing leading journalists with the group of citizens intensively engaged in politics.

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3   Due to the relatively low number of journalists in the sample, two measures were conducted to validate the reliability of the results and minimize potential distortion. First, the sample was weighted; second, the distribution of the journalists in the SOEP's various sub-samples was examined. The sample weighting did not result in any relevant change to the results, nor was any overrepresentation of journalists in the individual sub-samples found (e.g., migration samples).

Figure 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of the journalists and the comparison groups
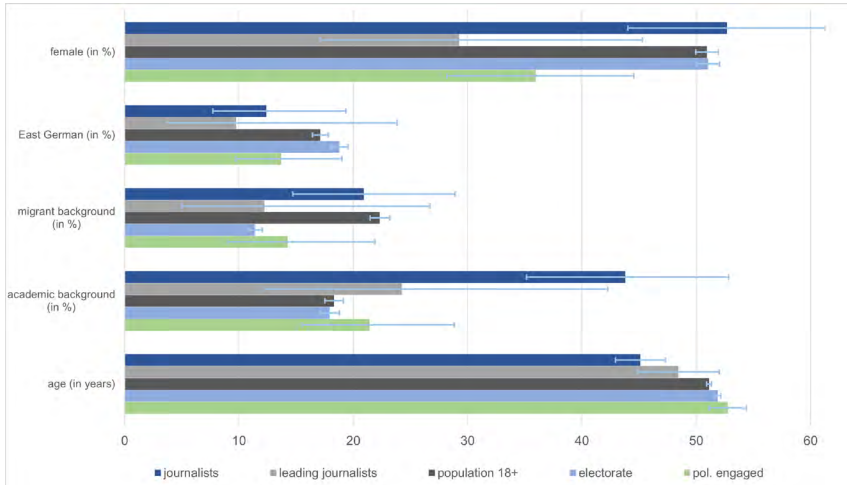
Note: The values for the comparison groups are based on weighted data for the adult population (18+) from 2019 (the question on political engagement is only asked every two years, most recently in 2019; and therefore not in the most recent data from 2020). The values for the journalists and the leading journalists are based on the most recent data from the period 2013 to 2020. This data is not weighted. Source: SOEP v.37.

It is surprising to find that, measured against the comparison groups, it is by no means rare for journalists in Germany to have a history of migration. Instead, the proportion of journalists with a history of migration is the same as for the comparison groups, or even higher (when compared with the electorate as a whole). This contrasts with estimates from earlier studies and shows that numerous people with a family history of migration (now) work in journalism. However, a closer look at the data reveals that this does not reflect the largest groups of migrants in Germany. Almost exclusively, the journalists surveyed come from European countries, and the small sample does not contain a single person from the African continent, for example.

Journalists are also much more likely than any other comparison group to come from families with an academic background. Specifically, around 40 percent of journalists have at least one parent with a university degree.

Because journalists are necessarily of working age, their average age of 45 years is significantly lower than that of the adult population as a whole, the electorate, and people intensively engaged in politics.

Table A.1. in the appendix shows that more than half of journalists are in full-time employment, around 36 percent part-time, and more than ten percent in the category »Other« (in training or in irregular or minimal employment yet still as their main job). Journalists are more likely than the comparison groups to work full-time or part-time – of course due to the fact that their being active in journalism means that they cannot be unemployed.

As would be expected, journalists have a higher level of formal education than the comparison groups; the smallest difference is between journalists and people intensively engaged in politics (see Table A.1). The SOEP results confirm those of the large survey studies in journalism research: Journalism as a profession is dominated by graduates. Furthermore, journalists live in households with a significantly higher monthly net income from employment than the comparison groups; leading journalists lead the ranking with a monthly income of almost EUR 5,000 (note the large margin of uncertainty, see Tab. A.2).

4.2   Further features

The rest of our results are based not on simple descriptive analyses, but on regression analyses. These make it possible to pool observations from different calendar years while also highlighting which of the differences between the journalists and the comparison groups are statistically significant.

In the charts below, the dots represent the coefficients of the 0,1 dummy variables for the group of journalists in such away that the dots show where journalists are positioned compared with the respective comparison group (red line). The top line (for the trait »I work thoroughly«) in Figure 2.1, for example, shows that journalists are slightly more likely than the population as a whole (aged 18 years and over) to state that they work thoroughly, but that this difference is not statistically significant. This is shown by the lines surrounding the dots: The lines show the 95% confidence intervals, i.e., the range of results in which there is a 95% probability that the true result lies. An effect can only be said to be statistically significant if the confidence interval does not include the red line (this is the case, for example, in the fourth block in Figure 2.1 for the level of originality of journalists compared with all adults and the electorate). Because the number of journalists in the sample (129) is relatively small, any effect needs to be relatively large in order to be statistically significant and thus relevant in terms of content.

4.2.1   Personality traits

The »Big Five« charts (Fig. 2.1 & Fig. 2.2)[4] show that journalists differ significantly from the comparison groups when it comes to the personality traits that they describe for themselves (since the SOEP is not a specific survey on journalism, we can reasonably expect that the journalists surveyed did not give responses deliberately targeted at the expectations of the profession). The journalists show more or less significantly higher levels of communicativeness, originality, interest in artistic experience, imagination, and curiosity than the three demographic comparison groups. It may be more surprising to learn that journalists see themselves as having a tendency for laziness (compared to the whole population and to the electorate). Journalists consider themselves stronger than the politically active in terms of artistic experience and imagination, but do not provide statistically significant higher values for communicativeness and originality than citizens engaged in politics.

The data for leading journalists (see figures in online appendix, Fig. A.1.1) reveals that the only difference between them and their colleagues is their bigger belief in their ability to forgive. Compared with the other population groups, leading journalists see themselves as less nervous, more curious, more imaginative, and more resistant to stress.

The general willingness of journalists to take risks is distinctly higher than that of the adult population as a whole and the electorate (albeit with only weak statistical significance). This was to be expected given that journalists as a professional group have a higher level of education, which is associated with a greater willingness to take risks (see Fig. 2.3). More surprising is the finding that the journalists' willingness to take risks is lower than that of people engaged in politics – which in turn is significantly far higher than that of the adult population as a whole (cf. HESS et al. 2018). It is less surprising, on the other hand, that the journalists, whose professional field is comparatively open, after all, stated a significantly higher willingness to take risks with regard to their careers than the comparison groups.

Interestingly, in their self-perception journalists tend to have greater trust in strangers than the population as a whole and the electorate. They are also more willing to take risks in relation to leisure and sport. When it comes to financial investments and their own health, however, the results clearly show that they are less willing than the comparison groups to take risks.

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4   The Stata charts for Figures 2 to 4 come from Bischof (2017).

Fig. 2.1
Big Five personality traits I
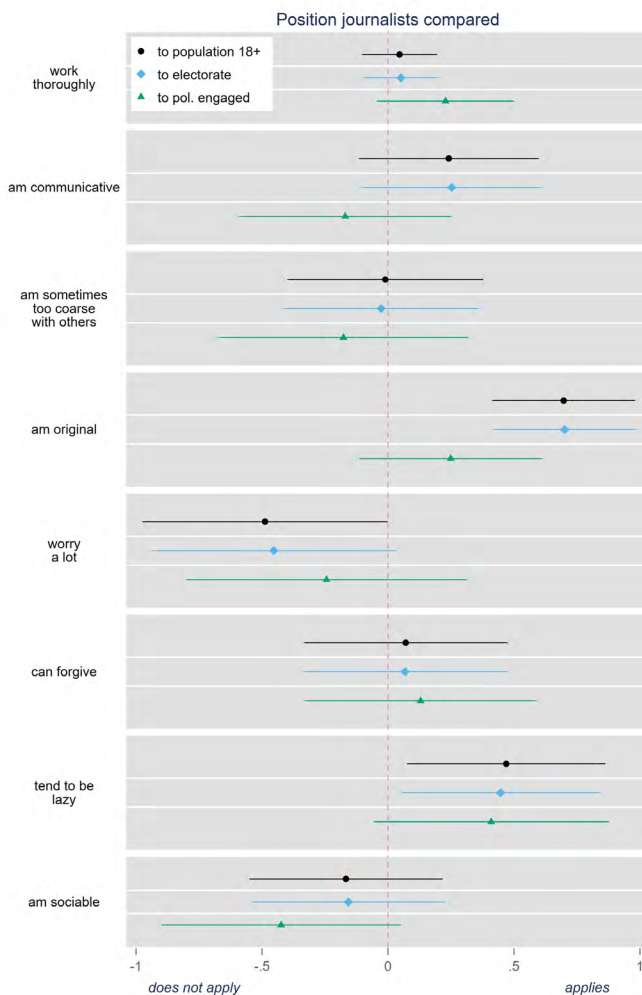
* Scale for personality traits: does not apply at all (0) – applies fully (7). Source: SOEP v.37; analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age² and education. Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups. Reading aid: Journalists state significantly higher values than the population as a whole and the electorate for the dimension »I am original.« Their responses do not differ significantly from those of people engaged in politics.

Fig. 2.2
## Big Five personality traits II
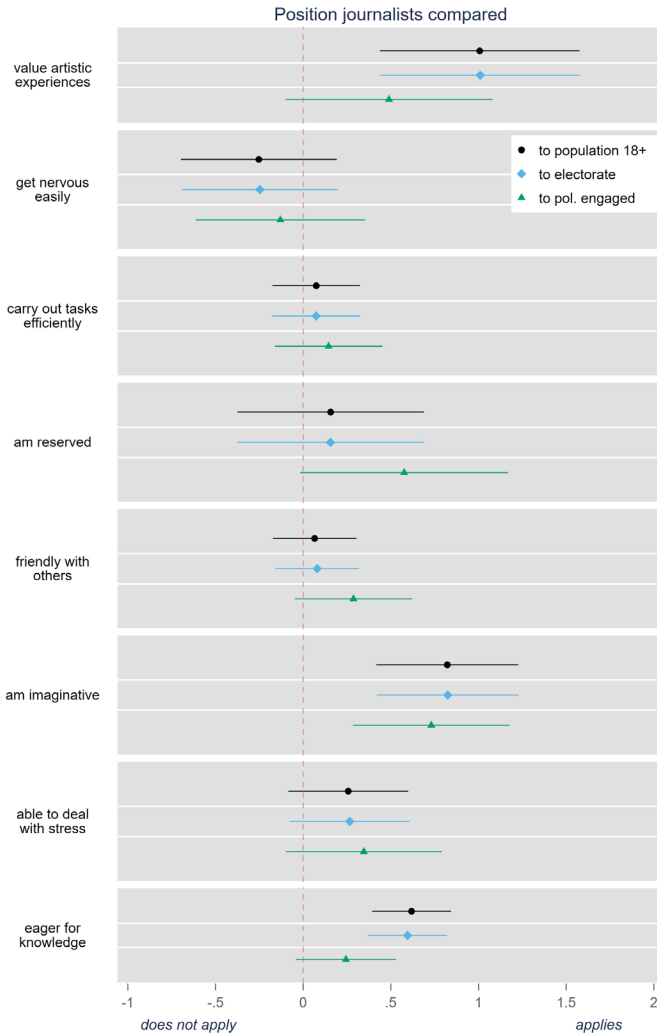
Position journalists compared

* Scale for personality traits: does not apply at all (0) – applies fully (7). Source: SOEP v.37; analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age² and education. Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups.

Fig. 2.3
Self-assessment of willingness to take risks

Position journalists compared
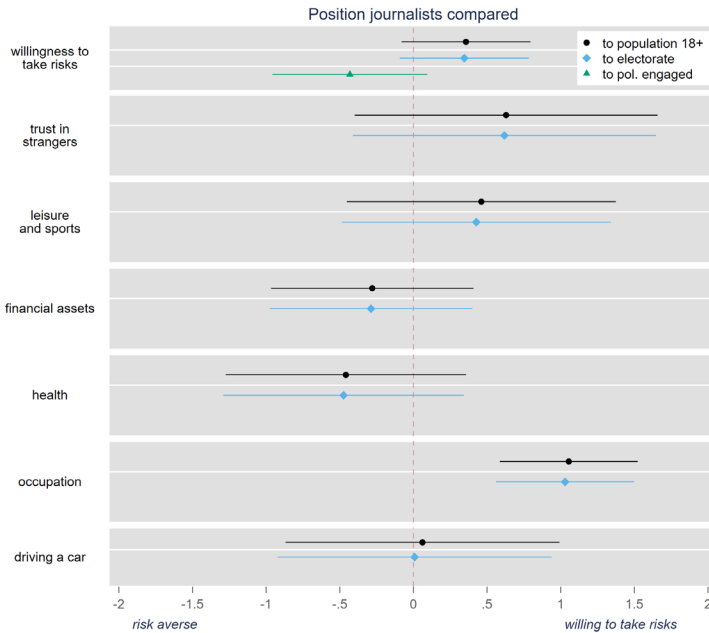
* Scale for willingness to take risks: not at all willing to take risks (0) – very willing to take risks (10); ** Data on the general willingness to take risks is gathered annually (here: pooled results for 2013-2020). Willingness to take risks in specific fields was only asked in 2014 and is thus based on responses from 61 journalists. Due to a lack of (sufficient) values, no conclusions can be drawn here on people engaged in politics or on leading journalists. Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups. Analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age² and education. Source: SOEP v.37

4.2.2   Satisfaction and worries

Looking at Fig. 3, it is striking that journalists are significantly more satisfied with their lives in general, and with their health and their sleep, than the population as a whole and the electorate. This comes as little surprise, however, given that both comparison groups also include people who are not in employment due to illness, and the effects are not controlled for the effects of age. The journalists' satisfaction with their lives thus does not differ significantly from that of people engaged in politics (although it is slightly higher). When it comes to satisfaction with work and leisure, journalists give average results, with leading journalists

slightly less satisfied with their work (see online appendix, Fig. A.2, cf. also findings on worries below). However, the data does show (statistically insignificant) greater satisfaction with family life.

The material situation in life is recorded here based on satisfaction with the personal and household income. Although not always statistically significant, the trend is clear: Journalists are less satisfied than the comparison groups with both their personal and their household income. However, this does not apply to leading journalists, who are significantly more satisfied with their personal income than their colleagues – and than the comparison groups of the population as a whole and the electorate. What is the situation when it comes to worries and the topics that are seen as politically important? The results on »worries« (Fig. 4) show that journalists displayed an approximately average level of concern about the general economic situation (in 2013 to 2020). With regard to their own economic situation, too, in the observed period the journalists do not differ significantly from the adult population as a whole, nor from the electorate. However, they are more worried about their own economic situation than those engaged in politics are, albeit not to a statistically significant extent.

Although journalists are said to have a stressful profession and many of them indeed bemoan an exhausting job situation (cf. LOOSEN 2023: 15), they are on average less concerned about their health than the demographic comparison groups. Given the complaints in the media sector about precarious employment, it is also surprising to find that journalists are only worried about their job security to an average extent (and leading journalists even slightly less than their colleagues, see online appendix, Fig. 3). Although this may be a result of the sample, given that it does not include journalists for whom journalism is a side job, for example. Only the citizens especially engaged in politics are less worried about their jobs.

The other worries asked about in the survey show that journalists are on average significantly more worried about »green« issues such as environmental protection and climate change than the adult population as a whole and the electorate (the same cannot be said for leading journalists). Journalists are less concerned about the development of criminality and immigration. The differences from the group of citizens engaged in politics are interesting in particular: There is little difference between journalists and those engaged in politics when it comes to worries about maintaining peace, environmental protection, and climate change, but those engaged in politics are significantly more concerned about xenophobia and immigration to Germany.[5]

5 As the most recent data included in the analysis is from 2020, the wars in Ukraine and in Israel do not impact the responses.

Fig. 3
Satisfaction
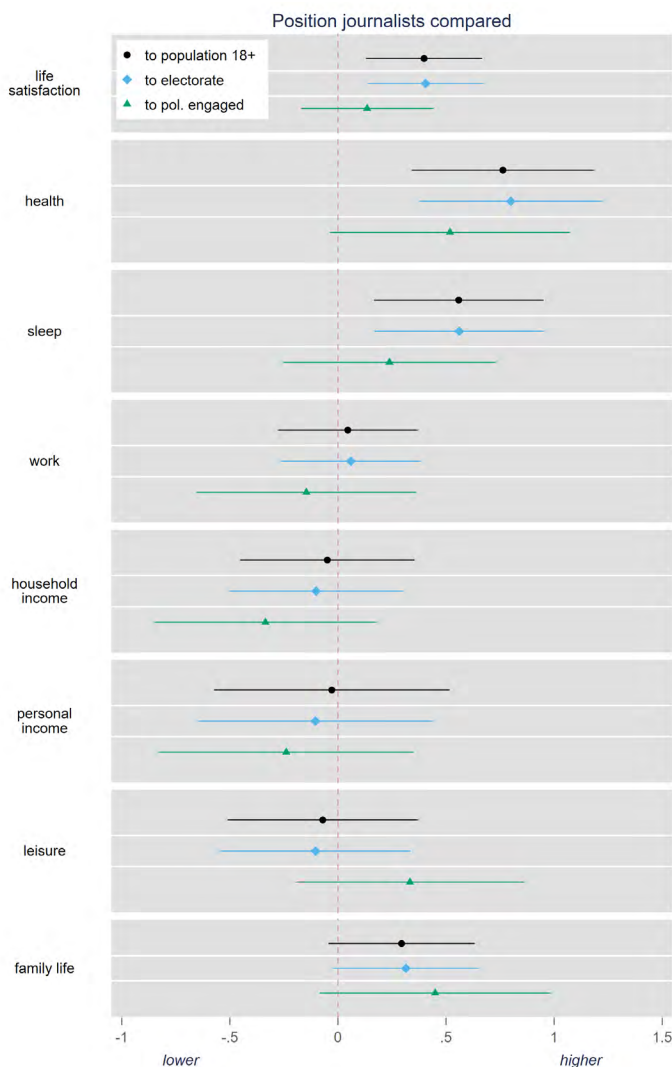
* Scale for satisfaction: not satisfied at all (0) – very satisfied (10). Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups; analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age² and education. Source: SOEP v.37

Fig. 4
Worries
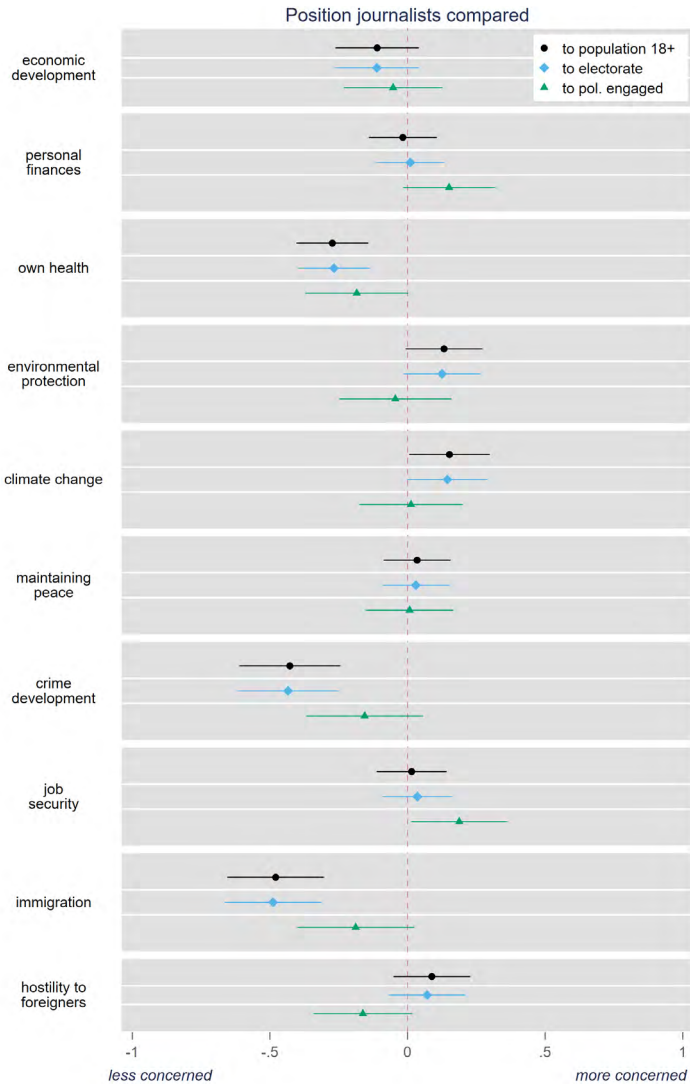
* Scale: no worries (1) – major worries (3). Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups; analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age² and education. Source: SOEP v.37

4.2.3 Political views and party preference

Given the structure of the journalists' worries, the results on their political views can no longer come as a surprise (Fig. 5.1.): On a left-right scale, journalists in Germany – as in the studies quoted in Section 2 – place themselves (statistically significantly) slightly to the left of the demographic comparison groups. The difference between journalists and citizens engaged in politics in this regard is not significantly significant.

Fig. 5.1
Political Views

Position journalists compared
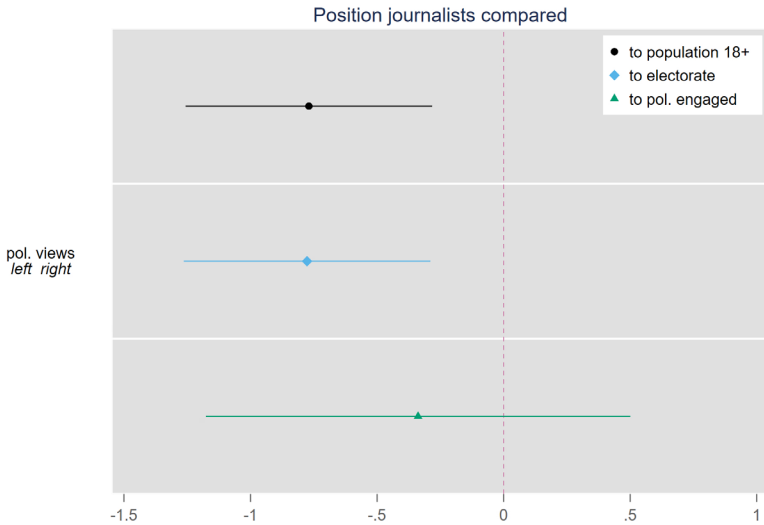
* Scale for political views: left (0) – right (10). Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups; analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age² and education. Source: SOEP v.37

Very clear structures can be seen regarding party preferences (Fig. 5.2). This is also emphasized in the available literature. Journalists in Germany are significantly less likely to prefer the conservative CDU/CSU than any other comparison group, and significantly more likely to prefer Die Grünen (Green Party).

Fig. 5.2
Party preference
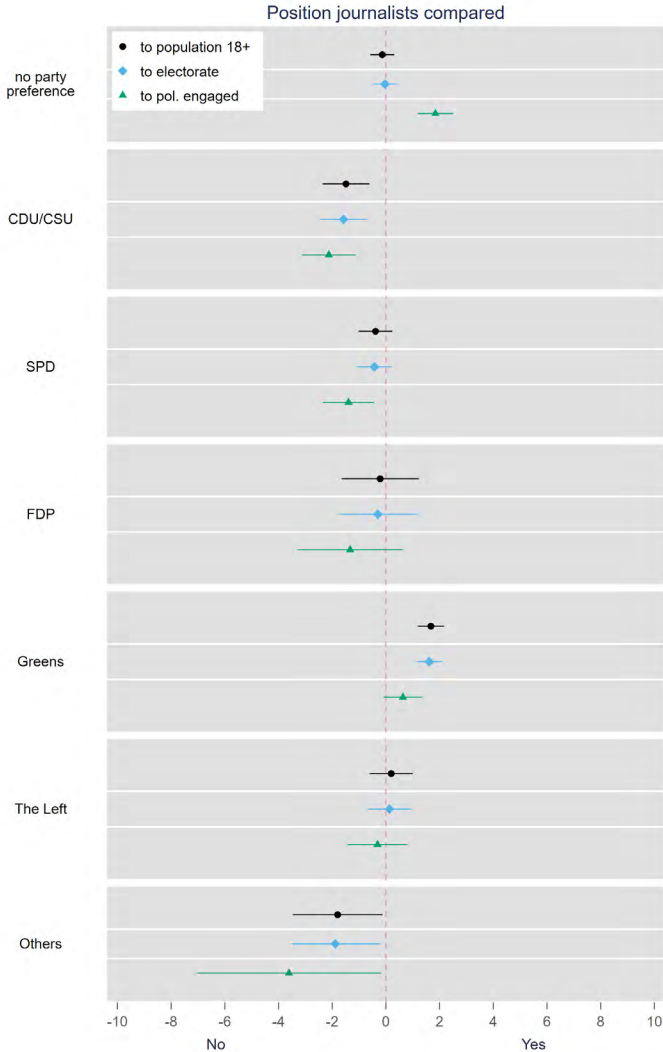
Note: Points denote the position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups (odds ratio); analyses based on pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people engaged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age² and education. Source: SOEP v.37

Their preference for the SPD (Social Democrats) and Die Linke (Left Party) is more or less the same as in the comparison groups (except leading journalists, who are much less likely to prefer Die Linke; see online appendix, Fig. A.4); although journalists are much less likely to prefer the SPD than those engaged in politics are. At the same time, they are slightly less likely than the three demographic comparison groups to prefer the FDP (Free Democrats – a business oriented liberal party), although the difference is not statistically significant. Interestingly, journalists are less likely to prefer other parties (including the right-wing AfD) than any other comparison group, especially those engaged in politics. Overall, it is worth noting that a majority of the total adult population (2019: 57%) and almost half (44%) of journalists stated that they do not prefer any particular party – a figure that puts the other party preferences named strongly into perspective.

When it comes to their opportunities for political influence (Fig. 5.3), journalists at all levels see themselves as much more influential than the comparison groups – with the exception of the citizens engaged in politics. Only on an international level do the journalists not see significantly more opportunity as the comparison groups to influence public decision-making.

5.   Discussion and conclusion

Journalists do not mirror the population, and the extent to which their biographies and views reflect society's diversity and the population average is limited. Although this fact has long been known within communication studies, few studies have been able to draw comparisons on a representative basis. With this in mind, this paper has drawn on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) – tapping an established source that has not previously been used in journalism research and that contains, in particular, variables on personality that have not previously been analyzed. Furthermore, the SOEP makes it possible to draw targeted comparisons with other population groups, in particular the group of citizens intensively engaged in politics.

These data cannot define whether or, if applicable, how a journalist's views and milieu influence reporting. As a general rule, it is important to be cautious when drawing conclusions about effects on reporting based on the views and social characteristics of individual journalists. Such connections are obviously complex (cf. LÜCK et al. 2022: 562-565; HOFFMANN 2023). Furthermore, the analysis using the SOEP data is based on a very small sample of journalists for whom journalism is their main job – offering limited opportunity to differentiate within this group.

Fig. 5.3
Estimation of opportunities for influence (2019)
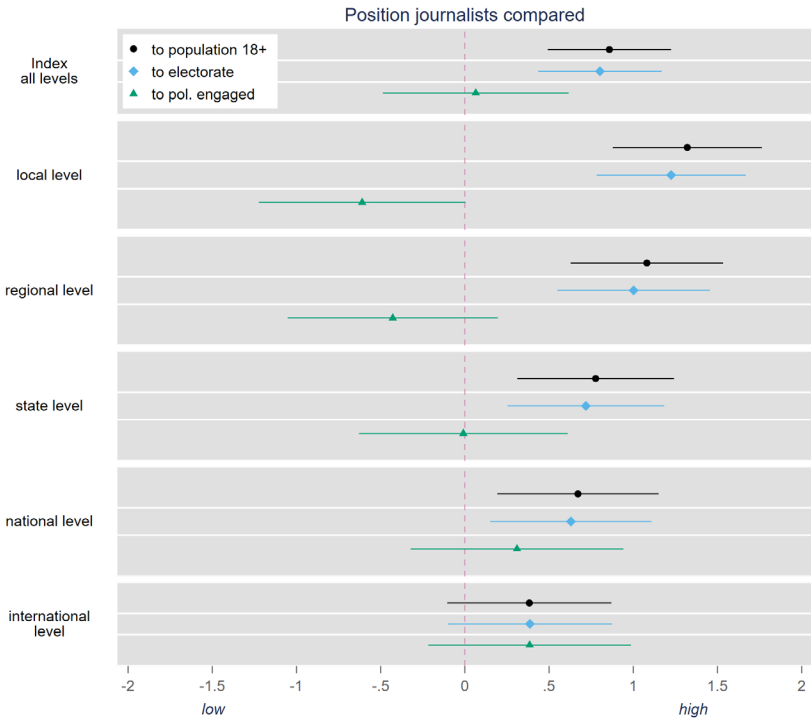
* Scale for estimation of opportunities for influence: no opportunity at all (1) – huge oppor-
tunity (7); ** The estimation of opportunities for influence was only included in the survey
in 2019 and is therefore based on the responses of 42 journalists. Note: Points denote the
position of the journalists compared to the respective reference groups; analyses based on
pooled data 2013 to 2020, controlled for the year of collection. In addition, »people enga-
ged in politics« is controlled for gender, age, age² and education. Source: SOEP v.37

The first task of this study was to record which features are typical of journalists
in Germany. Corroborating previous study results seems important here. After
all, surveys in the media sector face a large number of difficulties, for example in
determining the population, selecting the sample, and the number of responses
received. The data base and the methods on which our analysis is based differ
fundamentally from the survey studies conducted in journalism research. One
key advantage of the SOEP data set is that it is representative of the population as
a whole, with the group of journalists included automatically alongside all other
professional groups and asked the same questions. Replication of the results for

characteristics like age, income and political views can therefore be seen as a sign of the quality of the various studies and their design.

When it comes to the respondents' age, level of education, social background and political views, the results for 2013 to 2020 corroborate the trends found in older investigations by Weischenberg et al. (2006) and Hanitzsch et al. (2019b) and in a new study by Loosen et al. (2023). The majority of journalists in Germany come from an academic background. East Germans (measured by place of residence) are underrepresented among those working in journalism. Despite widespread discussion and awareness of the problems related to precarious employment in the media sector (cf. Hanitzsch/Rick 2021), people who work in their first jobs as journalists tend to live in households with an income higher than the average for the population as a whole. Politically, journalists tend to be slightly left-wing and have a clear above-average preference for the Green Party (Die Grünen). And there is further evidence to support the theory that journalists are dominated by an urban, green milieu: They are significantly more worried about the climate and environmental protection than the population as a whole. Their worries are similar to those of the small group of citizens intensively engaged in politics. However, journalists are less concerned than the politically engaged when it comes to topics like criminality and immigration – yet another indication of a more left-wing, liberal attitude.

The analysis of the SOEP expands and refines what we know about journalism in Germany in many ways. One surprising result relates to the journalists' migration history. Previous assumptions on this have been based on older rough estimates or on analyses of a small, selective group (e. g. main editorial offices). The SOEP data now shows that the proportion of journalists with a history of migration – who were either born abroad themselves or have at least one parent who is not from Germany – is larger than was thought: around 20 percent, or close to the proportion of the population as a whole. However, it was found that a large majority of people working in journalism with a history of migration come from neighboring European countries, with only a tiny minority from Asia, and not a single journalist from Africa in the sample. Migrants are also underrepresented among leading journalists.

Our representative data show that journalists see themselves as creative, curious and imaginative to a much greater extent than other people do. Furthermore, their responses in the SOEP show them to have above-average trust in other people – all characteristics that can make a positive contribution to their satisfaction with life. When it comes to satisfaction with life, the results do not necessarily correlate with common ideas or prejudices. Despite the pressure being put on journalism by the digital transformation, journalists' satisfaction with their work, lives and leisure time differs little from that of the rest of the population. They do not stand out at all as a group that is struggling. They

might not be too satisfied with their income, but when it comes to their family life and their health, journalists actually tend to be more satisfied than average. Although leading journalists are slightly less satisfied with their work than their colleagues are, they are significantly more satisfied with their personal income.

It is worth noting that these findings are all for journalists in Germany who work in journalism as their main job and have already established a career. In fact, the media sector as a whole may in future see an increasing trend for people to work as journalists as a side job or leave the field of journalism. And this analysis was unable to reflect any shrinking of the field of professional journalists or the problems this creates, and thus may underestimate the professional difficulties that (young) journalists currently face and will continue to face in the future.

Debates about journalism as a sector in crisis can quickly lose sight of the fact that many, indeed most, sectors of the economy are also facing enormous challenges and uncertainty, and that the situation in which many media workers find themselves may not necessarily be worse, and in some cases may be better, than that of other people in work. The SOEP data showed that journalists are less risk-averse than average and more willing than average to take risks in their professional careers. Another factor in their satisfaction with life may be that they assume more strongly than others that their work gives them political influence and the ability to make a difference.

All in all, the results paint a picture of a fairly satisfied, fulfilled professional group. The evaluation could be different or become more complex if problems and symptoms of crisis in the media sector were explicitly addressed. However, it is interesting that the journalists were certainly not found to be particularly dissatisfied in direct comparison with other population groups. This may also be linked to their level of education and their personality traits, which indicate that they are more open than average to new experiences and are able to handle professional strain and changes in society comparatively well. In addition, many journalists are driven by idealism to join the profession and see it as meaningful (as demonstrated by their level of satisfaction with life). As a result, they may be willing to accept strain up to a certain level. For example, journalists may have vital resources and mentalities that help them not only to ensure the dynamic transformation of the media, but to play a constructive role in shaping it.

For future studies in journalism research, it may be worth integrating features like those examined in the SOEP (e.g. Big Five variables). Systematic comparisons with other population and professional groups, investigated not only with the SOEP but also with other surveys (like the European Social Survey or the World Value Survey), could provide further insight into professional journalists as a group.

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Appendix

Table A.1
Socio-demographic features of the journalists and the comparison groups

	Journalists		Leading journalists		Population 18+		Electorate		People intensively engaged in politics	
	%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean
Gender										
Male	47.29		70.73		49.06		48.96		64.03	
Female	52.71		29.27		50.94		51.04		35.97	
Region of residence										
West Germany	87.60		90.24		82.88		81.23		86.3	
East Germany	12.40		9.76		17.12		18.77		13.7	
Age		45.12		48.94		51.14		51.89		52.76
History of migration										
No HoM	79.07		87.80		77.69		88.59		85.75	
Direct HoM	13.95		7.32		16.04		6.00		9.49	
Indirect HoM	6.98		4.88		6.26		5.41		4.76	
Level of education										
No qualification (yet)	0.00		0.00		3.28		2.07		1.76	
Lower high school certificate	0.00		0.00		29.97		29.19		17.22	
Advanced high school certificate	7.09		7.32		26.07		28.88		17.36	
University entrance qualification	19.69		12.20		16.08		15.02		15.16	
Graduates	73.23		80.49		24.60		24.85		48.51	
Family background										
Graduate background	43.80		24.24		18.32		17.93		21.42	
Non-graduate background	56.20		75.76		81.68		82.07		78.58	
Employment status										
Full time	52.71		100.00		39.66		40.06		38.31	
Part time	36.43		0.00		13.98		13.86		19.56	
Unemployed	0.00		0.00		38.81		38.58		36.39	
Other	10.85		0.00		7.55		7.5		5.74	
Net household income (in €)		4315		4910		3312		3361		3922
N		129		41		29.145		23.543		454

Note: The values for the comparison groups are based on weighted data for the adult population (18+) from 2019 (political involvement is only included in the survey every two years, most recently in 2019; therefore the most recent data is not from 2020). The values for journalists and leading journalists are based on the most recent data between 2013 and 2020 in each case. This data is not weighted. Source: SOEP v.37

Table A.2

Socio-demographic features of the journalists, incl. 95% confidence intervals (margin of uncertainty)

	Journalists				Leading journalists			
	%	Mean	Lower ci	Upper ci	%	Mean	Lower ci	Upper ci
Gender								
Male	47.29		38.76	55.98	70.73		54.70	82.87
Female	52.71		44.02	61.24	29.27		17.13	45.30
Region of residence								
West Germany	87.60		80.63	92.30	90.24		76.15	96.40
East Germany	12.40		7.70	19.37	9.76		3.60	23.85
Age		45.12	42.93	47.30		48.44	44.87	52.01
History of migration								
No HoM	79.07		71.11	85.29	87.80		73.29	94.97
Direct HoM	13.95		8.93	21.14	7.32		2.30	20.97
Indirect HoM	6.98		3.65	12.94	4.88		1.17	18.17
Level of education								
No qualification (yet)	0.00							
Lower high school certificate	0.00							
Advanced high school certificate	7.09		3.70	13.13	7.32		2.30	20.97
University entrance qualification	19.69		13.61	27.60	12.20		5.03	26.71
Graduates	73.23		64.79	80.26	80.49		65.04	90.15
Family background								
Graduate background	43.80		35.16	52.84	24.24		12.27	42.26
Non-graduate background	56.20		47.16	64.84	75.76		57.74	87.73
Employment status								
Full time	52.71		44.02	61.24				
Part time	36.43		28.52	45.15				
Unemployed	0.00							
Other	10.85		6.50	17.57				
Net household income (in €)		4315	3914	4716		4910	4262	5558
N	129				41			

Note: The values for journalists and leading journalists are based on the most recent data between 2013 and 2020 in each case. Source: SOEP v.37.

Research Paper

T. J. Thomson and Ryan J. Thomas

Generative visual AI in newsrooms

Considerations related to production, presentation, and audience interpretation and impact

Abstract: AI services that provide responses to prompts, such as ChatGPT, have ignited passionate discussions over the future of learning, work, and creativity. AI-enabled text-to-image generators, such as Midjourney, pose profound questions about the purpose, meaning, and value of images yet have received considerably less research attention, despite the implications they raise for both the production and consumption of images. This essay explores key considerations that journalists and news organizations should be aware of when conceiving, sourcing, presenting, or seeking to fact-check AI-generated images. Specifically, it addresses transparency around how algorithms work, discusses provenance and algorithmic bias, touches on labor ethics and the displacement of traditional lens-based workers, explores copyright implications, identifies the potential impacts on the accuracy and representativeness of the images audiences see in their news, and muses about the lack of regulation and policy development governing the use of AI-generated images in news. We explore these themes through the insights provided by eight photo editors or equivalent roles at leading news organizations in Australia and the United States. Overall, this study articulates some of the key issues facing journalists and their organizations in an age of AI and synthetic visual media.

Keywords: generative visual AI, text-to-image generators, journalistic innovation, synthetic media, AI journalism

An image of Pope Francis wearing a luxury fashion house's puffer jacket (see Figure 1) went viral in March 2023. It was created using text-to-image generator Midjourney and posted on Reddit before being extensively posted and seen

elsewhere online (DI PLACIDO 2023). That same month, AI-generated images depicting former U.S. President Donald Trump being arrested also spread widely online (DEVLIN/CHEETHAM 2023). The rapid circulation of the images online and the extent to which they were treated as credible has raised concern about how online audiences can't always discern truth from falsehood (STOKEL-WALKER 2023; VINCENT 2023). The images also provide a useful entry point into a discussion about what journalists and newsrooms need to be aware of as generative visual AI becomes increasingly widespread.

Figure 1
Twitter Screenshot

Screenshot of a Tweet showing an AI-generated image (left) of Pope Francis wearing a luxury puffer jacket

   In this essay, we examine relevant domains – production, presentation, and audience interpretation and impact – of generative visual AI and its implications for newsrooms, journalists, and their publics.
   Our essay joins other recent work (see BECKER 2023; COOLS/DIAKOPOULOS 2023) that examines newsroom policies (primarily in Europe and North America) in

relation to AI. Those studies found that transparency, accountability, and responsibility are often mentioned in AI-focused editorial guidelines but that questions around legal compliance and algorithmic bias, for example, are less prominent. The present essay contributes to the literature by the addition of newsrooms in Australia as well as evaluating editor perspectives at different newsrooms in North America than Becker (2023) and Cools/Diakopoulos (2023) studied. Our essay also differentiates itself by its central focus on the visual aspects of generative AI rather than treating these as peripheral or ignoring them entirely; by expanding beyond questions of production to also consider the domains of presentation and audience interpretation and impact; and by exploring internal thinking on policy and practice rather than on only evaluating publicly available policies.

Considerations for the production domain

It is inexpensive and straightforward to harness the power of generative visual AI through online tools like Midjourney, DALL·E, and Nightcafe. All a user needs to do is imagine the scene they want to visualize and describe it through words so the underlying algorithm can return one or more results that it thinks match the provided description. This is called »prompting« or »prompt engineering« and the prompts can be simple, one-word labels (e.g., »girl« or »restaurant«) or lengthy descriptions that specify particular attributes of the scene and the equipment used to visualize it (e.g., »a 12-year-old girl sitting on a stool in an empty restaurant in Berlin, cinematic, 85 mm lens, f/1.8, accent lighting, global illumination, --ar 2:3«). In this second example, the user has provided more clarity about what they want to see (namely, a person of a certain gender with a specific age in a certain location and shown using a specific focal length with a specific aperture value). They have also specified a visual style (»cinematic«), lighting conditions (»global illumination«), and an aspect ratio (»2:3«), which is the width-to-height relationship of the image's frame.

Potential problems emerge, however, due to the ways algorithms are developed and the available source material the algorithm draws on to generate images (SUN/WEI/SUN/SUH/SHEN/YANG 2023). In the above example, for instance, while we have specified the person's gender and age, we have not specified their ethnic background or ability status. The AI is left to fill in these gaps and, often, returns results that reinforce existing biases and stereotypes (THOMAS/THOMSON 2023), including those related to gender, age, ethnicity, ability, and location.

Because of the ease and cheapness of tools like Midjourney and DALL·E, a journalist or editor (or their potentially more budget-conscious business colleagues) might ask themselves if their newsroom can turn to AI to generate images rather than paying staff or freelancers to go out and photograph a scene. So-minded

newsrooms could buy an annual subscription to a text-to-image generator like Midjourney for the cost of a single freelancer's day rate. Indeed, the use of AI to create content is increasingly a problematic feature of written journalism. For example, the tech news site CNET was found to have errors in over half of the stories it had relied on AI to write (SATO/ROTH 2023), while the newspaper publishing company Gannett was widely criticized for the turgid prose of its AI-written sports stories (WU 2023).

Between March and July 2023, we interviewed photo editors or equivalent in newsrooms in Australia and the U.S.A. about how they regard and use generative visual AI in their newsrooms. We promised our participants anonymity so can't disclose the names of the outlets they worked for. However, we can say that the eight brands in our sample were primarily large organisations (with an average of around 3,000 employees) and primarily reached national or international audiences rather than regional or local ones. Our rationale for studying the largest outlets with the biggest audiences was that these organizations are likely the most resourced and most likely to have the opportunity to develop guidelines related to generative visual AI. We hypothesized that smaller and less-resourced outlets would either lack policies entirely or would adopt or adapt those published by larger organizations or professional journalistic associations.

Most of the editors we spoke with said they only use generative visual AI for creative brainstorming or to illustrate stories specifically about generative visual AI. Some editors differentiated between using generative visual AI for news and for other »feature« or opinion content where photo illustrations and concept art was more common. These editors felt more comfortable with the idea of using generative visual AI for these latter tasks compared to using them in news stories. Most editors said they were concerned about the labor implications of generative visual AI and its potential to displace traditional, lens-based storytellers. They said they felt responsible to their industry to continue investing in the lens-based storytelling craft and to support lens-based workers even when colleagues in other departments or with different backgrounds might not appreciate the difference between AI-generated and traditional lens-based production methods or results.Another production-related consideration editors raised was copyright. Text-to-image generators work by training on vast and often copyrighted sets of imagery. The question arises of whether services like Midjourney are impinging the intellectual property rights of photographers, artists, and other visual communicators by learning from their images to make their own. This is a matter made more complex by how opaque most text-to-image generators are about where their training data come from and how their underlying algorithms work. It is also a matter currently before the courts in various jurisdictions (BRITTAIN 2023). A notable exception is Adobe's answer to generative visual AI, Firefly. Adobe claims its Firefly model is trained on its own Adobe Stock repository,

openly licensed content, or public domain imagery, which reduces the legal risk of using the resulting generations for commercial use.

Considerations for the presentation domain

Journalists and editors enjoy more freedom to customize the presentation of elements on their own websites (though journalists we have interviewed bemoan that this is still often a time-intensive, expensive, and frustrating process). However, news publishers enjoy significantly less relative freedom when posting their content to social media platforms. They can control aspects like the number of images in a post and what the accompanying textual description says but aspects like the absolute size of posts, the color of post frames, and other features of the user interface are determined by the platform, leading to a relatively homogenous viewing experience (SUTCLIFFE 2016). The content from a respected news brand can and does appear next to the content from a stranger and the two posts can »look« relatively similar in terms of the basic elements being used. Verification methods and statuses exist on some platforms but are absent or only denote users who have paid for verification and meet certain criteria on others (BRANDTZAEG/LÜDERS/SPANGENBERG/RATH-WIGGINS/FØLSTAD 2016).

The relative uniformity in the design of social media feeds can lead to issues with transparency when AI-generated images are used and outlets wish to inform their audiences of this fact. Editors we spoke to said news publishers are often left noting these details in the post description and hoping that the user will read that context. Yet, depending on the platform, text descriptions are often truncated and the user must click or tap on an »expand« or »more« button to read the full post, which can present challenges for deciding where to position relevant contextual information about an underlying image's production circumstances. This was the case when American documentary photographer Michael Christopher Brown, known for his visual reportage for outlets like *National Geographic* and the *New York Times*, posted to Instagram in April 2023 a series of Midjourney-created images (TERRANOVA 2023). He described the imagery as a »post-photography AI reporting illustration experiment« and later edited the caption to include »THIS IMAGERY IS NOT REAL« at the beginning but many commenters noted how they didn't read the caption and were initially fooled about the images' provenance.

A potential for watermarking exists to denote synthetic or partially synthetic content; however, no industry standard annotation exists and the potential for this annotation or symbol to be weaponized and used by nefarious actors to try to discredit non-synthetic content also exists. Some platforms add tags, labels, and notices to content with AI-generated elements, if platform employees think

the posts in question have the potential to mislead. However, these additions are not automatic nor uniformly applied.

Considerations for the audience interpretation and impact domain

One of the chief considerations related to audience interpretation and impact is whether audiences will be misled by seeing AI-generated content. The potential for being misled should be discussed in concert with aspects like visual literacy, the viewing conditions of an audience and their typical behaviors, and how suitable traditional fact-checking practices are to AI-generated visual content.

Audiences' visual and media literacies vary widely and are affected by attributes such as age, location, education, socioeconomic status, and ability (NOTLEY/ CHAMBERS/PARK/DEZUANNI 2021). The editors we spoke to were, overall, pessimistic about audiences' abilities to detect images produced by generative AI and thought that this detection was difficult even for visual experts. The difficulty in detecting unethical production or editing practices is not unique to generative visual AI, however, extending to photographs and other types of traditional visual media (THOMSON et al. 2020).

Regarding audience viewing conditions, although exact figures will vary depending on the country under study, audiences in countries like the U.S.A. and Germany tend to consume social media content on mobile devices compared to desktops (BROADBAND SEARCH 2023). This has implications for the size of the viewing window and of the nested content presented within on social media platforms. Newsrooms and fact-checking organizations that publish guides on »how to spot an AI-generated image« encourage audiences to look for irregularities in places like eyes, hands, and other inconsistencies where AI hasn't preserved the internal logic of the image (DEVLIN/CHEETHAM 2023). Yet, considering viewing patterns that suggest a relatively low audience attention span, the small size of the content, and the number of posts being consumed in a sitting (MEDVEDSKAYA 2022), detecting such details while casually scrolling through a social media feed becomes increasingly difficult. Rapid advances in AI technology also mean that these irregularities will become less frequent over time.

The potential for audiences to just see a headline or image and keep scrolling rather than clicking or tapping through also complicates the amount of context they are able to consume in a standard viewing environment (FLETCHER/NIELSEN 2018). Platforms will sometimes add a contextual note about potentially misleading content but this process is not automatic and is troubled by the scale of information online and the speed at which it is produced (THOMSON/ANGUS/DOOTSON/ HURCOME/SMITH 2022). These factors are two of the persistent key threats to the work of those concerned with stemming the tide of mis/disinformation.

Fact-checking organizations sometimes suggest as an image verification strategy considering whether there are multiple angles of a purported scene or whether the fact-checker can request them from the source (WEIKMANN/LECHELER 2023). However, such techniques are frustrated by recent advances in generative visual AI. In late June 2023, Midjourney announced a new and highly discussed feature, »Zoom out,« which allows the user to generate variations of the same object, scene, or person from different focal lengths. This can lead to a perception of authenticity as some previous visual manipulations were one-offs rather than being part of a series of manipulations.

Beyond concerns about algorithmic bias and whether one's audience is represented in resulting AI-created outputs, it is worthwhile to consider the effect of generic representations on how an audience perceives content and its quality. Scholars such as Thurlow, Aiello, and Portmann (2020) have investigated how stock photography is deployed in news contexts and the impact this can have on audiences. These scholars have argued that such generic visuals present a narrow, sometimes pessimistic, and almost always reductionist view of people, places, and issues. It is worthwhile considering the degree to which AI-generated visuals function in ways similar or distinct to stock photographs and whether audiences appreciate the differences between generic and more specific types of imagery.

Conclusion and next steps

Various moral panics have accompanied each wave of successive technologies from photography and moving images in the 1800s to aerial drone imagery and virtual reality in the 1900s (THOMSON 2019). The same is true for generative visual AI and related techniques that have become far more accessible in the 2020s. We do observe considerable risks and challenges related to this technology but also reflect on the creative possibilities and potential this technology offers for ushering in the next generation of imaging practices. To manage the risks and guide the technology's creative potential in responsible and ethical ways, we see a pressing need for news organizations to have clear guidelines governing their use. The editors we spoke to at leading outlets in Australia and the U.S. echoed this desire and are hungry for guidelines and policies that can inform how they can responsibly use generative visual AI technologies.

While some of the editors we spoke to could articulate principles that shaped whether and how they or their staff used generative visual AI, none of their newsrooms had formal policies that governed if or how this technology should be used. By June 2023, we were only aware of a single outlet, the technology oriented brand, *Wired*, with publicly facing guidance on how its staff should and should not use generative AI. *Wired* states its staff won't use AI to write stories (unless the

article is about AI generators and then it will disclose this and flag any errors) nor will it use AI to edit stories. It allows AI when writing headlines, generating short social media posts, for inspiration when generating story ideas, and for research or analysis. On the visual front, *Wired* states it does not »use AI-generated images instead of stock photography« but can use AI to spark ideas or for publishing AI-generated images or video but only when the generation involves »significant creative input by the [commissioned] artist and does not blatantly imitate existing work or infringe copyright« and only then with appropriate disclosure for how generative AI was used. *The Guardian* followed in July by publishing a policy on the use of generative AI (RIBBANS 2023) and the Associated Press, as discussed more below, followed this with its own policy in August (BARRETT 2023).

It bears noting that responsible use of AI is not an obligation of journalists and editors alone. Too often, scholars and critics assume newsroom personnel have more »allocative control« (MURDOCK 1982) over strategy and resource use than they in fact possess, raising the question of whether ethics codes are addressing the wrong audience or are even moot (see, e.g., ADAM/CRAFT/COHEN 2004; BORDEN 2000; CRAFT 2010; MCMANUS 1997). The above-mentioned examples of CNET and Gannett are troubling instances of AI use through management fiat. Therefore, the economic contexts of news production and the tension between journalism's democratic ideals and the economic imperatives driving its owner-vulture class must always be at the forefront of discussions about technological adoption (PICKARD 2019, 2020).

Overall, generative visual AI continues to evolve massively in the span of mere months with industry lagging to catch up and provide guidance. The Associated Press, for example, only issued guidance on using generative AI in August 2023, roughly one year after text-to-image generators like Midjourney entered the open beta phase (BARRETT 2023). Many other outlets are either ignorant of generative visual AI entirely or are searching for guidance in this space. Reflecting on the various issues that exist in the production, presentation, and audience interpretation and impact domains – and situating these discussions in the concrete economics contexts of contemporary news – can help start or advance the conversation in developing guidelines for appropriate and ethical use of generative visual AI within newsrooms.

About the authors

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Essay

Maryna Grytsai

Fixers in a war zone

Foreign media's invisible producers

Abstract: **Fixers are rarely mentioned as members of journalistic teams, yet their contribution to foreign and specifically war reporting is enormous. The current war in Ukraine is no exception. Fixers act as guides for foreign correspondents, helping them to navigate a foreign country, language, and culture. At the same time, they often receive the least protection – as demonstrated recently by the death of the Ukrainian journalist and fixer Bohdan Bitik, who was working together with a correspondent from the Italian newspaper** *La Repubblica* **in Kherson. This case, and others like it, give rise to plenty of questions: Under what conditions do fixers work and what are the rules for their work? What does their role include and (how) are their rights protected? This paper seeks answers and presents some views from journalists and media experts.**

Translation: Sophie Costella

1. Working at their own risk

The start of the Russian attack in February 2022 triggered an enormous rise in the attention paid by foreign media to reporting from Ukraine. Journalists from all over the world not only reported on the events of the war, but also began to discover Ukraine as a nation and cultural region. In large part due to a lack of language skills and insufficient access to the country's institutions and people,

many editorial offices are forced to rely on news fixers when working in Ukraine. News fixers are people, usually locals, who are familiar with the locations and language and who work together with foreign correspondents (cf. PALMER 2019). They are sometimes also known as »stringers.« Many media rely heavily on the work of journalistic fixers in their international reporting, especially in regions in which they do not have their own correspondents' offices.

Fixers often take on tasks that would originally have been done by journalists. They not only help with interpreting, but also plan the reporting, organize meetings and contacts, research facts and background on events, conduct interviews, and analyze documents. Without their fixers, foreign correspondents would often be literally lost. Ukraine is no exception. Demand there has risen sharply since the Russian invasion, with Western media not only drawing on fixers they have used in the past, but also employing many more people over the last few months.

Ukrainian actor Rita Burkovska is one of them. She has worked as a fixer since last year and says that she has already worked with various foreign journalists. »I had the feeling that Ukraine has become very important to them. They want to find out more about the background to the conflict. They want to understand who we are.« She herself was also highly motivated to tell the world about the war in Ukraine: »I want to stay in Ukraine, at the heart of the action, and do something useful here.«

The actor played an aerial reconnaissance specialist who returns from Russian imprisonment in the Donbas in the wartime drama *Butterfly Vision* by Ukrainian director Maksym Nakonechnyi. »The film is about sexual violence, torture, and imprisonment,« she says. »We spent time looking at these topics when researching the film; we met with victims and their families. This has been going on in this war for nine years. When an acquaintance asked me whether I could help journalists as a fixer after the Russian attack, I said yes straight away.« Rita Burkovska then travelled to the liberated town of Bucha with BBC reporter Joel Gunter, accompanying investigators and relatives who were documenting the Russian war crimes and mass graves. »I can't say that I or the others were not afraid. But who else will do it?«

Almost everyone in Ukraine who has at least basic knowledge of a foreign language in order to communicate with foreign correspondents has been asked to be a fixer, says Oksana Romaniuk, Director of the Ukrainian Institute of Mass Information (IMI), which is independent of the government and works to strengthen the media and civil society in Ukraine. As time goes by, however, interest in news on the war has waned, and many fixers have now become aware of the risks of their work. After all, they usually work at their own risk. If they get into a difficult situation, they cannot necessarily rely on support from the media companies – as fixers in other crisis and war zones have found to their cost (cf. PALMER 2019: 142-168). All this has meant that the number of short-term fixers in Ukraine

has fallen once again, the IMI observes. International editorial offices now generally choose support from professional local journalists or producers. But even they sometimes have only the precarious status of a fixer. Oksana Romaniuk: »Their lives and their health are constantly under threat. In the past, fixers have been kidnapped and tortured, and foreign media have just left them behind.«

One of the biggest problems is that the work of fixers is not subject to general, binding rules. Jobs are often very individual. The work of foreign media does not fall under Ukrainian jurisdiction. Collaboration between a fixer and the foreign media is organized based on individual agreements – which do not usually include compensation in the case of injury or death.

Without written contracts and agreements, it is very difficult to support fixers who get into difficulties. Often the only way to help is to attract public attention, reports Oksana Romaniuk. One example is the case of the Ukrainian journalist and fixer Bohdan Bitik, who was killed near Kherson in April 2023 while working for the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*. Initially, his death was not even mentioned – only the fate of the Italian correspondent who was wounded. It was only when the Ukrainian media community applied pressure and created a scandal around the case that the Italian company recognized the fate of the Ukrainian journalist and paid compensation to his family.

Payments in the case of injury or death of a journalist are actually required by law in Ukraine (unlike in many other states, crisis regions and war zones) – as long as the status as a media representative is proven. It is therefore recommended that fixers formalize and legalize their working relationships with the foreign media in question. Accreditation from the military is also important, providing another instrument to protect fixers. Once accredited, a fixer can expect support from the Ukrainian state, says Romaniuk. The documents needed for this process include confirmation from the relevant editorial office or media company that the fixer is part of the journalistic team. But the situation is more complicated when it comes to insurance: »Foreign journalists are insured, but Ukrainian fixers unfortunately have to take care of their own safety. I know very few who have insurance via the foreign media company. Most of them work at their own risk.«

Actor and fixer Rita Burkovska corroborates this. In her experience, insurance and contracts are the exception (the BBC and a documentary filmmaker from a Spanish broadcaster, for example, offered them to her). Often they are not even mentioned. It is a problem that not only affects fixers, she says. Foreign editorial offices often do not take responsibility for freelance journalists either – and the teams' drivers have even less security. Some drivers are not even provided with safety equipment, procuring it either themselves or through the fixers. However, the situation is not hopeless. In May 2022, six public organizations founded the International Insurance Fund for Journalists (https://war-correspondent.info/en). The foundation provides insurance for fixers, journalists, filmmakers, editors

and photographers of independent Ukrainian media and has already insured 100 media professionals working in dangerous areas (as of 31 October 2023).

2. Risks for fixers – and for journalism

The risk of physical injury is the biggest risk facing fixers in their work, but it is not the only one. Abit Hoxha from Adger University in Norway researches how conflict reporting in international media is created and defines four categories of risk: physical, financial, psychological, and digital.

Although fixers generally have comparably high earnings compared with the population in the country in question, it is not a secure, permanent income with which they can plan for their lives and their families. They have little social security and have to accept risks whose consequences, such as trauma, may continue even long after the job is over. »We must not forget that these people often watch their fellow citizens die. That can have a long-lasting impact on them, as they do not receive appropriate psychological preparation (training),« says Abit Hoxha. Rita Burkovska confirms this. The most difficult aspect for her, she says, is when people she knew well die in the war. When she thinks about difficult topics like that, she often does not feel the effects until after the job is done. »I actually cannot imagine how one can live in a world in which the kind of incredible brutality that Russia is inflicting on Ukraine is possible,« says Bukovska. »How can one not lose one's inner light, one's trust in people and in the future?« She finds that meditation helps, and receives support from the large community of fixers who have had similar experiences. Her profession as an actor and the fact that she had engaged with war as a topic before help her to maintain a certain distance, Bukovska believes. »However difficult it might be, it is not happening to me, but to other people, who are suffering much more than I am. But that makes it all the more important to report on what happens to them.« She also attends special training courses, such as on dealing with victims of violence and their relatives, on ethically responsible reporting, and on methods for preventing emotional exhaustion. This kind of professional preparation and follow-up can clearly help fixers to avoid, or at least alleviate, some risks. A lack of experience, however, can be very dangerous – both for the fixers themselves and for others.

When it comes to online safety, says Hoxha, fixers are less aware than experienced journalists – especially fixers who have no journalistic experience at all. Some do not even know how to protect their own privacy. In a war, being able to deal with the dangers of online misinformation and personal discreditation online is crucial. Unlike foreign correspondents, local fixers are integrated into the social life of the local area, have friends and family in the region, are

members of clubs and societies, and may have another profession. All that makes them vulnerable in multiple ways.

Fixers not only put themselves in danger – they can also put other people in a difficult or perilous position. Insufficient training and journalistic experience can be a problem here, too, not least when it comes to applying and adhering to professional and ethical standards in reporting. When a Russian rocket killed a four-year-old child in the Ukrainian town of Winnyzja last year, doctors decided not to tell the child's severely injured mother of the death immediately, so as not to make her condition worse. But a team from an Italian broadcaster went into the hospital with their Ukrainian fixer, told the mother of the death of her child, and filmed her reaction. The incident caused a scandal. »The fixer was not a professional journalist and had no idea about ethical professional standards. Fixers without prior experience might not know about the unique features of working as a journalist in a warzone,« says Oksana Romaniuk.

Under wartime conditions, Ukraine has put legal and executive limits on the work of journalists (for example decree N 73, which governs relations between the media and the Ukrainian army). But fixers and film crews have still sometimes ended up in forbidden zones: »The fixer wanted to impress some foreign journalists, but the violations led to them losing their accreditation,« reports Romaniuk. In her opinion, inexperience can be exploited for purposes that have little to do with good journalism. »There have been cases where fixers begin to work with people who later turned out to be Russian propagandists. When a professional journalist works as a fixer, he analyzes who his client is and can quickly find out whether they are really journalists.«

3.   Collaboration only on a »technical« level?

How can the security problem be resolved? Our interviewees do not have a clear answer. They even have different interpretations of the term »fixer« and what the role entails – the features and limits of the job are not clearly defined. What they do agree on is that attitudes to the role and the working conditions of fixers need to change.

Abit Hoxha does not see the term »fixer« as negative. He believes that those who work as fixers deserve to be seen differently, and to receive more recognition and respect. After all, he says, they have experience and abilities that established journalists lack and urgently need. He recommends a broader definition of the role of fixer. Ultimately, they are not just people who support journalists in war reporting – they might also be specialists who analyze large quantities of data, for example, without which vital journalistic research would not be possible.

That is why, Hoxha continues, it is so important to achieve greater recognition for the role of fixers in journalism – an auxiliary role that is no less important.

Oksana Romaniuk does not agree. In the context of the war in Ukraine, the fixers have no time to lose, the media expert argues. It will take years for attitudes and views on the role to change. In her view, the concept of the fixer needs to be abolished altogether. »The Western media community sees fixers as technical workers who are not part of the media team. There is therefore no need to mention them publicly or to pay them compensation. They are ›just‹ people who call a few numbers, no more. To change this attitude, we need to change the concept, we need to refer to these people not as fixers, but as producers. The producer is a member of the journalist team who has the same rights and deserves the same respect.«

As an expression of this respect, fixer-producers expect their names to be mentioned in the finished material and publications (cf. PALMER 2019: 185-190). A lot here depends on the medium in question or the journalists responsible. »Sometimes, an experienced journalist who has worked in Afghanistan comes along and behaves as if he knows everything because he has been to war. But the war here is totally different,« says Rita Burkovska. Sometimes, she continues, the refusal to name fixers is explained with the argument that it is too dangerous – although this is not necessarily true. But Burkovska has also had positive experiences. There are many journalists for whom treating their Ukrainian colleagues properly is important, she says. Her favorite form of work is when she has the opportunity both to learn from experienced foreign journalists and to contribute her own ideas, research unusual characters, develop a topic, or take on editorial tasks, such as interviewing soldiers in a psychiatric clinic (for an article in the *New York Times* about post-traumatic stress disorders). Luckily, there are journalists who appreciate this exchange of ideas and are looking for professional collaboration.

Efforts to be recognized as »producers« are commonplace among Ukrainians working in the media. Many fixers today take on roles that go beyond their conventional duties. Oksana Romaniuk lists some of them: »They organize travel, they are responsible for context. They apply for permits, they help with communication, they look for protagonists. They are responsible for a large part of the journalistic work.« For this very reason, she believes, foreign colleagues who come to Ukraine are increasingly looking not for inexperienced fixers, but for seasoned journalists and producers.

ZDF correspondent Dara Hassanzadeh is one of those who works with a professional Ukrainian team. He rejects the term »fixer.« »Who is a fixer? Anyone who works in journalism is a journalist, even if they have not studied at a university or written for the *New York Times*,« says the correspondent. For him, the most important thing is that the cameraman, the cutter and the journalist that accompany the team and take on the role of fixer are able to understand the language

and the social conventions. This not only makes it possible to achieve better images and an atmospheric cut, he says, but also helps to foster trust in difficult situations, which are not uncommon in times of war.

When journalist-fixers not only organize the work of foreign journalists, but also take on work that is essentially editorial in nature, they become co-authors. Sometimes they even get the recognition they deserve. The *New York Times*, for example, which won a Pulitzer Prize for its reporting on the war in Ukraine, listed all the journalists and fixers involved as members of the team. One of the fixers, Ukrainian journalist Stas Kozlyuk, drew attention to this with these words: »In this story, Ukrainian journalists are often true colleagues of foreign journalists. And it is cool that some of our foreign colleagues see us that way.« The editorial office listed everyone who had contributed to an article, he continues, even when the list ran to around 20 people, like in the article »Putin's War.«

At the other end of the spectrum, says Oksana Romaniuk, is the work of ›parachute journalists,‹ who just fly into the warzone knowing little about the context of the country, or are simply looking for sensations and pay little attention to the professionalism of their fixers. But there are now far fewer foreign journalists in Ukraine than there were at the start of the invasion. The war has become a sad part of everyday life, and fatigue has set in in large parts of the international media. As a result, fixers see their work as more important than ever, despite the risks. Rita Burkovska: »We make a huge contribution to reporting in the foreign media. Thanks to our help, the war has not disappeared from the public agenda.« In future, Rita Burkovska would like to return to professional acting. But while the war continues, she wants to carry on her work as a journalistic producer. Meanwhile, Rita Burkovska has been named Best European Actress at the Septimius Awards for her role in the film »Butterfly Vision«.

About the author

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Debate

Nora Hespers

All twittered out

What @ichbinsophiescholl tells us about platform criticism in journalism

Abstract: **Journalists and media houses use a wide range of social media platforms to reach their audience. Yet this use is rarely subject to critical examination. The downfall of Twitter, now X, is the ideal opportunity to take a critical look at the structures and economic conditions behind these networks. But still there is no great debate – just as there wasn't in the case of the Instagram project @ichbinsophiescholl. Does journalism lack expertise in social media?**

Translation: Sophie Costella

Martina Thiele and Tanja Thomas' analysis of the Instagram project @ichbinsophiescholl, run by SWR and BR, found a great deal of PR journalism and very little critical reflection (cf. THIELE/THOMAS 2023). That revealed a deficit that is seen throughout digital journalism. Media criticism in Germany is already very limited, and interest in platform criticism is even lower. What are we journalists actually using to reach our audience? How do social networks change and develop depending on who has the power at the company in question?

Every one of us is currently witnessing first-hand the development of a social network into a dystopian juggernaut. Social networks have never been a ›safe space‹ – it does not take much to trigger a furor on a national or even international scale within just a few hours. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine in particular have seen yet another increase in hate and harassment on social media (cf. HOVEN 2022) – not just in the German-speaking world, but internationally. In a paper published in January 2023, the UN refers to

hate speech as a growing international threat (cf. UN 2023). Yet threats on and via social media are rarely taken seriously – or seriously enough. This was demonstrated with tragic consequences by the case of doctor Lisa-Maria Kellermayr (cf. VICHTL 2023), who took her own life after being on the receiving end of massive hostility and threats. Although multiple suspects were investigated, there was no trial and no conviction. Apparently it was impossible to prove the crimes beyond reasonable doubt (cf. TILLACK 2023).

That is the dark side of social media. At the same time, Twitter – now renamed X – in particular has created enormous connection between people in recent years. People from the worlds of science, media, and politics create a public sphere, making themselves visible, approachable, but also vulnerable to attack. Communicating in a multi-faceted public sphere takes specific skills. After all, it faces an individual with a potential audience of millions, all of whom can join in the discussion. Having an enormous reach, but without the financial and time resources with which to provide communication services, is undoubtedly a dilemma.

Of course, this is not news. But it clearly demonstrates once again how important it is to moderate exchanges on social media well. Otherwise, discussions get out of hand and a furor becomes almost impossible to manage. Useful, evidence-driven debates become impossible. That brings us to what has happened with a certain platform after Elon Musk took it over on October 28, 2022 (cf. *Spiegel* 2022). Anyone who took even a passing interest in Elon Musk's actions at Tesla in the months and years leading up to his takeover of Twitter will rightly be concerned. Yet reporting on the Twitter case remained largely at the level of phenomenon reporting – chronologies of a catastrophe without deeper analysis of the causes, almost as though it were a soccer game. Dennis Horn and Gavin Karlmeier were the only journalists to give the takeover the attention it deserved from the very start in their daily podcast *Haken dran*. You could call it platform analysis as a kind of volunteering. All other media focused on reporting on isolated aspects, making it difficult to understand the overall development as a whole. As a result, it is impossible to have or gain an awareness of the effects of the technical – especially in terms of the algorithm – and economic changes to the platform. The most common argument used? ›Not many people are on Twitter anyway.‹ So it is strange that so few journalistic media today publish articles that do not include tweets. Things that are published on Twitter – and on which journalists gather information – do appear to be relevant after all. Yet, apart from *Haken dran*, there is a complete lack of systematic and transparent consideration and reflection by media and media representatives themselves in connection with the use of this and other platforms; of a large-scale discussion of when which platforms can be used in a useful way – besides their promise of reaching a large audience in the relevant target groups; and of with whom one is actually getting into bed by continuing to play the platform's game.

Perhaps we should provide a few examples. Elon Musk regularly tweets anti-Semitic content that reflects conspiracy theories. By the time the *New York Times* accused the entrepreneur of crossing a red line on September 11, 2023, this line had already been far crossed (cf. WALSH 2023), again and again, long before. Under Elon Musk, users who had previously been barred from the platform for hate speech, racism, far-right statements, or anti-Semitism were reinstated. Many of the content moderators responsible for removing discriminatory and violent content were fired under Musk, and similar contracts with contractors ended. The platform thus has no interest in protecting vulnerable groups and minorities.[1] Nor is the platform now secure at a technical level (cf. DAN 2023). For example, users who had limited the visibility of their profiles to hand-picked followers suddenly found that their tweets were publicly visible. In *Forbes magazine*, a security expert warned users to delete private messages in order to prevent data leaks after numerous software developers were fired (cf. COLLINS 2022). While many people have left the platform and looked for alternatives, most media have continued as though nothing about the platform's relevance and content had changed – even when it became possible to purchase the blue tick (to show that the profile had been verified as authentically belonging to a famous personality from sports, politics or the media), negating its original significance. After all, there is not really an alternative to Twitter/X. And the other dilemma: There is not even a public discussion. Discussion is reserved for a small, critical section of society, as though the media were not responsible for how social networks are used.

What does all this have to do with criticism of the @ichbinsophiescholl project? Both cases are about journalistic skill and expertise – and about the difference between project PR and descriptions of phenomena on the one hand, and critical journalistic classification and contextualization on the other. Comprehensive insight into a social network like Instagram and projects like @ichbinsophiescholl takes expertise that does not appear to be widespread and, where it does exist, appears unappreciated. After all, although the detailed, objective, and well-informed criticism of the @ichbinsophiescholl project across various levels of communication and interaction ultimately received a great deal of praise, the work was largely a hobby project – just as *Haken dran* was journalistic voluntary work until the completion of this essay.[2] Competent, critical, complex appraisal of platforms and the content published on them demands social media experts: people who are able to understand, analyze, and dissect a public service project like »Sophie Scholl on Instagram« or a micro-blogging service like Twitter/X

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1   This article was written before the Hamas massacre of Jews on October 7 and 8, 2023. A contextualization of the role of social networks in the dissemination of videos of terror can be found here: HÜBSCHER, MONIKA: Krieg der Bilder. In: *taz.de* dated 19. October 2023. https://taz.de/Nahost-Konflikt/!5963808/ (date of last retrieval 1 November 2023)
2   The podcast temporarily ceased broadcasting on September 29, 2023, with the departure of host Dennis Horn.

in all their complexity because they have been aware of certain regularities and developments over an extended period. It is important to critique content and report on developments as they occur, but this kind of journalism is often insufficient if it does not also look at structures. And if established media with a large reach do not provide space for this criticism of social media phenomena and the platforms of large tech corporations, then criticism and discussion remain the realm of a small, selected audience. This is not the way to encourage large debates across society.

The invisible work in the background

That brings us to the work involved in this form of media and platform criticism. After all, in order to gain expertise, people need to actively use the relevant platforms. This work is very rarely paid. It is ongoing, voluntary, unpaid training that can only be turned into capital if it gives rise to products with a large reach, i.e., posts that are shared or quoted by a lot of people – when the regularities of the platforms are used in the way demanded by the platforms' current, constantly changing rules. Among journalists in particular, there is a significant gradient between media representatives who create content for publishing houses' or broadcasters' own platforms and those who use social media to distribute their own content and to discuss it in the communities they themselves have created. This gap is seen not only between older and younger media representatives, but also between those in fixed employment and freelancers. After all, freelance journalists in particular have to rely on communication and community work. Their reach is then used by media providers, usually without appropriate payment, even though their explicit goal is for this work to pay into their medium's own reach. No additional resources, like time and therefore money, are provided for this community-building and the reach it produces.

In order to look at the content of @ichbinsophiescholl, various female authors – Charlotte Jahnz, Heike Gumz, and Katharina Helling, who initiated the Instagram channel »Nicht Sophie Scholl,«[3] historians Bianca Walther with »frauenvondamals« and Laura Baumgart with »frauabgeordnete,« and journalist Jasmin Lörchner with the podcast *HerStory*[4] – continuously received the content on the Instagram channel @ichbinsophiescholl, posted several times a day by swr and br, and commented on it to provide context and critique. This

3   The project was nominated for the Grimme Online Award in 2022.
4   In reaction to the account, the latter three began a Twitter thread under the hashtag #frauenimwiderstand [women in the resistance], in which they published 60 brief biographies and sources on cis women and LGBTQI+ in the resistance against National Socialism over around 60 days between June 2021 and July 2021. In order to retain the biographies for the long term, the Instagram account @frauenimwiderstand was also set up.

meant investing resources into researching sources, into formulating criticism objectively, and into exchange with the community, the editorial office and SWR's community management. All these contextualizing comments and the author of this text's expertise from many years as a social media and community manager form the basis for the three articles that were ultimately published under a single name on *uebermedien.de*. Acknowledging joint work like this appropriately is of course a challenge. And it is not the fault of *Übermedien*. The articles themselves were paid for very appropriately. But, given the wide range of resources and work that went into them, it feels wrong for only one person to receive payment – which is why all payments were donated to charity.

This demonstrates another structural problem in journalism: *Übermedien* was not the only medium to offer media-critical consideration and analysis – but it was the only journalistic medium to understand the significance of the criticism of @ichbinsophiescholl and to provide space for it. Of course the comprehensive criticism of the @ichbinsophiescholl Instagram project and its complexity cannot be summarized in two-and-a-half minutes. Longer formats would have been needed. But high-quality media with large reaches did not see the importance, and certainly not the hard work, that went into the well-founded criticism – because the media took only a very superficial look at the project.

What is the relevance of ›women's issues?‹

This brings us to another question: Why was so little relevance ascribed to the project? In their paper »Really?! Sophie Scholl on Instagram,« the authors find that most of the people who had written about the project were read by women, and most were relatively young. It is possible, the authors say, that many were interns or freelancers (THIELE/THOMAS 2023: 22). Is this evidence of a gender bias? A history project for young women – how important can that be? How challenging? Especially if it is ›only‹ on social media. Journalists still have reservations about the relevance and quality of social media content. The prejudice that its content tends to be shallow, under-complex, and of low quality and importance results in it being perceived and discussed less. It is a vicious cycle.

And if anyone is about to object that some big names did write about @ichbinsophiescholl and express their criticism: This is true, but their content focused on other areas. It was rare, say Thiele and Thomas (2023: 23), for it to be examined at the level of communication and interaction, let alone placed in the context of media politics and media economics.

I also want to mention the following: Among all the critics on Instagram itself, it was predominantly the women who provided context and additional information, sometimes on a daily basis. It was they who formed the basis for criticism,

but whose work remains largely invisible to this day. Ultimately, this is another example of unpaid care work.

It was only once Jan Böhmermann looked at the @ichbinsophiescholl project on his program zdf *Magazin Royale*[5] that it became the subject of criticism. Yet the articles on the program and the discussions in social media rarely mentioned the work of the journalists and historians named. Hardly any of the female critics was invited to an interview; instead, renowned male historians were asked to provide context.

Journalism thus has some questions to answer: Which structures are necessary – not least in view of the increasing use of ai to create social media content – in order to react more appropriately to developments like in the case of Twitter or projects like @ichbinsophiescholl in future? Why was, as Thiele and Thomas found, the reporting on »Sophie Scholl on Instagram« more pr than journalism? Was it really mostly young women with no fixed contract who wrote about the project and, if so, why? Why do so many editorial offices ascribe so little relevance to these topics, even though they achieve an impressive reach? Where is the kind of large-scale, broad-based platform discussion that we need to hold, not least since the Twitter disaster? Why are there these gaps between journalism on publishing houses' and broadcasters' own pages and that which they publish on social media platforms and channels? Where is the discussion of dependencies on entrepreneurs, commercially-operated reach algorithms, their influence on content creation on social media, and, last but not least, users' data security? After all, the data linked to the content and topics on commercial platforms is largely used to generate profit via personalized advertising. Or via political propaganda, fake news, and hate speech. What role do media and media representatives want to play on these commercial platforms? Where are the famous red lines, at which we say: We can no longer accept this if we take democracy and human rights seriously? After all, only these values can guarantee us free, independent, and diverse journalism – on any platform. Finally, we need further research on gender bias and the lack of diversity in journalism, and on the way money, time, and attention are distributed.

About the author

Nora Hespers (1978) has worked predominantly for public service broadcasters in various roles since 2003. For eleven years, she worked with the tv format *Zeiglers wunderbare Welt des Fußballs* as a content producer and community manager

5   The program also benefited significantly from the work conducted by the aforementioned media critics in advance, as the sources named in the closing credits showed.

on social media. Since 2014, she has blogged and presented podcasts under the name *Die Anachronistin*, among others. The project was nominated for the Grimme Online Award in 2018, just like her philosophy podcast *Was denkst du denn?,* which she has produced since 2017 together with philosopher Rita Molzberger. Hespers has presented the WDR sport background podcast *Sport inside* since 2020. Contact: norahespers@web.de

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Book Journalism

Fritz Hausjell and Wolfgang R. Langenbucher

The top ten of book journalism

Recommendations for books by journalists

The idea of selecting and presenting the best books written by journalists is a project of the Institute for Journalism and Communication Studies at the University of Vienna, co-founded by Hannes Haas (1957-2014) and compiled by Wolfgang R. Langenbucher and Fritz Hausjell. The project published its first recommendation list in 2002 in the quarterly journal *Message*, founded by Michael Haller. After the journal's discontinuation, the selections were documented in the magazine *Der österreichische Journalist* [The Austrian Journalist] starting in 2015. In 2020 and 2021 the publication of the recommendation list had to be temporarily suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It found its new home, *Journalism Research*, in 2022.

Translation: Sophie Costella

1. Reinhard Bingener, Markus Wehner (2023): *Die Moskau-Connection. Das Schröder-Netzwerk und Deutschlands Weg in die Abhängigkeit.* [**The Moscow connection. The Schröder network and Germany's road to dependence.**] **Munich: Verlag C.H.Beck, 300 pages, EUR 18.**

The two authors of this explosive book, both writers for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (*FAZ*), waste no time in revealing an astonishing finding. The foreword states: »There has been no shortage of well-researched reporting on Germany's policies on Russia and energy over the last 20 years. Almost every problem has been cited clearly and early. The claim that Putin deceived ›everyone‹ is not true« (p. 9). Co-author Wehner is himself a reliable witness in this regard, having been his newspaper's Moscow correspondent for many years and written an insightful

book upon his return (Markus Wehner: *Putins Kalter Krieg. Wie Russland den Westen vor sich hertreibt*, [Putin's cold war: How Russia controls the West], Munich 2016). The book was published as part of Knaur's »Klartext« [straight talking] series. When viewed from a 2022/23 standpoint, it is a bitter irony that economic and political leaders' notorious skepticism towards »news hacks« clearly prevented them from taking this kind of journalistic evidence seriously.

This book is all about why, despite the unmistakable crimes committed by the Kremlin, it took more than two decades before this ignorance was overcome. It reveals a corrupt, conspiratorial network that remained almost totally unrecognized by the world of daily news. Deep-dive journalism like this is only possible through years of extremely patient, long-term research, supported by the professional team of a respected medium like the FAZ. Most of the sources are oral – and certainly not official. Over the decades, the institutions have built up communication departments the size of political editorial offices with the purpose of idealization, rather than information. It usually takes hundreds of interviews to get to the bottom of a story.

One finding is especially frightening: The fact that Putin came from the KGB and that the KGB's »secret service methods, lies, deception, manipulation,« as well as »rewards, flattery, blackmail, intimidation, punishment and violence, even murder« were now being used as political instruments (p. 40) was completely ignored. Yet despite all the journalistic efforts, the two authors still do not understand one thing: How can a former German Chancellor continue to act as Schröder does to this day? Is it defiance, greed, stubbornness? They are certainly the ongoing, disastrous and expensive actions of a network, here made mercilessly transparent.

2. Michael Thumann (2023): *Revanche. Wie Putin das bedrohlichste Regime der Welt geschaffen hat.* [**Revenge. How Putin created the world's most threatening regime.**] **Munich: Verlag C.H.Beck, 288 pages, EUR 25.**

Moscow has traditionally – regardless of changing political circumstances – been well populated with correspondents from German media. Many of these journalists have risen to prominence through their work, which is difficult yet attracts a great deal of interest. Many have worked in the country for years, returning there repeatedly after periods away. Their books about their time in Moscow or upon their final return to the newspaper that sent them would fill entire bookcases, beginning with works like *The Anatomy of Soviet Man* (1958) by the well-known journalist Klaus Mehnert (1906-1984). One reliable contributor to this imaginary journalistic library is Michael Thumann, who has reported from Moscow and Russia time and again as foreign correspondent for *Die Zeit* since 1990.

His latest book rose rapidly up the bestseller lists, especially as Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine led to a sharp rise in interest in the aggressive regime. Thumann makes drastically clear how urgently we in the West need this knowledge after decades of self-delusion: »The hybrid war is primarily directed against us. Putin wants to bury liberal democracy. He is attacking Europe's way of life, its security, and its livelihood« (p. 10). The author provides a detailed portrayal of something ignorantly and naively suppressed outside Russia: Through his manipulative treatment of the essentially democratic constitution of the post-Soviet state, Putin has over the decades become a »classic example of an authoritarian ruler« (p. 37). Even economic development fell victim to the ruthless expansion of his power. The conditions for this have far-reaching consequences: »The life of the individual is now worth nothing« (p. 139). This system has now been in place for more than two decades, resulting in a »frightening pathological state of mind« (p. 171). The evidence is shocking, especially given the way that television programs have now morphed into absurd propaganda. Common everyday threats include predictions of the »nuclear pulverization of London, Washington, or Berlin« (p. 267). As Thumann soberly notes, we simply do not know what the 70-year-old ruler, sitting in his nuclear bunker, will decide to do next. This book certainly uses all the tools of the journalistic trade to remove our blinkers, supported by countless sources and the realistic viewpoint of an astute observer. Thanks to this book, readers will be immune to the »arts« of a secret service agent and his many abettors.

3. Anna Sauerbrey (2022): *Machtwechsel. Wie eine neue Politikergeneration das Land verändert.* [**Transition of Power. How a new generation of politicians is changing the country.**] Berlin: Rowohlt Berlin Verlag, 320 pages, EUR 22.

By using the term »generation,« the journalist – a member of weekly newspaper *Die Zeit's* political department – picks up on a theory developed by a big name in sociology: Karl Mannheim (1893-1947), who was born in Austria and emigrated to England in 1933. This alone, and her placement of the thirteen sections (plus an introduction and conclusion) of what is, as she explicitly states, her first book on such a challenging intellectual foundation, gives it its journalistic class. Furthermore, she herself is part of the generation that is the subject of her portrait and analysis. These portraits are as enjoyable as they are informative to read. Admittedly, this kind of journalistic product is also found in daily media production. What makes her analytical, reportage-saturated, original access to her subjects stand out is signaled in the ten pages of notes, which demonstrate both Anna Sauerbrey's thorough research and extensive reading, and her innovative, intellectually acute analysis. A meticulous and precise observer, she outlines the

psychology of day-to-day politics – psychology that is impossible to see when looking at a series of current news stories, but that here provides a look behind the political scenes. One of the most momentous insights: The generation of politicians that is laid on the journalistic couch here relies on a sense of time that is not »experienced history, but taught history« (p. 47). The difference this makes is fundamental. The transformation is intensified by (un)social media, which conducted highly problematic »hyperpersonalization« (p. 213) during the federal election campaign in 2021. Without a doubt, anyone who wants to understand what connects the »key figures of the governing coalition« (p. 238) as a generation and how they fundamentally differ from the previous generation should turn to this brilliant journalist. She herself speaks of the making of the book as an »adventure« (p. 320). With a debut like this, it surely will not be the last.

Places 4 to 10

4. Lutz Herden, Wolfgang Herles, Luc Jochimsen, Michael Schmidt (2023): *Der aufhaltsame Abstieg des öffentlich-rechtlichen Fernsehens. Berichte von Beteiligten.* **Mit einem Vorwort von Daniela Dahn. [The resistible fall of public service television. Reports from those involved. Foreword by Daniela Dahn.] Berlin: edition ost im Verlag Neues Berlin, 281 pages, EUR 20.**

Coming from different public service broadcasters, the three authors and Luc Jochimsen are united in their anger and disappointment at the state of those broadcasters and their current programming, for which the authors were once responsible. Over the last few months, this has been compounded by a series of scandals that put ARD and its regional broadcasters in the headlines, and continues to do so. The four polemics contain an impressive wealth of arguments – both on the broadcasting policies of the federal states and on programming planning, which is the responsibility of the regional broadcasters and their shared institutions. The four authors are particularly enraged over the issue of programming, yet still maintain an almost desperate hope that this institution – with its rich tradition and tough demands on communication policy – could still be capable of reform.

5. Richard C. Schneider (2023): *Die Sache mit Israel. Fünf Fragen zu einem komplizierten Land.* [**The thing about Israel. Five questions on a complicated country.**] **Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 192 pages, EUR 22**

Schneider, a former Israel Correspondent for ARD, introduces himself on his website as a journalist, author, and filmmaker. His bibliography shows that, alongside reporting on current events, he has been a reliable producer of book journalism since the 1990s. As an observer, Schneider is as acute as he is critical. »Israel« is notoriously one of the most controversial topics in Germany and Austria, loaded with cliches and stereotypes with various origins and levels of explosiveness. Five of these are tackled here, with a wealth of material and a sophisticated approach. Anyone who wants to know about the relationship between Palestine and Israel should inform themselves here before joining the next discussion. The same applies more generally: The historical background to the current unrest in Israel regarding judicial reforms makes it clear that the country's democratic future is at stake.

6. Simone Schlindwein (2023): *Der grüne Krieg. Wie in Afrika die Natur auf Kosten der Menschen geschützt wird – und was der Westen damit zu tun hat.* [**The green war: How nature in Africa is being protected at the people's expense – and what the West has to do with it.**] **Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 256 pages, EUR 20.**

Born in 1980, journalist Simone Schlindwein has lived in Uganda since 2008 and is part of the editorial office of *die tageszeitung* (*taz*). Followers of her work admire and value her as one of the few people – others include Bartholomäus Grill with *Ach, Afrika* (2003) – to report as a correspondent from an enormous continent that has seen notoriously little exposure from journalists. Simone Schlindwein focuses on a specific topic that receives little coverage in current reporting: the creation of more and more national parks in various African countries and the problems this presents. »This book is the result of years of sometimes highly perilous research into national parks in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and of numerous discussions and interviews with those active in nature and species protection worldwide« (p. 11). A well-researched alarm call detailing how honest intentions can give rise to circumstances dominated by violence and militarization – now that should really be a topic for the news.

7. Christian Buckard (2023): *Egon Erwin Kisch. Die Weltgeschichte des rasenden Reporters. Die Biografie.* [**The global history of the racing reporter. The biography.**] Berlin/Munich: Berlin Verlag, 445 pages, EUR 28.

Does a biography of this scope (still) count as journalism? With more than 40 pages of tightly printed notes in the style of an academic monograph? Using an impressive wealth of primary and secondary literature? It is worth remembering that the life and work of Egon Erwin Kisch was covered back in the 1990s by Germanist and historian Marcus G. Patka (1997) in a voluminous lexicon-style book. Reading and comparing the two reveals that the more recent study certainly counts as journalism in the sense that, despite being based on research more akin to an academic text, it is written in an easily accessible style that is exciting to read. Kisch became a cult figure as the »racing reporter« thanks to his ingenious self-marketing; an enemy as a »communist« (there is particularly intensive research on this difficult topic); and a style-defining figure as a journalist. Christian Buckard is a brilliant narrator, transforming Kisch from a legend into an epochal figure of German-language journalism.

8. Patrick Bahners (2023): *Die Wiederkehr. Die AfD und der neue deutsche Nationalismus.* [**The return. The AfD and the new German nationalism.**] Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 540 pages, EUR 28.

The same question as for the book on Egon Erwin Kisch must also be asked here: Is this (still) journalism? Authors in social sciences could fill entire bookcases on this topic. Patrick Bahners is a trained historian and, as he says in his acknowledgements, still well-connected in that world today. Stretching to more than 500 pages, the book goes far beyond the scale typical even for book journalism. A detailed bibliography indicates his systematic way of working, while an eight-page register of names provides more access to the content. Yet Patrick Bahners, born in 1967, has been part of the editorial office of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), where he is responsible for the liberal arts, since 1989. His book is the big hit of a sensitive observer, thorough reporter, and acute analyst. He warns against seeing the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) [Alternative for Germany, a right-wing populist political party, positioned on the radical right] as a phenomenon with a limited shelf life. Taking a sophisticated historical view, he instead sees in its rise elements that return again and again in German history and society, and that demand a democracy »willing to defend itself.« Many university-based historians are also able to write in this readable way, but Bahners' craftsman-like writing is of a different quality: journalistic quality.

9. Gunter Hofmann (2023): *Willy Brandt. Sozialist – Kanzler – Patriot. Eine Biographie.* **[Willy Brandt. Socialist – Chancellor – Patriot. A biography.] Munich: C.H. Beck, 518 pages, EUR 35.**

The author – a true elder statesman of the profession, born in 1942 – has already written numerous books, many of which have been honored here. His work has always given rise to the question: Is that (still) journalism? His latest is a biography of Willy Brandt. Hofmann was Chief Correspondent at weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* until 2008 and, with this book, has remained true to his journalistic roots even as an author. As German democracy has grown older, (political) journalism has built up a tradition over multiple generations, and media have become established, it has become traditional for journalism and contemporary history writing to become identical. The benefit of this for readers is that journalism can work with the experiences of contemporary witnesses, rather than being limited to archives. Brandt's first journalist biographer, Peter Merseburger (2002), demonstrated this. In addition, journalists do not require particular courage to replace historic objectivity with a clear judgment. This fascinating biography shows how stimulating this is – as well as highlighting the politics of Willy Brandt (1913-1992), which is once again the subject of contentious discussion.

10. Kai Diekman (2023): *Ich war BILD. Ein Leben zwischen Schlagzeilen, Staatsaffären und Skandalen.* **[I was BILD. A life of headlines, scandals and affairs of state.] Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 544 pages, EUR 34.**

Yet again, a highly unusual book leads us to ask ourselves: Is this (still) journalism? Almost 550 pages in the format of a large dictionary, notes in justified small print, a documentary appendix, and extensive references; its style a jumbled mix of autobiography, reportage, quotes, and descriptions. But the author was BILD. Even those who have never read that newspaper, or do not know who its Chief Editor is, must admit that this star of tabloid journalism not only created plenty of outrage, but also proves with this book that he is a documentarian with an outstanding memory, a dramaturg capable of clever arrangements, a brilliant writer, and a sophisticated apologist for himself. Readers who are unaware of the tabloid BILD will be especially astonished to find what an enormous political role it has often played. Indeed, this book is not a »trivial collection of anecdotes,« but a collection of »stories that tell stories. Contemporary history« (p. 510). And it shows the »mechanism of power« in a frightening way (p. 512). With astounding openness, Diekmann uncovers the backstage world of media and politics.

Extra: a translation

Evan Osnos (2022): *Mein wütendes Land. Eine Reise durch die gespaltenen Staaten von Amerika.* [Wildland. The making of America's fury.] **Translated from English by Stephan Gebauer. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag 2022, 638 pages,** EUR 32.

Born in 1976 and today a member of the editorial staff of *The New Yorker* magazine, Evan Osnos reported from the Middle East and the People's Republic of China for many years beginning in 2002. Now he has written a book on today's America. Its method is a result of Osnos' many years living in other countries: »Coming home always holds the promise of a new way of seeing« (p. 12). The author refers explicitly to the work of John Gunther (1901-1970), a legend of American journalism, who reported from Europe in the 1940s and later other continents, publishing a series of books entitled »Inside....« During periods he spent in the United States between postings, Gunther found he felt like a Martian – a viewpoint he used in 1947 to publish the book *Inside U.S.A.*, which became a sensational bestseller.

Thanks to Gunther's method, Osnos developed a fine nose for the tiny details that make his picture of America so lush and colorful. Most of the material for this comes from interviews: a key method that has given rise to many products of high-level journalism. »This account is based on thousands of hours of conversation over seven years, from 2014 to 2021,« (p. 24). When analyzing and working on the method, a concerning question arises in Evan Osnos as he remembers how often he has stood up for his country: »When I returned to the United States, I began to wonder if I had been lying all those years to people around the world – and to myself« (p. 26). *Mein wütendes Land*, notes Osnos in his extensive acknowledgements, is a book about public life, seen through the prism of personal experiences (p. 577). The book does not leave the reader feeling optimistic, but may help them to gain a realistic picture, not least given the election year coming up. Not to forget that the commented list of »sources« stretches to 35 pages – evidence of the true qualities of this culture of journalism!

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Reviews

Frank Bräutigam (2023): *Recht richtig formulieren. Ein Handbuch mit Beispielen aus der journalistischen Praxis.* [How to Correctly Phrase Legal Matters. A Manual with Examples from Journalistic Practice] Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 178 pages, EUR 37.99.

Tobias Gostomzyk; Uwe Jürgens (eds.) (2023): *Böhmermann, Künast, Rezo. Medien- und Internetrecht in 20 Fällen.* [Twenty Cases from Media and Internet Law] Frankfurt/M.: Fachmedien Recht und Wirtschaft, 552 pages, EUR 39.

Reviewed by Tanjev Schultz

A journalist cannot be an expert on everything. But certain deficits quickly become embarrassingly obvious. If a publication gets its math wrong because it attracts staff who are averse or straight up hostile towards numbers, things can get awkward. And a newsroom that doesn't have a single staff member with basic legal knowledge – that is plain negligence. Almost every relevant topic has a legal side to it, and many public debates concern issues that are fundamentally legal matters.

Journalists should not be daunted by legalese. Contrary to widespread preconceived notions, many rulings, especially those issued by the German Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe, are quite a smooth and compelling read. In addition, there are textbooks that are accessible for people outside the legal profession, too. Here are two books that fall into this category: A new handbook by ARD journalist Frank Bräutigam on how to correctly write about legal topics, and the volume *Böhmermann, Künast, Rezo*, published by Dortmund-based media law professor Tobias Gostomzyk and Uwe Jürgens, legal adviser to *Der Spiegel*.

Bräutigam's book explains key legal terms, facts, processes, and institutions which routinely, but not always correctly, appear in media coverage. It describes typical situations the sports world would call »set pieces« (p. VI). In fact, at some point of their career, every journalist will be confronted with articles about a legal investigation, and even when editing agency texts at the newsdesk. In that case, it would be helpful to understand the inner workings of such an

investigation, or the exact definition of an arrest or a search warrant and how they are issued. This book explains these matters clearly, concisely, and precisely.

Investigations often entail lawsuits. Frank Bräutigam describes the stages of a court case and the appeal process. What is an appeal? What is a revision? What are the specifics of juvenile criminal law? Rather than intimidating his target group with an extensive bibliography, the author, who is a Doctor of Law, provides examples from journalistic practice and essentials for everyday reporting. What is the difference between murder and manslaughter? If you ask people on the street (the author was tactful enough not to write »if you ask journalists«), the answer usually goes: Murder is premeditated (or planned). Manslaughter occurs in the heat of the moment. »Please remember: This is wrong! The correct distinction is: The basis for murder and manslaughter is the same: A person was killed intentionally. Intention can mean premeditation. However, it is sufficient for the perpetrator to consider the other person's death a possibility, and to ›condoningly accept‹ that possibility.« (p. 65).

Murder requires so-called characteristics of murder, such as greed or malice. Another possible characteristic is the ›intention to conceal‹. Whenever Bräutigam introduces a cumbersome legal term, he offers an example: The point here is to kill someone in order to cover up another crime, »For example: In the case of the police murder in Kusel in Rhineland-Palatinate, a policewoman and a policeman had allegedly caught the main defendant and his accomplice while poaching at night. According to the court, he shot the two officers so his criminal poaching would not be exposed« (p. 65).

In other chapters, Bräutigam draws a basic outline of the German security architecture (the role of the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office in cases of terrorism and espionage), explains the importance of civil law, the administrative courts, and the supreme federal courts, including Federal Constitutional Court and the European courts, as well as basic features of international (criminal) law, which is important not least because of the current situation in Ukraine. None of these explanations is meant to be in-depth; nor is the purpose of the book to advance a scientific discourse. Its point is to help improve the quality of media coverage. Seemingly simple errors such as misused terms (for instance, saying »search warrant« instead of »search ruling,« or using inappropriate symbolic photos, such as a gavel hitting a judge's desk, which is not a common practice in Germany, expose journalists as legally incompetent. This is why the book, which was published in Springer vs' yellow practical series, comes straight to the point by listing 15 useful rules. They are about common linguistic pitfalls, for instance, the fact that in German criminal law, a person is not »sued,« but »charged«; the correct German phrase for a life sentence is »lifelong,« not »for life,« and that is is unhelpful to mention the maximum sentence for a crime early in a case because it is rarely imposed. At the end, Bräutigam offers some practical tips,

including court accreditation procedures and how to research legal cases. I recommend this book to any journalist. It can also be used as a reference and lends itself well for teaching at universities and schools of journalistic practice.

Böhmermann, Künast, Rezo, on the other hand, probably caters mainly to lawyers, yet it is also relevant to journalism; particularly for researchers working on topics such as freedom of the press or broadcasting systems. The editors selected 20 high-profile cases pertaining to media and Internet law: treason charges against two journalists from *netzpolitik.org*, viral footage of a man in a patriotic hat raging against a camera crew at a protest in Dresden; or the »Brender case« at the ZDF and the question what, if any, amount of political and state influence on public broadcasting is appropriate. Then, the book delves into the three cases that gave it its title: the insult poem by Jan Böhmermann railing against the Turkish President; Green politician Renate Künast fighting back against insults on the Internet; and YouTuber Rezo's viral video »The Destruction of the CDU«, which caused a huge political stir.

The innovative aspect of this book is its approach of outlining each case in a comprehensible, rather journalistic way. The texts were authored by (former) journalism students from Dortmund. The general outline is followed by a short interview with a key actor in the case, such as journalist Arndt Ginzel, who was covering the Dresden protest on behalf of the ZDF; or Claus Kleber discussing the dispute over the editor-in-chief appointment in the »Brender case«. Experienced lawyers then present professional legal solutions to these cases, following legal usage in structure, language, and source work. This is not only compelling for law students and legal professionals, but offers great insights into legal argumentation to anyone who is interested.

The book's systematic approach is impressive and useful to train and inspire non-professionals in the basics of legal enquiry. Michael Libertus, for example, walks readers through the possible legal implications of news coverage of the infamous »Ibiza video« featuring Austrian FPÖ politician Heinz-Christian Strache. He distinguishes two levels of action that each involve civil as well as criminal aspects: First, the act of recording and passing on a secretly captured video; second, disseminating excerpts of the video and the subsequent media coverage. He very clearly explains the outcome of this case: Public interest in this information was so great and justified that it made its publication legally acceptable.

The book is also valuable because it addresses a number of scenarios that did not result in court decisions, but which are nonetheless highly relevant from a legal and journalistic point of view. For instance, the investigations against journalists of *netzpolitik.org* did not result in an indictment, but in the ousting of Attorney General Harald Range. Jan-Hendrik Dietrich's solution to the case suggests that political reasons took precedence over legal grounds and that the journalists were lucky it did not come to court proceedings because the two

»bloggers« did indeed publish a state secret (classified information from the German domestic intelligence services). Their actions might well have been considered a felony. Really? There are other takes on this, not only from a journalist's point of view.

Dietrich is a professor of constitutional and administrative law at the Intelligence Services Department of the German Federal University of Public Administration. He also serves as director at the Center for Intelligence and Security Studies at the University of the Federal Armed Forces in Munich. It is thus unsurprising that he would side with domestic intelligence. He undeniably makes valid legal points and a solid case, but from a perspective of press freedom, and given the problematic nature of classified information, the case could have been weighed and assessed differently. In this context, it is no small detail Dietrich refers to the journalists in question as mere »bloggers«. The preceding interview with *netzpolitik.org* founder Markus Beckedahl shows that this »blogger«-label corresponds with the position of the German domestig intelligence services, even though Beckedahl and his colleague had long been established members of Berlin's press community at the time of the investigation.

It would have been useful to make it clear that there are alternative, equally justified assessments of some of the »case solutions« presented in the volume. It would also have been interesting to juxtapose diverging solutions (not in undisputed cases, of course). Other than this, it is a book worth reading, offering valuable hints for the practice and study of journalism.

About the reviewer

Tanjev Schultz is Professor of Foundations and Strategies of Journalism at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and co-editor of *Journalistik*.

Alexis von Mirbach (2023): *Medienträume. Ein Bürgerbuch zur Zukunft des Journalismus.* [**Media Dreams. A Citizen's Handbook on the Future of Journalism.**] **Cologne: Herbert von Halem Verlag, 272 pages,** EUR **27.**

Reviewed by Gabriele Hooffacker

What's on citizens' minds when they think about media and journalism? What are they critical of? How do they define good journalism, and what do they consider necessary conditions for quality journalism? The answers to these questions are obviously essential for the democratic functioning of the media and for democracy itself. This is why the Bavarian State Ministry of Science and the Arts launched the research network »Future of Democracy« (ForDemocracy) in 2018. In the context of this project, Michael Meyen conceived The Media Future Lab, which he implemented with Sevda Arslan and Alexis von Mirbach, a student assistant, students at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) Munich, and numerous partners. 33 people contributed to the »Citizens' Conference on Media,« the result of which is presented here as a book. The previous publication, *Das Elend der Medien* [Media Misery] (MIRBACH/MEYEN 2021) had triggered heated discussions (cf. TRÖGER 2022; MIRBACH 2022).

First, let me say that the title *A Citizen's Handbook* is a bit misleading. While seven chapters are indeed dedicated to seven work groups, describing their process and outcomes (more about the Citizens' Conference in a moment), a substantial portion of the book (three chapters) addresses the difficulties of exploring the subject. So it is both a citizens' handbook and an explorative book.

Obstacles for the project

Research projects such as the Media Future Lab (2019-2022) operated under restrictions imposed by the pandemic, which entailed certain methodical constraints: Some of the planned larger conferences were replaced by small group discussions and guided interviews. Nevertheless, between the »fall of 2019 and the fall of 2021 (including the Citizens' Media Conference), we conducted just over a dozen Media Future Labs with nearly 200 participants« (MIRBACH 2023: 52). The project was implemented in three phases: The purpose of Phase 1 (summer of 2019) was to generate expert knowledge from media practitioners, media policymakers, and professional media observers. 19 experts were invited to hold a series of lectures and discussions with students at LMU Munich. At this point already, the project encountered criticism, which persisted throughout the project and certainly hampered its implementation. In this case, the project was accused of »left-wing bias,« as voiced by students in their evaluation of the event

(MIRBACH 2023: 43). Phase 2, the »Citizens' Conference,« consisting of numerous decentralized meetings of the seven groups and their subsequent evaluation, was also affected by unexpected events. Following media coverage of Michael Meyen, an entire group in Munich cancelled their participation in the project (ibid.: 63f.). Phase 3 (summer 2020), intended as an online debate on journalistic quality, was kickstarted prematurely and somewhat unexpectedly by a blog entry by Mirbach. Mirbach writes: »I wrote about a journalist from the alternative media. The piece caused a scandal, which was covered by Süddeutsche Zeitung and Telepolis.« (ibid.: 18)

Methodology and results

Methodologically, the research project followed the »Future Labs: Criticism, Utopia, Proposed Solutions,« as well as Erik Olin Wright's concept of »Real Utopias«. Mirbach describes the theoretical framework in detail (especially in chapter 2). Countering the accusation that his selection of discussion partners was not »representative«, he maintains that the project was about media criticism, which is why critical voices had to be heard. The book also keeps circling back to the role of »alternative« media (for a debate on this in »Journalistik,« see HOOFFACKER 2022; MEYEN 2022).

Yet the involved citizens did not always stick with the research team's instructions to propose concrete solutions. This is what makes the outcomes in the book so interesting. The Radio LORA work group led by Fabian Ekstedt met the project objectives almost perfectly. Among other things, this group proposed a »Voluntary Journalistic Year (FJJ)« (chapter 7) [akin to the »Voluntary Social Year« that is popular among German high school graduates, translator's note]. Subsequently, 30 students gathered general solutions and utopias on the topic of »media dreams«. The work group »Basis« addressed the financing of journalism, proposing a blockchain solution (Chapter 8). The work group from Tegernsee looked at the social integration of journalism and science. In addition to the havoc caused by the pandemic and the criticisms that had been riddling the project, this group also threw the plans and specifications for the project out the window (chapter 9). The Zwickau-based work group completely derailed the project, calling into question whether journalism could even make any difference in society at all (chapter 3, p. 88ff.). By contrast, the Munich-based work group (Chapter 4) was highly productive. Among other things, it came up with a constitutional utopia, envisioning a »Council for Sustainable Information of the Federal Republic of Germany« (MIRBACH 2023: 119).

The Leipzig work group (Chapter 5) made a connection with public broadcasting and explored what participation might look like in this area. The group eaborated five statements and a vision of a »social communication platform«.

In Chapter 6, the work group »Standing Audience Conference« developed approaches for an audience complaints website and a citizens' foundation modelled after consumer testing agencies. At the beginning and at the end, Mirbach addresses the ARD future dialog, which was held almost simultaneously. This project included a large-scale citizens' survey. However, considering or implementing its results is the domain of audience councils or »media policy« (MIRBACH 2023: 266). Compared to the ARD Future Dialog, the Media Future Lab deserves credit for focusing on citizens' participation by documenting and reflecting on their utopias (»media dreams«) as well as on the process of participation. This is, perhaps, the added value of this project documentation.

About the reviewer

Gabriele Hooffacker, Prof. Dr. phil., (*1959), is co-editor of *Journalistik.* She teaches »Media-Appropriate Content Preparation« at HTWK Leipzig. Gabriele Hooffacker serves as editor of the textbook series »Journalistische Praxis« (Journalistic Practice) at Springer VS, which had been founded by Walther von La Roche (1936-2010); as well as the series »Leipziger Beiträge zur Computerspielekultur« [Leipzig Contributions to Gaming Culture]. She is a jury member for the Alternative Media Award. Contact: g.hooffacker@link-m.de

Miriam Grabenheinrich (2023): *Journalismus und Diversity. Umgang mit kultureller Diversität in der journalistischen Praxis und Konsequenzen für die Aus- und Fortbildung.* [**Journalism and Diversity. Addressing Cultural Diversity in Journalistic Practice and Implications for Education and Training.**] Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 414 pages, EUR 69.99.

Reviewed by Bärbel Röben

Germany has long been a country of immigration, but in journalistic training, the necessary new key skills of addressing diversity and differentiation are rarely taught, as I pointed out at the DGPuK conference as early as 2003 (cf. RÖBEN 2004: 265-275). Thanks to Miriam Grabenheinrich's extensive research, we finally have a theoretically sound, practice-tested concept for raising journalists' intercultural awareness! The volume is published in the series »Ethnologie als Praxis« [Ethnology as a Practice].

It is the first ethnological study on the »Implementation of Media Diversity in Journalism Education and Training,« as proposed by ethnologist Julia Bayer in her dissertation in 2013 (BAYER 2013: 232ff.). Miriam Grabenheinrich, an ethnologist, lecturer, and coach with over twenty years of professional experience as a journalist, is familiar with both disciplines. She has been working on journalists' (lack of) diversity skills since 2010. In her research project, she combines scholarly theories and methods with journalistic research to determine »how journalists address cultural diversity and the implications for ethnological perspectives in journalism education and training« (p. 275).

She explores this issue in eight chapters. First, she sheds light on the profession of journalism, using online and telephone research to determine the current state of teaching diversity in journalism training. As of August 2019, only schools in Berlin and Nuremberg explicitly offered journalism courses on diversity. She used a focus group analysis to determine to which extent journalists address cultural diversity in their training and further education, and to assess the unmet need for diversity training. Participants are to gain awareness that »by selecting and reducing topics, they construct a media reality dominated by the majority perspective«. The author conducted a content analysis to enable the necessary examination of media content, derived from an inventory of German media coverage of people with a migratory background. She found deficiencies in local news coverage and only a small number of categories for diversity. Especially people with African backgrounds are barely covered at all.

The theoretical framework for Grabenheinrich's research is a diversity approach, which is no longer structure-oriented following a critical examination of the concept of culture in anthropology. Grabenheinrich highlights three

aspects of this modified diversity approach: first, its multidimensionality, i.e., a wealth of dimensions such as gender, age, religion, and culture. Expanding the concept of culture in the concept of superdiversity, the approach is also intersectional: It is about intertwined, multiple, variable identities. A third aspect is a critique of representation, including a »reflection on normativity, speakers' positions, contexts of power and contexts of formation.«

Postcolonial theory offers »a solid basis, especially in its concept of ›Othering‹«, to recognize dominance structures and processes of demarcation, as the author explains. The social orders of difference inscribed in discourses of knowledge emerge by combining homogenization, naturalization, dichotomization, and hierarchization.

Grabenheinrich also identifies these four strategies in a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 60 articles about people of African background in the television show *WDR-Lokalzeit* and the newspaper *Neue Westfälische*: They are homogenized and naturalized by phrases such as »the blacks,« »the Africans,« »African culture,« as well as by drumbeats and images of nature-based, traditional life in Africa. By way of dichotomization and hierarchization, »the Africans« are demarcated from »the Germans«. »Helping Germans« are contrasted with »needy, silent Africans« (p. 194).

The focus group analysis consists of classroom observations, written surveys, and focus group discussions. The subject of the study is a total of 16 diversity events between 2013 and 2018. Grabenheinrich first took part in two diversity training courses offered by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, and then evaluated twelve university seminars on practical journalism as well as two trial trainings on diversity conducted by herself. As she evaluated her own events, she reflected on her underlying ethical position as a researcher (cf. p. 156 f.). From the focus group analysis, she derives proposed standards for a diversity training program: strong practical relevance (esp. competitive advantages, topic setting, product analysis), background information (especially facts about minorities, culture, diversity) as well as soft skills (especially perception of others, change of perspective, reduction of bias) as well as creativity techniques and guidelines for diversity-sensitive reporting. From content and focus group analyses, Grabenheinrich developed a detailed didactic concept. Journalistic diversity skills can only evolve in the long term, however, if a differentiated understanding of diversity is embedded in media companies – by way of regular learning opportunities, a holistic mission statement, hiring diversity officers, networking with migrant organizations or ethnologists, as well as a higher proportion of staff with a migratory background, and, of course, regular evaluation of all these measures.

Grabenheinrich's book is a smooth read. She presents the results of her research and analyses not only in the body text, but also in visual overviews. Numerous appendices and an extensive table of contents complete her work.

Another interesting aspect is the many parallels between her theoretical framing and gender studies in communication studies (such as representation critique, postcolonial studies, constructivism, »Othering«). Unfortunately, Grabenheinrich does not address these, nor any ethnographic methods in gender research. Hopefully, diversity skills will finally find their way into the mandatory curricula of journalism training. With her research, Miriam Grabenheinrich laid the foundation for it!

About the reviewer

Dr. Bärbel Röben is a freelance journalist and media scientist living in Attendorn/Sauerland. She works primarily for the ver.di media magazine *M – Menschen machen Medien*. One of her main areas of work is the topic of »Migrant women in media production«, on which she published an article in the handbook *Medien und Geschlecht* (2023, Springer vs).

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Erfolgsfaktor**
*Schriften zur Rettung des öffentlichen
Diskurses*, 5
2023, Broschur, 190 x 120 mm, dt.
ISBN (Print) 978-3-86962-660-4

Journalismus

Journalismus. Das Lehr- und Handbuch von Stephan Russ-Mohl erscheint mit Tanjev Schultz als neuem Ko-Autor in vierter Auflage – aktualisiert und von Grund auf überarbeitet. Das Buch widmet sich primär der Praxis und dem journalistischen ›Handwerk‹, lässt aber Erkenntnisse der Journalismus- und Medienforschung mit einfließen, wenn dies nützlich ist und den Horizont erweitert. Es spürt den dramatischen Veränderungen im Berufsfeld nach, ohne in modischen ›Hype‹ zu verfallen. Das Buch zeigt, wie sich durch netzbasierte Recherche- und Kommunikationsformen der journalistische Alltag verändert. Nach amerikanischen Vorbildern konzipiert, ist das Lehrbuch leicht lesbar, aber vor allem informativ. Kurze Pro- und Contra-Texte zu umstrittenen Themen sollen zu eigenem Nachdenken anregen.

Das Buch bietet Grundlagen für Volontäre, Journalistenschüler und Studierende der Journalistik, Kommunikations- oder Medienwissenschaft, aber auch Interessantes für voll ausgebildete Journalistinnen und Journalisten, PR-Fachleute und Medienmanager.

Journalismus

JANA WISKE / MARKUS KAISER

**Journalismus und PR.
Arbeitsweisen, Spannungsfelder, Chancen**

2023, 248 S., Broschur, 213 x 142 mm, dt.

Das Verhältnis zwischen Journalisten und Kommunikationsverantwortlichen von Unternehmen und Organisationen gilt als kompliziert. Letztere fühlen sich durch entsprechende Berichterstattung hintergangen, Journalisten sehen sich durch Einflussnahme und Material manipuliert. Dabei verstehen sich viele Verantwortliche in Kommunikationsabteilungen als Dienstleister der Medien. Journalisten erkären sich dagegen gerne als moralische Wächter.

Das Buch beleuchtet unterschiedliche Themenfelder im Miteinander von Journalismus und PR. Arbeitsweisen und Berufsbilder werden verglichen, Spannungsfelder beleuchtet, Erwartungshaltungen eingeordnet und Chancen ausgelotet. Die Fachlektüre zeigt auf, wie unterschiedlich die Organisationsstrukturen und Herangehensweisen an Themen und Tools trotz aller ›handwerklichen‹ Gemeinsamkeiten sind. Neben Forschungsergebnissen zur Krisenkommunikation in Pandemiezeiten und die Auswirkungen auf beide Seiten, dem Einfluss von Social Media oder dem brisanten Thema ›bezahlte Pressereisen‹ legt das Buch Wert auf aktuelle Beispiele und Nähe zu den handelnden Protagonisten.

Dieses Buch richtet sich an Journalisten und PR-Verantwortliche, Studierende beider Fachrichtungen und interessierte Leser.

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NIKLAS VENEMA

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FELIX KOLTERMANN

Fotografie im Journalismus.
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ISBN (PDF) 978-3-86962-442-6

STEPHAN RUSS-MOHL / TANJEV SCHULTZ

Journalismus.
Das Lehr- und Handbuch

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