

Interview

The war in Gaza, German media and the »wrong side of history«?

Mandy Tröger in conversation with Kai Hafez

The German Communication Association (DGPUK) recently published a »position paper for non-discriminatory discourse.« It was prompted by reactions to a statement issued by academics at Berlin universities defending the right of students to protest against the war in Gaza. The DGPUK condemns any hostility towards academics, defamation and threats – both from outside and within the academic community (see DGPUK 2024).

This position paper shows again the great need for academic expertise and discourse regarding the war in Gaza, reporting on this war and the conflict in the Middle East. Kai Hafez, Professor of Comparative Analysis of Media Systems and Communication Cultures at the University of Erfurt, Germany, is a recognized expert on questions of media representations of the Middle East in German media. In the last few months, he has been expressing his criticism on current war reporting, for example, on German national radio Deutschlandfunk (i.e. FRÖHNDRICH 2024), in the press (i.e. ALLISAT 2024) and in media podcasts (i.e. MINKMAR/ZABOURA 2023).

In his interview with *Journalism Research*, Prof. Hafez asked what purpose researchers have »if not to develop their own ideas, which can then also be discussed critically«. Following this concern, we talked with Prof. Hafez about issues relating to the war in Gaza, such as its coverage in German media, the role of academia in analyzing this coverage, the fear of speaking critically about the conflict, and alternative approaches to war reporting (see also RICHTER 2023; ROTTMANN 2024).

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Translation: Mandy Tröger

Prof. Hafez, you have repeatedly criticized German media coverage of the current war in Gaza (i.e. ALLISAT 2024; FRÖHNDRICH 2024; MINKMAR/ZABOURA 2023). Can you nevertheless briefly outline two or three of your main points of criticism?

The first main point is that neither the current war nor the overall conflict can be explained solely through the lens of anti-Semitism – even if the debate in Germany but also in German media is very much limited to this perspective. Such a narrow view is fatal because it prevents any real analysis of the conflict in the Middle East. Ultimately, this conflict is about territorial rights, water rights, population exchange and historical repatriation claims. There are also racist motives, but they tend to be secondary. German media hardly tell us anything about the genesis of the conflict or the material interests that drive the current war.

Secondly, and as a result of this confined view, the variety of Palestinian positions are hardly shown in German media and are completely underdeveloped in the German public. At the same time, little attention is paid to the fact that there are far-right coalition members in the Israeli government. Before October 7, this was a topic of discussion, but currently there is a kind of discursive split. In other words, the *state* of Israel is shown to be at war, not the government of Israel, even though this government includes racist, far-right forces that are anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. In many ways, they are a kind of counterpart to radical forces within Hamas.

All of this is missing in German media discourse, which is, thirdly, working on a completely different level, namely the negotiation of emotions. We find a stream of allegations of racism, accusations and moral judgements, polarization and often stereotyping. What dominates this discourse is strong opinion journalism. If one has, like me, been researching the conflict in the Middle East for decades, its media coverage sometimes hurts.

What positions on the conflict are particularly annoying to you?

For example, there is a widespread opinion that the conflict in the Middle East is so overly complex that outsiders cannot understand it and can therefore give up trying to understand it. I deeply doubt that. The conflict is actually relatively easy to explain. There are long historical lines, certain options, levels and territorial claims. Currently, we are dealing with an asymmetrical war between a terrorist organization and an occupying settler state that continues to exercise control over Palestinian territories illegally and by means of violent force.

Of course, Germany is directly linked to this conflict because the state of Israel would probably not exist without the German Holocaust. The conflict therefore seems to me to be historically interwoven with Germany. Nevertheless, this

history is not a bilateral one between Israel and Germany, but a trilateral one between Israel, Palestine and Germany, whereby one must distinguish between the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).

German media show little to none of these political interdependences. On the one hand, Palestine often falls out of the picture as a political actor. On the other hand, reporting on the conflict is dominated by a self-reflective discourse. This means that media coverage tends to focus more on Germany and the strong cultural references to its own history than on the history of the conflict in the Middle East. Accordingly, research from past decades shows that the coverage of the Middle East greatly relates to domestic German politics. This also has an impact on current war reporting.

You have been researching the Middle East for 30 years. Do you see recurring patterns in war reporting?

The strong imbalance in German media dealing with Israel and Palestine, especially in the first few months after October 7, is a recurring pattern. This one-sidedness appears in waves and usually in relation to specific events of aggression. In the past, these events related to the Arab-Israeli conflicts or the disputes on the West Bank. In recent years, they have related to the Gaza wars.

These repetitive media loops are exasperating. There is hardly any learning curve, but what we find above all are repetitive loops, redundancies and a journalism that seems to have more or less settled into a sort of »autistic bubble«. A shift in media discourse towards a more balanced reporting will probably only occur after a political solution to the conflict is found – which in turn is unlikely without media pressure.

Unfortunately, hardly any communication researcher in Germany is studying these questions.

Prof. Carola Richter from the Free University of Berlin wrote about the conflict in the Middle East and German media in 2014 (i.e. RICHTER 2014). She describes very similar patterns to those you are outlining.

Carola Richter is a highly esteemed colleague and former doctoral student of mine. She is actually one of the very few researchers focusing on these issues. Other former students are now working abroad, such as Hanan Badr at the University of Salzburg, Austria.

Is that why you are being asked to be an expert for analyzing the current media coverage, because there is hardly any such expertise in the German

field? After all, you have decades of political, practical and academic work experience on and in the Middle East. That should count for something.

One factor certainly is my interdisciplinary background. I hold a doctorate in history, a post-doctoral qualification in political science and a minor in Islamic studies and journalism. That kind of synthesis of different areas of expertise is rare in Germany. More important than my own skills, however, is that there are hardly any chairs at the intersection of communication and social analyses, especially global social analyses.

For example, in Islamic studies there are still too few links to the social sciences, and in communication research one hardly finds any area studies focus, for example on Asia, Africa or Latin America. This leaves huge gaps in research and teaching in Germany. To this day, there is no chair that combines modern media analysis with Islamic or Middle Eastern studies.

Why is researching at the intersection of communication and social analysis so important?

We can currently see why. On the one hand, we need expertise and analyzes to be able to assess the quality of media coverage of the conflict in the Middle East. On the other hand, such expertise is important to be able to see what is *not* being reported.

One example: a few years ago, Israeli and Palestinian representatives drew up plans for a two-state solution as part of the Geneva Initiative. These plans are highly intelligent and feasible; they were barely mentioned in German media. In other words, the discourse of the political backstage is often hardly visible in the media discourse.

This means that there is a kind of »double invisibility«. Firstly, there is an invisibility in communication research because many academics in the field lack an understanding of the conflict. Because of that there is, secondly, also a lack of understanding needed to identify any invisibilities or the »missing news« in media discourse. As a result, research loses its advisory role and control function.

Do you then see a more fundamental and theoretical problem here?

Yes, absolutely. For a long time, communication research in Germany denied that it had any relation to the existing political and social conditions within which it was operating. Instead, following the theory of Niklas Luhmann, the assumption was that one could focus entirely on communicative behavior. I never shared that opinion. What we need, alongside the kind of radical constructivism that has long been advocated in Germany, is what Günter Bentele called

re-constructivism. In other words, we need a sensible relationship to the reflection of matter-of-fact political and social conditions.

Of course, there are discursive spaces. But I think it is wrong to apply, for example, Foucaultian analyses to regions – such as the Middle East – if the political and social conditions of these regions have not been equally studied. Thus, in addition to having a communications background, it requires knowledge in social theory and practice. However, this synthesis is rarely found in the field in Germany.

The situation is different in other countries, for example at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London or at certain institutions at Georgetown University in the United States, where efforts are being made to combine competences, skills and knowledge. This is partly due to either the colonial history or claims to world leadership of the respective countries. The corresponding global traditions leave their mark also on academia. In my opinion, academic research in Germany is lagging decades behind and the alleged academic role model of the US is not understood properly.

So the lack of expert knowledge and the development of the field in Germany explain why there is so little critical analyses of the media coverage of the war in Gaza?

Yes, I think those are the main reasons. At the same time, I have recently been observing something that could perhaps be called a »phenomenon of fear.« Colleagues tell me, they hardly dare to criticize Israel. That is truly shocking to me. How can it be that colleagues develop a fear of thinking, which consequently leads them to silence? Apparently, there is a kind of hegemony of opinions that counteracts the goal of academic research, which is rational debate and discussion.

What exactly is shocking to you?

What function do we have in academia and research if not to develop our own ideas that can then be discussed critically? I am surprised by the fear of being scandalized when researchers try to analyze certain things rationally.

I understand such dynamics better when it comes to journalists. In journalism, there are certain organizational contexts, for example editorial policies that tend to be pro-Israel. The German publishing house Axel Springer is not the only example here. In other words, it is easier to infer organizational constraints in journalism, because journalists work in networks that are tightly organized.

But academia, if we follow Luhmann at this point, is a loosely organized social system. Therefore, we should be used to thinking outside the box and to acting »deviantly« as long as we argue reasonably. This is because minority positions should be the norm. In other words, every academic must, by definition, adopt

a minority position in order to be able to make any academic contribution at all. Ultimately, bans on thought and speech in research are fatal. In addition, the absence of rational impulses from academia are detrimental to politics and media because these impulses are important for governance.

Where do you see the field of communication research in relation to governance?

The field in Germany is hardly in a position to leave its mark on public debate and discourse. Regarding the media coverage of the Middle East, the main reason for this deficit certainly is the lack of expertise described above. However, it may also have to do with the relationship between the field, politics and media. This relationship is unclear, but not independent. In other words, we may be taking too much of our research agenda from mass media. This makes it difficult to set our own, new agendas from within academia.

Only recently, both yourself (i.e. ROTTMANN/TRÖGER 2023) and Carola Richter (i.e. ROTTMANN/TRÖGER 2024) used the concept of peace journalism as a kind of analytical tool to identify patterns and gaps in current war reporting. Is this tool useful, and what should »good« war reporting look like?

The concept of peace journalism lends itself to making visible unquestioned patterns and gaps in war reporting, for example the dehumanization of certain victims. In addition, peace journalism offers alternatives to the staccato of military reporting that are worthwhile discussing.

With regard to the war in Gaza and the conflict in the Middle East, we generally need more information-driven journalism. This means, reporting needs to be more systematic, more comprehensive, and less opinionated and emotionally charged. Part of this shift must be the historicizing of the conflict and the various phases of Germany's relations with Israel and Palestine.

For example, for 30 years, the German government has been spending massive sums on the Palestinian autonomous territories. Thus, Germany was the largest financier in Europe to the Oslo peace process. At the same time, the German government is willing to let Israel destroy these values again in every conflict, regardless what government is in power. Such background information is important for German society as a whole. I myself was involved in initiating the construction of ports and airports in Gaza in the 1990s, which Israel bombed shortly after. How can the German government invest money only to ultimately watch it being destroyed and then assume that we are making good foreign policy? These ambivalences must be part of the media discourse, but they are completely absent.

On the other hand, journalism in Germany must reposition itself in relation to the conflict in the Middle East. What needs to come to the fore are basic journalistic and ethical tasks, as well as the overall task of providing information. These goals could be expanded by including peace journalism, which entails a moral responsibility for peace and a critical awareness of any form of state disinformation – including Israeli state sources that are used far too often in German media.

To be able to do this, journalists need the resources. Only then can they provide good information about the conflict and international relations. There are many journalists in Germany who would like to see such a critical shift and who are trying to change prevailing media discourses from within. However, their possibilities of implementing such changes are structurally and culturally limited. Next to time, money, staff and journalistic freedom, they also need academic expertise to break up established patterns. This is where academia needs to come in.

Since you mentioned self-reference earlier, what consequences does the war in Gaza have for Germany?

Last week, I took my students to the German Foreign Office. In conversation one of my foreign students said that, when it comes to Gaza, Germany is once again »on the wrong side of history.« Tens of thousands of civilians are dying and we are watching more or less without complaint. That got me thinking. Though politically the situation is somewhat more complex, Germany still supports every Israeli government in every crisis without any public debate. Of course, I can see the pain that the attack of Hamas has caused in Israel and also in Germany, and I mourn the victims. At the same time, there is emotional despair on the Palestinian side as well – also in our midst.

Pro-Palestine protests in Germany are generally dismissed as being anti-Semitic, and there is little differentiation between the various Palestinian issues and concerns. In my opinion, it is a disaster for German politics that no one talks to the participants of these protests – also given that freedom of assembly is a relevant topic for communication research. An entire generation is being driven into political apathy, which should suit the German alt-right, such as the AfD, just fine. However, democratic parties must start to interact but that is simply not happening, not in media nor in politics. On the contrary, prominent figures such as Nancy Fraser are being disinvited from German universities.

Internationally, this is being observed very critically. Germany is currently experiencing an enormous loss of reputation, in particular in the Global South. I think it is fair to say that this loss of reputation is perhaps comparable to the image loss of the United States in the wake of the Iraq war in 2003. I notice this on my trips to South Africa, Asia and the Arab world.

Of course, questions as to whether Germany is once again on the wrong side of history should at least be debatable. However, these debates hardly ever take place in politics, media or in academia. It is on us to urgently fill these blank spots of debate and analysis.

About the authors

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