

Essay

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Journalism under threat, democracy under threat

Remarks on media development in an age of digitalization

Abstract: Digitalization and economization are not only changing the public space and thus the public discourse. Today, anyone can communicate with anyone. In theory, this enables discourse free from domination – in reality, the result is a Babylonian mix of media, with fake news, propaganda, and PR on an equal footing with serious information. Many are talking, few are listening. It is a development that undermines the business models of conventional media and throws journalism into a crisis of legitimacy. This text analyzes this development and names the greatest challenges facing media and society.

Keywords: civic participation, democracy, digitalization, deliberative public life, Habermas, journalistic media, media education, social networks

»Almost four out of five citizens see [...] democracy in Germany as increasingly threatened. 78.9 percent agree [...] with the statement that democracy is being attacked more strongly today than it was five years ago. This is the finding of a representative population survey published on Monday by the German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM). Only 3.4 percent think that democracy is under attack less than it was in the past. According to the survey, the population would like to see the attacks being countered more strongly.« (N.N. 2023a¹⁾)

This news story brought me up short in May 2023. Why? Because we should be concerned about it? Stories like this appear almost every day at the moment; I

1 The report refers to Kleist et al. 2023.

should have updated this long ago. What alarmed me was the second finding in the report on the survey, namely that 84.9 percent of respondents saw it as the role of the federal government to do something about it (cf. N.N. 2023a). That is not what I learned. A democracy is only strong and lively when it is carried and developed by a strong and lively civic society. But that civic society has become lazy. If the state is expected to be the sole entertainer, this can often lead to authoritarian forms of rule or perhaps dangerous overextension. Of course, the state can and must support civic society in its role – in particular through clever policymaking. There is plenty to talk about there.

One could also gripe further about how the process of opinion polling has gone off course, its excessive role in the political process, and the pitfalls and consequences of incorrect or suggestive formulations. That would be a paper in itself, although it is certainly a tangent of the issue under discussion here. After all, opinion polling is also an actor in the public sphere in which everyone today tries to shout over one another, and hardly anyone listens.

In order to understand the challenges, a few fundamental remarks must be made first. I will then briefly turn to the phenomenon of the public sphere and the question of what exactly is the structural change that has hovered over the public discourse, not only in the feuilletons, since Jürgen Habermas published his postdoctoral thesis (HABERMAS 1971). Next, we will turn our attention to the development of the media, concentrating on the newspapers and their digital forms, even though the lines between the various media genres are today increasingly blurred. Given the limited space here, however, it would be impossible to conduct a serious examination that also included the development of (public service) broadcasting. Finally, we will look at society and attempt to trace what impact the development of the media has had on society and democracy. And we will keep an eye out for something or someone to rescue the situation.

1. Democracy requires a public sphere

The first person to mention is Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, a former judge in Germany's Federal Constitutional Court and an expert in constitutional law. A dictum named after him describes a dilemma:

»The liberal-democratic, secular state relies on conditions that it itself cannot guarantee. [...] On the one hand, it can only exist as a liberal-democratic state if the freedom it grants its citizens regulates itself intrinsically, from the moral substance of the individual or the homogeneity of society. On the other hand, it cannot attempt to regulate these forces of regulation itself, i.e., through legal coercion and authoritative decrees, without giving up its liberal-democratic nature.« (BÖCKENFÖRDE 1976: 92ff.)

Libraries are full of papers in which academics have slaved away on this dictum. For our purposes, supplementing Böckenförde with the work of Habermas is sufficient in order to emphasize the challenge currently faced. In his theory of communication, Habermas finds that modern societies can no longer rely on this binding background consensus. Conflicts that arise must therefore be managed through the medium of communication. A constructive interplay must be found between the decision-oriented discussions, regulated through democratic processes, and the informal opinion-forming processes of an informed public sphere (cf. HABERMAS 1992: 13).

Incidentally, this unmask the basis for the deliberative democracy that was so important in Winfried Kretschmann's program of government in Baden-Württemberg (one of the 16 German states), where it was known as the »politics of being heard« (cf. Kretschmann et al. 2011); and to which Gisela Erler, long responsible for the field as State Councilor for Civil Society, repeatedly added »being heard, but not being listened to« (e.g., HAUSER/WINKLER 2022: 44).

Pursuing this now, however, would lose sight of the fact that, with Habermas, this ominous »public sphere« enters the stage as the central actor. When we search for threats to democracy, it demands our full attention.

Who or what is this »public sphere«? The obvious answer would be, »everything that is not private.« But then we would have to define »private.« In the age of the global data network, we would quickly end up in quicksand. Some have even discussed the end of privacy in this context (cf. e.g., WHITAKER 1999).

Habermas, however, develops the concept precisely in this distinction out of the Greek city-state, by separating the sphere of the polis, shared by the free citizens, strictly from the sphere of the oikos, which belongs to each individual. Although, argues Habermas, public life, *bios politicos*, plays out on the market square, the *agora*, it is not tied to a locality, but develops out of conversation (cf. HABERMAS 1971: 15ff.).

In simple terms and applied to today, one could say that the public sphere is the space in which individuals relate to social entities. In liberal societies, the public sphere on the part of the state means transparency about what it does; on the part of society, it means interested and active citizens who form a critical opinion through sources accessible to all and who take part in the state's process of will-forming and decision-making both directly, such as through elections, and indirectly with the help of political parties, citizens' initiatives, citizens' councils etc.

This public sphere is subject to permanent change. Jürgen Habermas described this change for the period up to the 1960s – from the representative public sphere of pre-democratic times to the bourgeois-literary public sphere, to its depletion through economization and concentration (cf. HABERMAS 1971). The fact that his analysis ends at a point at which this bourgeois public sphere and

its media were on the verge of a rare heyday is another story. The fundamental finding remained accurate: Professional media should ideally draw attention to »important« topics and organize discussion of them. They force transparency on behalf of the citizens, thus helping citizens to make informed decisions.

This model brings with it prerequisites, assumptions, and impositions. Journalism presumes to know which topic is important and in need of public discussion. It lives off the trust of its readers, listeners and viewers; on their belief that it is pursuing no other goal than to provide information and arguments – that it is an honest service provider for bourgeois society.

On the other hand, journalists are subjected to attempts to influence them from all sides. They are needed, courted, harassed. And, unfortunately, journalists have repeatedly been locked up or even killed. Author Gustav Freytag described the challenges more than 170 years ago: »The whole world complains about it [journalism], and everyone wants to use it for himself« (FREYTAG 1988: 71). The journalists themselves, however, need to remain unfazed and objective.

This cannot go well, and frequently does not. History is full not only of excellent research, reportages and analyses, but also of journalistic hubris, errors, poor behavior, and contempt for the audience. Helmut Schmidt was right:

»Politicians and journalists. Both are categories of people that have to be treated with great care: After all, both range from almost-statesmen to almost-criminals. And the average remains average.« (quoted in RAUE 2015^[2])

But, I would like to add that the same applies to independent, professional journalism as to democracy itself: It is the worst option apart from all the others.

2. Journalistic media in the digital crisis

Journalistic media have always been both a cultural and an economic asset – and of course an instrument of power. An aspect that Habermas believed only applied until the mid-19th century actually remained in place for a long time:

»The publishers secured the commercial basis for the press, but without commercializing it as such. A press that has developed from the reasonable consideration of the audience remained an institution of this audience itself: effective in the way of a mediator and amplifier, no longer simply an organ for transporting information and not yet a medium of consumer culture.« (HABERMAS 1971: 219)

This was possible because the strict separation between the editorial office and the publishing house remained largely in place. Into the 1990s, confident editorial offices were able to occupy their role without harming the business

2 According to concurring reports in various media – including *spiegel.de*, *tagesthemen.de* –, the sentence was uttered during a speech to students in Freiburg. However, as for many common quotes, it is difficult to tell whether the different sources are drawing on one another and what the precise wording was.

interests of their publishers. Then, however, the connection between the media and the audience began to loosen; the circulation of printed newspapers began to sink – first slowly, then ever faster. When the dot-com bubble burst in 2001, advertising revenue also plummeted. The growing success of the large internet corporations sucked the financial oxygen out of the journalistic newsrooms. Today, they account for more than 50 percent of global advertising turnover. Google alone generates more advertising revenue in Germany than all the daily newspapers combined.

Regional newspapers – a key pillar of German democracy for decades – suffered particularly badly. Their income mix – two thirds advertising, one third sales and subscriptions – disappeared overnight. The internet was dominated by the discounter principle, with large numbers and small margins. Most newspapers do not have the size or the reach to keep up. Editorial offices always find it easier to be independent when their publishing houses are in a strong financial position.

Even with rising prices for subscriptions, the old business model could not be transferred to the digital world. Internet users quickly learned that online news was free. The large platforms made a fortune, in part by using the services provided by traditional media. The latter were left, as publisher Hubert Burda once complained, with just »lousy pennies« (quoted in MEIER 2009^[3]). The dispute over whether the publishing houses should have put up paywalls earlier, however, appears absurd. Those who did, had no reach; those who did not, at least had readers. Neither earned any money.

Even today, journalistic income from digital business cannot compensate the decrease from print journalism. In the brave new media world, income from traditional business collapsed, while the major cost factors – printing and sales – could not be reduced in the same way. Major rises in subscription prices did manage to slow the fall in income in the short term, but exacerbated the crisis in the long term. This was because savings were also made in the cost factors that could be influenced quickly: staff and the product. It was like committing suicide for fear of death. There was also a wave of mergers at the same time. Today, one newsroom often produces dozens of newspaper titles.

The situation can be seen especially dramatically in local journalism. Being present on the ground demands a great deal of time and personnel, and is therefore especially expensive. The alternative *regional reporting*, sold as a way of moving closer to readers as income fell, is actually a move further away. Reportages tell stories whose relevance is measured on assumed reader interest. One takes the pulse of the town not to attract attention to important issues, but mainly

3 Hubert Burda said this at the Digital Life Design Conference in Munich in 2009 and referred to it again a year later in his opening speech at the same event.

to attract attention to oneself. The result is not only depoliticization, but also a reframing of the term relevance. Today, something is relevant when it attracts users to the platform and keeps them there as long as possible.

This turning point in journalism began when electronic data processing began to make its way into editorial offices in the early 1980s, changing their work radically. First, typesetting, layout, and proofreading shifted into the editorial office. Today, the finished pages are sent straight from the editorial office to the printing press. Articles for the digital edition are published directly. This brought with it a double change in perspectives. In the past, journalists designed their articles for print earlier and posted them online later; now, it is usually the other way round. In the past, they addressed their articles at empowered citizens; now, they woo the consumer.

People today no longer live with, but in the media. The media is where they communicate, organize, buy, gain information, and start, maintain, and end relationships. This results in a competition for attention – the scarce commodity of the digital economy. What counts is loyalizing users – a revealing term in itself. For this reason, marketing is also increasingly shifting into newsrooms, where the behavior of media users is observed in real time and examined for consequences for the service offered in future. All this alters the topics, the language, the storytelling, and the tone.

And it shakes the very foundations of the journalistic concept. Around 90 percent of newspapers in Germany, excluding tabloids, are sold as subscriptions. Journalists encounter readers who both complain about and expect schoolmasterly attitudes. They pay money for their newspaper to filter out the news they need in order to play their role as citizens from the background noise of information; to provide them with arguments and background that allows them to keep up with the democratic discourse.

3. Journalism in the digital public sphere

In the digital world, people can get fit for the discourse on their own. They do not want prompting or preselection. They are able to follow events in real time without having to be at the site of the action, can access numerous original sources directly and chat with key actors, can define their own filters or create their own public sphere.

Journalism not only loses its gatekeeper function here. It becomes a supplicant who has to strive to be noticed and to be allowed to offer its services. It therefore comes as no surprise that the internet works by the rules of the tabloid. Topics from the fields of ›red light, blue light, floodlight‹ are always popular; politics works at most in the form of the expectation of immediate solutions. Outrage

replaces engagement with the issues. More in-depth descriptions and analysis of complex issues become a topic for a minority only; John F. Kennedy's call for people to consider what they can do for the state becomes an imposition. And the etiquette is free from any restraint. Cabaret artist Christian Ehring described this digital public space as an »Empörium« [a play on the German word for »outrage«]^[4]. Bernhard Pörksen sees us as the »Fifth Estate« within it, acting in a »mental puberty« (PÖRKSEN 2021: 26^[5]). Either way, the result is the same: The public is stoking exactly the development of democracy that it complains about.

Today, we see in the public sphere a phenomenon that is familiar from restaurants or family gatherings: Everyone wants to talk to everyone else so, in order to be heard, everyone talks over one another, louder and louder. By the end, everyone's head is spinning.

The public sphere today has become an overfilled room. As well as journalism, it is inhabited by new, professional gatekeepers like the large internet platforms with their opaque algorithms. This is where propaganda and PR are active, with their massively increased staff and budgets. Opinion polling is also playing an increasingly obtrusive role, as are the strange satire-information-disinformation shows associated with the name Jan Böhmermann in Germany. And in amongst all this, influencers, bloggers, and we ourselves all throng social media to a greater or lesser extent. Migration has made the national public sphere global. Migration of people is followed by the migration of their media and their issues. Ultimately, countries like Russia and China can also become involved with targeted disinformation campaigns.

All of this has consequences. Reputable information is found intermingled with fake news, PR, propaganda, and nonsense. When everything appears to be of equal value, nothing has value at all. And when politicians like Friedrich Merz triumphantly state »we don't need them anymore« (quoted in N.N. 2020)^[6], meaning journalists, because parties and interest groups can now communicate

4 In a television program *Extra 3* on ARD. It is hard to say who coined the word. For example, there is also a song by Aut of Orda entitled *Das Empörium schlägt zurück*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HY54yN_mlhs (25.11.2024).

5 The full quote is: »We are living in a phase of mental puberty in dealing with new possibilities, shaken by growing pains of the media revolution, which we need to face with conceptual intelligence.« In interviews, Pörksen speaks of an »age of digital puberty,« for example in an interview with Marie-Christine Werner on SWR 2 on October 19, 2019.

6 The full quote is: »At the moment, there is a real power shift between those who disseminate news and those who generate news. It is in favor of those who generate news. We don't need them anymore. And that is the good thing. Today they can use their own social media channels, YouTube, to reach an audience that the public service broadcasters, and the commercial institutionalized media, often no longer reach. If this is used properly, if it is done well, these channels give you an opportunity to attend to your own interests, to retain your own interpretational sovereignty about what you have said. In a very different way from what we previously thought. So, that is the good news of digitalization.« Friedrich Merz said this on January 21, 2020 at AKV-Rittertalk in Aachen. There is a video clip, numerous media reactions, and a protest by the Deutscher Journalisten-Verband; cf. *Der Standard*, 17.2.2020. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000114666921/cdu-politiker-friedrich-merz-haelt-herkoemmliche-medien-fuer-verzichtbar> (25.11.2020).

directly with voters and followers, this should ring alarm bells. The same goes when Elon Musk, the owner of X (a platform that began life as the harmless tweeting of a bird) states on the Russian Gazprom channel NTW that, »All news is to some degree propaganda. Let people decide for themselves« (quoted in SHTEYNGART 2023: 20). The dream of discourse on the internet free from domination – dreamed of by its pioneers and claimed by Jürgen Habermas to be the essential moral-theoretical factor in a lively, working democracy – has now become a nightmare.

Yet the internet does serve up all the basic ingredients for discourse free from domination. After all, digitalization brings with it a wealth of opportunities. Empowered citizens are no longer limited to receiving media – they can become broadcasters themselves. The fight for press freedom in England in the 18th century centered around the desire to be allowed to report from parliament. Today, we all have access to many original sources that were long reserved for insiders, politicians, academics, and journalists. Without leaving our sofas, we can consume media from all over the world and talk to people all over the world (as long as we speak the relevant language or use translation programs). We have more freedom than ever before when it comes to choosing our sources of information. So free that we run the risk of drowning in the flood of information.

While in the past we needed a service provider to seek out issues and sources, today we must act as pearl divers, picking out issues and information that is truly relevant in order to adequately fulfil our role as citizens. Artificial intelligence (AI) can help with this search, but how much do we want it to decide for us?

The increasing use of AI is exacerbating another challenge: When the lines between people and machines, fact and fake become so blurred that it becomes almost impossible to differentiate between true and false, we have to rely on belief. And that would be the end of enlightenment.

The conclusion we must come to is sobering. Digitalization first debunked and then destroyed the (sometimes effective, sometimes less effective) symbiosis between journalism and society. Debunked because the media audience that became empowered through digitalization was suddenly able not only to become broadcasters themselves and spread their information directly to others largely without limits, but also to examine the work of journalists more easily. In doing so, they discovered something that they should have known all along: Journalism is not objective. It selects, weights, and conceals information, makes mistakes, and sometimes pursues its own agenda. The accusation of the lying press suddenly seemed more plausible, in part because many of those shouting it so loudly neglect to mention that those making the accusation have put lies and falsehoods at the heart of their own program. And that they are fighting independent media because they fear its power to enlighten.

With so much chaos all around, the grand master of communication theory, Jürgen Habermas, felt driven to intervene from his retirement home by Bavaria's Starnberger See.

»An entire democratic system is damaged when the infrastructure of the public sphere is no longer able to direct the attention of the citizens to the issues that require decision-making, nor to guarantee the formation of competing public spheres, i.e., *qualitatively filtered* opinions. [...] It is therefore not a choice of political direction, but a necessity under constitutional law, to maintain a media structure that enables the inclusive character of the public sphere and a deliberative character in the process of forming opinion and will in the public sphere.« (HABERMAS 2022: 65-67^[7])

Professional journalism is a public service. That is why it is protected under Article 5 of the German Basic Law. But this is only justified if it succeeds in its most important task: to enlighten civil society such that it is able to fulfil its role in democracy. But what if it no longer wants to? For younger generations in particular, newspapers, especially local newspapers, are now barely relevant. They get their information from digital platforms (TikTok, YouTube, Instagram). It would be fascinating to investigate where the sources of the news they consume there are. My personal, but not representative, experience with students allows me to present the working hypothesis that many traces lead back to traditional media after all.

4. Society and politics in the digital culture

Time for a change in perspective; a look at society. It has become a truism to say that the state and society are suffering multiple crises. The first tremor was the bursting of the dot-com bubble and the terrorist attacks on the USA on September 11, 2001. The German Chancellor at the time was Gerhard Schröder. Almost all of Angela Merkel's tenure as Chancellor was spent in crisis mode: The financial crisis, the Euro crisis, the refugee crisis, Putin's invasion of Crimea, flight and unplanned migration, Afghanistan, Syria, Donald Trump's first term as president, Covid-19, the surge of right-wing populism around the world and in Germany all preceded Olaf Scholz' premiership – not to mention climate change, digitalization, and China's increasing dominance on the world stage.

The world we were used to is foundering, the future is unclear, and the best we can do about many problems is manage them. Yet the public expects policymakers to solve the problems quickly, with as little change as possible, and, above all, without no losses for anybody. Angela Merkel was an expert in making us believe

7 First published in: SEELIGER, MARTIN; SEVIGNANI, SEBASTIAN (eds.) (2021): *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Sonderband 37 der Berliner Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft Leviathan. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

that she had everything under control, even though, as we now know, many things were ignored and, as a result, some challenges have since resurfaced even greater than before. »You know me« was the slogan that won her elections, albeit with decreasing majorities. It was given the name »asymmetrical demobilization.« To many, Olaf Scholz appeared her logical successor in this regard.

But this is only part of the truth. Looking at the 2021 election results, it was already clear that society was just as divided as the »traffic light« coalition they had elected. Modern liberal societies, especially those with high levels of immigration, are not homogeneous communities, but complex and therefore fragile constructs. Sociologist Andreas Reckwitz first diagnosed a society of singularities (cf. RECKWITZ 2017) and then a new class society (cf. GERWIEN 2018), dominated by a new middle class – highly educated and largely urban – that benefits from globalization and values personal fulfilment and quality of life highly. This middle class squeezes out the old middle class of the industrial age, which had stronger regional roots and valued order, discipline, and status. This process of squeezing out triggers experiences of devaluation and fear of loss, which are discharged in the form of conflict and offer populists a wide range of business models for their »entrepreneurship of loss« (cf. JAKOBS 2023).

In addition, there is a growing service sector proletariat, who have very limited opportunities for upward mobility. This group includes many migrants, making their integration more difficult and leading to further conflict. Multi-ethnic societies like Germany also import international and revive nationally suppressed historical conflicts. With models of society as vulnerable as this, their complexity and fragility are indisputable. Societies like this need to constantly renegotiate their common ground with themselves in difficult processes – assuming that such common ground is possible at all.

This is the explosive situation with which Olaf Scholz was confronted from the very day he took office, along with sky-high expectations and latent mistrust. Modern consumer citizens expect everything from policymakers, but do not trust them an inch. Scholz was equipped for this mission with the smallest voter mandate of any Chancellor since 1945 – and with two coalition partners whose goals could not be more different. With majorities like that, the let's-do-it Chancellor that many wished for would quickly become the »Vati« described in the song *Vatis Argumente* by Franz-Josef Degenhardt, in which the father is permanently furious at realizing that no-one takes him seriously anymore.

The traffic light coalition's analysis must have seen all this coming before they embarked on their adventure. It is worth remembering the selfie they took to document their resolve. In his book *Mehr Zuversicht wagen* [Daring to be more optimistic], Hamburg's Culture Minister Carsten Brosda has an idea of what they needed to achieve, and refers to the co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, Alicia Garza:

»The individual groups are now too small to relate only to themselves and to sense solidarity through similarity and identity. What matters is building alliances across differences, because we are all affected by similar challenges. We need political movements that can bear complexity. This is the only way for us to learn how to reach one another, even if it makes us feel uneasy.« (BROSDA 2023: 323)

What matters, therefore, is to use dissent constructively in order to find new solutions.

Then came Putin's invasion of Ukraine – the *Zeitenwende*, the change in times, diagnosed by Olaf Scholz. It not only laid waste to the post-war global order, but also shook the foundations of the promise of prosperity. The story told by all reformers – that the hard work involved in the process of change would be followed by a better, successful future, became implausible. And the Chancellor's mantra that the country was on the right path, became strangely surreal, not least given the technical errors and exhibition fights within his coalition. The result is a mood that makes the real situation sound worse than it is.

This coalition failed because of a fight about the state finances. Yet a key cause is probably also its failure to develop a unified position for dealing with the »Empörium.« The clearer it became that the challenges of today can no longer be handled using the German carnival motto »good to all, harm to none,« the harder the steady hand of the Chancellor of few words clashed with his coalition partners' impatient wrangling for position and the excessive expectations of many citizens. Writing checks in order to form alliances across differences, as called for by Brosda, is no longer possible, not least following the Constitutional Court's ruling on the federal budget on November 15, 2023.

But this paper is intended to look not at the state of politics, but at the development of media and journalism. Situations like the one we face today require journalism that separates what is truly relevant from agitation and sensitivities, describes complex situations carefully, and uses words to disarm and objectivize the fiery public debates.

The reality goes the other way. Media that stare at what their users want and (have to?) exaggerate in order to be heard, reinforce concerns and aggressions rather than rationalizing them through objective enlightenment. They pillory and become alarmist, thus reinforcing the hysteria in political debate. They also support the consumer attitude of the citizens, who demand that policymakers solve problems quickly. All this results in the frustration with politicians and democracy that is then proven in opinion polls in order to be complained about. French author Silvain Tesson described the result for his country so fittingly that the lines even found their way into the second part of the comedy film *Monsieur Claude*: »France is a paradise inhabited by people who believe they are in hell« (quoted in KUPER 2022). The same could be said for Germany.

So are »the media« at fault yet again? This kind of knee-jerk polemics does not do justice to the seriousness of the situation, nor does it help in the search for solutions. Many people and many things have played their part in the current situation, most of them driven rather than drivers. The question of »whose fault it is« merely results in everyone pointing to everyone else.

I have an image in my mind. It shows politics as an enormous mobile in which numerous contradictions have to be balanced with one another. Freedom and security are one of the pairs; individuality and solidarity another. There are thousands of these pairs. The task is made even more difficult by the fact that, every time one tries to balance one pair, something else that one had not even considered suddenly becomes imbalanced.

Many of us are lucky enough to have been born at a time in which this balancing act was successful – in part because we outsourced the risks and side-effects of our prosperity, or pushed them to the back of our minds. We lived in stable, peaceful conditions for decades and forgot that, in historical terms, this is the exception rather than the rule. All too often, a wind of change blew and stirred up the mobile.

We are in a phase like this now. We face multiple crises, most of which cannot be solved, but merely managed. We are in the middle of transformation processes in which there will not only be winners. We have a political system in which voters' party loyalty is becoming ever weaker, and the parties are therefore tempted to play on »trigger points« to gain attention, as sociologist Steffen Mau and others have analyzed (cf. MAU/LUX/WESTHEUSER 2023). And we have media where even the reputable outlets exaggerate, emotionalize, personalize, and scandalize in order to be heard above the rising noise of the digital public sphere. At the same time, it is clear that we will not be able to tackle these challenges with citizens focused on consumption and rage, with populist or even opinion poll-driven policymaking that does good to all and harm to none, with an economy that puts profit above morals, or with media that see themselves as part of consumer culture.

So far, I have analyzed what is going wrong and what does not help, and made use of the privilege of doom-mongering behind which academics and journalists sometimes ensconce themselves. But it is only possible to draw the right conclusions if one asks the right questions and is careful to observe and describe reality accurately – even if that sometimes makes one a Cassandra, like Andreas Reckwitz, who wrote in *Handelsblatt* in August 2023 that, without growing prosperity, western democracies were at risk of implosion (cf. JAKOBS 2023).

It is high time to plant an apple tree. Not because there is suddenly cause for optimism. As the philosopher Susan Neiman argued in an analysis in *Zeit* in early January 2024, referring to Immanuel Kant, who would have celebrated his 300th birthday on April 22, 2024: »Optimism is not hope. Optimism is failure to recognize the facts. Hope aims to change facts« (NEIMAN 2024).

5. How can the situation be rescued?

What can be done to counter the crisis in the liberal public sphere that threatens democracy? Or, to put it another way: How can the digital public sphere be civilized? There is no silver bullet. We must not trust anyone who offers us one. Every level of politics and society must play its part.

Let's start with politics. Policymakers face the challenge of not only defining rules for the major digital platforms, but enforcing them, too. These platforms are based in the USA or China, are active worldwide, and, if in doubt, do not feel responsible for the content they carry. Data also flows all over the world and is usually saved on servers outside Europe. Yet policymakers must still define rules. In order to be taken seriously, they should do this at least at a European level. The EU has therefore passed various laws, including the 2022 Digital Services Act, which came into full force in mid-February 2024.

Yet the fight to delete hate speech and fakes is just one example that demonstrates how difficult it is to enforce rules like this. Platform operators have an obligation to check for hate speech and fakes, react to reports of it, and act. but what can the law do when the companies, as in the case of the Russian-dominated messenger service Telegram, are based in Malta and simply do not react to legal rulings? When the internet giants ally themselves with power at the start of Donald Trump's second term as President and either fight or simply ignore all regulation? When, as in the case of Twitter, now X, owner Elon Musk himself spreads hate and fake news? Insiders describe how X has become an unpleasant, inhospitable place (cf. e.g., KÜHL 2023; N.N. 2023b; COHEN 2023). But it is a central marketplace for communication between policymakers and professional media.

One could follow the conflict between the primacy of politics and the rule of law on the one hand and the audacity of libertarian turbo-capitalists on the other with interest – if it did not have the potential to put an end to constitutional democracy. However, the front lines are not always as clear-cut as we saw in the struggle over rules for artificial intelligence in Europe, for example. After all, at stake are markets worth billions and the threat of dependency on the USA and China. Policymakers and the law thus face extremely difficult considerations and debates. We as a society should share in this responsibility. Society as a whole must overcome its media puberty and grow up. Every individual must play their part in this.

Education could help. Today, we conduct our lives in the media and are – perhaps – able to use them, but we have not mastered them. We do not need to explain to our children and grandchildren how the technology works. They are far ahead of us there. What is missing is *media education*. The first step would be training for school and kindergarten teachers, as well as massive investment in technology and staff for schools, and adding dealing with the opportunities

and risks to the interdisciplinary curriculum. The federal and state ministries have known this for a long time. But shockingly little has been done. We are still discussing basic questions, while AI applications are developing at lightning pace and the next tsunami is coming.

What needs to change in the media? Nothing less than their fundamental attitude. Media that see themselves as an instrument of consumer culture are part of the problem, not the solution. They need to become more political, not least in order to enable them to force policymakers to become more reputable. Being the loudest to shout ›scandal‹ does not deserve attention; facing up to the complexity of the challenges and attempting to understand and explain it do. In this light, the discussions about the German Buildings Energy Act – Minister for the Economy Robert Habeck's ›heating hammer‹ – and about the Federal Constitutional Court's ruling on the limit on public debt were low points in the public discourse.

Media also need to become more local. Democracy lives from the bottom up. Those who want democracy need to live it. One key reason for the decline in the major political parties is the loss of their local base. They have become anonymous companies, influenced more by political advisors and opinion polls than by lively discussion with their base – if they even still have one.

Regional newspapers, for decades a vital stabilizing force for democracy, are undergoing a similar development. Robbed of their role as the Agora of democracy, many eke out an existence as peddlers of outrage and entertainment. Local issues have always been a place where democracy is learned. When local journalism disappears – and that is happening, even if the marketing wants us to believe otherwise – democracy is damaged. Media therefore need to return to their role as informers, platforms for discussion, and sought-after neighbors. But how?

If it is true that modern societies have difficulty dealing with loss, and that societies like ours probably cannot expect to see their prosperity increase over the next few years, at least not for the broad base, then this society is suffering not least from the loss of positive outlook.

Constructive journalism is therefore a logical response from the sector. But misunderstanding this approach as a call to gloss over the situation would be fatal. What is needed is a return to long-neglected roots. Journalism should not merely look for the negative and describe the problem or failure – it should present the challenges in all their complexity and be involved in the search for solutions. Or for examples of success.

Other potential responses can be seen in the USA, where developments often take place many years before they do in Europe. By observing the USA, we can look into our future and potentially avoid some undesirable developments. Unfortunately, we rarely succeed in this. Large stretches of the USA are now completely devoid of professional local media. But while media companies let more

and more staff go, renowned charities and foundations there are increasing their spending on regional news.

In Ohio, for example, an initiative called Cleveland Documenters has been set up. It pays a small fee to around 600 Clevelanders – not experienced reporters, but curious citizens – to make notes at local government meetings. These are then published online. The initiative does not call this approach journalism, but information. The foundations that fund it are not looking to provide journalism for journalism's sake, but primarily to improve voter turnout. Studies show that turnout falls (along with other forms of civic engagement) when people feel that they do not have enough information. The initiative has now not only given rise to a network in other cities, but has also seen the development of a full news editorial office employing around 25 journalists and four »community listeners,« who gather ideas for stories from a district in which two thirds of people live in poverty.

A similar project is now planned for Indianapolis. Before charitable foundations agreed to provide funding, 1137 people in 79 of the city's 90 districts completed a detailed survey. The most common request voiced was not for detailed reporting on government errors and scandals, but to find out what is happening in their area. Gerry Lanosga, Associate Dean of The Media School at Indiana University: »One way you can avoid needing investigative stories on corruption in government is having regular reporting« (quoted in GREENWELL 2023).

Our ancestors could hardly have put it better when they fought for press freedom. We must not squander this freedom, or democracy itself.

About the author

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