

Research Paper

Jörg-Uwe Nieland / Hektor Haarkötter

Publicity and transformation through the thematization of non-thematization

The German project Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung and its contribution to transformative communication studies

Abstract: Anyone who might be wondering why the discipline of communication studies receives little attention in media in the form of »public scholarship« must critically question the media's function to set thematic agendas, by applying theories and methods inherent in science. For almost 30 years, the Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung (INA) e.V. has been taking on the task to question the media's function to set themes by confronting the influence of AI and disinformation as well as the power of platforms and the powerlessness of recipients and scholarship. In the spirit of transformative public scholarship, the initiative publishes an annual list of severely neglected news topics after joint research and discussion by scientists, journalists and experts. Educating the public about news is here understood and practiced by providing criticism of the lack of thematization and suppression of news and discourse. In this sense, neglected news is also a category of disinformation. This article presents the research findings on »negative news value theory«, »agenda cutting« and »junk news«.

Keywords: News clarification, journalistic self-reflection; agenda cutting, negative news value, junk news

On the occasion of the 300th anniversary of Immanuel Kant's birth, we are reminded of the essence of his reflections on enlightenment: The path »out of self-imposed immaturity« (KANT 1999: 19) firstly presupposes the *public* use of reason and, secondly, must be understood as an *open process* (FRICK 2021: 25). This

fundamental idea of the European Enlightenment can, and indeed should, also be a North Star for media and communication studies (HAARKÖTTER/NIELAND 2018b: 3).

»Public scholarship« as the public use of reason

Enlightenment in times of darkness, to put it somewhat pathetically, remains the noble goal of these efforts. Compared to the conditions in the 17th and 18th centuries, today »ignorance and political bondage are just packaged differently and the stakes are much higher« (BLOOM 2023: 42). This is also because »part of the public is less likely to locate and head for the island of reliable journalism in the ocean of social media« (DE WECK 2024: 180), as the former editor-in-chief of the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* writes. The darkening and growing unease as stated by sociologist Armin Nassehi (NASSEHI 2021: 12) requires counterweights: on the one hand, a *resilient journalism* despite the media crisis, tabloidization and a style of thinking that is far removed from the facts and, on the other hand, a *communication science that is critical, public and transformative*.

The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) of the German government describes transformative research as a »societal search process« that requires acceptance, legitimacy and participation (cited in KRÜGER/MEYEN 2018: 351). According to this understanding, transformative communication studies use scientific means to advocate for socio-political issues. The discipline examines which actors, structures and processes in the field of public communication hinder or promote transformations, in order to strengthen them through specialist public attention and other measures (KRÜGER/MEYEN 2018: 351). A so-called Initiative18, founded in Germany, is campaigning for free, safe and sustainable media to be included and promoted as the 18th sustainability goal in the list of the United Nations' current 17 »development goals« (INITIATIVE18 2024). The Initiative18 sees the extension of the list of goals as a contribution to social transformation, because ensuring the freedom of the press and of broadcasting as well as maintaining media diversity is an essential contribution to sustainable development, especially in light of the power of platforms. For the Initiative18 founders this also especially includes »combating disinformation and harmful content«, which points to the strong role of communication studies to research these phenomena.

In fact, the charter of the association »Public Media and Communication Studies« (2019) also addresses this aspect. Paragraph 9 of this charter states: »[S]ocial stakeholders should be able to participate in the research process«. In this way, public scholarship in the field of media and communication studies should be enabled to »actively participate in addressing social problems and challenges« (KRAINER 2022: 4).

The Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung (INA) e.V. has the programmatic goal of bringing together different parties involved in news production while enabling the participation of different social actors in its daily work. The initiative strives for an open and transformation-oriented dialog between (social) scientists and experts in journalistic practice and the interested and committed public. The INA positions itself against disinformation and networked conspiracy myths that have recently been constructed by artificial intelligence (LUDES 2018a: 17; NIELAND 2022: 3). The initiative also practices active media criticism by combining the perspectives of journalistic self-scrutiny with critique generated by scholarship and the audience (HASEBRINK/BEAUFORT/OEHMER-PEDRAZZI 2021: 451f, 445f.).

The main field of activity of INA is the examination of topics and discourses that are neglected by news media – in sum: it focuses on the thematization of non-thematization. Despite the positive response that the work of the initiative has received in the scientific community and the media, further cooperation and discussion partners could and should be found, especially in news media and communication studies. The initiative is dependent on such partners, if only to be able to guarantee holding the research seminars at universities and colleges, in which neglected topics and discourses are researched. The constraints of the modularized curriculum and the one-sided research orientation of many institutes and individual academics make it difficult for INA to achieve a wider network. This is reason enough to present the initiative, its aspirations, its working methods and the findings of its accompanying research on intelligence gathering in this article and thus to promote the involvement of further colleagues from various disciplines. Above all, it serves to fulfill the (interdisciplinary) claim of critical, transformative scholarship. Hence, this essay not only addresses public, transformative scholarship, but also aims to contribute to the public sphere itself, or to create, enlarge and expand it. In sum, this essay embodies the topics that it focuses on.

The role of communication studies in times of crisis

Changes and crises, to which modern societies are exposed to with increasing frequency, challenge the social sciences. At least three different measures are required to deal with this phenomenon, which has already been identified as a »multi-crisis« situation (BRÜNING 2024: 176): First, diagnoses are needed that start from ideal and typical concepts to then discuss theoretical proposals, and are based on quantitative and qualitative studies. Second, it is important to assess whether only the sciences or also society have the resources and structures to describe and master changes and crises. Third, it is necessary to create and participate public discourse on how to face changes and crises (cf. DICKEL 2020: 79). According to Nassehi (2020:

33), crises challenge various control mechanisms in a society, which are intended to maintain continuity in a discontinuous world.

In light of the serious challenges posed not only by the climate crisis but also by the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the principles of democracy – such as political equality, the rule of law, the separation of powers, the protection of minorities and participation – are under threat (KRÜGER/MEYEN 2018: 349). It is therefore necessary to reflect on what impact this has on the role of the media in the public and what it means for the quality of democratic media (EISENEGGER/UDRIS 2021: 93ff.). In addition, the question arises as to how the changing demands on the media's observation and communication performance can be met (BEAUFORT 2021: 71).

First and foremost, the discipline of communication studies has to deal with the changes and crises in the media and journalism. Here it is necessary to discuss whether journalism, or which parts (sectors etc.) of it, are in crisis (cf. WEISCHENBERG 2018: 4), which ways out of the crisis are proposed and which actors are needed for that purpose. Roger de Weck (2024: 150ff.) suggests understanding »journalism more as a project than a product«.

From a communication studies perspective, questions about the working conditions and the understanding of the role of journalists, media quality (RIEDL 2024: 68), the concentration and empowerment of media structures driven primarily by the platforms, media ethics, media literacy and the media performance of the audience are becoming virulent. According to de Weck (2024: 106), we find ourselves »in a public sphere of compliant followers shaped by anti-deliberative algorithms.«

The increase in »bullshit« and disinformation (FRANKFURT 2006), cancel culture and »moral panic« (HÜBL 2024a) as well as hate call for transformative communication studies. Initial proposals for dealing with this development are available and deserve more attention both in specialist discussions and in public discourse (HÜBL 2024b; KRAMP/WEICHERT 2024). Additionally, there are issues associated with datafication and automation. Not only is the use of AI increasing rapidly, but legal and, above all, media ethics issues are largely unresolved.

This is where the discipline of communication studies as public scholarship is called upon. The discipline must become visible and audible with its theoretical debates, methods, findings and also its representatives – driven by an appreciation of representatives of media outlets and communication studies scholars as critical experts who seek answers to social challenges and create interventions (KRAINER 2022: 5).

Communication studies, which has recently been criticized for hardly intervening in the public debate, should engage with developments outside its own discipline to avoid the danger of navel-gazing (cf. KRÜGER/MEYEN 2018: 353f.). Currently, such developments would be social processes that are not limited to

the supposed »overwhelmed society«, but above all the rise of populism and the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. Risks, crises and conflicts are not only a challenge in media reporting. They are central to communication studies because their central role in democracy is at stake (RITZI 2014). At the moment, »populism and the expansive ›tabloidism« form an »alliance that maximizes the electorate or user base through provocation and the management of fears and excitement« (DE WECK 2024: 13). Speculating with attention (HENDRICKS/VESTERGAARD 2018) is clearly on the rise. This speculation is based on the principle that frequently clicked topics create information bubbles through self-reinforcement, which function in a similar way to economic speculative bubbles. Hypes cause topics to become overvalued and receive too much attention, similar to real estate or shares. The more attention they already have, the more additional attention they attract. Meta-discussions in the media – when news outlets do not report on the events themselves but on comments on social media about events – further increase these information bubbles. The reason for this is obvious: This information is available for free and can easily generate additional attention (HÜBL 2024b: 59).

Simply demanding that communication studies play a greater role in the public sphere is not enough. Communication scholars should not wait until they are asked, but – together – proactively ask existing initiatives such as the aforementioned association »Public Media and Communication Studies« or the INA about the structural reasons and blockages why media and communication scholars are *not* asked.

Why intelligence?

Educating the public about news dynamics is linked to the basic attitude of the Enlightenment and is particularly explosive in view of the current media transformation, because »the fight against overly convenient stories [...] is more important today than ever, because the colorful illusory worlds are pumped with ever greater efficiency into the brains of primates that have not been prepared for them by evolution and are hopelessly overwhelmed and oversaturated« (BLOOM 2023: 39).

This sense of being overwhelmed, in combination with a changing in media use behavior and the polarization of the audience, is reflected in a decline in trust in the media. The public feels increasingly insecure about the objectivity and independence of reporting; in some cases turning away from and even refusing news can be observed. A long-term study by a research team in Mainz, Germany, shows a slight decline in media trust in 2022: 44% of the German population trust the media, while 31% describe their trust as only »partly, partly« (QUIRING et al.: 2). In Germany, trust in public broadcasters tends to be higher

than in online media and private media, with younger generations taking a more critical stance (QUIRING et al. 2024: 4–5). The study emphasizes that factors such as political attitudes, the use of social media and personal experiences with news sources influence trust. It also found that trust is strongly dependent on political orientation: People with a critical attitude towards the establishment tend to trust the media less. In particular, the perception of fake news and the polarization of the public debate contribute to skepticism. In Austria, the picture is similar: Trust in the media is declining, although here too, public service media perform better than private media outlets (HASEBRINK/BEAUFORT/OEHMER-PEDRAZZI 2021: 455f.). Overall, the findings make it clear that there is an urgent need for action to restore and strengthen trust in the media.

Journalists are therefore called upon to explain their (democratic) mission, their working methods, routines and decisions – even and especially when they are vilified as members of an alleged »system media« or a supposed »lying press«. As journalist Stefan Niggemeier (2016: 8) puts it, journalists are forced to »go where it hurts, they have to know what they are accused of, [...] have to give an account, [...] argue, explain and [...] argue.« Moreover, this type of professional self-scrutiny is taking place under difficult conditions as advancing digitalization and, above all, the establishment of social media platforms are changing the way journalism works, noticeably restricting journalists' scope for action (see WEISCHENBERG 2018; HANITZSCH/SEETHALER/WYSS 2019; V. ENGELBRECHTEN-ILOW 2023).

News education requires an examination of the changed structure of the public sphere. While the structural change of the public sphere diagnosed by Jürgen Habermas at the beginning of the 1960s (HABERMAS 1990) resulted in increased power dynamics of the political public sphere, the »new structural change of the public sphere« (HABERMAS 2022; cf. IMHOF 2006; 2011) has been leading to a democratic public sphere that is becoming unbalanced (RITZI 2021). This process is taking place due to an increase in the dissemination of unverified, incomplete or even false information, which also exposes journalism to »toxic rhetoric« (WEISCHENBERG 2018). This development is driven by the deceptions and lies spread by populist politicians such as Trump, Putin and Orban. Attacks on media freedom and propaganda have been an issue not only since the war in Ukraine, and the quality of public debate has suffered considerably as a result of hate speech, shitstorms and conspiracy stories (see RUSS-MOHL 2017; 2020; FRICK 2023). According to Peter Ludes, the side effects of globalization and digitalization often lead to the breach of communication rules and civilizational standards: »Digitally formatted social networks spread organized opinion power more easily than ever before and promote coordination and cooperation, even for the most trivial purposes« (LUDES 2018b: 1). These spirals of banalization can be interpreted as processes

of de-traditionalization or obscuration (9). Media criticism and news education should actively oppose this banalization and brutalization (NIELAND 2022: 4).

In the meantime, there are increasing signs that it is no longer just a question of structural change, but of structural destruction. The business model of the (traditional) media has eroded. The consequences are fatal. Roger de Weck (2024: 159) quotes Penny Abernathy, head of a Medill study, on the effects in so-called media deserts: »Firstly, voter turnout is declining. Secondly, corruption in politics and business increases, and taxes go up [...]. Thirdly, disinformation and misinformation spread more widely.«

The aim of INA's work

Without comprehensive freedom of opinion and speech, (news) enlightenment is not possible (PÖTTKER 2016). News education fights against all forms of disinformation. In addition to the dissemination of fake news, agenda cutting – which is understood as the deliberate obstruction of stories and discourse in the public sphere – is also a practice of disinformation. Therefore, any form of news education is based on a realistic recognition of facts and realities that constitute a shared world in which different opinions and perspectives are not only accepted but also given space to develop. News enlightenment connects the world of news with the realm of social and political enlightenment. News journalism prepares the facts of the world and makes them generally available to the media in recognized forms of presentation (HAARKÖTTER 2015: 176). For this reason, social enlightenment, journalistic reporting and democracy are inextricably linked. In the form of constructive criticism of journalism, news education aims to point out negative developments in a society structured by media and to identify potentials for improvement to increase the quality of media and discourse.

The INA's media criticism takes place on two levels: as journalistic self-criticism and as external criticism from an academic perspective or from the perspective of the audience (HAARKÖTTER 2020: 99).

The initiative endeavors to name socially and politically relevant topics and discourses that are ignored or neglected in the media, thus promoting a critical public.

The Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung e.V. (INA): role models, history and working methods

In the United States, two major political scandals in the 1970s – the Pentagon Papers and Watergate – provided the impetus for founding »Project Censored«

in 1976. Since then, critical academics and journalists have been pursuing the mission »to promote critical media literacy, independent journalism, and democracy« (www.projectcensored.org/#ourmission). The project focuses its work on three pressing problems, namely the »Lack of Critical Media Literacy«, the »Concentration of Media Ownership« and the »Limited Access to Trustworthy Information.« The Project then offers three »solutions«: first, »Free Press, Media Literacy, and a Democratic Self-Government«, second, »Countering Misinformation and Disinformation« and third, »Making Educational Materials Available«. The following quote from the extensive catalog of measures provides an insight into the critical and educational work of Project Censored:

»We promote public awareness of, trust in, and support for independent news sources that provide meaningful alternatives to corporate news reporting. Our promotion of independent journalism includes tools for educators and the general public to enhance peoples' critical media literacy skills, and therefore enrich each persons' interactions with news media« (www.projectcensored.org/#ourwork).

In addition to the website, the newsletter and a podcast, the extensive year-books document the work (see currently ROTH/HUFF 2024).

Inspired by the work of Project Censored, the Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung (INA) was launched at the University of Siegen, Germany, in 1997 (LUDES/SCHANZE 1999; HAARKÖTTER/NIELAND 2018b: 3; NIELAND 2022: 4). Similar to the mission of Project Censored, INA sees its task as publishing neglected topics on an annual basis (<http://www.derblindefleck.de/top-themen/>). Specifically, a jury consisting of academics, journalists and students select the »Top Ten Forgotten News«. The jury's work is based on topic suggestions on neglected news and research protocols that are created in courses at various universities in German-speaking countries. The proposals come from the general public, NGOs, academia, journalists and participants in research seminars (NIELAND 2022: 5). Topics are submitted via the initiative's website (<http://www.derblindefleck.de/thema-einreichen/>). Recently, INA typically receives 70 to 90 serious topic suggestions per year. In the courses at the universities, the individual topics are subjected to a multi-stage review process. The first step is »fact checking«. This »fact-checking« involves contacting the submitter to find out the background of the submission and initial relevant sources. Then, the social relevance of the topic is determined: Who is or could be affected by the topic and to what extent. In the third step, a media analysis is carried out. Queries in relevant databases provide information about the extent to which the topic has been neglected by the media. This step is supplemented by interviews with journalists, academics, representatives of NGOs and other experts who give their assessment of all three steps (fact-checking, determining relevance and identifying neglect) and, ideally, name further sources and contacts (cf. HAARKÖTTER 2016: 368; NIELAND 2022: 5).

The subsequent meeting of the INA jury to select the »Top Ten Forgotten News« not only serves to generate publicity, but is itself a form of public scholarship. The composition of the jury brings together scholars and practicing journalists who are actively involved in public relations work and thus contribute to the desired publicity. For instance, the newsroom of the national public broadcaster Deutschlandfunk has been a permanent media partner of INA and is regularly involved in researching and selecting the Top Ten. The list is then published in a joint press conference with the Deutschlandfunk, which refers to the newly selected Top Ten in its main news programs. The success of INA is measurable: A significant proportion of new topic suggestions from the public in turn are submitted via the Deutschlandfunk website or e-mail address. Public scholarship is therefore a central design principle of INA.

The selection and announcement of the »Top Ten Forgotten News« is also flanked by events and publications on the causes of the neglect and suppression of news (see LUDS/SCHANZE 1999; PÖTTKER/SCHULZKI-HADDOUTI 2007; HAARKÖTTER/NIELAND 2018a). Since 2015, INA has also been organizing the »Cologne Forum for Journalism Criticism« in cooperation with Deutschlandfunk to initiate a dialogue between journalists, academics, civil society groups and the interested public (see <http://www.derblindefleck.de/koelner-forum-fuer-journalismuskritik/>). For instance, at the 8th Cologne Forum the topics »Power, media and people: How does communication succeed in a crisis?« and »Between criticism, polemics and agitation: How to talk about the Middle East?« were discussed. Additionally, the »Günter Wallraff Prize for Freedom of the Press and Human Rights« is awarded at this event (see <http://www.derblindefleck.de/guenter-wallraff-preis/>), which has achieved a high level of visibility and thus also promotes interest in other INA topics (NIELAND 2022: 5). Winners in 2019 included the European Journalism Observatory (EJO) and the Saudi Arabian blogger and human rights activist Raif Badawi. In 2022, Julian Assange, co-founder of the Wikileaks whistleblowing platform, was honored for his commitment to research and civil courage (NIELAND 2022: 6), and in 2023, human rights activist Alexei Navalny, who has since died in a Russian gulag, received the award. In 2024, INA honored two women's peace initiatives in the Middle East – the Israeli »Women Wage Peace« and the Palestinian »Women of the Sun« – for their peace work, which is reflected, among other things, in joint appearances. (<http://www.derblindefleck.de/guenter-wallraff-preis/>). The prize is not only an award »against forgetting«, but is also intended to keep the memory of the victims of violence alive.

In order to strengthen the international focus of INA, the initiative has been participating in the Global Media Forum of Germany's broadcaster Deutsche Welle since 2022 (NIELAND 2022: 6). As part of the Global Media Forum 2024 (www.dw.com/de/global-media-forum-medien-unter-druck/a-69333040), INA

organized a panel entitled »Covering the global south: Western media and agenda cutting« together with colleagues from Project Censored and the »Network Global South in the Media«, which campaigns for greater visibility of the Global South in the media. In addition, cooperation with Project Censored will be intensified, including through joint publications, events and the publication of a list of the top five internationally neglected news stories from 2023 (NIELAND 2022: 6).

The activities of INA, which have been briefly listed, pursue a dual objective: in addition to the core task of identifying forgotten, neglected and suppressed topics, the aim is to create publicity in order to draw attention to political and social discourses that otherwise receive little attention or represent an alternative perspective to the mainstream. The principle of public scholarship is anchored in many ways in INA's statutes, structure and staff composition.

Contributions to theoretical debates in communication science

With its publication series »Media – Enlightenment – Criticism«, INA aims to intervene in both, communication studies and social debates, and contributes to the development of theory and the discussion of methods in the field. Three areas of current research activities are outlined below.

Negative news value theory

Analyses and discussions on news selection and news neglect, which were primarily conducted during INA's jury sessions, resulted in a fundamental critique of news value theory. It is well known that news value theory has a long tradition and has been intensively discussed and further developed in recent decades. While the approach is often used uncritically today and the news factors are often used as an orientation catalog in journalistic training, the founders of the news value approach pursued a media-critical intention. The peace researchers Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge (1965) asked why significant international conflicts such as the Congo, Cuba or Cyprus crises received so little media attention. Based on their analysis, they called for news factors to be avoided as a journalistic guide wherever possible (cf. HAARKÖTTER 2016: 370).

INA also investigates the reasons for the low level of attention paid to certain topics and suggests that the news value approach should also be viewed substractively and reinterpreted as a negative news value theory: The more news factors are subtracted from an event, the more difficult it becomes for this event to be perceived as news (HAARKÖTTER 2016: 370; 2020: 98; NIELAND 2022: 6).

Numerous studies based on the news value approach show that journalistic reporting overrepresents prominent actors, national or regional events, confirms

stereotypical expectations and overemphasizes violent, controversial or value-violating facts (cf. with a critical interpretation GERHARDS 1991: 25; SCHICHA 2007: 27f.).

With medialization and digitalization, attention management techniques are gaining in importance. The result is a pronounced focus on individuals and an increase in the staging of conflicts and scandal communication (IMHOF 2006: 198f.). This development challenges critical communication science: the negative news value theory refers to both individual and institutional decisions in journalism. Many people working in science and research have had experience with this negative news value theory, as their topics and issues often do not match the simple standards of news factors (NIELAND 2022: 7). Public relations work in science therefore also means dealing with negative news value theory and deriving insights for one's own scientific publication practice. INA is doing pioneering work in this area.

Agenda cutting

Another important area of research of INA focuses on criticizing the agenda-setting approach. This concept, which is well established both theoretically and empirically, states that the media have the power to set topics. In contrast, little research has been done on the reverse process. The term »agenda cutting« was first mentioned by Wober and Gunter in a book on *Television and Social Control* (1988). It stands to reason that where topics are actively addressed, topics are also deliberately excluded from the agenda. The interesting question in communication studies is whether this process is involuntary or deliberate – in other words, whether the agenda is also influenced by the deliberate omission of certain topics.

Relatedly, Colistra (2008) distinguishes three forms of agenda cutting: first, prioritizing topics low on the news agenda; second, removing topics from the agenda after they have been placed; and third, ignoring topics from the outset. Buchmeier (2020) emphasizes the »epistemic dilemma« in the investigation of missing content and argues that agenda cutting is an intentional act that focuses on relevant and controversial topics (for the whole section, see HAARKÖTTER 2023).

Although agenda cutting receives less attention in research than agenda setting, empirical studies prove its existence and effects. These show that Western media often neglect entire regions, such as the Global South, as well as specific topics such as human rights violations and corruption.

Ludescher (2023) documents a strong marginalization of countries of the Global South in news broadcasts such as the German flagship newscast *Tageschau*, which intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Schuler (2023) reveals how the Bertelsmann media group uses strategic agenda cutting to

prevent unwelcome research by filtering critical reports and manipulating editorial offices. Krüger, Beuthner and Endt (2024) emphasize the importance of freedom of the press and academic freedom for critical reporting. Their study shows that legal strategies such as strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPPs) influence reporting and create a »chilling effect« that puts the public at a disadvantage.

This is where the work of the INA/News Enlightenment Initiative begins. It argues that »investigative journalistic (and in some cases also scientific) research can counteract agenda cutting and thus contribute to (journalistic) criticism and news clarification.« (HAARKÖTTER/NIELAND 2023b: 7).

Junk news

Tabloid journalism and diverse (journalistic?) entertainment offered in legacy media as well as the so-called social media are hardly dealt with in German-speaking communication studies. This is surprising, as entertainment programs have exploded in recent years and the public desires an overview over both, information and entertainment. The assessment of quality (see ARNOLD 2008 and most recently RIEDL 2024) in the media must therefore also be extended to entertainment programs. In an era in which disinformation and »digital demagoguery« (FUCHS 2018) are increasingly jeopardizing journalistic reporting, the audience is finding it increasingly difficult to distinguish between curiosities, trivia and relevance. Such a distinction is the central pillar of news clarification and is becoming increasingly important, especially in the context of »junk news« (FENTON 2009). The term goes back to Carl Jensen, the founder of Project Censored (cf. JENSEN 2001: 251). In an analogy to »junk food«, it refers to easily digestible and less relevant news stories with no journalistic nutritional value. Venterini (2019: 129) describes the dangers of these lurid stories and superficial reports: »Junk news« is dangerous not because it is false, but because it saturates public debate, leaving little space for other discussions, reducing the richness of public debate and preventing more important stories from being heard.«

In order to systematically capture the phenomenon of junk news, we propose four manifestations: *First-order junk news – news without substance or relevance:* This news focuses on trivial, private, sensational and scandalous matters with no social relevance. They are exaggerated and easy to consume. *Second-order junk news – social relevance as an empty shell:* This news has high social relevance, but focuses on unimportant aspects such as celebrities without shedding light on the actual relevance. *Third-order junk news – social relevance in small doses:* These reports combine private aspects with socially relevant topics, require greater journalistic care and contain relevant information for many people. *Fourth-order junk news – personal and private aspects as a means of conveying relevant information:* These

reports use the personal and private to convey socially relevant information and have the highest educational value. One example is reports on the involvement of celebrities in social projects.

A rating scale for junk news, similar to the nutritional scoring for food, could be helpful in assessing its journalistic value. Junk news requires investment both in media literacy to develop »bullshit resistance« (HÜBL 2024b) and in journalism and the training of journalists.

Conclusion: More light for news clarification

In view of the massive disruption to social discourse and cohesion, media criticism and news education are essential. The INA/News Enlightenment Initiative addresses and reflects on journalistic decisions, routines and processes with regard to »clarification and clarification, showing and not showing« (LUDES 2007: 75) because the continued existence of democracy, the rule of law and individual freedoms depend on reliable information, freedom of opinion and critical reflection.

The INA/News Enlightenment Initiative strives for »constructive journalism criticism«, which aims to create public awareness and to contribute to a social transformation towards more news justice and media literacy through the results of both scientific and (citizen) journalistic research. These efforts are based on the identification of negative developments and threats as well as the identification of optimization possibilities (HAARKÖTTER 2020: 99). INA advocates for a different kind of journalism that goes beyond mere criticism. It also calls on the field of critical communication studies to »reflect on its social conditions and thus also its social function« (NIELAND 2022: 4).

In light of current crises – such as the jolting of the autonomy of nation-states, the vulnerability and weakness of global markets and questions of cultural affiliation and asymmetry between different milieus and genders that have been intensified by digitalization (NASSEHI 2020: 36) – it is necessary to conduct multidimensional research based on democratic theory. On the one hand, such research should evaluate how perceptions are changing in regard to what is seen as normative quality of democratic media. On the other hand, it is important to investigate the extent to which these perceptions are reflected in the information offered and in the changing expectations of users (BEAUFORT 2021: 71).

Digitalization and algorithmization harbor the risk of social and dis-social media accelerating collective myths and thus creating new perceptual constraints (NIELAND 2022: 9). This leads to reshaping cohesion and exclusion in society (LUDES 2018a: 35). At this point, the democratic-political significance of INA in terms of public media and communication studies becomes clear (KRAINER 2022: 5). On the one hand, the initiative acts publicly as an instance of

social criticism and, on the other hand, transforms this criticism into cooperation with other critical bodies (such as Project Censored, but also media outlets such as Deutschlandfunk and Deutsche Welle) and, finally, supports persecuted journalists, journalist organizations and civil society groups (especially through the public awarding of the Günter Wallraff Prize) by making them visible and supporting them.

In line with Beaufort's call (2021: 74), the initiative motivates and activates journalists, academics, civil society groups and citizens to participate in open discourse, form networks and call on the media to »reflect the diversity of real social conditions and contribute to strengthening social cohesion«.

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