Journalism Research

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2025 | Vol. 8 (2) **www.journalistik.online**

HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

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Journalism Research
(Journalistik. Zeitschrift für Journalismusforschung)

2025, Vol. 8 (2)

http://www.journalistik.online

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Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the Presse-Haus NRZ Foundation in Essen for their kind support. We would also like to thank the Ludwig-Delp-Foundation for financially supporting the translations in this issue.

Publisher

Herbert von Halem Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG
Boisseréestr. 9-11
50674 Köln
Phone: +49(0)221-9258290
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E-Mail: info@halem-verlag.de

Represented by:
Herbert von Halem Verlagsges. mbH
Executive Director: Herbert von Halem
Registration Court: Köln
Registration No.: HRB 25647

Registration:
Registered in Commercial Register.
Registration Court: Köln
Register No.: HRA 13409

VAT-ID:
VAT-ID-No. according to §27a Umsatzsteuergesetz:
DE 172 714 183

Journalism Research
2025, Vol 8 (2) pp. 127-129
ISSN 2569-152X

HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

Editorial

Change and compulsion

»I believe that journalism must change,« says Dirk von Gehlen, journalist and director of the SZ Institute, the think tank of the national German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Gabriele Hooffacker and Nicola Moser headline their essay with this sentence from an interview with von Gehlen. He and other experts from academia and practice were asked about how generative language AI is changing journalism and how educational institutions should react to the rapid technological change. The pressure to adapt seems enormous, but the talk of »compelling change« does not necessarily conceal the idea of journalistic practice for more quality, more information and a more democratic public sphere. When editorial offices use AI tools to produce more content faster with fewer staff, efficiency and cost minimization are the top priorities.

Journalism cannot remain as it was, according to the experts. The academic articles and essays in this issue deal with what these changes look like in concrete terms. Jessica Kunert, Luka Simon and Volker Lilienthal use the example of the research network of NDR, WDR – two German public broadcasters – and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* to show how professional journalism is organized today through collaboration and, at the same time, a division of labor in order to enable in-depth research despite fewer financial and human resources. The researchers are particularly interested in work processes and problems of internal communication. Who works on what, who informs whom, what is published and when? These new forms of cooperation between journalists from public and private-commercial media require trust and repeated agreements. They are time-consuming and cost-intensive, but ultimately pay off because scandals are uncovered and those responsible are held accountable. However, research alliances such as that of NDR, WDR and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* are also confronted with accusations of distortion of competition and cross-subsidization.

So-called »charitable« or non-profit journalism operates beyond traditional forms of organization and financing. It is not financed by contributions, sales or advertising, but by donations, memberships and foundation funds. Sebastian Gall and Uwe Krüger look at how to safeguard its independence. Using the

example of the German non-profit newsroom *Correctiv* and its research about the »Potsdam Meeting« of high-ranking AfD politicians, entrepreneurs and neo-Nazis, the authors show how journalistic work financed by donations can have a social impact: Hundreds of thousands demonstrated in Germany against right-wing extremism in January 2024. Nevertheless, the problem of financing journalism remains, and that »non-profit« journalism depends on the willingness of individuals to donate.

So what is reported, which topics does journalism use to reach its audience, and which topics does it neglect? Since 1997, the *Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung* (*News Enlightenment Initiative*) has been analyzing what is not reported or reported too little. It not only names the »Top Ten« neglected topics every year, but also criticizes the structures that lead to non-reporting. In their article, Jörg-Uwe Nieland and Hektor Haarkötter discuss research on the media's thematization function, agenda setting and agenda cutting. They provide information on what makes an event newsworthy and why some news stories do not receive the attention they deserve. The authors see not only journalism, but also journalism studies and communication and media studies as having a duty, calling on their colleagues in the field to provide more public criticism and public scholarship to educate the public.

Enlightenment includes looking beyond the national horizon and addressing, for example, the presidential election in Romania and the situation of the media and political journalism there. Eduard-Claudiu Gross and Tanjev Schultz examine how social media, despite all promises of democratization, spread disinformation during the election campaign and ensured an election victory for the radical right-wing, pro-Russian candidate Călin Georgescu. As a result, the Romanian Constitutional Court ordered a re-run of the election in December 2024, also on suspicion of Russian influence. The use of TikTok by far-right politicians highlighted the disruptive power of digital communication platforms, but also the potential of professional, fact-based reporting. The election victory of moderate candidate Nicușor Dan shows: Media can be a democratic corrective and regain trust through high-quality journalism. But political journalism needs independence from platform and market logic.

Finally, the study by Ella Hackett, Teodora Tavares and Gregory Perreault reminds us that journalism is always also a struggle for representation and recognition. In their analysis of obituaries of US women journalists, the authors show how this particular genre conveys views on what good journalism is and what makes a good journalist. For the most part, the obituary writers pay positive tribute to the courage and non-conformity of the deceased. Overall, the computer-aided analysis of over a thousand obituaries of women journalists reveals a change in the »meta-journalistic discourse« and a different understanding of

journalism: away from a neutral, distanced journalism towards a committed, value-oriented journalism as a place of social negotiation and emancipation.

Hence, journalism is constantly changing; nothing stays the same. However, if we believe that journalism must change, this should not mean that it must become even more data-driven and efficient. It would be better if it were more independent of market constraints, platform logics and technocratic promises of salvation.

The reviews, articles and essays in this issue combine empirical research with theoretical reflection, international perspectives with concrete case studies. They invite you to understand journalistic change, and may they also invite you to actively shape this change. We wish you an inspiring read and look forward to hearing your opinions!

Martina Thiele

Journalistik. Zeitschrift für Journalismusforschung
HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG
Heft 2/2025, S. 130-148
8. Jahrgang
ISSN 2569-152X
DOI: 10.1453/2569-152X-22025-15334-en

Research Paper

Jessica Kunert / Luka Simon / Volker Lilienthal

Cooperation despite competition

Work processes and potentials for conflict in an investigative research network

Abstract: **The journalistic cooperation in the investigative research network of the German public broadcasters NDR and WDR and the national daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* has not yet been scientifically examined with regard to internal work processes (workflows and standards) and possible problems and conflicts (journalistic research, objectives and financing). In this article, we analyze the form of cooperation of the research network on the basis of its structures and degree of organization. We interviewed nine journalists in the network, using qualitative, guided interviews. The results of the internal work processes show that research teams within the network come together to work on specific topics and benefit from each other's qualifications and approaches. In-depth discussions and firm agreements are essential. Problems and conflicts arise mainly from the different levels of human and financial resources required by the newsrooms, as well as from the high organizational effort involved. It is clear that the journalists value the network above all for the variety of topics and the high quality and quantity of the research results. As a form of cooperation, the investigative research network we examined is a success that is supported by a large number of implicit rules. In addition to the internal structures, the accusation of distortion of competition – raised due to the cooperation between two public and one private media – needs to be discussed.**

Keywords: Investigative journalism, cooperation, research, collaboration

The investigative research network of WDR, NDR and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) is one of the best-known German inter-media journalism networks (cf. SCHULTZ

2021: 338). Since it was founded 2014, there have been numerous joint investigations and publications by different constellations of the three investigative departments involved. For instance, in January 2023, the three media reported on inconsistent price negotiations for PCR tests between medical officials and health insurance companies; shortly thereafter they identified hotspots of the harmful chemical PFAS in Germany's soil. In the summer of 2022, WDR, NDR and *SZ* published the »Uber Files« together with media in 28 other countries, uncovering that the US ride-hailing company Uber was trying to circumvent laws by using contacts to top European politicians such as Emmanuel Macron. In 2023, the network investigated allegations against German »Rammstein« singer Till Lindemann.

In investigative journalism in particular, uncovering abuses requires cross-editorial and even cross-border cooperation during research (CARSON/FARHALL 2018; cf. SCHULTZ 2021: 339). Such collaborations can develop powerful publishing dynamics and provide great social benefits (cf. SCHULTZ 2021: 339). Thus, even strong media competitors come together for such cooperations, making use of the division of labor (cf. SCHULTZ 2021: 340) or – as in the case of the research cooperation discussed here – private and public media. This form of intermedia cooperation is sometimes criticized for media policy reasons, in particular for distorting competition and cross-subsidizing two types of media (e.g. MEIER 2015). Meanwhile, collaboration between journalists from different newrsooms is not new. In recent years, various national and international journalistic networks have emerged (cf. SCHULTZ 2021: 338). The USA is leading the way as researchers have seen a clear trend towards cooperation and collaboration in journalism there since the late 1990s (cf. HEFT 2021: 454; cf. SCHULTZ 2021: 338).

One reason for the increasing importance of research networks is the digital transformation and the amount of data that is stored online (cf. LUGSCHITZ et al. 2024: 109). Investigative journalists in particular face new challenges in researching and verifying data, for instance when stemming from leaks (KUNERT et al. 2022). Hence, the exchange and mutual support between investigative teams is becoming increasingly important, particularly in terms of landing scoops besides reporting the daily news, to stand out among competitors in the media market (cf. SCHULTZ 2021: 341). The trend towards collaboration and research networks is also seen as a »contribution to saving and safeguarding quality journalism« (SCHULTZ 2021: 341; original in German).

Despite these well-known developments in journalism, few academic studies have analyzed such cross-editorial collaborations thus far. We examine the investigative research network of NDR, WDR and *SZ* because in their case two public broadcasters cooperate cross-medially with a privately organized and more text-based press/online medium. The difference between the media houses is twofold: in terms of production processes and publication channels as well as financially

(licence fee vs. sales and advertising revenues). These structural differences suggest certain work processes and internal cooperation conflicts, which are examined in this study.

Characteristics of investigative journalism

Investigative journalism is understood in academic research as a special journalistic discipline. Hoxha defines this professional field as a »particular way of reporting by relying on a rigid and systematic investigation and layers of verification of facts to the last detail [...] with the aim to have an impact on the public« (HOXHA 2019: 1). In order to achieve their goals – be they personal or social in nature – investigative journalists are attributed a certain degree of professional self-sacrifice: »[...] journalists are likely to stir up a hornet's nest bearing risks for their career, their whole profession and their own safety« (HAHN/STALPH 2018: 2). According to Hoxha, the basic goals of investigative work are to verify and thoroughly research topics (HOXHA 2019: 1; also KAPLAN 2008: 115). Investigative journalists see themselves as »watchdogs« (LUDWIG 2014: 171) and as the fourth estate in the state with a »claim to control power« (CARIO 2006: 121; original in German). They are also driven by the potential social impact that journalistic work can have on changes to systems or laws and by standing up for the interests of the general public (cf. KAPLAN 2008: 115f.; LUGSCHITZ et al. 2024: 115).

Ludwig identifies three criteria that define investigative journalism: first, the topics are socially, politically or societally relevant and thus essential for public opinion (especially corruption, abuse of power, bribery, fraud or violations of the law) (cf. LUDWIG 2014: 17); second, investigative research is an interplay between journalists and informants, whereby the roles of both can vary; third, compared to other journalistic beats, research is carried out under »more difficult conditions« (LUDWIG 2014: 18; original in German), which leads to an increased workload (cf. LUDWIG 2014: 17f.). Lanosga et al. (2017) distinguish between the self-image of investigative and non-investigative journalists: investigative journalists are, for example, more open to unconventional research practices such as the use of hidden cameras (cf. LANOSGA et al. 2017: 283).

Forms of cooperation in investigative journalism

Since the late 1990s, researchers have observed an increase in collaborative journalism in the USA, including in the investigative beat and across national borders (see CARSON/FARHALL 2018: 1899f.; see HEFT 2021: 457; see KRÜGER et al. 2019; see SCHULTZ 2021: 338). A trend towards collaborative journalism can

be observed especially in the case of major international topics (cf. KAYSER-BRIL 2018: 60; cf. LÜCK/SCHULTZ 2019), as complex research and the evaluation and examination of large amounts of data require more resources, both human and financial (cf. KAYSER-BRIL 2018: 27; cf. LILIENTHAL 2017: 661; cf. LÜCK/SCHULTZ 2019; cf. LUGSCHITZ et al. 2024: 114). Researchers cite increased competition within the media industry and financial restrictions in media organizations as further reasons for an increase in willingness to cooperate in journalism (cf. HEFT 2021: 459; cf. KONOW-LUND et al. 2019: 2). In addition, Lilienthal recognizes an »increased focus on research« (LILIENTHAL 2017: 661; original in German) since the early 2000s, the aim being to enable exclusive research and thus asserting oneself against competitors in times of scarce resources. Other motives of journalists who collaborate across borders include the quality improvement of journalistic products, the possible political and social impact of journalistic research, addressing a larger audience and synergies in terms of resources, technologies, finances and expertise (cf. CAIRO 2008: 181; cf. HEFT 2021; cf. SAMBROOK 2018: 27). When collaborating, trust between the collaborators is just as essential as care in handling confidential data (cf. SAMBROOK 2018: 31). Yet, cooperation also harbors potentials for conflict, such as a lack of motivation and activity of individual partners or communication problems (cf. KONOW-LUND 2019: 4). This in turn increases the effort required for coordination (cf. KAYSER-BRIL 2018: 62f.).

Investigative research networks are a formalized form of cooperation and team building, which are defined as »organizational alliances between independent newsrooms that enable planned cooperation between journalists from different media houses« (SCHULTZ 2021: 338; original in German). In addition to the investigative research network discussed in this study, cross-border forms of cooperation have emerged, such as the European Investigative Collaboration (EIC, founded in 2016 and consisting of the German news magazine *Spiegel* and ten media partners), Investigative Europe (about 15 journalists from several European countries), the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN). To date, there has been little research into the functions and characteristics of such networks in (investigative) journalism (cf. HEFT et al. 2019: 1184). In the few studies that did research it, the focus was on the above-mentioned cross-border associations (cf. KRÜGER et al. 2019: 406), in which journalists from different countries work on a common topic, merge and review their research results, but then publish their stories depending on the media house and audience (cf. ALFTER 2018: 41; cf. LÜCK/SCHULTZ 2019; ROTHENBERGER et al. 2023). The type of cooperation between media varies; for instance, cross-media research is increasing (cf. CARSON/FARHALL 2018: 1902). Although more and more public media are cooperating with private media players (cf. GRUBENMANN/RUSS-MOHL 2016: 1), Cairo (2006: 181), for example, identifies a potential for conflict if the potential cooperation partner is a competing medium.

The networks can be differentiated according to their organizational structure and the length and intensity of cooperation, which can be applied to both cross-border and national networks (cf. HEFT et al. 2019: 1197; cf. HEFT 2021: 458). Heft (2021: 458) distinguishes between »low degree« networks with little structure and flat hierarchies and »high degree« networks with a fixed organizational structure and a leadership that monitors compliance with the structures. »Medium degree« networks with a medium-strong structure and control form the middle ground. Heft also distinguishes between »top-down« and »bottom-up« initiatives: The former means that cooperation takes place on the basis of a fixed agreement between the newsrooms; these are long-term collaborations, i.e. high degree networks (cf. HEFT 2021: 455f.). Bottom-up initiatives are created on the initiative of the journalists involved and are usually only temporary, i.e. in the form of low-degree networks (cf. HEFT 2021: 455f.). According to Heft, intensive cooperation exists when there is close teamwork within a research team and research material and knowledge is exchanged and published at the same time (cf. HEFT 2021: 458). In contrast, in loose collaborations little is exchanged and no binding joint publications exist (cf. HEFT 2021: 458). This results in differences in the length and intensity of a collaboration, in the objective of the research (only one project or several projects) and in the form of publication (identical or individual). In addition, networks can differ in their composition, depending on how many media companies are involved and which type of media is represented, as well as in the length of a collaboration, its thematic focus and its form of publication (cf. SCHULTZ 2021: 338).

This study focuses on the internal work processes and possible conflict potentials in the investigative research network of NDR, WDR and *SZ*. The research questions are:

RQ1: How does the cross-editorial cooperation in the research network of NDR, WDR and *SZ* work in terms of internal work processes?

RQ2: What problems and conflicts arise during collaboration?

Method

Nine people who worked as investigative journalists in the research network of WDR, NDR and *SZ* in the study period from December 2022 to May 2023 were interviewed using qualitative, guided interviews. It was important that the interviewees had already worked together for at least two years and were therefore familiar with internal work processes. For reasons of source protection, the

interviewees' names remain anonymous and are only noted by a letter and number combination (e.g. B3) in the findings chapter.

The members of the research network were identified on the basis of information on the websites of the participating media. Identifying journalists working for the NDR broadcastser was easier than for the WDR and *SZ* journalists, as it was not always clear who worked for the research network. Editorial managers and other journalists were asked who regularly worked for the research network. In addition, personal websites, Twitter profiles of investigative journalists and joint publications by WDR, NDR and *SZ* served as indicators of participation in the research network. Names of people were also requested via the personal working environment at NDR by of one of the authors.

The interviews were conducted via video call at the request of the participants and lasted 45 minutes on average. The interview questions concerned the internal work processes in the research network (workflows: selection of topics, division of work, exchange of information; standards: rules, agreements on publications, financing) and problems and conflicts in the collaboration (in research, objectives, financing).

The interviews were transcribed by hand. No transcription software was used to ensure that the sensitive information shared during the interviews was not stored on the platforms of commercial transcription service providers and thus potentially disclosed to third parties. The interview quotes were translated from German.

The evaluation followed the principle of qualitative content analysis according to Mayring, Fenzl and Gläser-Zikuda (cf. GLÄSER-ZIKUDA et al. 2022: 243; cf. KUCKARTZ/RÄDIKER 2022: 514). A category system is the basis of the evaluation. The deductive first category ›internal work processes‹ is divided into ›workflows‹ and ›standards‹. The following subcategories, among others, were formed and coded for ›workflows‹: selection of topics, division of work, exchange of information, each of which is intended to cover different assumed work steps. The second subcategory ›standards‹ is divided into research rules/standards, agreements on publications and financing rules. The second deductive category ›problems and conflicts during collaboration‹ was divided into the subcategories conflicts/problems during research, conflicts concerning objectives/problems and financing conflicts/problems.

The study is subject to some limitations. On the one hand, the deliberately open-ended interview questions ensured that the interviewees gave a wide range of answers. On the other hand, it was sometimes difficult to tell in retrospect whether certain things were not mentioned or were mentioned with varying degrees of clarity for reasons of confidentiality or whether they were simply forgotten to be mentioned. It is assumed that some aspects of the collaboration did not occur to the interviewees ad hoc. One limitation of the open questions is the fact that some interviewees already listed the advantages and disadvantages of

research cooperation at the beginning of the interview. This inevitably led to a redundancy in the questions during the course of the interviews, but they were deliberately asked again so that the interviewees could once again think specifically about the disadvantages or advantages of intermedia cooperation, for example. Finally, it must be pointed out that the results are not universally valid. The data were already saturated after half of the interviews. However, due to the members' individual assessment of the collaboration, it cannot be ruled out that new aspects would have come up if all participants in the research network had been interviewed.

The findings below shows the internal work processes in the research network as well as problems and conflicts in the collaboration.

Findings: Internal work processes

Research question 1 relates to the organization of internal work processes within the research network, focusing on the selection of topics, the division of work, the exchange of information, the rules, and agreements on publications and financing.

The internal work processes presented first concerns the *selection of topics*. All nine interviewees state that most of the topics are brought in from outside the newsroom. Almost all of them cite existing contacts as main sources for their topics. Many of the long-standing research network members are considered »specialists on various topics« (B2), have developed topics themselves through years of research, have built up a network in social areas and have thus gained »special access« (B9). According to B8, topics often come »from the political sphere from sources [...] who are somehow involved, but who of course also pursue a certain interest«. It is important to maintain contact with previous sources and to hold background discussions that can lead to new topic ideas (B3, B4). In addition to the existing contacts of research network members, the majority of interviewees cite informants as sources who leak or anonymously transmit information to the newsrooms. This takes place via secure mailboxes of investigative journalists or anonymous mailboxes, as was the case with the reporting by the *SZ* on the ›Swiss Secrets‹ story (B2). As B9 explains, such secret data are often passed on to the research network members because the research network has »now made a name for itself«. Three interviewees (B6, B7 and B8) cited other cooperation partners such as the ICIJ or the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) as another important source of information from outside the newsrooms. These statements lead to the conclusion that such an exchange of topics between cooperation partners takes place either at joint conferences or through a member of WDR, NDR or *SZ* who is also connected to another network

(B7). B8 states that although international research topics are rare, they are particularly powerful. Two thirds of respondents also consider the internal choice of topics to be worth mentioning. This is triggered by current events and the news situation (B8). These topic suggestions are then shared in conferences or among colleagues.

With regard to the *division of work*, the interviewees' responses indicate that the distribution of tasks is decided »depending on the topic and occasion« (B9). Here, the journalists' statements are similar in that there does not seem to be a fixed process, but rather the distribution of tasks sometimes takes place bilaterally between the network members, sometimes in conferences and sometimes at department management level. Each investigative newsroom decides independently with whom to cooperate from the other media houses. Above all, however, it is clear that investigative journalists contact each other independently and across newsrooms and come together to conduct joint research.

The decision as to which of the three investigative newsrooms or which of the colleagues should be involved in the journalistic research is not made according to fixed patterns, but rather depends on the subject area to be researched, the different competences and personal sympathies. If colleagues join forces for a joint project, the interviewees cite the factors of trust, journalistic skills (such as data analysis) and existing access to sources and contacts as particularly decisive; specialist knowledge also plays a role (e.g. B9). It is also important whether successful cooperation has already taken place in the past and whether there is sufficient time available (B4). It must be made clear that all those involved work primarily for their own organization and that collaboration within the network is decided on a case-by-case basis. As a result, not all three newsrooms are always part of a project, but sometimes only NDR and WDR, WDR and *SZ* or NDR and *SZ*, depending on availability, according to the majority of interviewees. Depending on the scope of a project, international cooperation partners such as the ICIJ are also brought on board.

With regard to the degree of the division of labor, the interviewees largely agree that they divide work mostly during the research phase and less so during writing up the story. Respondents said that each newsroom works independently on the same topic, but then shares its research results and uses the different qualifications and contacts of the other participants across newsrooms. In particular, large amounts of data from leaks are analyzed based on a division of labor to save time. Two interviewees from NDR and *SZ* stated that journalists take on different tasks during research: Some colleagues are mainly responsible for gathering information and others for evaluating the material or journalistic implementation (B7). As part of this division, some colleagues only get involved at the end of a project (B8). However, there is not always a complete division: some appointments are attended by employees from all three media houses (B6).

B3, B4 and B6 state that in the German national broadcaster ARD (of which the regional broadcasters NDR and WDR are member stations) one editorial department is often in charge. These responsibilities are reflected in fact checking and the approval of an investigation: While the *SZ* is responsible for its own fact checking according to most interviewees, at NDR and WDR the managing editor who is in charge of the investigation or the legal department is responsible for the fact checking for most of the investigations.

According to B3, B7 and B2, the final responsibility for the publications lies with each media house itself: »So since everyone writes their own story, everyone is also responsible for their own actions, so to speak.« (B2). Some of the interviewees point out that a contribution is sent to all those involved in the research process for approval in addition to the in-house fact checking – in other words, all three media can also be involved in the fact checking. It becomes clear that the approval process is not set in stone, but varies from project to project.

It is striking that many interviewees ascribed a different independence to *SZ* as a private-sector newspaper than to NDR and WDR: »*SZ* does its own thing.« (B3). The reason for this are the different research steps, production channels and the differing production times of print and television reports. With regard to the division of work, the statements of the interviewees therefore differ in that some emphasize the continuous independence of the three investigative newsrooms in the implementation while others state that the channels are divided between NDR and WDR in particular, with one newsroom taking over radio and the other one television.

To *exchange information*, all members of the research network take part in regular video conferences to discuss past and planned publications, offer criticism, collect and discuss topic suggestions and ideas and decide on joint research. In addition, the department heads meet in joint sessions, and bilateral conferences are held between project partners.

All interviewees perceive the exchange of material as intensive, cooperative and as an »ongoing process« (B5), in the course of which the participating journalists continuously share data, knowledge, documents and central research results with each other. There are no limits to the exchange – apart from a possible exception due to source protection. Everyone conducts interviews, exchanges the results, passes on contacts and »everything is shared« (B6). The exchange takes place bilaterally between colleagues and does not have to be approved at the manager level: B3 describes this exchange as an exchange of »many messages back and forth between colleagues«. Journalists often exchange information several times a day, especially towards the end of a project. Large-scale projects are perceived as particularly exchange-intensive. All interviewees agree that cooperation with another media house only makes sense if there is an intensive exchange during joint research and that the participants need all

the information to enable them to conduct their own research and produce journalistic contributions. B4 says that the exchange of central research results is a »basic principle«. B8 adds: »And that's also the case with such joint research, that you're pleased if you can help somehow, everyone can do something and everyone brings some information and that's why you're happy to share with everyone.«

When sharing data with other colleagues two main restrictions remain. Three interviewees cite source protection: Documents that can provide information about sensitive sources are not shared with other colleagues, or only in a restricted form, for example in the form of excerpts. Contact details of sensitive sources are also not passed on: »If material cannot be passed on for reasons of source protection, then of course we adhere to this strictly, because source protection is really the be-all and end-all« (B5). Three other interviewees mentioned the restriction that *SZ* does not receive any video or audio material from NDR and WDR to refute the accusation of distortion of competition from the outset. NDR and WDR co-operate to develop moving image content (B3). The gathered information is then used to select the publication channel for *SZ*, NDR and WDR. Each media house decides for itself how a story should be published, as B5 describes:

> »In general, we exchange everything, because every newsroom needs to have the basics to be able to decide whether to report and have all the facts together, because in the end, each media house always decides for itself what to do with the material.«

Internal work processes also include standards, i.e. rules, agreements on publications and the distribution of financing. The statements of the interviewees suggest that there are no written *rules* for cooperative research, but rather an informal code of conduct. When asked, the majority of the network members emphasized the individuality of the three newsrooms and the journalistic standards they had already internalized through their many years of work in the journalistic profession. Their research is based on »unspoken standards« and a »netiquette [...] that is adhered to, which [...] is not written down anywhere« (B1), but had become established over the years of working together. The information on research standards is correspondingly diverse. Most journalists mentioned basic standards such as journalistic due diligence, confrontation of all parties, trustworthy handling of sources, including keeping sensitive information confidential from third parties. According to B8, everything else is »very, very flexible«. B2 also mentions joint confrontation, which is then carried out on behalf of WDR, NDR and *SZ*, and consultation with the legal departments on sensitive publications. B4 and B8 state that there must be fair, sufficiently long response times for sources who are confronted. B4 adds that, in principle, all persons named in the research must actually be contacted and written evidence of oral statements must be collected.

With regard to *agreements on publications* or regulations for joint publications by the research network, all members agree that publications are generally published

at the same time after a jointly set embargo period. However, a majority of the journalists emphasize that they sometimes deviate from these embargo periods depending on the topic of the research and accordingly discuss the publication date anew each time: »How we publish is something we discuss anew each time, because the question of when we make embargo periods varies from project to project« (B1). The embargo periods also depend on the planned format of a story.

Three interviewees say that consideration is always given to the respective editorial deadlines of the media houses and the upcoming broadcasts, so that no newsroom misses out on a publication because there is no suitable broadcast at the time (B7). This difference in the accessibility of the various target groups should be taken into account, especially in cross-media work (B3). Despite these statements, conflicts also arise (see below). In addition to the joint publication date, B3 in particular lists other aspects in the planning of publications: the orientation towards target groups depending on the topic, a joint press release on behalf of all media houses in the case of important research, the naming of those persons and their newsrooms as authors who were actually involved in the research (also B7), and fact-based and fully researched reporting. B8 also adds that only NDR and WDR can publish the same text (for example on *Tagesschau.de*), but not *SZ*.

With regard to *financing*, five interviewees said that financing agreements between the three newsrooms were not in place. In principle, there are no such agreements; instead, each media house provides its own staff and therefore its own financial resources. All interviewees stated that the research network does not have a joint budget. According to four interviewees, the different workloads and the use of different media formats prevent this. Care is taken to ensure that everyone contributes their fair share of research work from project to project. For freelance journalists who work for all three newsrooms, there is a separate regulation, which, however, is only cited by B5: »And there are people who work for [all three media houses], where everyone pays their fair share, so to speak, as far as the fee is concerned, so that it doesn't fall apart here either.« According to B6, it is only between WDR and NDR that there are different levels of financing for research, depending on who is in charge. The only binding regulation is dividing the fee of the research network team leader fee between all three newsrooms.

Findings: Problems and conflicts during collaboration

The second research question relates to problems and conflicts in the collaboration. These are divided into the areas of research, objectives and financing.

When asked about possible problems or conflicts during the *research* process, the respondents' answers varied. The greatest consensus was that there was potential for conflict if a newsroom wanted to publish research on its own

without cooperating. For B6, B8 and B9 the reasons for such behavior are exclusivity in access to special sources, but according to B6 this is »super super rare«. B8 says: »It's for reasons of source protection or a bit of exclusivity and access, so to speak, to protect your exclusive access from your colleagues, [...] you're happy for every great story that the other person does, but you'd actually like to have done it yourself.« A second frequently mentioned area of conflict, according to five interviewees, is the different workload of the newsrooms: B6 points out that it is an »insane coordination effort« to ensure an equitable division of labor. There are complaints and frustration when one newsroom believes it is doing and investing more in research than the others. Communication across the four locations of the newsrooms in Hamburg, Berlin, Cologne and Munich is also impractical (B6). Further uncertainties lie in the secure transfer of materials from location to location (B4). Four interviewees also say that human and personal conflicts between colleagues can make it difficult to come together as a team for research (B4 and B6) and to exchange materials (B7 and B9). B8 also sees a problem in the unclear responsibilities the larger a project team is:

»I would say that there is sometimes a kind of diffusion of responsibility, the feeling that ›Ok, if I don't request the interview now, then someone else will do it‹ or ›If I don't research this aspect, then someone else will do it‹.«

According to B2, B7 and B8, potential for conflict also arises from the different channels of the news media: As broadcasters WDR and NDR in particular need video or audio material whereas the *SZ* does not prioritize such considerations.

With regard to conflicts concerning *the objectives* of the research network, the interviewees mentioned a total of three different conflicts of objectives that can arise when publishing an investigative story. Three interviewees cite the cross-media-related different preferences in the publication times of radio, television and print, as each medium wants to reach its audience in the best possible way and in as many publications as possible (B3). B4 describes this as a »core conflict«. Three other interviewees state that the question of which type of publication should be chosen for cooperative research can also be a source of conflict. The reasons for this are different focuses on a topic to be reported on or different orientations of the publishing medium: »News plays a greater role at WDR, [which] *SZ* is not so interested in because it simply cannibalizes long-term research« (B7). For B8, the question of how big stories need to be to deserve the research network label at all also harbors potential for conflict, as well as the problem that one of the newsrooms would prefer to be the only one responsible for a publication. Despite the willingness to collaborate, B8 and B9 believe that each newsroom focuses on its own visibility.

When asked whether conflicts could arise with regard to *financing*, a third of respondents did not provide any information due to a lack of knowledge on the subject. Four respondents, however, do see problems: B1, B4 and B6 say different

kinds of workloads are difficult to compare. Although B6 states that the workload for a newsroom is recouped through the publication and conflicts are therefore unnecessary, he also sees a problem in determining the workload per person: »So, if [a journalist] has some source in the BKA [German: Bundeskriminalamt; translation: Federal Crime Police Office] and then generates some information from it, do you pay for the half day he was there to meet the source, or do you pay for the 14 years of preparatory work he needed to get access to this source?« B7 mentions a problem that arises from the avoidance of cross-subsidization of the privately owned *SZ*: a lack of a common data platform for NDR, WDR and *SZ* on which information can be stored and shared. B7 expands on the problem: »And then, just for example, the *SZ* could make it available to others on a voluntary basis. But it would be expense that such a media house can only afford to a limited extent.« The reason why there is no shared data platform is that the *SZ* would otherwise be accused of working with material from public service media – in other words, the *SZ* would benefit indirectly from the broadcasting fees without having to incur the costs of its own research.

Discussion and conclusion

The objective of this study was to make the cross-editorial and cross-system cooperation of the research network of WDR, NDR and *SZ* comprehensible through the assessments of the investigative journalists involved from these media houses. The following conclusion can be drawn: The investigative network is nowhere near as firmly institutionalized as accusations against it suggest (see e.g. MEIER 2015). Rather, the collaboration can be described as a media partnership for specific news events. There is no fixed set of rules, no permanently assigned staff and no joint project financing. The unifying elements are mutual trust, which is continuously strengthened through regular joint research, knowledge of colleagues' skills, mutual enrichment through specialized competences and the mutual exchange of materials and information, as described in previous studies (cf. CAIRO 2008: 181; cf. HEFT 2021; cf. SAMBROOK 2018: 27, 31).

Research question 1 asked about cross-editorial cooperation in the research network of *SZ*, NDR and WDR with regard to internal work processes. It became clear that not all three media houses are necessarily always involved in a piece of research, but that the project teams are formed depending on topic and occasion. The findings show that the cooperation does not consist of WDR, NDR and *SZ* journalists together researching and writing journalistic products, but that selected colleagues from different newsrooms work independently on the same project and strive for an editorial publication. While doing so, they benefit from each other's qualifications and access to sources and exchange of materials. It

should also be noted that there do not appear to be any written rules, agreements or financial arrangements. Ambitious journalistic standards and a non-written code of conduct apply to the research network's work, which has been established since it was founded and which each member has internalized through many years of work. This code of conduct includes the journalistic duty of care and the definition of when a publication receives the »WDR-NDR-*SZ*« label. The principle of simultaneity with a common embargo period applies to joint publications. However, as the journalists are aware that different target groups are reached depending on the time of publication precisely because of the cross-media nature of the publication, this embargo period can vary.

Based on the classification of journalism networks cited by Heft (2021), it can be concluded from these moderately strong structures and the flat hierarchy that the research network of WDR, NDR and *SZ* is a *medium-degree network* that lies in the middle between a *top-down structure* (fixed agreements) and a *bottom-up structure* (own initiative) (cf. HEFT 2021). The cooperation structure can be described as intensive, based on Heft's categorization of the intensity of cooperation, as there is a constant transfer of knowledge (cf. HEFT 2021: 458): A regular exchange takes place in joint conferences, among other ways. The journalists perceive this exchange as intensive, cooperative and generous. Larger projects are described as particularly communication-intensive. Contact details and documents from sensitive sources are excluded from the exchange.

As shown in research question 2, areas of conflict and problems in the collaboration can be identified. During the research, these conflicts lay in the occasional solo effort of a newsroom, the different levels of resources required and the organizational effort. The feeling of investing more in research (people, time, finances) than the others is the main cause of frustration and dissatisfaction. This confirms Kayser-Bril's (2018: 62f.) criticism of the lack of activity on the part of cooperation partners and the high coordination effort. However, low motivation and poor communication, as stated by Konow-Lund (2019: 4), do not play a role here. When asked about financing conflicts, the willingness to provide information was weakest – interviewees were unable or unwilling to provide much information here and limited themselves to naming conflicts in the fair division of labor. It is clear that there is no fixed procedure here either. Rather, decisions are made on a case-by-case basis and attempts are made to generate an even workload over the years. These results contradict those of Kayser-Bril (2018: 62f.): The costs of collaborative projects are not per se higher than those of individual research; rather, the equitable distribution of costs is the decisive factor. In contrast to Kayser-Bril, the interviewees believe that financial discrepancies are offset by the success of the projects, i.e. the benefits.

Accusations of distortion of competition and cross-subsidization were also a topic that was raised by some interviewees during the interview without the

question being asked. The statements on this topic vary greatly. Sometimes the journalists only describe whether and how it is ensured that the accusations are not substantiated, sometimes they deny the criticism; two people show understanding for the accusations. In principle, all interviewees are aware of the criticism and can even understand some of it, but are convinced that sufficient care is taken within the research network not to offer any targets for attack. With regard to dealing with criticism in everyday journalistic work, seven people stated that particular care is taken not to offer any grounds for criticism, especially when it comes to the use of resources and their financing. According to the interviewees, the travel expenses of the ARD media houses on the one hand and the *SZ* on the other are strictly separated. There is no transfer of money from the public service media to the *SZ*; a »very high level of sensitivity« (B4) is displayed and »the utmost care« (B9) is taken to ensure that the *SZ* does not receive any advantages from NDR and WDR. However, all of this was not due to pressure from outside, but out of the research network's own interest in not cross-subsidizing, says B4. In general, no other ARD station is allowed to be included in the research network so that there is no distortion of competition (B5). B5 and B6 in particular make it clear that the fair distribution of personnel resources is monitored and that each newsroom must actually contribute something to the research to be named in the publication. B3, B6 and B7 emphasize that the cooperation manifests itself particularly in the conference, that it is not a closed research cartel and that only the investigative newsrooms cooperate with each other. Four people point out that there are now many other collaborations and networks.

In conclusion, it can also be stated that the research network is highly valued by the interviewed journalists: The interviewees attach great importance to the diversity of topics and presentations thanks to the cross-media work and the high quality and quantity of the research results. According to the interviewees, quality and quantity result above all from the depth of the research, which is possible thanks to the division of labor and bundling of competences as well as the diversity of sources used, as also reported by Cairo (2008: 181), Heft (2021) and Sambrook (2018: 27): »Together we can simply go much more in depth and thus report much more precisely, report much more comprehensively and that is the great value of cooperation.« (B5). Five interviewees conclude that the three cooperating media houses have journalistic clout and a special reach due to the diverse publication channels and their track record: »And this clout arises on the one hand from the fact that you can go into the matter with a certain amount of manpower and then of course also [...] from the fact that you have the opportunity to reach people through various outlets« (B2). For almost all interviewees, the diverse skills, competences, expertise and qualifications, but also ideas and perspectives, from which each individual person can benefit, are also essential for research. Here, the interviewees are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses

and emphasize how helpful the skills of their colleagues are (cf. KAYSER-BRIL 2018: 27; cf. LILIENTHAL 2017: 661).

In view of current developments in journalism, it is clear that many media now consider it sensible to join forces with other newsrooms for research purposes. The research network examined here is just one example of the many cross-media journalistic teams that have been formed in recent years in Germany and previously, above all, in the USA. So far, journalistic networks appear to be a sustainable trend. But how effective is it for the media industry and journalism in the long run if more and more large media houses, such as German national broadcaster ZDF or magazine *Spiegel*, cooperate with the research network *CORRECTIV*, and the broadcasters DEUTSCHE WELLE or BR, no longer produce their reports exclusively for themselves and there is no longer any competition for the best story or the fastest publication between the media houses? Particularly in the case of cooperation between media houses financed by broadcasting fees and those financed by the private sector, the question must be raised as to what long-term effects this will have on the willingness of the audience to pay for media services. This represents an exciting new field of journalistic research, in which it could be investigated from the perspective of both the audience and journalists how the willingness to continue such cooperations develops. Whether research networks are actually a sustainable trend will probably only become clear in the coming years. A third scientific perspective should be mentioned: In future content analyses, the quality-enhancing effect of the described synthesis of multiple competences in research could be investigated.

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Journalism Research
2025, Vol 8 (2) pp. 149-169
ISSN 2569-152X
DOI: 10.1453/2569-152X-22025-15336-en

HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

Research Paper

Sebastian Gall / Uwe Krüger

Non-profit journalism in Germany

A survey on funding, safeguarding independence and working methods

Abstract: **In the wake of digitalization and the economic media crisis, a new field of journalism has emerged aiming to compensate for the weaknesses of traditional news media: non-profit journalism. Instead of being financed by sales and advertising revenue (or broadcasting fees), it is primarily funded by small donations, membership fees or foundation money. However, the attempt to operate independent of market logics and to work solely in the public interest raises new questions, especially with regard to maintaining independence from donors. It also poses challenges for media organizations with regard to fundraising. This article uses ten guided interviews with employees of non-profit editorial offices to examine how their work differs from that of editorial offices financed by the private or public sector and what strategies they use to meet the above listed challenges. The results show 1) that the work differs positively from that of a traditional editorial office, especially relating to the choice of topics, research time and organizational structure; 2) that most of the organizations studied use only one type of funding; and 3) that the feared influence of large donors on content apparently does not take place, but that on the contrary, foundations supporting journalism are sometimes even more concerned about maintaining distance to the editorial offices than the other way around. At the same time, it should be noted that only few media organizations employ fundraisers, which means that this work falls onto the shoulders of management, editorial or layout staff.**

Keywords: non-profit journalism, foundations, independence, fundraising, donors

1. Introduction

At the beginning of 2024, more than 3.5 million people across Germany demonstrated for democracy and against right-wing extremism. It was the largest wave of protests in the history of the country (RUCHT 2024: 17; SANDER 2024). The protests were triggered by an article of the investigative news outlet *Correctiv* about the »Potsdam secret meeting« (BENSMANN et al. 2024) – a meeting of neo-Nazis, members of the German right-wing extremist party Alternative for Germany (AfD), the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and of the right-wing association Werteunion. At this meeting, the Austrian right-wing extremist Martin Sellner spoke about »remigration« and, according to *Correctiv*, stated that »assimilation pressure« should be exerted on citizens who resisted such assimilation, namely migrants (ZIMMERMANN 2024). For this work, the non-profit journalism association Netzwerk Recherche (Research Network) awarded *Correctiv* with the »Lighthouse for special journalistic achievements« prize. The chairman of the association, Daniel Drepper, said: »Rarely has a single piece of research had such an impact and shown us all how important this type of journalism is for our democratic discourse« (NETZWERK RECHERCHE 2024). A survey of protesters against right-wing extremism in southern Germany in 2024 shows that the high impact of the research was real and not just a claim by the awarding institution: 75 percent stated that *Correctiv's* report was the decisive factor in their motivation to participate (BITSCHNAU/KOOS 2024: 5).[1]

What makes this case special is that: *Correctiv* is neither a private-sector nor a public-sector medium, but it is committed to non-profit journalism (LILIENTHAL 2017: 660) and is financed primarily by foundation funds and donations. This type of funding has become increasingly important for journalism in recent years, but it has also been the subject of repeated criticism: How independent are editorial teams from their sponsors? The international investigative network Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) was recently in the headlines in this regard. At the end of 2024, the French investigative media outlet *Mediapart* accused it of being not only financially but also structurally dependent on the US government: Employees of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), from which the OCCRP received around half of its budget, said that USAID had veto power over the appointment of the network's top staff (PHILIPPIN/CANDEA 2024). In response to this case, Leonard Novy from the Institute for Media and Communication Policy in Cologne, Germany, told the German public broadcaster NDR that even the appearance of partisanship is

1 It should not be concealed that Kucklick et al. (2024) criticized the *Correctiv* research in the online magazine Übermedien for journalistic deficiencies and accused the German media of handling it uncritically. Reisin (2024) wrote a critical response to the text. However, this debate does not change the broad reception and high impact of the *Correctiv* publication.

a massive problem for the credibility and legitimacy of non-profit journalistic work (EICHHORN/BECKER 2024).

In the following, this article explores empirically the tensions between newly gained freedoms from market constraints and possible new dependencies on donors. By interviewing leading personnell from ten media organizations in the field of non-profit journalism in Germany, the aim is to find out how the work differs from a traditional editorial office, what the financing looks like exactly in each case, what implications this financing has for journalistic independence and what steps are taken to secure the latter.

2. Non-profit journalism: emergence, characteristics, criticism

Non-profit journalism has developed in the context of the media funding crisis and the decline in reach of traditional journalistic products resulting from the digital transformation of the public sphere (EISENEGGER 2021; KRÜGER 2018). Non-profit journalism counts among the most relevant innovations in Western media markets of the past decade (MEIER et al. 2022), although its historical roots go back further, particularly in the field of investigative journalism and in the US (cf. KRÜGER et al. 2019). Here, in the country where non-profit journalism originated (HOMBURG/NGUYEN 2018: 39), it is now an important player: »In the US media landscape, such solutions have already established themselves in great diversity in the face of greater market failure and a more pronounced culture of civic engagement« (BALLWIESER et al. 2011: 8). According to one count, before 2008, there were a total of 49 such newsrooms; from 2017 until 2020, the development accelerated, with over 20 new organizations being added each year (ROSEMAN et al. 2021: 5). The Institute for Nonprofit News (INN), which commissioned the census, has 425 nonprofit newsrooms.[2] Not only the quantity of such media outlets has risen, but evidently so has their quality: Birnbauer (2019: 2) lists prestigious awards such as the Pulitzer Prize that have been won by non-profit newsrooms.

The growth of this new type of journalism is unmistakable. But how can it be conceptualized? To Schnedler and Schuster (2015: 5–6), the central attributes of non-profit journalism are an orientation towards the common good and independence from the logic of the market economy. It is »an attempt to find a balance in which business is not the most important ingredient, but rather an orientation towards the common good« (6). They identify four characteristics:

1. Takes seriously the public task of journalism
2. No intention to make a profit
3. Significant funding from donors and sponsors

2 https://inn.org/about/who-we-are

4. Recognized as a non-profit organization by the authorities (6).

Reuter (2023: 112) defines the »operating model« of non-profit journalism in a similar way: »Like the public broadcasters, it is oriented towards the common good instead of profit, but combines this orientation with the agility and innovative capacity of private media organizations.« She goes on to write: »Non-profit newsrooms are to a certain extent free of the criteria that profit-oriented, private media have to follow – the fit between content and advertising, access figures, quantitative attention factors, length of stay, etc.« (116). When it comes to defining »non-profit journalism,« it is worth taking a look at Konieczna's (2018: 62) list of characteristics of respective organizations or projects. They

- »were founded at least in part to fill the gap left as commercial news organizations or projects retreated from producing public service journalism;
- offer benefits to their community instead of advancing private interests or focusing on profits;
- produce educational content, informing on public issues and institutions;
- have professional staffs;
- don't distribute earnings to private people;
- don't endorse political candidates;
- are nonpartisan and transparent about funding;
- don't advocate or lobby around any issues other than freedom of information and the press; and
- produce investigative or public service journalism« (62).

While in some aspects Konieczna is more detailed than the cited definitions from German authors, it is noticeable that she does not mention any sources of funding. Other authors offer three different types of such sources:

1. Small donations/crowdfunding: These are smaller amounts through which individuals and non-professional sponsors support selected projects (PRINZING/GATTERMANN 2015: 189). The »possibility of financing through small and individual donations from users (crowd) is perhaps the most genuine and honest form of civil society support for journalistic content« (WEICHERT 2013: 223).
2. Memberships: Individuals can also finance non-profit editorial offices through memberships. These include »models that rely on paid membership in a community or an organization – for example in an association« (SCHNEDLER/SCHUSTER 2015: 8). This form of financing has only played a subordinate role in many organizations to date (8). The principle behind it: Only members get access to the content. This can work, for example, by paying a monthly fee (KURP 2016).[3]

3 It should be critically noted that the privileged access of paying members to content is actually alien to the »public task« of journalism (cf. Pöttker 2025) and that such a model is not fundamentally different from market-based subscription models.

3. Grants from foundations: Foundations are mentioned in the research literature as the major pillar of financing. For years, experts have been discussing whether foundations can serve as a lifeline for struggling media companies. In his study, Frühbrodt (2019: 217) comes to the conclusion that 85 foundations in Germany supported non-profit journalism in various ways in 2019. He calls the number »sobering« as there are no fewer than 21,800 foundations in Germany (218). Nonetheless, foundations have already become important players in media financing: »Private capital donated by wealthy citizens and entrepreneurs has gained enormous relevance as a civil society instrument for promoting journalism« (WEICHERT 2013: 224). This can also be observed in the US. Benson (2017: 1063) speaks of over 300 new non-profit news organizations that emerged in 25 states between 2005 and 2012 and that are supported by almost 280 foundations. The way in which foundations promote journalism varies. They award prizes, finance field trips and support the training and further education of journalists. Sometimes, as with *Correctiv*, they provide start-up funding (FRÜHBRODT 2019: 219-220).

In the »Journalism Value Report« (FLÖTHER/WERNER 2024: 30), income from memberships, crowdfunding, donations, subscriptions, and sales is summarized under »Audience revenue« while »Foundation funding«, »Public funding« (tax funds, for example via EU grants) and »Advertising« are listed as additional sources.

Most criticism of non-profit journalism is related to the funding from foundations. The main criticism is that donors pursue their own interests by allocating funding to journalism. Holland-Letz (2018: 92), for example, asks who still does critical coverage on foundations when journalists are funded by them. Schnedler and Schuster warn that topics may not be researched and new »blind spots« (SCHNEDLER/SCHUSTER 2015: 45) may arise. In addition, foundations with great financial resources could try to use the leverage of journalism to introduce their talking points into the public discourse. Non-profit journalism must therefore develop strategies to maintain its independence (45).

These concerns are also expressed by other researchers. Degen and Spiller (2014: 233), for example, write that possible biases can arise, but still see little sensitivity towards the issue among the organizations they studied (232). In their study on the influence of foundation funding on journalistic work, Ferrucci and Nelson (2019: 52) come to the conclusion that no »firewall« exists between donors and editors, unlike in the case of advertisers.

Further research conducted in the US goes beyond the mere criticism of a possible dependence on specific donors and sponsors. In the literature, there is a concern that a »philanthro-journalism« is adapting the ideology of »philanthro-capitalism,« »characterized by the naturalization of pro-market ideologies, which are supportive of the current economic and political status quo of global capitalism

from which most foundations have derived their wealth« (SCOTT et al. 2017: 168). Benson (2017) notes that non-profit journalism organizations cannot only become prisoners of foundations' agendas, but they are also caught in a dilemma between two different expectations of foundations: they should achieve economic sustainability as quickly as possible (i.e. stand on their own two feet), and at the same time have a social impact (i.e. not only achieve high reach, but also initiate change). This creates pressure to either imitate the practices of commercial media or to target a small, powerful elite audience. With regard to the problem of measuring impact (to prove it to the donor), it should also be noted that some types of impact are easier to measure than others: The ousting of a corrupt public official or the passing of a new law would be classic social effects that investigative journalism aims to achieve and that are easy to demonstrate to funders. Journalism's contributions to the long-term transformation of cultural norms – for example, regarding ecological sustainability or the emancipation of marginalized groups – are just as important, but less clearly visible and verifiable (SCHIFFRIN/ZUCKERMAN 2015: 51). This suggests that journalism funded by donations or foundations might tend to focus on topics with short-term, clearly perceptible impact.

Based on 74 interviews with foundation representatives and funded journalists, Scott et al. (2019) found that foundation funding shifts the boundaries of journalism 1) because of new, non-editorial activities in administration, fundraising and marketing, and 2) because the journalistic role now focuses more strongly on the outcome, including the production of »longer-form, off-agenda content that offers ›more bang for less buck‹« (SCOTT et al. 2019: 2049). With a similar method – 40 interviews with foundation and editorial representatives –, Ferrucci and Nelson (2019: 50) observed foundation impact beyond direct influence on content: 1) through technology-driven projects (i.e. when money is linked to the application of the latest trending technology, such as virtual reality or AI), 2) through »audience engagement projects« (when work »with the community« is rewarded, regardless of whether it is useful to the story or not), and 3) through stipulations that the medium must do PR for the funded project and the funder in addition to the journalistic project itself.

A multifaceted influence of foundation funding on the functioning and output of media organizations can therefore be assumed. The following empirical study primarily aims to expand the research literature on Germany and to identify possible problems and solutions that go beyond the issue of foundation funding, i.e. that are related to other sources of money.

3. Method

The study aims to answer the following research question through guided interviews with experts: How are German non-profit journalism organizations financed and what influence does financing have on these organizations with regard to journalistic work and independence?

In this case, experts are defined as persons who work in a German non-profit journalism organization. The pool from which the editorial offices were selected was the Forum Gemeinnütziger Journalismus (Forum for Non-Profit Journalism). Founded in 2019, this association of media organizations, journalist networks, foundations and trade unions has, according to its own statement, »the goal of strengthening non-profit, non-commercial journalism in Germany.«[4] As not all of the listed media organizations responded to the request, Werner's (2022) »The New Sector« was used for further search: Part of the compilation commissioned by the German non-profit network for journalistic inquiry Netzwerk Recherche is a database of non-profit news organizations from across Europe. In the end, the local online magazine *Wokreisel* from the district of Dahme-Spreewald (in the federal state Brandenburg) was the only editorial office from this database to be included in the sample. A total of ten interviews were conducted (see Table 1) allowing for the exploration of a large variance in the field; we can speak of a »theoretical saturation« (PRZYBORSKI/WOHLRAB-SAHR 2021: 233). It should be mentioned, however, that a kind of self-selection took place with these recruitment sources: Only media outlets that refer to themselves as part of the field, are part of a network with others or that were classified as such by an organization from the field – Netzwerk Recherche – were approached. Other media outlets that are neither privately owned nor publicly owned (cooperatives such as *taz* or *junge Welt*, community radio stations, neighborhood magazines run by citizen associations, etc.) were not included in the sample.

The expert survey was divided into three parts. The first dealt with the sources of funding, i.e. whether the media outlet is primarily financed by donations, members or foundations. The second part touched upon issues of ensuring the independence of the editorial offices, especially in relation to funding from major sponsors. Finally, the aim was to identify differences in the way non-profit editorial offices work compared to editorial offices in the private or public sector. All ten interviews were conducted via video call, nine of them via Zoom, the other on Whereby at the request of the interviewee. They took place between January 17 and April 30, 2024 and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. During transcription, the interviews were slightly smoothed out linguistically. The interviews were analyzed using the content-structuring content analysis

4 https://forum-gemeinnuetziger-journalismus.de/

according to Mayring (2022) with the MAXQDA software. All statements made by the participants were authorized before publication.

Table 1
Overview of the interviewees[5]

Organization	Interviewee (function)
netzpolitik.org	Anna Biselli (Co-Editor-in-Chief)
FragDenStaat	Vera Deleja-Hotko (Head of Research)
Finanztip	Hermann-Josef Tenhagen (Editor-in-Chief)
Veto Magazin	Susanne Kailitz (Founder)
MedWatch	Sigrid März (Managing Editor)
Investigate Europe	Harald Schumann (Founder)
Relevanzreporter Nürnberg	Alexandra Haderlein (Founder and Managing Director)
Belltower News	Stefan Lauer (Editor-in-Chief)
Wokreisel (Dahme-Spreewald)	Dörthe Ziemer (Founder)
Abgeordnetenwatch	Martin Reyer (Head of Research)

4. Results of the survey

4.1 Financing: Sources and selections of donors

The media organizations surveyed are financed from different sources and the ratio between small donations, membership fees and foundation funding varies. Netzpolitik.org and *Abgeordnetenwatch* are financed to over 90 percent by small donations of between 5 and 20 euros. *Investigate Europe*, on the other hand, is 90 percent financed by funds from foundations. *Finanztip*, an editorial team specializing in consumer services, is a special case. The employees test various products and recommend them to their readers. The providers of the products can pay to link directly to their products in the articles (affiliate links).

The majority of the organizations surveyed are predominantly financed by only one type of funding, be it individual donations or funds from larger donors. The smaller proportion is financed via a mixed funding. According to the interviewees, small individual donations ensure autonomy. »Smaller donations guarantee us maximum independence« (Martin Reyher, *Abgeordnetenwatch*).

5 Function at the time of the interview (Susanne Kailitz was no longer working for *Veto Magazine* at the time the manuscript was written, and *MedWatch* was discontinued at the end of May 2025).

Relevanzreporter Nürnberg and *Finanztip* were developing a donation or subscription model at the time of the interviews.

It is striking that three organizations currently receive or have received state funding in the past. *Abgeordnetenwatch* received funding for election-related projects from the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Agency for Civic Education) and a Landeszentrale für politische Bildung (State Agency for Civic Education in one federal state). *Veto Magazine* is partially funded by the Bundespresseamt (Federal Press Office). *Wokreisel* is mainly funded by grants, including the local journalism program of the Medienanstalt Berlin-Brandenburg (Media Authority Berlin-Brandenburg, MABB), which is funded by the state of Berlin. The start-up funding for the online magazine also came from the MABB; at the same time, funds have been provided in the past through the federal funding program »Talk with each other« (»Miteinander reden«). According to Stefan Lauer from *Belltower News*, this journalistic platform of the Amadeu Antonio Foundation is mainly financed by private donations, unlike other projects of the foundation.

It should therefore be noted that non-profit journalism in Germany is partly financed by taxpayers' money. This source of funding has not played a significant role in either German or US literature to date. However, this fact is already known from public debate, as *Correctiv*, for example, has been heavily criticized for receiving subsidies from federal and state funds – primarily by politicians and publicists from the right-wing and liberal-conservative spectrum (BECKER 2024; VON CASTELL 2022).

After financing, the interviews focused on fundraising. The aim was to find out what premises the editorial teams have for their choice of donors, whether the editorial team has a say in this, who is responsible and how fundraising takes place.

When it comes to selecting donors, media organizations financed by small donations are excluded as they cannot choose who donates. What all foundation-funded organizations have in common is that it is particularly important to them that the foundations either fit in thematically, represent shared values or decidedly promote journalism. Alexandra Haderlein from *Relevanzreporter Nürnberg* gave an example:

> »The most important thing for us is that the values match. In other words, the values and purposes according to the tax code, which the respective foundation and we have set out in our statutes and which guide us in our work.«

Harald Schumann from the *Investigate Europe* cooperative went on record:

> »The most important premise, and this is what makes it so difficult, is that donors have to agree to fund journalists, which is fundamentally different from funding researchers or civil society initiatives. Because journalists, that's the sine qua non, want and have to decide for themselves what content they work on.«

The experts clearly articulated in the interviews who they would and would not want to receive funding from. The majority said that political or party-affiliated foundations are not desirable sources of funding. Vera Deleja-Hotko from *FragDenStaat* gives an example of this: »We also receive support from foundations, but the fact is that we do not receive money from state foundations, for example, nor do we receive money from party-affiliated foundations.«

For the most part, the surveyed media outlets also check the foundations. At the same time, some of the interviewees say that once a foundation has been collaborating for a certain length of time or is well known, it no longer needs to be checked. The editorial teams mainly look at what else the sponsors are funding. »If it doesn't fit in with what the editorial team stands for, funding is out of the question« (Vera Delaja-Hotko, *FragDenStaat*). However, Harald Schumann points out:

> »There is no such thing as clean money. There is only more or less dirty money. But you can't really stay completely clean. It's in the nature of capitalism that you can't keep track of that. That's why you shouldn't get carried away when it comes to these criteria.«

A foundation that earns its money with »fossil fuels, nuclear weapons and pesticide production« he would »pick up gingerly.« On the other hand, there is the Schöpflin Foundation, which is »first class« when it comes to promoting journalism, lobby criticism and human rights NGOs.

> »Of course we're happy to take money from them, we're happy to be part of it. But we'd rather not know exactly how Mr. Schöpflin earned his money. Because we know that he earned his money as a venture capitalist in America. And very, very much so.«

When foundations are selected, all but one of the interviewees see themselves and/or their colleagues to have a say in the matter. According to Alexandra Haderlein, the editorial team is aware of the organization's financial situation. At the same time, she was involved in the development of the subscription and supporter model that was being set up at the time of the interviews. The situation is similar at *MedWatch*, where financing is a topic of discussion in editorial meetings. Not only topics for coverage are being discussed, but also the structure and organization of the editorial team, which includes financial aspects. Decisions are made in a smaller circle, but not against the editorial team. The *Wokreisel* team works together to find programs and funding agencies that are eligible for financing. According to Harald Schumann, the constitution of *Investigate Europe* as a cooperative ensures an institutionally anchored right to have a say. Martin Reyher from *Abgeordnetenwatch* also believes that he and his colleagues are able to intervene in the event of a critical large donation:

> »So the question always is: how likely is it that the donor will be the subject of critical reporting from us because they are playing the whole lobbying game? I myself take a more radical position in the team, saying: let's do without corporate donations as a matter of principle. I haven't been able to get my way with this so far, but I can now live with the

decision to make all donations of 1,000 euros or more a year public so that everyone can take a look for themselves and critically scrutinize them.«

The fundraising process takes varying lengths of time. It takes between eight weeks and nine months from the application to the confirmation of funding. Who is responsible for fundraising in the organizations also varies. Three interviewees stated that their organizations have specialized employees. At *Abgeordnetenwatch* and *Belltower News*, there are fundraisers who work for the larger structure within which the editorial offices are integrated (Parlamentwatch e. V. and Amadeu Antonio Foundation respectively). The third editorial team is *FragDenStaat*. Vera Delaja-Hotko said:

»In the beginning, it was just Stefan Wehrmeyer, the founder. Then Arne Semsrott joined, and the two of them ran it as a duo for a relatively long time, until one or two others joined. And when Judith joined, as I was told, [...] it was another leap in stability, because one person really takes care of the financial side and not just the content. [...] It's good when one person does it, so it has developed from a hobby project into stable jobs.«

In the other editorial teams, fundraising responsibilities are shared among several people. In three cases, the work takes place at the founder or management level. Two people said that fundraising is done by employees alongside their actual work. Anna Biselli said that at Netzpolitik.org it is mainly »our graphic and creative design person, [...] because it's always about external communication and he takes on many, many of these tasks without fundraising campaigns and the like being part of his job description when he was hired.« Hermann-Josef Tenhagen reports that employees at *Finanztip* are responsible for finding companies that would like to advertise their products via affiliate links. Several editors said that, though they would like to, they could not afford someone who was exclusively responsible for fundraising.

Small donations are acquired online by the organizations: for example, directly via the homepage or via newsletters that advertise their own research. Martin Reyher from *Abgeordnetenwatch* and Vera Deleja-Hotko from *FragDenStaat* also stated that larger investigations in conjunction with other media often lead to an increase in small donations. According to Deleja-Hotko, this is similar for foundations. Her editorial team is the only one that was directly approached by foundations. Other media organizations contact large foundations by telephone, e-mail or mail. Often, application forms for funding are also filled out online. In general, media outlets try to establish a trusting relationship with the foundations, who often show up at journalism conferences. Alexandra Haderlein from *Relevanzreporter Nürnberg* comments:

»The journalism bubble isn't that big, which means that those who support journalism are also at conferences, of course you know them. The foundations themselves, depending on their commitment, also offer their own events where you can meet them and other funded projects.«

4.2 Safeguarding independence

The autonomy of editorial teams in relation to their sponsors is a central topic of research into non-profit journalism. There are fears that wealthy foundations and patrons are buying influence over public discourse. Whether and how this occurs in the organizations surveyed in Germany, how they protect themselves against it, and whether there are conflicts of interest between editors and donors was clarified in the next part of the interviews.

First, interviewees were asked whether they were aware of any attempts to exert influence on the part of their donors and, if so, what these attempts looked like. All interviewees from organizations that are partially or fully funded by individual private donations reported receiving emails or phone calls from people aiming to influence them in one direction or another. Martin Reyher from *Abgeordnetenwatch* comments:

> »People pretend that they can imagine supporting us and say: ›I would support you if such and such happens‹. It also happens that people say: ›I've supported you for years now, but because the newsletter is gendered, I'm withdrawing my support.‹«

Sigrid März and Anna Biselli made similar statements about *Medwatch* and Netzpolitik.org. Unsurprisingly, given the phenomenon of social desirability (cf. SCHNELL et al. 2023: 325), none of the interviewees stated that this type of attempt to exert influence had ever worked. The editorial offices that are financed by foundations, on the other hand, unanimously stated that there were no attempts to influence content. Vera Deleja-Hotko, for example, said: »They know what we do and we don't get any interference at all. There is no one who tells me anything as a journalist.« Two of the interviewees even reported the opposite case, so to speak: contacts from the editorial team asking for expertise or contacts for research were blocked. Alexandra Haderlein comments:

> »For example, with the Schöpflin Foundation as our first and long-standing start-up funder, I asked for their expertise because of the experience they had in non-profit journalism. And then they said: ›I'd like to say something now, but I'm not allowed to‹. And it's actually in their funding agreement that they simply won't comment on certain things.«

Similarly, Harald Schumann reported that he had asked the communication office of a larger foundation, which also financed its editorial team, for a contact for research. The foundation refused. The foundation's reaction suggests that there is a high level of awareness of the issue of independence between sponsor and sponsored party:

> »Then he gave me a good shitting and said: ›So now, to make this clear once and for all: Our funding and your content-related work do not belong together. And that's why you'll never ask me a question about content again.‹ They were more dogmatic than we were in that case.«

In order to protect themselves from possible influence, four of the media outlets have written codes of conduct in which they stipulate that they work independently. There seems to be an awareness in all editorial offices that funding from major donors can be problematic. Alexandra Haderlein gives an example of this:

> »I think our safety mechanism, even if it's not in a written manifesto, is to realize that money is not independent. That there could be influencers and we think about how we would deal with it if that were to happen.«

In addition, the editorial teams try to ensure that journalistic freedom is respected when selecting donors. According to Harald Schumann, this already becomes clear during the first talk with each other. Hermann-Josef Tenhagen says that the independence of *Finanztip* is ensured by the fact that the journalistic employees are not the same people who take care of the affiliate links.

4.3 Differences in journalistic work

Journalists in non-profit organizations work differently than their colleagues in traditional media. The majority of interviewees stressed an essential difference: Clicks do not play the predominant role, especially in comparison to other online media. All of the media outlets surveyed are published online. »But we are not dependent on generating a lot of clicks in order to generate advertising revenue,« said Anna Biselli from Netzpolitik.org. Clickbait articles are not an issue. Susanne Kailitz from *Veto Mag* said that there is no »pressure to sell,« which is »something pleasant.« Martin Reyher from *Abgeordnetenwatch* mentioned other advantages of his work:

> »Firstly, complete independence in the choice of topics. No one in the team has ever told me what to do. Sufficient time, so all the time in the world. No production pressure. And I also have to say, a really good work-life balance.«

It can be stated that non-profit journalism is produced outside the logic of the market and that journalists are free to pursue topics they assume are in the public interest and not just in the cumulative private interest. Nevertheless, journalists stated that of course they want their pieces to be read.

Another difference in the way non-profit editorial offices work is their greater willingness to cooperate with other media. The reasons for this vary. Editorial teams are often dependent on cooperating with media with a wider reach in order to make their topics accessible to a larger audience. Martin Reyher from *Abgeordnetenwatch* said:

> »In the beginning, it was like this: we did some research, gave it to media and said: ›Do you want this exclusively?‹ And then they reported on it. The second step was that we asked media outlets whether we could do further research and investigate a story together.«

Vera Deleja-Hotko from *FragDenStaat*, who had already worked with the German national weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* and the public broadcaster RBB, among

others, reported something similar. She said her editorial team had probably been in contact with every investigative editorial team in Germany:

»Because we wanted our content to be shared, in the beginning, we often sent articles to editors and hoped they would report on it because we thought it was worth reporting on, without insisting that they mention us.«

Anna Biselli from Netzpolitik.org said that her editorial team feels a great deal of freedom to cooperate:

»We don't have to be the ones who get the clicks for this story, but we want the story to have the widest possible reach. Regardless of whether it goes directly to our site or is published somewhere else. We are free to say that we can work with you without any competitive behavior. And I believe that [...] makes journalism important that is oriented towards the common good and financed differently.«

Harald Schumann from *Investigate Europe* also emphasized the relevance of cooperation:

»All this exclusivity hype is just the original logic of our commercial employers, which for absurd reasons the public broadcasters have also adopted, even though they have no commercial pressure at all.«

Schumann said that his editorial team is currently working together with the research network of the public broadcasters WDR and NDR and the national daily newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Further, the non-profit organizations of this study are partly specialized in certain subject areas. Other journalists and media companies approach them accordingly in order to benefit from their expertise and receive advice.

At the same time, the type of financing also changes the editorial structure. Harald Schumann comments:

»The difference is like night and day. As a normal employee in the newsroom, you have superiors who tell you: today you do this and tomorrow you do that. And if you can, you'll do the second article afterwards. So it's assembly line production and an incredible hierarchy. We have a common selection of topics.«

The interviewees differed in their assessment of whether there is more work put onto journalists in non-profit media outlets. Four of the ten interviewees said that their funding model did not result in an additional work burden for the staff. Others reported that extra work is mainly seen at the management and founder level. According to Dörthe Ziemer, who is both the founder of *Wokreisel* and a journalist, working time has to be spent on funding applications and administrative tasks. Stefan Lauer noted that at *Belltower News*, all work relating to the journalistic product, such as editing, social media and CMS (Content Management System), is in the hands of just a few people. However, this has probably more to do with the size of the editorial team than with the type of funding.

How editorial offices (have to) prove their impact depends on how they are financed. Organizations that rely on small donations do not have to provide

formal proof of their work. However, they demonstrate their impact in order to generate new donations. All but one of the organizations funded by foundations provide evidence of their impact on an annual basis. Susanne Kailitz from *Veto Mag* reported that the foundations ask for access figures, for example. *Relevanzreporter Nürnberg* are not explicitly asked for their figures, Alexandra Haderlein noted:

> »The contracts with the donors state what the target is, i.e. what the money is for. You also have to submit a budget plan with figures that prove and demonstrate what you are doing. We haven't yet had any explicit follow-up queries about this in this form.«

Only a few interviewees have heard that funding is linked to conditions. Sigrid März from *MedWatch* said: »The Media Lab in Bavaria, for example, has always said: ›The funded project must be innovative. And *that's how* we define innovation.‹ That's very strict. And if you don't fit in, then it won't work.«

5. Conclusion

The study shows that non-profit journalism in Germany is financed in various ways. Previously known financing schemes such as crowd funding, memberships or foundations are used either exclusively or in combination. At the same time, other avenues are also being explored, such as financing through taxpayers' money, for example via state funding programs for journalism, the Federal Press Office and Federal or State Agencies for Civic Education. Fundraising takes place online, for example via newsletters, e-mails or appeals for donations on their own homepages, with past successful investigative stories being used as promotional material. On the other hand, funding is applied for from larger foundations or initiated in personal encounters at journalism conferences. The duration of these processes varies greatly depending on the donors' regulations and ranging between eight weeks and nine months.

In terms of content, the interviews did not show any dependence of the editorial offices on their sponsors, which in view of social desirability was to be expected; on the other hand, it is plausible that direct influence is prevented by a value-based pre-selection of donors. In some cases, media outlets are definitely financially dependent on the funders. Organizations are under pressure to keep coming up with new sources of money. Accordingly, some of the interviewees spoke of their at times financially precarious situations. In addition, it can be assumed that more and more non-profit media will be created – and it is unclear whether the total budget of funds provided by foundations and other donors will also increase. This could lead to intensified struggles of distribution and a decrease in the willingness of non-profit media to cooperate. It was also astonishing to find that large foundations are sometimes more concerned about

avoiding contact unrelated to the direct funding than the receiving journalistic organizations; foundations are generally reluctant to respond to journalistic inquiries from the latter in order to avoid being seen as too closely intertwined.

The interviews show major differences in the work in non-profit editorial offices compared to work in traditional media: the emphasis lies on the greater deal of autonomy in the choice of topics and research time, as well as a high willingness to cooperate with other media. Market logic hardly seems to play a role. There is also no evidence that funders would put editorial teams under strong pressure by demanding concrete, impressive proof of impact. At the same time, it should be noted that only a few organizations have employees who specialize in fundraising, meaning that this work falls on the shoulders of management, editorial or layout staff.

In order for non-profit journalism to play a greater future role within the media system, it must be placed on a secure basis with regard to tax law. This was agreed in the coalition agreement of the broken Social Democrat (SPD)-led coalition government. The project seemed to have taken a big step forward last summer: With a so-called application decree on the tax code, the federal government wanted to instruct the tax offices in July 2024 to assess non-profit media in a uniform manner and grant them the tax relief applicable to non-profit organizations. However, the plan failed due to resistance from the federal states. The new coalition agreement between the CDU, CSU and SPD from April 2025 now states: »In the interests of nationwide provision of journalistic services, we are creating legal certainty with regard to non-profit status.» (CDU/CSU/SPD 2025)

The legal situation therefore remains unclear. To date, the respective organizations have had to obtain and secure their non-profit status through activities other than the production of journalistic content, such as educational work. In the open round of answers at the end of the interviews, many of the interviewees said that the recognition of non-profit status for their organizations was essential for their future existence. Strong non-profit journalism could partially fill the gaps left by weakened corporate media and public broadcasters on an austerity course.

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Journalism Research
2025, Vol 8 (2) pp. 170-187
ISSN 2569-152X
DOI: 10.1453/2569-152X-22025-15356-en

HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

Research Paper

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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 ert 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 yearbooks 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 LUDES/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 *Tagesschau*, 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. Ventorini (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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Journalism Research
2025, Vol 8 (2) pp. 188-206
ISSN 2569-152X
DOI: 10.1453/2569-152X-22025-15338-en

HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

Research Paper

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Social media dynamics in the 2024-2025 Romanian presidential election campaign

TikTok's disruptive role and the enduring importance of journalism and legacy media

Abstract: **This article investigates the interplay between social media, mainstream media, and democratic processes in Romania's 2024–2025 presidential election, highlighting the pivotal role of media freedom and professional journalism in an era dominated by digital platforms. While social media, particularly TikTok, emerged as a powerful force capable of influencing political discourse and amplifying fringe candidates through algorithmic bias and coordinated inauthentic behavior, the study also underscores the enduring importance of legacy media as a space for public debate, critical questioning, and accountability. The case of the finally winning presidential candidate Nicușor Dan illustrates how a combination of traditional media appearances and creative engagement on platforms like TikTok and Meta can overcome the asymmetries of algorithm-driven information flows. Consistent visibility in mainstream media, combined with adaptive strategies in the social media landscape, remains a winning formula. The Romanian experience offers lessons for democracies navigating the challenges of maintaining electoral integrity and media pluralism in the face of digital manipulation techniques and regulatory challenges.**

Keywords: Social media; TikTok; electoral manipulation; algorithmic bias; coordinated inauthentic behavior; Romanian politics

Contemporary political realities have increasingly challenged the traditional assumption that mainstream legacy media have a decisive influence on election

outcomes. A compelling illustration of this paradigm shift can be observed in Romania's 2024 presidential elections, where the far-right candidate Călin Georgescu secured an unexpected first-place position in the initial round (which was annulled later), despite conspicuously abstaining from conventional media engagements and public debates. Instead, Georgescu opted for a communication strategy primarily centered on social media and on podcast appearances, effectively circumventing established media channels while still resonating with a significant portion of the electorate. This phenomenon exemplifies what Chadwick (2017) has termed the »hybrid media system« wherein legacy media no longer monopolize political discourse but instead compete and interact with – and often find themselves overshadowed by – alternative communication platforms. The Romanian case demonstrates how candidates can now successfully navigate electoral campaigns by cultivating direct connections with voters through decentralized digital media, thereby undermining the gatekeeping function traditionally exercised by journalists and outlets of legacy news media.

The surprising electoral performance achieved through such strategies suggests a profound transformation in how political information circulates and influences voting behavior. As Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) argue, this represents not merely a tactical innovation but a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationship between media, political actors, and citizens in the digital age. This article examines the transformative impact of social media, with a special focus on TikTok's unprecedented role in shaping political discourse and electoral dynamics in Romania. Romania's digital landscape presents a compelling case study for understanding broader global trends in political communication. The country's unique position – with its post-communist legacy and its still relatively recent development of free media (cf. STARCK 1999), its current digital transformation, and an evolving media regulatory framework – offers insights for scholars and practitioners interested in the intersection of (digital or traditional) media and democratic processes.

At the end of some turbulent months, the moderate candidate Nicușor Dan was elected as the new President of Romania in May 2025. His success, as we will emphasize, is also proof that the established media cannot be written off just yet. Traditional journalism, TV debates, and serious, rapid fact-checking can still make a difference.

TikTok's role in the 2024 Romanian presidential election

The 2024 Romanian presidential election marked a significant shift in political campaigning strategies, with the social media platform TikTok emerging as a crucial battleground. This analysis examines how politicians leveraged the

platform, the effectiveness of various approaches, and the subsequent regulatory concerns that arose. Romanian politicians across the political spectrum embraced TikTok during the 2024 campaign, though with varying degrees of success. Notably, ultranationalist candidate Călin Georgescu – previously a relatively obscure figure in Romanian politics – conducted what analysts characterized as an »adroit campaign« on the platform (CARLUGEA/WESOLOWSKY 2024). Through use of short, viral clips, Georgescu effectively reached millions of young voters, accumulating approximately 260,000 TikTok followers by election day. His content primarily consisted of question-and-answer segments and critiques of the European Union and NATO (PĂVĂLUCĂ 2024).

Although other political figures maintained TikTok presences – including far-right AUR leader George Simion, former prime minister Victor Ponta, Social Democratic Party leader Marcel Ciolacu, and reformist candidate Elena Lasconi – observers consistently noted that Georgescu alone »unlocked the full potential of the platform« (CARLUGEA/WESOLOWSKY 2024). Evidence of this effectiveness can be found in the disparity between traditional and social media engagement; for instance, one of Georgescu's television interview excerpts garnered approximately 70,000 views in its original broadcast format but achieved 4.1 million views when shared on TikTok. Several political parties attempted to leverage paid influencer campaigns on TikTok, despite the platform's formal prohibition of political advertisements. Investigative journalism revealed that the governing center-right National Liberal Party (PNL) contracted a third party to orchestrate a TikTok influencer campaign for its candidate. Paradoxically, this campaign appears to have been ›hijacked‹ to benefit Georgescu instead – a finding subsequently confirmed by Romania's tax agency, which verified that PNL had financed TikTok promotions and hashtags that ultimately favored Georgescu (GOURY-LAFFONT 2024).

Furthermore, declassified intelligence documents allege that an »aggressive promotion campaign« included approximately $381,000 paid to TikTok influencers specifically to promote Georgescu (CHAN 2024). This suggests that informal influencer endorsements functioned as a circumvention mechanism for TikTok's ban on formal political advertising. Consequently, while various political actors attempted to utilize TikTok for conventional campaign messaging, their success was inconsistent, whereas Georgescu benefited from a particularly effective, youth-oriented strategy. Romanian TikTok users demonstrated unusually high political engagement for a predominantly young demographic. A December 2024 poll of TikTok users aged 18-35 found that a majority reported exposure to election-related content and dubious claims on the platform immediately preceding the canceled runoff election (GLOBAL WITNESS 2024). Although TikTok questioned the methodological rigor of this poll, its findings align with other indicators of significant political content saturation on the application. In

practice, many young Romanians utilized TikTok not merely as an entertainment platform but as a primary news source. According to Eurobarometer data, social media have long been more important for current information in Romania than in other EU countries on average (EUROBAROMETER 2023).

Georgescu and his supporters employed viral content strategies and hashtag campaigns to maximize engagement. Users created participation-oriented memes – such as »Where are you supporting Georgescu from?« – that encouraged sharing and fostered a sense of collective identity. Georgescu's personal content blended nationalist and anti-EU rhetoric with relatable everyday imagery, including church visits, judo training, and jogging, to cultivate a likable persona (GLOBAL WITNESS 2024). One of Georgescu's most widely-circulated TikToks propagated the false claim that Ukrainian refugees received substantially more financial aid than Romanian children, an assertion subsequently debunked by fact-checkers (FACTUAL 2024). Despite its inaccuracy, this video accumulated over 5 million views (ARAMBESCU 2024). This suggests that the TikTok messaging campaign effectively combined emotional nationalist appeals, misinformation, and explicit calls for content amplification.

Multiple investigations concluded that TikTok's recommendation system disproportionately amplified Georgescu's content. Controlled experiments using balanced TikTok accounts revealed that pro-Georgescu posts were recommended between 4 and 14 times more frequently than content supporting rival candidate Lasconi (GLOBAL WITNESS 2024). Romanian media outlets and non-governmental organizations reported that automated accounts, inauthentic profiles, and algorithmic bias on TikTok contributed significantly to Georgescu's transformation from a marginal figure to the winner of a plurality of votes (HENLEY 2024). While TikTok denied providing preferential treatment to any candidate, the magnitude of Georgescu's online surge is noteworthy: He amassed many thousands of followers and millions of video views, substantially outperforming his competitors (HAECK 2024; ILIE 2024). In late November 2024, Romanian authorities formally addressed these concerns when the telecommunications regulation agency (ANCOM) requested that the European Commission initiate an investigation under the Digital Services Act (DSA) regarding TikTok's role in the election. Shortly thereafter, the Constitutional Court took the unprecedented step of annulling the election's first round, citing »foreign intervention« and algorithmic distortion – an acknowledgment that TikTok may have substantively influenced the electoral outcome (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2024).

Covert influence operations and disinformation campaigns on TikTok raised significant concerns among regulators. TikTok informed regulatory authorities that it had identified several »covert influence networks« targeting Romanian voters. By mid-December, the company reported having banned tens of thousands of inauthentic accounts and removed millions of fraudulent likes and

followers. Specifically, TikTok disclosed its disruption of a network comprising 4,453 fake accounts operating from Turkey, each with approximately three followers, primarily promoting the AUR political party and, to a lesser extent, Călin Georgescu. Following the election's annulment, TikTok banned an additional 22,764 accounts from this same influence network. Other inauthentic campaigns were also identified: one Romanian-based network of 78 accounts had promoted Georgescu (disrupted in November), while separate networks comprising dozens of accounts advocated for the PNL and PSD parties. According to TikTok's transparency reports, the platform blocked over 92,000 fake accounts and prevented millions of fraudulent engagements in Romania during the campaign period (TIKTOK NEWSROOM 2024). The 2024 Romanian presidential election illustrates the profound impact that social media platforms – particularly TikTok – can exert on democratic processes, highlighting urgent questions about algorithmic transparency, platform governance, and the evolving nature of political communication in digital environments.

Regulatory frameworks and emerging challenges

Romania's electoral landscape has undergone significant transformation in response to the proliferation of digital platforms and their influence on political communication. This section examines the regulatory frameworks established to govern digital content in electoral contexts and analyzes the emerging challenges posed by sophisticated manipulation tactics in the Romanian political sphere. Romania has established a complex regulatory architecture for digital content in electoral contexts. Notably, the National Authority for Administration and Regulation in Communications (ANCOM) has been designated through Law No. 50/2024 as »the authority responsible for all aspects related to the supervision of online services,« including oversight of major digital platforms (CRISTESCU 2024). This designation is particularly significant as it centralizes regulatory authority and establishes a clear institutional mechanism for addressing illicit content and electoral disinformation.

Nevertheless, this centralization has not eliminated jurisdictional complexities within the regulatory landscape. The National Audiovisual Council (CNA) has attempted to extend its control over online video content, issuing »removal orders« for social media posts. However, this expansion of authority has been criticized by civil society organizations such as ApTI and ActiveWatch, which contend that the CNA »illegally extends its jurisdiction« and imposes disproportionate sanctions without clear legal foundation (BUNEA 2025). Additionally, the Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP) and Central Electoral Bureau (BEC) coordinate the monitoring of online electoral content through complaints which, if

substantiated, require major platforms to remove illegal advertisements (G4MEDIA REDACTION 2025a).

The European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) implementation in Romania further complicates this landscape by imposing transparency obligations on platforms. Users affected by restrictions can directly challenge platform decisions and, if dissatisfied, can notify ANCOM with detailed evidence. ANCOM can resolve complaints if the platform is established in Romania or forward them to the coordinator in the respective country (G4MEDIA REDACTION 2025b). This approach, while comprehensive, presents challenges in terms of coordination and effectiveness. In response to the annulment of the November 2024 elections, the Romanian Parliament has adopted stringent online regulations. Sponsored political content must now be marked with identification codes (campaign and sponsor) in each electoral message. Messages that fail to comply with this labeling can be deleted by platforms »in less than five hours« according to the law adopted in January 2025 (CHASTAND/MALINGRE 2025). These measures complement DSA obligations regarding transparent political advertising and combating disinformation.

The implementation of these regulations has led to new reporting mechanisms whereby citizens can report suspected illegal online messages to the BEC. If the complaint is justified, BEC issues an order to platforms (through AEP) to restrict the content. ANCOM has published guidelines and complaint forms to assist citizens and parties in identifying and reporting non-compliant electoral content (G4MEDIA 2025a). Furthermore, electoral campaigns must comply with legislation on financing and advertising, with each paid material being reported to BEC. Despite these regulatory advances, controversial situations have emerged during campaigns that highlight imbalances in enforcement. Nicușor Dan, for example, has accused the AEP of »bad faith« for not prohibiting anonymous defamatory materials freely circulating online. He maintains that his supporters who post organically (without paid advertising) are penalized by algorithms, while anonymous negative content »is not sanctioned« (EMILIAN 2025). This case shows the persistent challenges in enforcing regulatory frameworks equitably across different types of content and actors.

A significant development in Romania's electoral dynamics has been the shift from traditional fake news to more sophisticated manipulation techniques. According to a report by Expert Forum, the focus has moved beyond combating false news to addressing »the ability to flood the digital space with oceans of information, memes and videos about one's own candidate, plus negative propaganda about opponents« (IONIȚĂ/VOINEA 2025). This phenomenon, identified as Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB), represents a fundamental change in digital electoral tactics. The impact of CIB on candidate visibility has been substantial, with evidence of artificial enhancement of visibility and credibility through the use of bot networks and inauthentic accounts. Expert Forum's analysis

reveals exploitation of platform algorithms at the limit or beyond the provisions of Romanian laws. Data collected over 30 days showed over 100 million views produced by 600 CIB-type videos, with 270 clips supporting George Simion and 180 promoting Crin Antonescu (IONIȚĂ/VOINEA 2025).

Furthermore, suspicious growth patterns were observed in candidates' official accounts. Victor Ponta recorded an increase of 100,000 new TikTok followers in the last analyzed week (April 20-24), followed by Nicușor Dan with approximately 30,000. Analysis of comments on candidates' videos indicated a significant proportion of duplicate comments, suggesting bot usage. Victor Ponta had 47.6% potentially duplicate comments, Nicușor Dan 37%, and George Simion 23.1% (IONIȚĂ/VOINEA 2025). Particularly noteworthy is the case of Crin Antonescu, whose positive visibility (118 million views in recent months) stemmed »mainly from support networks, not from the activity of his official account« despite having a »systematically neglected« official account. This demonstrates the coordinated action of inauthentic networks in shaping public perception independently of candidates' official communications (IONIȚĂ/VOINEA 2025). The opacity of TikTok's algorithm presents a significant challenge in addressing CIB. Expert Forum emphasizes that »we are practically in the dark« due to the opacity of TikTok's viralization algorithm, which selects content based on unknown criteria (IONIȚĂ/VOINEA 2025).

Additionally, the Romanian state lacks dedicated structures with genuine expertise for monitoring inauthentic networks. Expert Forum argues that digital platforms have »an obligation of compliance, not just one of voluntary collaboration« in combating systemic risks. The document contends that at the national level, easily quantifiable aspects (e.g., complaints to BEC) are prioritized at the expense of systemic issues related to CIB (IONIȚĂ/VOINEA 2025). The case of Nicușor Dan further illustrates these structural limitations. In April 2025, he announced that he had stopped paid promotion (approximately €15,000/day) after his Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok pages were »invaded by hundreds of thousands of fake accounts« aggressively distributing his posts (BULARCA/POPESCU 2025; OTOPEANU 2025). He informed the AEP and filed complaints with DNSC and ANCOM, requesting identification of those who »paid the bots.« While DNSC confirmed receiving such a notification regarding »inauthentic behavior« on his accounts, and ANCOM officially received the complaint and announced its analysis, the outcome remains uncertain.

The Romanian case demonstrates that despite establishing comprehensive regulatory frameworks for digital content in electoral contexts, significant challenges remain in effectively addressing sophisticated manipulation tactics. The shift from fake news to Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior represents a fundamental change in digital electoral tactics that current regulatory approaches struggle to address adequately. This evolution highlights the need for enhanced

monitoring capabilities, greater platform transparency, and more proactive collaboration between regulatory authorities and digital platforms. Moreover, the discrepancy between regulatory intent and implementation effectiveness raises questions about the adequacy of current approaches in safeguarding electoral integrity in digital environments.

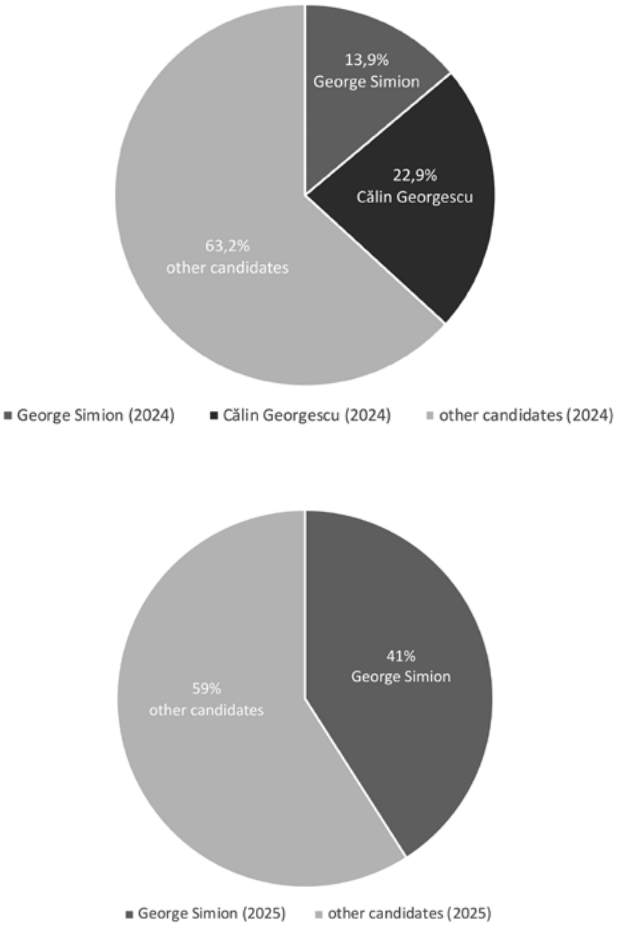
Image transfer and transfer of electoral capital between Georgescu and Simion

In the context of the Romanian presidential elections, the political relationship between Călin Georgescu and George Simion offers a notable example of symbolic alignment and electoral capital transfer. George Simion, the leader of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), has been portrayed in media reports as using Georgescu primarily as a symbolic figurehead – a »sovereignist image« to be marketed to the electorate (POPESCU 2025). This strategy appears to have yielded substantial political gains in the first round of the 2025 presidential elections.

In 2024, Georgescu, an »independent« candidate, had emerged as the frontrunner in the first round, securing 2,120,401 votes, amounting to 22.94% of the total. In the same election, Simion received 1,281,325 votes (13.86%) (POPESCU 2025). One year later, however, in the 2025 election, Simion recorded a dramatic surge, receiving 3,862,761 votes (40.96%) – a figure that not only surpassed his own previous performance but also significantly exceeded the combined total of votes he and Georgescu had received in 2024 (3,401,726 votes) (AGERPRESS 2025; CRISTEA 2025).

This 2025 outcome suggests a successful consolidation of the sovereignist electorate under Simion's candidacy, alongside a noteworthy expansion of his support base. The approximately 460,000 additional votes he received beyond the 2024 combined total of both candidates point to attracting new voters outside the original sovereignist segment. Media analyses reinforce this interpretation, noting that Simion's campaign effectively appropriated Georgescu's sovereignist appeal while mobilizing broader public support (HOTNEWS 2025). Moreover, the shift in voter behavior may also reflect wider political dynamics. Some former supporters of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) appear to have gravitated toward the sovereignist discourse represented by Simion, suggesting that his electoral gains were not solely due to Georgescu's endorsement or symbolic influence. In contrast, other political figures, such as Crin Antonescu, did not resonate with this segment of the electorate. The electoral data and media narratives converge on the conclusion that George Simion successfully absorbed Georgescu's political image and voter base while expanding his appeal to new segments of the electorate. The 2025 election results underscore this achievement: not only did Simion consolidate the sovereignist vote, but he also transformed it into a broader political force.

Figure 1
Vote distribution 2024/2025 (first rounds)



Source: own diagram

Nicușor Dan's media exposure and the role of television

During the campaign period for the second round of the 2025 presidential elections, Nicușor Dan participated in a series of televised programs with significant viewership, strategically attempting to consolidate his visibility and bridge the vote gap with his opponent. His participation in debates and nationally impactful broadcasts constituted a strategic component of his campaign, particularly considering that George Simion chose to avoid individual television appearances, instead concentrating his communication efforts on online platforms, predominantly TikTok. This strategic divergence created an imbalance in traditional media presence between the two candidates, consequently allowing Nicușor Dan to capture the attention of mainstream audiences, especially among voter segments less engaged in digital environments.

For instance, the debate broadcast by the public station TVR 1 on May 15, 2025, recorded an average national audience of approximately 220,000 viewers, according to data published by Obae (2025c). Although the overall rating was relatively modest compared to other programs, Nicușor Dan's presence in a space associated with TVR's editorial neutrality can be interpreted as an attempt to consolidate his image as a serious candidate open to broader public engagement, particularly among urban viewers and those interested in substantive debates.

Another notable appearance occurred on May 14 at România TV, where a special program featuring Nicușor Dan attracted an average of approximately 665,000 viewers, corresponding to a national rating of 3.8% (OBAE 2025b). Since România TV is perceived as favorable to George Simon's electorate, this platform provided an intriguing framework for Nicușor Dan to communicate his message to a traditionally less favorable audience segment. This exposure can be interpreted as an attempt to penetrate his opponent's supporter »bubble« seeking to bring his message to those who would otherwise have been less exposed to an alternative voting option.

On the evening of May 13, Nicușor Dan participated in a debate on Antena 3, moderated by Mihai Gâdea, which was watched by approximately 480,000 viewers nationally (OBAE 2025a). Given Antena 3's profile, which attracts an audience interested in political subjects as well as more ›spectacular‹ debate formats, this appearance allowed the candidate to express his viewpoints in a high-visibility format and establish a leadership profile before an electorate that combines interest in political current affairs with mainstream television consumption.

In contrast, opponent George Simion did not participate in individual programs with significant impact during May 4-18, 2025, focusing his communication almost exclusively on the TikTok platform. This strategy limited the general electorate's ability, particularly those less active in digital environments, to evaluate his positions and personality in formal debate contexts directly. The only

direct encounter between the two candidates occurred during the Euronews-moderated debate on May 8, 2025, which attracted 272,000 national viewers – a figure smaller than the cumulative audiences of Nicușor Dan's appearances (BUNEA 2025).

Table 1
TV appearances by Nicușor Dan in the 2025 election campaign

Format (Show)	TV Station	Date	Time interval	Rating (National)	Rating (Urban)	Rating (Commercial)
Debate (Mihai Gâdea as presentor)	Antena 3	13.05. 2025	19:00-23:45	480,000	355,000	115,000
Debate	România TV*	14.05. 2025	20:00-22:00	665,000	450,000	150,000
Debate	TVR 1	15.05. 2025	21:00-00:00	220,000	160,000	60,000
Debate (only true debate with both candidates)	Euronews	8.05. 2025	20:00-00:00	272,000	233,000	135,000

*** A television station that caters to George Simon's fanbase.**

Therefore, Nicușor Dan's multiple exposures in television programs with significant audiences served as an important vector for electoral visibility, especially given his opponent's absence from these traditional public debate spaces. Through participation in these programs, Nicușor Dan successfully reached diverse audiences, transmitted his messages to viewers from different audience categories (national, urban, commercial), and implicitly created a contrast between his profile as a candidate present in traditional public space and George Simon's more restricted strategy, focused on digital communication within a specific supporter »bubble.«

Contextualizing these audience figures is essential, as Nicușor Dan's mainstream media participations were not merely simple appearances but became catalysts for consolidating critical narratives against his opponent, George Simion. For example, following the first debate, Nicușor Dan was perceived as the victor, benefiting from George Simon's frequent blunders, including remarks such as »I am better than you at throwing words,« to which Nicușor Dan promptly responded with »exactly, exactly« (SAVA 2025). This dynamic was subsequently exploited by the pro-European camp, which amplified Simon's image as an unprepared and superficial candidate.

The symbolism of absence

George Simion's absenteeism from subsequent debates was, in turn, transformed into a media symbol. The empty chair reserved for Simion in television studios became a metaphor for absence and lack of courage in facing direct confrontation, being ironized both in online spaces and in symbolic campaigns. Brands and users replicated the empty chair image, using it as a point of irony: »we found George Simion« (COȘLEA 2025). This symbolism was amplified by incidents such as the one generated by stand-up comedian Micutzu, who organized a neutral debate to which George Simion initially confirmed participation but later refused to attend, subsequently denying that he had accepted the terms. The publication of an audio recording in which Simion expressed his agreement accentuated perceptions of insincerity and inconsistency, and Micutzu ironically punctuated the situation with the remark »why do we flee from debate and then lie« (ZIA 2025), a comment that also included an allusion to the grammatical errors made by members of the extremist POT party (Young People's Party).

The impact of this dynamic was felt even in the symbolism associated with George Simion in the digital public space: users began repeatedly using the chair emoticon in response to his posts, ironizing his absence from essential confrontations. Moreover, his meetings with European political leaders, such as Georgia Meloni or the nationalist candidate from Poland, Nawrocki, did not produce official support, which accentuated the perception of failure in consolidating his image as an international leader. Consequently, Nicușor Dan's consistent presence in traditional media space, combined with the symbolism created around his opponent's absence, contributed significantly to consolidating his position in the second round. This strategy successfully exploited George Simion's lack of response, allowing Nicușor Dan to assume the role of a present, prepared, and dialogue-oriented candidate, in contrast to his adversary's isolated and evasive leader image.

Free press in the age of short-form content: A case for prebunking and responsible journalism

On the morning of May 17, 2025, just one day before the second round of Romania's presidential elections, the TikTok account of George Simion, the far-right AUR party's presidential candidate, unexpectedly disappeared. Without prior context or warning, users trying to access his page were met with the platform's default message: »*This account could not be found*«. What followed was a textbook example of narrative hijacking. Given his self-styled position as an anti-system figure, Simion seemed poised to claim political censorship. A journalist from

Realitatea TV, known for echoing populist themes, quickly posted that »the system's desperation is showing,« while a network of TikTok influencers amplified the claim in near-real-time. It was a critical moment shortly before the election, which must also be seen against the background of the nationalists' claim for weeks, reinforced by US Vice President J.D. Vance, that also Georgescu had been cheated out of an election victory.

Yet, the strategy failed. And it failed precisely because of timely, evidence-based journalism. Here, the concept of prebunking – a proactive strategy in combating misinformation – proves essential. Unlike *debunking*, which reacts to false claims post-distribution, *prebunking* functions as a form of psychological inoculation, preparing the public in advance by exposing the rhetorical and emotional tactics likely to be used in disinformation campaigns (LEWANDOWSKY/VAN DER LINDEN 2021; ROOZENBEEK/VAN DER LINDEN 2019). In this case, the editorial team at Context.ro applied a prebunking logic by immediately reaching out to TikTok for clarification. Within minutes, they received confirmation that George Simion had deactivated his own account voluntarily, thereby defusing the narrative of censorship before it could metastasize.

With the initial disinformation line exposed, Simion was forced to improvise. He declared a »day of silence« ahead of the Sunday election, announcing the suspension of all his social media accounts. Yet, contradicting his own premise, he continued posting on X (formerly Twitter), maintaining contact with a loyal base nested within his ideological bubble. This event illustrates the critical importance of a genuinely free press in countering strategic misinformation – particularly in the attention economy fostered by short-form content platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels (NAPOLI 2019). It also underscores the dangers of echo chambers, where algorithmically-driven content reinforcement minimizes ideological diversity, intensifying group polarization and susceptibility to populist disinformation (CINELLI et al. 2021; SUNSTEIN 2018). Within such closed systems, misinformation spreads rapidly – unless disrupted by timely and credible counter-narratives. The fragmented nature of online discourse continues to challenge traditional journalistic authority, this case study reaffirms that prebunking, combined with responsive, investigative reporting, can still act as a democratic safeguard. In the age of viral populism, the truth (accurate facts), verified swiftly and communicated transparently, remains the best defense.

Conclusion

The 2024–2025 Romanian presidential election offers a stark illustration of the evolving dynamics of political communication, where the boundaries between traditional media, social media, and algorithmic influence are increasingly

blurred. While TikTok emerged as a disruptive force capable of amplifying fringe candidates and distorting public debate, the ultimate success of Nicușor Dan underscores that a multifaceted strategy remains key to electoral success. His consistent presence in mainstream media – through televised debates, interviews, and public appearances – provided a crucial platform for critical engagement, message amplification, and credibility building, particularly among demographics less active on digital platforms. Simultaneously, his creative use of TikTok and Meta allowed him to connect with younger audiences, demonstrating how innovative campaigning can complement, rather than replace, the foundational role of traditional media in shaping democratic discourse.

The Romanian example is encouraging in that it reveals the enlightening potential of TV debates during election campaigns, which, in the age of populism and extremism, have become more of a problem for democracy in other countries and have in some cases literally turned into »slingshots of lies« (SCHULTZ 2024). However, Nicușor Dan benefited in Romania also from the fact that his populist opponent George Simion avoided most debates and only faced a direct TV duel once.

This case highlights the critical importance of preserving media freedom and ensuring pluralistic access to information in an age where algorithmic gatekeeping and coordinated manipulation threaten to erode the very foundations of democratic debate. While social media offers unprecedented opportunities for direct engagement, it also introduces vulnerabilities that can be exploited to undermine electoral integrity. The Romanian experience demonstrates that mainstream media remains an essential space for public scrutiny, offering a counterweight to the opacity and volatility of algorithm-driven information flows.

Ultimately, safeguarding democracy in the digital age requires a dual commitment: to support resilient, independent journalism and to develop robust regulatory frameworks capable of addressing the challenges posed by algorithmic amplification and digital manipulation. The Romanian case offers a timely reminder that while the tools of political communication are evolving, the core principles of transparency, accountability, and media freedom must remain at the heart of democratic practice.

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Journalism Research
2025, Vol 8 (2) pp. 207-226
ISSN 2569-152X
DOI: 10.1453/2569-152X-22025-15340-en

HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

Research Paper

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Memorializing women journalists

Obituaries on women journalists' role performance

Abstract: **Obituaries, though seemingly straightforward, hold deep reflections for the role of women journalists. Through the lens of metajournalistic discourse, this study explores obituaries of women journalists (n=1064) from the United States. The analysis finds that the memorialization of women journalists reflect on their role as advocates in and outside of the newsroom. In doing so, they not only redefine their profession, but work to champion societal advancement and gender equality.**

Keywords: women journalists, metajournalistic discourse, advocacy, memorialization, departed journalists, obituaries

Joan Kuni (1930-2019) had a unique way of doing things. Instead of taking the bus, she rode her horse to school. She would change the lyrics of songs to create her own stories. When it came time to decide her future, »Joan did not follow the path that most young women took in the '50s. Rather than become a bride, teacher or secretary, Joan focused on a broadcasting career, and she excelled.«

Joan Kuni's career started as a disc jockey and news reporter at KWWC college radio, which led to a position at WJR-AM Radio in Detroit. As a program director there, she demonstrated her versatility in news, sports, sound, and commercials. Moving to television with WXYZ, Joan notably helped launch the career of the famous TV personality Soupy Sales, making a significant impact on the television industry.

When she decided to start a family, »her tenacity, creativity and huge heart« remained undiminished. Her first two sons were born with intellectual and developmental disabilities and were told they would not lead meaningful lives. Joan Kuni, staying true to her nature, chose a different path, advocating tirelessly for

them and others facing similar challenges. Her efforts resulted in the creation of the Wayne D. Kuni & Joan E. Kuni Foundation, which supports housing and enrichment opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities. In 2013, Joan Kuni was instrumental in developing Stephen's Place, an assisted living complex named after her son, funded by the Kuni Foundation. Her advocacy continues to inspire positive change. »Throughout her life, Joan was a pioneer and advocate, blazing a trail for women in broadcasting and shifting the tide of inclusion for individuals with intellectual disabilities« (Obituary 502).

This study aims to understand how women journalists are memorialized by analyzing a large corpus of obituaries of women journalists (n=1064) from the United States. Using this dataset, the paper explores the metajournalistic discourse surrounding women journalists, examining how obituaries provide insights into their professional identities and news work. Metajournalistic discourse, as a self-reflective practice within journalism, offers a lens to analyze the portrayal of women journalists in obituaries, highlighting their contributions, challenges, and the evolving dynamics of the journalistic landscape.

The authors engaged in an iterative, constant-comparative analysis (LINDLOF/TAYLOR 2011) of the dataset. Fram (2013) notes that such analysis is valuable for etic coding, driven by literature and theory. Through this analysis, the study addresses research questions concerning the memorialization of women journalists' professional identities and news work. By exploring themes of community engagement, advocacy, career achievements, and personal relationships, alongside the values and persistence exhibited in their journalistic endeavors and news work, this research illuminates the multifaceted roles and impact of U.S. women journalists within the field.

In examining the memorialization of women journalists through obituaries, the concept of role performance as advocacy emerges as a significant theme. Women journalists, as depicted in these obituaries, are portrayed not only as professionals but also as advocates for broader societal change. This advocacy is demonstrated through their volunteer work, community involvement, and active participation in local organizations and charities.

Notably, narratives highlight their pioneering roles as »first women« in journalism, emphasizing their advocacy for gender inclusivity and representation within the profession. These women journalists' stories and advocacy extend beyond newsrooms, as they take on leadership positions in organizations, assume chair roles, and become the first women to receive prestigious awards. By stepping into roles that had never been filled by women before, whether within the newsroom or beyond, these journalists not only reshape their profession but also advocate for societal progress and gender equity (CUNNINGHAM et al. 2017), leaving a lasting legacy memorialized in their obituaries.

Women's role performance in newswork

Obituaries can highlight the unique contributions of women journalists within the newsroom. By the late nineteenth century, white, middle-class women in the United States increasingly sought active roles beyond domestic confines. However, the opportunities for white, middle-class, and educated women in journalism were limited, leading them to engage in writing that differed significantly from the straightforward factual reporting of their man counterparts (CHAMBERS et al. 2005). Women's roles in journalism are often shaped by societal expectations and may be linked to stereotypical feminine traits (CHAMBERS et al. 2005), which can include values such as cooperation, non-violent conflict resolution, peace advocacy, compassion, emotionality, honesty, congeniality, and altruism (PAUL et al. 2022; SHOR et al. 2018).

Women in American journalism today face challenges that hinder their ability to succeed and progress within newsrooms across the country (YORK 2017). The percentage of women journalists in the United States rose from 37.5% in 2013 to 40.9% in 2022 (WILLNAT et al. 2022). Similarly, the Reuters Institute found that an average of 40% of journalists in 12 markets were women in 2024 (ARGUEDAS et al. 2024). A study in 2025 found that there are over 6,047 journalists currently employed in the United States, and 53.4% of them are women, while 46.6% are men (ZIPPIA 2025). There is, however, a significant lack of women in leadership positions in journalism. Arguedas et al. (2024) examined the representation of women in top editorial roles across those 12 markets with different levels of gender equality, using data from 240 news outlets (both online and offline). They found that only 24.2% of top editors were women, which is below the 40% average of women journalists in these markets (ARGUEDAS et al. 2024). Men still dominate top editorial positions in 11 of the 12 markets. The study revealed a weak positive correlation between the percentage of women in journalism and in editorial roles, but in most markets, women were underrepresented in senior positions compared to their numbers in the profession (ARGUEDAS et al. 2024). Although gender parity is far from achieved, the percentage of women journalists in top editorial positions has slowly increased from 23% in 2020 to 25% in 2024, with a potential to reach parity by 2074 if this trend continues (ARGUEDAS et al. 2024).

Women face several challenges in the workplace. Systemic sexism is one, which manifests in the silencing of outspoken women, pressure on women leaders to overlook issues, gender stereotypes, and widespread retaliation against women who challenge sexist behavior or demand accountability in newsrooms (BAILEY 2022; HECKMAN 2014; LIPINSKI 2019). Women are also hindered by harassment (CHAKRADHAR 2022), wage gaps, discrimination in job assignments (SCHUDSON/HAAS 2008; STIVERS 2012), and balancing family responsibilities with

career commitments (YORK 2017). Women in journalism are also less likely to get credit for the work they do (HECKMAN 2012).

U.S. women journalists often navigate gender expectations, specifically in regard to their news sourcing and choice of news topics, as part of their news work, recognizing that aligning with stereotypic expectations can impact how their work is evaluated (CHAMBERS et al. 2005). The journalist may recognize that such alignment could positively impact how her work is evaluated, as it conforms to societal expectations about the congruence between the reporter's gender, the topic covered, and the gender of the sources quoted (PAUL et al. 2022; SHOR et al. 2018). Even when women address political or social matters, they are encouraged to adopt a »human-interest« approach, emphasizing the impact of events on individuals' everyday lives. Thus, and conversant with literature on women's work in the professions, the primary role of early women journalists was to evoke emotional responses from readers (CHAMBERS et al. 2005); hence, they then are also tasked with a disproportionate amount of *emotional labor* in newsrooms (SORONEN 2018). Emotional labor is reflected in two activities – evocation and suppression; evocation requires women to manifest emotion in places where it is initially absent, and suppression requires women to manage undesired emotions which are initially present (HOCHSCHILD 1979). In a similar manner, women in the professions are often tasked with what Anderson (2023) describes as *hermeneutic labor*, in which women are tasked with making sense of the emotions of others.

In this way there exists an unintentional activation of implicit gender stereotypes within journalism, and there is the potential backlash when women journalists deviate from these expectations. A study done by Cassidy (2008) analyzed the professional role conceptions of men and women newspaper journalists in the United States. He found that women newspaper journalists tend to prioritize adopting an activist stance in their approach to journalism. He also found that women journalists tended to incorporate traditionally masculine norms of the profession into their job performance (CASSIDY 2008). They feel as if they have to adjust in order to be accepted as ›real‹ journalists (VAN ZOONEN 1998). In this way, women journalists engage in an interplay with societal gender norms, leveraging strategies, like taking on more man-centric characteristics (CASSIDY 2008; VAN ZOONEN 1998), to enhance credibility while being aware of the potential challenges and biases associated with these expectations.

Prior research reflects that the presence of women in significant editorial and managerial positions positively influences the overall reporting of various issues in the news, particularly with regard to the coverage of women (SHOR et al. 2018); this includes reporting on topics disproportionately affecting women. This viewpoint underscores the significance of women journalists in leadership roles, emphasizing their potential role in shaping and enhancing the quality and perspective of news reporting, particularly in areas related to women. More broadly,

this reflects the importance of diversity in decision-making roles for fostering inclusivity and accuracy in news media (CHAMBERS et al. 2005).

Despite strives in news leadership, journalism by women continues to be perceived as a counter-culture, conflicting with the prevailing journalist culture (MELIN-HIGGINS 2004), reflecting the minimal historical presence of women in newsrooms, typically men-dominated spaces. Simply being present in such environments often resulted in expectations that they would champion the interests of women in their audience.

Metajournalistic discourse on women

Metajournalistic discourse plays a crucial role in journalism, providing a platform where various actors, often journalists themselves, engage in defining, setting boundaries, and evaluating the legitimacy of journalism (CARLSON 2016). This discourse includes public assessments of news content, reflections on journalistic practices, analyses of ethical dilemmas, and considerations of the dynamics within the journalism field. The term »metajournalistic discourse« within the broader context of journalism refers to discussions that focus on evaluating news production processes and the conditions surrounding their reception, as well as delineating the profession's boundaries (CARLSON 2016). Metajournalistic discourse serves as a stabilizing force within the journalistic field, helping journalists to assess norms and expectations amidst the field's evolving standards (PERREAULT/PERREAULT/MAARES 2022). It acts as a self-reflective practice, enabling journalists to comprehensively examine their profession, contemplate the news media's impact on society, and navigate the evolving landscape of the industry (PERREAULT/TANDOC/CABERLON 2023); the practice allows journalists to engage in *epistemic contests* in which journalists debate not just what is known, but how journalists define their ways of knowing (CARLSON 2025). The evolution of technology has further expanded the avenues for discussions about journalism, allowing journalists to communicate in more emotional and personal ways across various platforms (PERREAULT/TANDOC/CABERLON 2023). But it is not only technological shifts that have shaped journalists engagement in discussion in regard to emotions, but also cultural shifts in regard to journalistic profession, news work, and journalistic audiences (see MAARES et al. 2023; PERREAULT et al. 2024b). Broadly, journalists feel more need to engage *affectively* and view the deployment of emotions as key to creating knowledge (KOTIŠOVÁ/VAN DER VELDEN 2023).

Metajournalistic discourse takes on diverse forms, such as editor's notes, amicus briefs, and public statements, and is not solely the responsibility of journalists; non-journalists also contribute significantly to co-creating and participating in critical discourses on the nature of journalism (PERREAULT/

TANDOC/CABERLON 2023; PHELAN/SALTER 2021). Moreover, it serves as a lens through which journalists conceptualize their work (PERREAULT/NÖLLEKE 2022; PERREAULT/KANANOVICH/HACKETT 2023), establish field boundaries, and navigate crises, contributing to a stabilized journalistic landscape (PERREAULT/PERREAULT/MAARES 2022; PERREAULT et al. 2024a). While some aspects of metajournalistic discourse address external readers, it primarily tends to be inward-facing, fostering discussions among journalists themselves and creating a space for introspection and dialogue within the journalistic community (VOS 2016).

The historical authority within journalism plays a crucial role in shaping journalists' perceptions of the world (MOON 2021). Obituaries, traditionally viewed as simple remembrances of the deceased, gain significance when applied to the experiences of journalists. They offer a unique opportunity for metajournalistic discourse, allowing the journalistic field to reflect on its historical trajectory and impact on journalists' worldviews (PERREAULT/TANDOC/CABERLON 2023). Beyond serving as a memorialization tool, obituaries become a form of collective memory, reaffirming the mission of journalists, reinforcing norms, and creating models for emulation, thus establishing a recognized tradition of journalistic success (CARLSON 2007).

In commemorating departed journalists, obituaries go beyond mere remembrance; they become a tool for boundary maintenance within the journalistic community (CARLSON/BERKOWITZ 2014). They provide spaces for introspection about journalism and contribute to the ongoing constitution of journalistic practice within the field (CARLSON 2016).

The theoretical argument supporting the significance of metajournalistic discourse, including the obituary as a form of it, lies in its ability to connect the creation and circulation of journalism's sociocultural meanings to the social practices surrounding news production and consumption. As a pragmatic discourse delineating journalism as a cultural practice and a normative one shaping perceptions of what news should be, metajournalistic discourse becomes the site where actors inside and outside of journalism engage in establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism's legitimacy (CARLSON 2016).

Obituaries of women

Obituaries are an often underdiscussed, but essential aspect of journalism knowledge-building service to a community by linking »the past to the present« (PERREAULT et al. 2023: 12) and connecting »individual lives with generational, or family, memory and with American collective memory« (HUME 2000: 11). Through the process of memorialization »even after journalists have passed

their contributions live on« (19); in effect, through reflecting a community back on itself. Obituaries are of course manufactured memorializations: reconstructing the lives of those who have passed through historical and social contexts (EDY 1999). As a staple in U.S. news, it serves as a »secularized rite de passage, to help the bereaved; yet is also a verdict…about the worth of the dead person's contribution« (FOWLER 2011: 61). Obituaries are developed in two manners: by family members who at times pay a fee for the obituary publications and at times by journalists within a newsroom. Nevertheless, given that journalists take part in production and distribution of the obituary, and that obituaries are suited to the form of journalism, we consider the overall process one of metajournalism. This also reflects Carlson's (2016) argument that researchers ought to take seriously the »divisions among journalists and the blurring of boundaries between journalists and non journalists« (CARLSON 2016: 357).

Fowler (2005) categorizes women's obituaries into five types: traditional positive, untraditional positive, negative, tragic, and ironic. Research shows that ironic obituaries, which humorously highlight the outrageous aspects of a woman's life, and tragic obituaries, which portray the deceased as victims of structural injustice, are relatively rare (FOWLER 2005). The more common types are:

Traditional positive: According to Fowler (2005), this is the most prevalent type, focusing on the deceased's achievements and celebrating their life.

Untraditional positive: Fowler (2005) describes these obituaries as highlighting the »mould breaking« work of women (160), while still adhering to the norms of traditional positive obituaries.

Negative: This rare type of obituary is applied to stigmatized individuals, either due to their actions or identity, effectively marginalizing them from the community (FOWLER 2005).

Unlike other forms of reporting on the death of a person, journalism practices regarding the obituary tend to offer a reflection of »a life lived instead of a death died« (STARCK 2005: 268). And these reflections tend to lean heavily on journalist's »cultural authority to make truth claims« (ADAMS 2022: 1040), regarding an individual's legacy.

This leads us to pose the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do obituaries of women journalists memorialize their professional identity?

RQ 2: How do obituaries of women journalists memorialize their news work?

Method

In response to Carlson's (2016) suggestion that researchers should seriously consider the divisions among journalists and the blurred lines between journalists and non-journalists who create metadiscourse, we adopt an inclusive approach

to metajournalism in this study. We include any obituary in our analysis if (1) the journalist is listed on the Journalist Memorial Site and (2) the obituary is published by a news source. Taussig (2017) highlights that obituaries can be written by various individuals, including family, friends, and journalists. However, our focus is on the discussion of journalism within these obituaries. Additionally, the obituary writer acts as an agent of memorialization (CARLSON 2007); these agents »speak to the importance of the news work or personal traits of the memorialized subjects (or a combination) take on a double role of constructing the memorialized subject as an elite figure while affirming, through their authority to speak, their own status as elite figures and authorities« (CARLSON 2007: 175).

In order to address the research questions, the scholars evaluated a database of obituaries, created as a part of a larger metajournalism and obituaries project (see also PERREAULT/TANDOC/CABERLON 2023); it was explored here in order to specifically highlight the experiences of U.S. women journalists. For inclusion in the study, obituaries needed to be listed on the Journalist Memorial Site between January 1, 2020 and December 31, 2021 – the timing, aligned with the height of coronavirus pandemic, made these years a key time for metajournalistic discourse reflections on journalistic identities and news work (PERREAULT/PERREAULT/MAARES 2022) – and be published by a news source in order to be eligible for inclusion. Some listed obituaries are only listed on Legacy.com, but the database privileges multiple players of engagement within the journalistic field; hence, it was deemed important that obituaries be published through a news outlet. The database draws no distinctions – nor does the Journalist Memorial Site – among the obituary producers, which of course include both journalists and non-journalists and are typically listed without authorship. This is in recognition that regardless of the obituary producer's background they are operating as an »agent of memorialization« (CARLSON 2007) and hence, play a crucial role in defining a range of topics within journalism. In line with this, the length of journalistic experience was also not applied for exclusion purposes given that all journalistic experience is relevant for discussion regardless of whether journalists spent only a few years or their entire working lives within the field.

For the purposes of this paper, the obituaries were winnowed by the authors to only evaluate women journalists in the United States (n=1064), given that women journalists face many of the same professional boundaries as journalists across the globe but in a socio-political context with a relatively weak social-safety support infrastructure (e.g. maternity support, etc.). The pronouns employed in the obituary indicated the gender of the individual as woman. The coding of the obituaries took place over three stages, following Creswell's (2007) structure for a constant comparative design: open coding, in which the authors read all content, taking note of broad trends; axial coding, in which these data trends were broken down into categories and concepts; and then selective coding, in which

the themes were used to find individual participant quotes which best evidenced the volume that the categories and concepts reflected within the data. While constant comparative research designs are often accompanied by a grounded theory framework, Fram (2013) notes that they are also well suited for an etic coding method, such as this one, driven by theory and literature. This coding process was done over the course of a series of meetings (December 2023-March 2024) among the authors, in which each scholar would share relevant data and emerging themes would be discussed.

Obituaries included a range of locations across the United States. In reporting the results, the authors hence privileged picking examples and quotes most illustrative of the overall themes in the data and share national location in cases where it adds valuable contextual depth. Furthermore, we've created a table for referencing the particular quotes and theirs sources used in this study for reference in the online Appendix (Table 1).

Professional identity of women journalists as community engagers

In regard to RQ 1, the obituaries of women journalists illuminate their professional identities through various dimensions, including community engagement, advocacy, career achievements, and family. This section delves into how these obituaries commemorate the professional identity of women journalists, focusing on their significant contributions to society and journalism.

In the obituaries of women journalists, professional identity is memorialized not only through their contributions to journalism but also through their extensive involvement in community engagement and advocacy for various causes. One, for instance, was not only known for her journalistic prowess but also for her active participation in »local community affairs« (Obituary 27): She was »involved in numerous charitable endeavors« and »directed funding to a variety of charitable causes, including St. Charles Borromeo Parish, Operation Breakthrough, The Kansas City Art Institute, The Kansas City Symphony, and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, among others.« Women journalists are portrayed as having »long record[s] of community involvement« (Obituary 34), as some specified serving »many years on the board« (Obituary 91) or having »deep connections to community that came from 60 years of living« (Obituary 89) in their hometown. It was also evident that women journalists pursued their passions with dedication. Obituary 99 notes, »Music was her ›heart‹ and she sang professionally in weddings, funerals, and other community gatherings, singing and acting in community plays.« This highlights their commitment to using their talents to enrich their neighborhoods. Through their performances and involvement in community events, they left a lasting impact, showcasing how

they seamlessly integrated their personal interests with their roles as community advocates and journalists.

The exploration of women journalists' engagement with advocacy reveals a multifaceted approach to memorializing their professional identities through causes they champion. Women were described as »strong« (Obituary 92, 230), »tireless« (Obituary 125, 130), and »outspoken« (Obituary 186) advocates. Many were advocates for equal rights and justice (e.g. Obituary 16, 162, 498), even participating in »civil rights lunch-counter sit-ins« (Obituary 16). Women were passionate about a wide range of causes and topics, from »children's literacy programs« (Obituary 115) and art (Obituary 230) to doctors (Obituary 186) and cancer research (Obituary 125). Many were also »strong feminist[s]« (Obituary 162). Obituary 650, for instance, noted the journalist was a trailblazer for women's opportunities and broke barriers in her professional career and advocacy work. She was »the first woman to receive an honorary doctorate from Concordia University Wisconsin, the first woman president of the National Association of Lutheran Development Executives (ALDE), the first woman to serve as development director of Bethesda Lutheran Home, [and] the first woman to receive the ›Keyperson of the Year‹ award from the Concordia Century Club« (Obituary 650). Another woman journalist »mentored dozens of younger women, encouraging them to take leadership roles in politics and social services« (Obituary 439).

Their efforts to make a positive impact in their community were further demonstrated through volunteering (Obituary 10). In connection to their advocacy, the obituaries often mentioned their efforts in »volunteering [their] ability« (Obituary 10). Obituary 33 noted the journalist was »awarded the Volunteer Activist Award in 1978 for her work to make the arts a central part of the BR community,« and Obituary 490, who was involved with a long list of community volunteer programs, »was named Wauwatosa Distinguished Citizen for 1999« and was »nominated by four organizations in which she had held leadership positions.« These obituaries highlight the journalists' multifaceted roles as volunteers and community leaders.

The obituaries showed that in the realm of journalism, women's professional identities are often defined by the remarkable scope and impact of their career achievements, serving as pivotal indicators of their expertise, influence, and significant contributions within the field.

For instance, one such trailblazer, recognized for her pioneering efforts in advancing women's leadership, directed intensive training sessions and focus groups aimed at fostering professional growth within the industry (Obituary 393). Her approach led to the establishment of annual Women's Leadership Conferences, earning her accolades such as being named a World Economic Forum Global Leader for Tomorrow and a Crain's New York Business Rising Star. Through her mentorship and vision, she catalyzed a transformation within her

organization, paving the way for greater gender diversity and representation at all levels (Obituary 393). Similarly, another exemplary journalist's ascent to leadership roles was propelled by her »work ethic, integrity, principles and respect for human dignity« (Obituary 407). The women are also often memorialized through various career progressions. Many were recognized for their journey to editorial positions within the field (Obituary 479, 484, 485, 514). In Obituary 951 a journalist was described as »a groundbreaker,« as »she was the first woman to be hired in some of her editorial positions.«

Women journalists are frequently memorialized for their groundbreaking achievements as the »first woman« to occupy significant roles and break barriers within their respective fields. For instance, Obituary 23 described the journalist's pioneering appointment as the first woman to serve as editor of a prominent section, underscoring her trailblazing role in journalism. Similarly, in Obituary 27, the journalist's distinction as the first woman to serve on the Board of Trustees and later as a Fellow at the University of Notre Dame highlights her significant contributions to academia and governance. In Obituary 87, the woman's legacy as the first woman city editor at the *Phoenix Gazette* exemplifies her trailblazing role in newsroom leadership. In Obituary 229, the departed journalist »broke barriers for future women journalists as the first woman promoted to city editor at *The Oklahoman and Times*.« They also seemed to challenge gender norms. Obituary 332 »noted that she was at one time the highest paid woman in Albany and one of the first to wear pants on the floor of the Senate Chamber.« Obituary 517 credited the journalist as »the first woman to cover sports in Toledo and an early role model for women succeeding in a male dominated career.« These instances illuminate the lasting impact of women journalists who have defied norms, shattered glass ceilings, and paved the way for future generations in their respective fields.

Notably, the obituaries seemed to provide more extensive coverage of a woman's career when she had held a leadership position. Obituaries highlighting the woman solely as a »reporter« or »columnist« often only described her career within a couple of sentences.

Finally, while the obituaries celebrate the professional accomplishments of women journalists, they also offer insights into their personal lives, including their familial relationships. The women journalists demonstrated an unparalleled devotion to their families, loving them »fiercely« (Obituary 876) and »deeply« (Obituary 216), as exemplified by their heartfelt expressions of »loving her family with her heart and soul« (Obituary 1013). These sentiments are echoed in those who are remembered for their absolute »devotion to motherhood« (Obituary 216) and descriptions of being a »beloved wife and mother« (Obituary 828, 837). One obituary exemplified the professional sacrifice women journalists make in order to preserve family. These obituaries would seem to be in contrast to related scholarship which includes men journalists (PERREAULT/TANDOC/

CABERLON 2023). Obituary 461 described that despite her »strong feminist views« during a blossoming woman's movement, she sacrificed her dream of being a reporter for *Newsweek* in Washington D.C. before starting a family, but was ultimately »joyful to welcome« her daughter in 1967 (Obituary 461). Despite the challenges and sacrifices they may have faced, the obituaries' focus on these journalists' enduring love and dedication to family serve as a reminder of their multifaceted identities and the values they held.

Women journalists memorialized in regard to their values

In regard to RQ 2, obituaries serve as a retrospective lens through which the lives and contributions of individuals are commemorated and remembered. In the realm of journalism, obituaries play a significant role in immortalizing the legacies of professionals who have made substantial contributions to the field. Women journalists, in particular, have historically faced unique challenges and barriers within the men-dominated industry. Thus, examining how their news work is depicted can provide valuable insights into the recognition and representation of their contributions throughout their career.

Obituaries of women journalists often emphasize their unwavering passion for the profession and their relentless commitment to pursuing stories with integrity and perseverance. Through expressions such as »dedicated,« »passionate,« and »committed,« these obituaries highlight the sentiment that the obituaries argue drove these journalists in their work. Moreover, mentioned awards and accolades for integrity and honesty serve as tangible markers of the journalists' dedication to journalistic ethics. By memorializing these qualities, obituaries underscore the role of passion and commitment in shaping the professional identity of women journalists and their news work.

The values upheld by women journalists in their practice, such as »reporting the unbiased truth« with »personal integrity and positivity« (Obituary 60) and reporting with »care, research, and thought« (Obituary 82) are recurrent themes in obituaries for women. These values are not only depicted as guiding principles but also as defining characteristics of their journalistic endeavors. Additionally, obituaries often celebrate the persistence exhibited by women journalists in pursuing stories (Obituary 87) and advocating for social change (e.g. Obituary 1, 4, 84). Whether through investigative journalism or human-interest pieces, these obituaries highlight the resilience and determination of women journalists in the U.S. in the face of adversity (e.g. Obituary 206, 691).

The obituaries also contextualize women journalists' role performance by describing their areas of specialization and level of industry involvement within print, broadcast, radio, and digital news media. They delineate the diverse roles

and contributions of these professionals within the journalistic field, portraying their involvement as either a hobby (Obituary 630), seasonal occupation (Obituary 764), or focus of their careers (e.g. Obituary 453, 828). Moreover, mentions of working closely with celebrities (such as Abbie Hoffman, Obituary 266; Lady Bird Johnson, Obituary 342; Frank Sinatra, Obituary 43) or specializing in fields such as entertainment, columns, and travel provide insights into the breadth and depth of their talents and expertise.

Discussion

Like the rest of the trailblazing journalists of this study, Joan Kuni defied societal expectations and pursued a career in broadcasting in the United States at a time when few women dared to do so (Obituary 502). Her determination to carve her own path, rather than conforming to the limited professional roles typically available to white, middle class women in the 1950s, mirrors the courage and resilience of those who paved the way for greater gender equality in journalism. Just as the women journalists advocated for greater representation, diversity, and inclusivity within the media industry and society at large, Joan Kuni advocated tirelessly for her sons and others with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Obituaries reflect on the long legacy of a journalist and offer a way to connect the values of the past with the context of the present (PERREAULT/TANDOC/CABERLON 2023). Hence, the findings of this study reflect on essential functions of women within the journalistic field, even as they also reflect the numerous constraints women faced during the times in which most of these departed journalists conducted their careers. In regard to RQ 1, obituaries of women journalists memorialized a woman's professional identity also in the context of community engagement (this was often constructed in relation to volunteer work and advocacy), but then in some cases in relation to women's career achievement. The latter was reflected only when women had exhibited noteworthy leadership or had received noteworthy awards. Regarding RQ 2, obituaries of women journalists memorialized their news work as stemming from passion. The particulars of women's news work (whether practiced through writing, video, photography) emerge from values identified in the obituaries: integrity, honesty, and persistence.

Taken together, we see a picture of women journalists in the United States emerge that is conversant with much of what we know regarding deceased journalists and the experiences of women in newsrooms. Women journalists in this study tended to be memorialized in relation to their advocacy (PAUL et al. 2022; SHOR et al. 2018), which seems conversant with prior research regarding the emotional labor expectations of women for, both, evocation and suppression

(SORONEN 2018); women journalists would be memorialized in relation to advocacy given that emotion is more tied into their professional expectations. Hence, it was the contributions to the communities and contributions to their family that tended to be noteworthy in their memorialization more so than their individual contributions to the journalistic field. This reflects two things: first, the constrained understandings of the contributions of women in newsrooms that is historically situated, and still persists as is evidenced in these obituaries; second, these memorializations are a tribute to contributions that extend far beyond the newsroom. Hence, women's work described as *trailblazers* or *trendsetters* or »*first women to…*« does point to their achievements, but these phrases also point toward achievements that emerged *in spite* of their cultural constraints (HOSLEY/YAMADA 1987).

Within these narratives, women journalists are not simply portrayed as professionals fulfilling their duties but as advocates actively engaged in promoting broader societal change (PAUL et al. 2022). Through their *mould-breaking* work, these journalists transcended conventional boundaries, stepping into roles and positions that had previously been exclusively occupied by men (FOWLER 2005). This courageous act of breaking barriers within the newsroom and beyond not only reshaped the landscape of journalism but also served as a catalyst for societal progress and gender equity.

For this reason, through the lens of Fowler's (2005) typology, the majority of the obituaries in this study tended to be untraditional positive, that is, they reflected the »mould-breaking« activities of women in journalism. Yet an important theoretical connection is evidenced here, in that for something to be recognized as »mould-breaking,« implicitly the »mould« itself is also recognized. Metajournalism engages within the field through three primary means: through boundary work, leading understanding as an interpretive community, and paradigm repair. This mould-breaking would seem to reflect a sort of paradigm repair work. Paradigm repair occurs through two steps: first, identifying an area within journalism that is a threat to the overall field (e.g. the mould), and, second, through offering applied means with which to diminish, expel, or rationalize the perceived threat (e.g. the mould-breaking; FOWLER 2005). The focus on the trail-blazing experiences of women journalists would then reflect the broad structural inequalities that women faced, such as working in a men-dominated field (Obituary 766), and through journalism's historical authority (MOON 2021). This allows the obituaries of women to rationalize that these inequities have been addressed, or at least *are being* addressed. Yet, that being said, through centering these experiences, and claiming these experiences, journalism is able to reify and reinforce the professional norms of the institution. In other words, by claiming a woman's *trailblazing* experiences as an experience of journalism, they

at once acknowledge that a trail needed to be blazed, but also offer the paradigmatic reinforcement that the trail now exists.

This memorialization reflects an increased recognition of women's contributions and a more inclusive environment within journalism and potentially in society as a whole. The fact that there are more women in the field in the United States now, compared to the times when the women journalists who were described in the obituaries worked, implies that the efforts of these trailblazers have had an impact. That said, previous studies of obituaries have reflected that the form of the obituary has changed significantly through American journalistic history, with individuals being memorialized differently in eras ranging from the Civil War to women's suffrage (HUME 2000). In this way, »obituaries highlight era ethical issues of virtue and exclusion« (HUME 2000: 12) and, in connecting the past with the present, the present is *making sense* of the experiences of the past – and not on the terms of the women memorialized.

In this way, the current obituaries do reflect something of U.S. journalism's present given that the increasing visibility of women in journalism, as seen in the rise of women journalists from 37.5% in 2013 to 40.9% in 2022 (WILLNAT et al. 2022) and 53.4% in 2025 (ZIPPIA 2025), signals significant progress. Nevertheless, systemic barriers still exist, especially in leadership roles. While women make up a growing portion of the journalism workforce in the U.S., they remain significantly underrepresented in top editorial positions, with only 24.2% of top editors being women (ARGUEDAS et al. 2024). This reflects ongoing structural sexism, with women facing not only gendered expectations and workplace harassment (BAILEY 2022; LIPINSKI 2019) but also enduring professional retaliation when challenging sexist behaviors. The fact that women still have to continue to »break the mould« to be recognized in these leadership spaces points to the persistent inequalities in the field, despite the positive shifts in overall representation. Moreover, this underrepresentation of women in senior editorial roles, coupled with slow but steady progress, aligns with the broader historical exclusion of women's contributions in journalism. The gradual increase in women's presence, while encouraging, underscores that these inequalities are deeply rooted and must be addressed through both structural and cultural change. The memorialization of trailblazing women, such as through the obituaries analyzed in this study, serves as an acknowledgment of their achievements but also highlights the ongoing need for institutional transformation to achieve gender parity. As Hume (2000) noted, obituaries of women – while more frequent today – often reflect a history of exclusion and the challenge of rewriting journalistic history to fully incorporate women's contributions.

As more women enter and succeed in journalism, their experiences become increasingly visible and acknowledged; something *The New York Times* famously engaged with in noting that »over the entire 167-year history of *The New York*

Times, between 15 and 20 percent of our obituary subjects have been women – a frustratingly imprecise number that also fails to fully reflect huge changes over the decades in the obituary form itself« (SUN 2018, para. 4). As Hume (2018) found, obituaries tend to favor men across the board with their remembrance reflecting a subtle conferring of enhanced social stature in American society. This highlights the importance of the present study in foregrounding the experiences of women journalists, in particular given that their stories have a history of marginalization within the U.S. press system.

All studies have limitations, and this study is no different. We know, for example, that journalism in one place does not reflect journalism in all places. Here of course, this database of obituaries reflects only the United States; hence, the experiences of women could have been reflected with a broader selection of countries (PERREAULT 2014; NIEMEYER 2023). Furthermore, the nature of the obituary means that the author of the obituary is often unknown, and while regardless of the authorship these obituaries speak to the contents of this study, it is possible that important nuance is lost when it is impossible to determine which obituaries are written from current journalists, family members, or prewritten by the departed journalist themselves.

Through their actions and commitment to their profession, these trailblazing journalists left a mark on history, a legacy that is vividly captured and celebrated in the obituaries that memorialize their remarkable lives and contributions. In essence, the memorialization of women journalists through obituaries serves as a reminder of their role performance as advocates, highlighting not only their professional achievements but also their enduring impact on societal norms, gender dynamics, and the ongoing struggle for equality.

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Journalistik. Zeitschrift für Journalismusforschung
HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG
Heft 2/2025, S. 227-236
8. Jahrgang
ISSN 2569-152X
DOI: 10.1453/2569-152X-22025-15342-en

Essay

Gabriele Hooffacker / Nicola Moser

»I believe that journalism is in urgent need of change«

On the relationship between academic journalism training and journalistic practice

Abstract: **Generative language models and AI tools have become essential tools in journalism – used in data analysis, research, translation, idea generation, and much more. How will the use of tools like ChatGPT impact the shape of journalism as a profession, and its academic teaching? Analysis of these expert interviews shows that ChatGPT and similar AI tools are already playing a role in academic journalism training. But while university teaching assumes that generative language models will not fundamentally change the shape of journalism, but merely expand it, the practicing expert interviewed sees a fundamental shift in the relationship between editorial offices and audiences. He also describes how the use of AI tools has long become common practice in editorial offices.**

Keywords: generative language AI, ChatGPT, journalism training, university teaching, journalism studies degree, transformation in the relationship between journalism and audience

Numerous publications have looked at how the use of generative AI platforms, especially language AI, will change the shape of journalism as a profession and thus also journalistic training at universities. Yet the development is so dynamic that studies quickly become obsolete: »The use of AI in journalism is not an isolated or completed topic, but a dynamic and interdisciplinary field that demands continuous and critical reflection, including from the perspective of communication studies« (WOLF 2024: 24). Many possible applications are known, and initial

experiences have already been evaluated. »The large language models can be used creatively to generate ideas, for suggestions for article structure, the thread of a story« (HAUSTEIN-TESSMER 2024: 75). The ability to use AI in a conscious and controlled way is becoming essential. An open attitude to technology, curiosity, interest, and a use of AI that is both playful and critical must be anchored in journalism training (cf. HOOFFACKER 2023: 210f.).

»Digitalization has changed journalistic training, careers and processes at regional media companies. But there are deficits,« says Oliver Haustein-Teßmer (HAUSTEIN-TESSMER 2024: 68). The young journalists whom Vera Katzenberger interviewed for her dissertation share that view (KATZENBERGER 2024), valuing training in specific digital tools less than openness to technology. One generally needs to be »very open and flexible towards new technology,« said one interviewee (KATZENBERGER 2024: 186).

»Looking at the didactics of journalism research drives right into the heart of the debate in journalism research about how it sees itself. This debate has always centered around the relationship between theory and practice. Journalism research has repeatedly been accused (and accused itself) of neglecting its explicit practical orientation,« write Beatrice Dernbach and Wibke Loosen at the start of their 2012-published *Didaktik der Journalistik* (DERNBACH/LOOSEN 2012: 11).

Is this also true in relation to the use of generative language AI and large language models (LLM) in academic journalism teaching and practical journalism? What do we know about how the profile of journalism as a profession is changing? And what are the consequences of this for academic journalism training?

Method

This paper is based on guided expert interviews that were conducted in 2024 and analyzed in a qualitative, deductive content analysis in line with Mayring. Nicola Moser developed the categories for the interviews' coding guidelines for his master's thesis (MOSER 2024) and used them as the basis for creating the questionnaire. Eight university lecturers from the fields of journalism, data journalism and media analysis were interviewed. The author then added to and compared the results with an interview with an innovative journalism practitioner, using the free AI software TurboScribe to transcribe the interview and ChatGPT and MS Copilot to help formulate the text.

When selecting the experts, attention was paid to achieving the most balanced gender ratio possible. Three women and five men from communication and media studies agreed to take part in the interview:

- Prof. Dr. Katharina Heimeier, Westfälische Hochschule – Westphalian University of Applied Sciences, Practice and Theory of Quality Journalism program
- Prof. Markus Kaiser, Technische Hochschule Nürnberg Georg Simon Ohm, Practical Journalism program
- Dr. Max Eder, LMU Munich, research associate at the Department of Media and Communication (IfKW)
- Prof. Dr. Andreas Moring, International School ISM in Hamburg, Digital Management program
- Prof. Dr. Markus Behmer, University of Bamberg, Empirical Communicator Research program at the Institute of Communication Science
- Prof. Dr. Volker Markus Banholzer, Technische Hochschule Nürnberg Georg Simon Ohm, focus on Innovation Communication
- Prof. Dr. Magdalena Taube, Macromedia University, Journalism program
- Dr. Theresa Körner, lecturer, research focusing on Automated Journalism

The results of the interviews were collated with the journalist Dirk von Gehlen, who is currently Director Think-Tank at the *Süddeutschen Zeitung's sz*-Institut.

Results of the expert interview

Nicola Moser identified the following eight categories for his master's thesis:

- K1: Effects on journalism
- K2: Opportunities offered by the language models
- K3: Risks of the language models
- K4: Influence on motivation to learn
- K5: Integration of ChatGPT in teaching
- K6: Changes to teaching content
- K7: Significance of prompt engineering
- K8 Changes in the profile of journalism as an occupation

The interviews were analyzed in line with the categories. The results of the K5 and K7 categories are combined in the description below.

K1: Effects on journalism

The experts agree that ChatGPT has a significant influence on working methods in journalism. The technology is seen as a useful aid that can be used in various phases of production, such as in generating ideas, creating drafts or translating content. However, fact checking remains essential, as the models can sometimes generate incorrect information or even hallucinate. Katharina Heimeier stresses

the importance of journalistic responsibility: »In the future, too, one needs to scrutinize the responsibility one holds, the consequences it will have if one publishes this or that.«

Andreas Moring adds that dramatic writing and embedding information in a larger context remain core human skills: »The journalistic human abilities of placing things in context, evaluating them and creating a common thread remain essential.«

K2: Opportunities offered by the language models

There were two topics that the experts interviewed saw as major opportunities: the time saved in editorial work, and multilingualism and the associated internationalization.

Time saving and increased efficiency: ChatGPT can take on routine tasks like composing simple texts, thus creating more freedom for creative and investigative work. Magdalena Taube explains: »It will hopefully create freedom to concentrate on the things AI cannot do.«

Translations and internationalization: Language models make it easier to create multilingual content and expand media companies' target audience. Magdalena Taube highlights the potential of this for tapping new markets.

In research, the interviewees said, the new tools can do much more. The most common example quoted was the enormous benefit to data-based journalism such as sport journalism. Automation and training artificial intelligence have made exciting results possible for several years now, says Markus Kaiser. A teaching and research project successfully managed to use live ticker results to produce match reports for lower leagues. Markus Kaiser sees this as offering potential to tap niche markets.

K3: Risks of the language models

In analyzing the results, it is noticeable that the experts identify significantly more critical points than advantages. They emphasize that many questions remain unanswered, such as the issue of copyright and source references. These aspects affect not only the legal constraints, but also how trustworthy and traceable the content generated by ChatGPT is.

Specifically, the following risks were identified:

Incorrect information: The danger of hallucinations, in which the model generates false content, means that constant checking by journalists is essential.

Linguistic levelling: Volker Bannholzer sees a risk that the use of AI could lead to simplification of language and convergence on lower linguistic standards.

Fake news and manipulation: Generative language models can be misused to spread incorrect information in a targeted way.

Markus Kaiser asks about transparency: Does content need to be labelled? In her research, Theresa Körner looked at the effect that texts have on an audience that knows how the texts were created. She comes to the conclusion that audiences fear manipulation of opinion and recommends labelling and explanations of how the texts are composed.

Max Eder notes that, in addition to checking the information and sources, AI-generated texts require a great deal of revision and tend to create more work. He also sees »a kind of digital divide« between older and younger journalists. Editorial offices need to find a way to bridge these differences.

K4: Influence on motivation to learn

In her 2023 workshop report, Gabriele Hooffacker comes to the conclusion that »the students test the potential uses with curiosity and enjoyment, and gain from this« (HOOFFACKER 2023: 211). It is striking that not one of the people interviewed has observed an impact like this among their own students. Three people did not comment on this at all.

Magdalena Taube has observed in her seminars that students rarely use the tools of their own accord. A similar observation comes from Volker Banholzer: ChatGPT is used occasionally but, if at all, for reasons of efficiency.

It is impossible to resolve this contradiction, but it is reasonable to assume that students do not always tell their teachers in detail how they really use generative language AI.

K5: Integration of ChatGPT in teaching and K7: Significance of prompt engineering

According to the interviewees, the integration of ChatGPT into journalistic training is still in its infancy. Initial approaches include teaching the basics of handling the technology, practicing prompting techniques and discussing ethical issues.

Markus Behmer stresses the necessity of integrating the use of ChatGPT into training for young journalists: »It is a journalistic technique that needs to be standard in training.« Handling language AI is a cultural technique, a journalistic technique that needs to be learned, says Andreas Moring: »How do I use it? How do I prompt? Which tool is suitable for what?«

Theresa Körner sees the use of ChatGPT as an opportunity to support students in developing arguments and perspectives: »The models can serve as sparring

partners to enhance arguments or develop new points of view.« Prompting plays a key role here, she says.

Katharina Heimeier addresses the topic of digital ethics in her seminars. »Here we discuss whether the Press Code should include this, yes or no? Or we look at specific examples.« She generally emphasizes the media ethics aspect of the topic.

K6: Changes to teaching content

For the university lecturers interviewed, a central consideration is how to adapt examination formats. The most common response is to increase the number of oral examination formats, as papers written at home do not fulfil their purpose if large sections are written by ChatGPT.

Theresa Körner recommends »more examination formats whose aim is for examinees to be able to reflect more effectively and back up their opinion with arguments.« Markus Behmer takes a similar view: At his university, he says, there is no oral defense of final theses. Action needs to be taken.

Will teaching be affected? It is a question that Volker Banholzer asks himself. Experiments are required, for example with students venturing to have texts they have written revised by AI. This should then lead to discussion: Is it OK, or has the text lost its character?

Andreas Moring and Magdalena Taube do not necessarily take a critical view of the use of AI in papers and final theses. However, it is important to be transparent about how the texts came about. Magdalena Taube explains: »At our university, we tell students they are allowed to use AI. But they have to compile a list of AI, like a list of references.« This even includes a list of prompts.

Markus Kaiser notes that the strict separation between print, audio and video as channels is disappearing, as can already be seen on social media channels. Teaching needs to adapt to this, he argues.

K8: Changes in the profile of journalism as an occupation

Here, all the interviewees are in agreement: The profile of journalism as an occupation will not change in the foreseeable future. They expect fully automated editorial offices and multi-channel distribution to play only a minor role initially. As it is impossible to predict how technical possibilities will develop, however, this point of view may change in a few years. Yet all the experts agree that they are seeing a transformation in the everyday working lives of journalists. In a few years, all editorial offices will use generative language models. This is already possible in every part of the working process, they said.

Which skills will young journalists need? Two aspects were named time and again. The first, named by Maximilian Eder and Magdalena Taube, is »digital literacy« – the ability to engage with and scrutinize new technical possibilities. The other is checking sources and questioning information. Magdalena Taube believes that, despite this, the craft of journalism will remain just as important as it is today.

Overall, all the experts interviewed expect generative language models to play an important role in everyday journalism in future. At the same time, critically evaluating and checking information remains a core competency for those working in journalism.

Interview with a practitioner as an extension of the results

In order to reflect the results of the expert interviews onto journalistic practice, questions for a journalistic practitioner and thought leader were developed from the categories. The interview with Dirk von Gehlen initially gives an insight into the working world of journalists, as well as a view of future normality and constant change.

According to von Gehlen, both consumers and publishers use generative language assistants. The first audience tool developed by *Süddeutsche Zeitung* as a pilot project offered readers a personalized review of the year. It was based on texts from the year 2023 and allowed readers to interact with their content and chat – a first attempt that demonstrated the tool's potential.

Most of his colleagues, says Dirk von Gehlen, work with DeepL, MS Copilot and other language assistants on a daily basis. Artificial intelligence is used throughout the entire process, from research to presentation to publication, and especially in creating content, structures or initial concepts.

The editorial office is aware of a certain resistance among the audience to texts that are not created by people, he continues. However, this could change as the technology becomes further developed and more widespread, leading to greater acceptance. Transparency is needed.

In contrast, Dirk von Gehlen does not expect prompt engineering to become an occupation. The skills needed for prompt engineering will be essential and go without saying for everyone producing texts, like the use of a search machine.

According to von Gehlen, it is impossible for conventional training to keep pace with the fast development of the technology, with a useful new tool appearing every few weeks. His conclusion: »Probably the most important skill to be taught is handling change and adapting new skills.«

He argues that constant change is part of the occupational profile of journalists: »Every idea of culture, of progress, of education, of scientific research is

based on the fact that things change. We have a tendency to always see our status quo as the pinnacle of human achievement and we like it when it stays that way. No, I believe that culture is movement and that journalism, as an accompanying technology or skill of culture, urgently needs to change.«

In many ways, Dirk von Gehlen's responses match the views of the academic experts. Yet he also sees a drastic change in the job profile and thus new demands on the competencies that need to be taught in journalistic training.

And the innovative practitioner's considerations go even further: Dirk von Gehlen speaks of a cultural transformation that is being driven by artificial intelligence, as well as by digitalization more generally. He believes that, in the long term, this development will result in a shift in communication between transmitter and recipient.

Another aspect, he continues, is the increasing segmentation of public discourse as a result of personalized content. Media are adapting ever more to the needs of consumers. Generative language systems allow content to be personalized even more.

Von Gehlen uses the analogy of a festival to describe the resulting challenge for journalists: »Today, we see that the public discourse is incredibly segmented, a bit like a music festival where there are thousands of stages. There is no longer a main stage, but lots of side stages on which lots of people are playing who do not know one another at all. You go to Stage C, I'm on Stage A and we know nothing about one another. The groups do not know each other anymore either, because this community connection no longer exists in the same way. In a plural theory of public discourse, this is huge progress, as it allows voices from outside this main channel to be articulated. On the other hand, the strong segmentation of public discourse challenges us. It is being accelerated enormously by AI and thus poses huge cultural challenges for us.«

All in all, Dirk von Gehlen hopes that it will be possible to outsource some annoying tasks to AI in the future. At the same time, there will be new tasks: »It will relieve us of tasks that we used to do ourselves by hand. But it also creates entirely new tasks. If we see journalism as communication, i.e., not just as transporting content, but as true communication with listeners, and respond to one another, we need to ask the question: What defines human communication as opposed to machine communication?« This is what he sees as the core task facing future journalists.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that the use of generative AI tools like ChatGPT is already influencing journalism and has already entered, or will enter, many areas of

editorial work. While university lecturers see AI as more likely to expand the profile of journalism as an occupation, rather than change it, the innovative practitioner sees a fundamental shift – especially in the relationship between editorial offices and their audience.

The opportunities the experts see include increases in efficiency, new forms of research, and internationalization through multilingual content. However, they also see grave risks: incorrect information, linguistic levelling and potential manipulation by generated content are major challenges. Fact-checking therefore remains an essential journalistic responsibility.

There were contradictory observations from university teaching. While Hooffacker saw students using AI in a playful and interested way, other interviewees reported more hesitant use. There were also differing views on the adaptation of teaching content, ranging from a stronger emphasis on oral examinations to the introduction of AI evidence in academic work.

The difference between the academic view and that of practitioners was especially clear when it came to the future occupational profile. While university teachers expect to see hardly any fundamental change, Dirk von Gehlen sees a deep-rooted transformation that is being accelerated by AI and digitalization. The advancing personalization of content could lead to greater fragmentation of the public discourse, he says, bringing with it new tasks for journalists.

Comparing findings from academic journalism teaching with the conclusions that can be drawn from how AI is already being used in practice clearly highlight a core challenge: Journalistic training needs to teach not only technical skills, but also the ability to adapt flexibly to the transformation. After all, as von Gehlen stresses, change is an inseparable part of journalism.

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Translation: Sophie Costella

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Journalism Research
2025, Vol 8 (2) pp. 237-248
ISSN 2569-152X

HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

Reviews

Vera Katzenberger: *Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit. Kompetenzen und Ausbildung für professionellen Journalismus.* [Between aspiration and reality. Competencies and training for professional journalism.] Cologne [Herbert von Halem] 2024, 393 pages, EUR 24

Reviewed by Gabriele Hooffacker

What do the next generation of young journalists believe they are facing? Did academic journalism training prepare them adequately for the reality of the profession? »Digitalization has changed journalistic training, careers and processes at regional media companies. But there are deficits,« states Oliver Haustein-Teßmer (HAUSTEIN-TESSMER 2024: 68).

What could be more obvious than to ask those starting out on careers in journalism about their experiences? And could this provide perspectives on the worrying observations that fewer and fewer university graduates are choosing a journalistic profession?

In her 2022 dissertation, now published in book form by Herbert von Halem Verlag, Vera Katzenberger looks at this issue in a two-part study, divided into a qualitative and a quantitative survey. Her integrative orientation framework is the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu, with its key terms field, habitus and capital. The empirical findings make for fascinating reading.

In the first section of the study, 25 people were interviewed: 16 women and 9 men aged between 21 and 32 years (161ff.). They had between one and six years of professional experience. Almost all had a university degree, mostly in journalism or media studies. Only one of the interviewees entered the profession via a school of journalism, having not completed their degree. All had completed multiple internships before joining the profession (cf. 164).

The interviewees took a sobering view of the situation. »All in all, it seemed like the original idea of journalism as a creative, varied, socially relevant dream job [...] was shaken quite soon after they begin their careers. The impression was that the professional reality caught up with them early in their careers« (171). The interviewees were concerned by the decreasing level of trust in journalism and by

the low view of journalism's credibility (cf. 182). This was accompanied by hostility on social media or the public realm (cf. 184).

Do the young journalists feel prepared for the digitalization of the profession? In their answers, they place less importance on training in specific digital tools and more on being open towards technology. One needs to be generally »very open and flexible towards new technology,« said one interviewee (186). Dealing competently with the different platforms is important, she said (cf. 189). Journalists need to be able to produce content for all media and platforms, from print to podcasts to Instagram reels.

Which parts of this did the young journalists learn in their university training? In summary, they viewed the background knowledge on the media system and media history as helpful, but emphasized that what they took away with them was largely ethical guidelines (cf. 196). Universities of applied sciences were especially likely to be assessed positively in terms of their practical relevance (cf. 200).

In the second section of the study, those new to the profession were surveyed online. A data set of 228 persons remained after data cleansing. The age range here was larger than in section I. All but 2.7 percent had either a university degree (81.7 percent) or at least a university entrance qualification. The majority of those surveyed stated that they were satisfied with their training, although the picture was more mixed for individual segments. 68.5 percent stated that »journalists are increasingly confronted with mistrust and hostility in their work« (250).

Vera Katzenberger sums up the findings of the two sections of the study as follows: »Once they had begun their careers in the field of journalism, in the view of the young journalists surveyed at the time of the survey, it was above all technological developments relating to social media, smartphones and algorithms, economic influences and profit expectations in the editorial offices, as well as low prestige of journalism and hostility towards journalists and journalism, that shaped the journalistic field and limited or even endangered its autonomy« (291).

She diagnoses not only a *dialog deficit*, related to audience-oriented forms of presentation, but also an *innovation deficit* regarding technological developments (cf. 294). Ultimately, the study does not provide an answer to the question of whether university-based journalism training qualifies students more for the market or for following the development critically in media and society. But it clearly shows that the work conditions of those surveyed – low pay for a high workload and a lot of responsibility – are extremely demanding.

Vera Katzenberger's study is highly recommended to anyone who currently works in journalism training, as there is a need for improvement in this field, too (cf. DERNBACH 2022). In particular, the deficits named provide important orientation for further developing curricula at universities and schools of journalism.

However, one thing that even the best journalism training will be unable to change in the short term is the audience's observable loss of trust in the media

and the associated hostility that journalists (and university teachers) face. One can only hope that dedicated young people will continue to come forward for a career in journalism and work long-term for lively, critical journalism. The framework conditions need to be right for this. Vera Katzenberger has clearly shown where the deficits lie.

About the reviewer

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Translation: Sophie Costella

This review first appeared in rezensionen:kommunikation:medien, 10 December 2025, accessible at: https://www.rkm-journal.de/archives/25269

Martín Oller Alonso: ***Decolonizing Journalistic Knowledge: Deliberative Communication in Central and Eastern*** **EU** ***Member States.*** **Bielefel [transcript] 2024, 176 pages, EUR 42**

Reviewed by Tanjev Schultz

What does the German public learn from the media about political and cultural events and developments in Romania or Bulgaria? Shamefully little. It takes Russian interference, annulled and rescheduled presidential elections like the recent ones in Romania – major crises, in other words – for these countries to make the news. The few German media outlets that report from Eastern and Southeastern Europe lack permanent correspondent offices there. What happens in Bucharest is monitored from Vienna.

Media ignorance of some countries prevails even when there is considerable historical, geographical, and cultural proximity to them. Bulgaria and Romania are members of the European Union, but invisible borders still run within the union. This is aptly described by the term »subalternity,« used by Martín Oller Alonso in his book. Certain regions are considered marginal, less important, less independent. This is reflected in media patterns and organizations, for example, in the power and ownership structures of Western media companies that expanded their operations to the East after 1989.

So, there are good reasons for a book that, inspired by postcolonial theory, outlines a program for the »decolonization of journalistic knowledge.« However, this is where the positive appraisal of this work by a Spanish colleague who conducts research at the University of Salamanca ends. The reviewer has learned almost nothing from the book about the Eastern European countries that were supposed to be honored in the book; almost nothing about specific media practices or content – and hardly anything tangible about the assumed colonial conditions. Instead, the text consists of often opaque abstractions, for which an astonishing number of Western (!) intellectual giants are mobilized in tiresome name-dropping.

The author's goals seem sympathetic; he is concerned with openness, diversity, and equality. He is concerned with multipolarity and a deliberative democracy in which capitalist market forces are not confused with the common good. However, the book does not reveal where and how such normative expectations are disappointed or fulfilled; nor does it explain why they should be at odds with »Western« or »Northern« values and journalism cultures. Where does the author get his normative ideas from? Without elaborating on the exact nature of the problems, he opposes a »Euro-centric knowledge hegemony.« This goes hand in hand with the usual reservations of postcolonialism and poststructuralism against the

supposedly Western concepts and understandings of subject and reason. Even those who share this perspective (unlike the reviewer, for whom universalism is not the same as colonialism) might expect the author to explain what characterizes the regional (journalistic) cultures in Eastern European countries and how they differ from their colonially imposed versions. But no – the book leaves that open.

In just a few pages, Martín Oller Alonso outlines the media landscapes in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and other Eastern European countries. These sketches do not go beyond the character of brief handbook entries, revealing little about the diversity and peculiarities of these countries – and also nothing about the destructive effects attributed to Western forces.

> The text remains cloudy: »As the reader may have noticed, my alternative *meta-vocabulary* and (*counter*) *narrative* steer clear of any normative standpoint that aims to define the professional profile of journalists based on established European social structures. The *supremacist dialectic* and the *language of domination and cultural imposition* (as John Tomlinson emphasized during the nineties) have become stagnant, as has the notion of a *superior culture*. Ideological and *professional isolationism* has lost its meaning. Journalism and its communicative model are deeply connected to the social context in which they develop.« (p. 41)

This openness and vagueness, however, will likely quickly be over if (media) people, whether in Western or Eastern Europe, warm to something the author finds evil, namely capitalism and forms of »European phallocentrism«(!). It would be interesting to know which model of society and journalism the people and (professional) colleagues in these countries actually desire and envision. The book, in its liberating tone, simply glosses over this.

So what are the prospects for the countries whose advocate the author sets himself up to be? This is what they should look like, whatever that may mean:

> »They possess the chance to reconnect with the historical theoretical-methodological foundations and align them with the goals of a late-capitalist democratic society. The objective is to formulate a harmonious nation and a deliberative communication model that can illuminate and pass on the legacy of critical, alternative, and participative communication to future generations.« (p. 61)

There are pages and pages of empty formulas. It is a tedious read. Exploring, appreciating, and strengthening journalism in the countries of Eastern Europe, and protecting it from Western arrogance and appropriation: That would be important and valuable. But this requires other means than this book.

About the reviewer

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this summer (2025). He is one of the editors of *Journalism Research*. Contact: tanjev.schultz@uni-mainz.de

Translation: Tanjev Schultz with help of DeepL

Ernst Tradinik (ed.): *Inklusive Medienarbeit. Menschen mit Behinderung in Journalismus, Radio, Moderation und Film.* [Inclusive media work. People with disabilities in journalism, radio, presenting and film.] Cologne [Herbert von Halem] 2024, 432 pages, EUR 37

Reviewed by Hannah Wahl

Inclusion – a buzzword that is becoming ever more present in a media context, too. When, for example, Austria's largest charity format is criticized on public service television (»Licht ins Dunkel«) or the mass media report very generally on people with disabilities in various program formats, the buzzword ›inclusion‹ is an essential component. But this belies the actual situation – inclusion in Austria and Germany remains a major work in progress.

When it comes to representation in mass media, people with disabilities remain highly underrepresented. Often, the mass media fall back on various stereotypes (»victim« vs. »hero«), rather than reflecting people's lived reality or creating an equal footing (cf. MEDIAAFFAIRS 2016). And it remains much too rare for people with disabilities to work as journalists or media-makers themselves. This is particularly true of people with learning difficulties (described in the book as a »learning disability,« outdated: »people with mental disability«) and people with experience of psychiatric treatment.

Inclusive media work can play an important role in pushing through positive change processes. Access to media, media representation on an equal footing, and the opportunity to make media themselves redistributes power a little and makes participation with equal opportunities more realistic. It allows people with disabilities themselves to (help) decide which topics are covered, and to influence their representation. Inclusive media work can make a significant contribution to (self-)empowerment, as Ernst Tradinik explains.

He is the editor and »main author« of the book *Inklusive Medienarbeit. Menschen mit Behinderung in Journalismus, Radio, Moderation und Film*, published in 2024 by Herbert von Halem Verlag. He himself spent many years as a support and social education worker – experience that he brings to the book in many places, often in the form of anecdotes.

Tradinik has subdivided the book into five sections. The first section centers around the question: »What is inclusive media work?« This includes outlines of segments of this field of work: What can supporters do in order to work inclusively? (»Integration and participation«) Which technical aids can support this? Section two provides »Insights into the history of inclusion and inclusive media work.« This section contains a collection of very different texts. In one of them, Cornelia Pfeiffer, a self-advocate, uses simple language to describe life in

residential homes. Descriptions of experiences and biographical accounts like this are essential for inclusive media-makers. Addressing these topics (including first-hand) is the only way to clearly depict the dimensions of societal exclusion and many power-specific aspects. The fourth and fifth sections describe different media (projects), initiatives and actors in the inclusive media field. Numerous QR codes make it easier to use the links.

It is positive that the editor always refers back to the complex question of power and the necessity of reflecting on one's own position. He calls on the reader to question whether inclusion can really be spoken of: »How do I respond to people? How do I actually deal with them? This is one of the most difficult areas. Because of course everyone wants inclusion and puts it into practice. Everyone would say that. It is in part so difficult because inclusion cannot be measured. It is often about (subconscious) questions of power. Yet one still needs to address how a certain quality standard can still be upheld« (20).

In some places, content remains vague; the book appears unstructured and erratic. Tradinik defines inclusive media work as follows: »Inclusive media work means electronic (radio, video and similar) media work by and with people with (learning) disabilities and/or psychological illness. With or without support from experts in (social) education, communication studies or similar (media) fields« (30). This very broad definition remains imprecise on the aspect of inclusion. It does not take into account how exactly the process of inclusive media work (participation and power relationships) should look – in short: When is media work really inclusive? Although the topic of participation is mentioned, it is not dealt with in more detail until later. The way the media projects are presented is more like a glossary and contains texts directly copied from websites in places. Media educator Anja Thümmler (among other authors) gives instructive insights into practice. She writes of the media work of »Radio Inclusive« and about how an equal footing can be created. In doing so, she addresses central points and barriers, such as that »many interview guests, even those who work in the field of ›inclusion,‹ are unable to speak simple language. They sit opposite radio editors or journalists with learning disabilities, are asked a question, and answer it in a way that their counterpart cannot understand« (242).

It is a shame that no summary in easy language is included with the chapters, especially given that the book repeatedly reflects on its importance for people with learning difficulties. This may be because the book is aimed at (potential) supporters without disabilities.

The book elaborates in an enriching way on the significance of (inclusive) media work for people living in institutions, and demonstrates the effects that this has on their self-image and the associated self-empowerment. Indirectly, Inklusive Medienarbeit also makes clear that inclusion is still far from being implemented in the German-speaking media world. »Inclusive media projects«

are still dominant in the field; participation in (paid) media work in established mass media, as a deskman or presenter, remains a rarity. It would have been desirable for the book to address this in more detail.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities obligates its signatory states to grant people with disabilities comprehensive participation in all areas of life. It states that people with disabilities are members of society with equal rights and have a right to inclusion. In order to embed and implement this understanding, (barrier-free) access not only to media, but also to the associated professions, is essential. Editorial offices at established media therefore need to work on inclusive media work. Inclusion is a matter for us all.

About the reviewer

Hannah Wahl works as a screenwriter and journalist in Vienna. In 2023, her book *Radikale Inklusion* [Radical inclusion] was published by Leykam Verlag. As co-founder of the Mabacher Award film prize, she advocates inclusion through films and inclusion in films.

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Translation: Sophie Costella

This review first appeared in rezensionen:kommunikation:medien, 4 March 2025, accessible at: https://www.rkm-journal.de/archives/25375

Felix Koltermann: *Fotografie im Journalismus. Bildredaktionelle Praktiken in Print- und Online-Medien.* [Photography in journalism. Image editorial practices in print and online media.] Cologne [Herbert von Halem] 2023, 284 pages, EUR 28

Reviewed by Kristina Wied

No text without an image – that is the rule in print and online journalism. Yet although visuals are highly relevant in journalistic reporting, actual editorial practice does not seem to reflect this significance. In his book, Felix Koltermann shines a light on how photography is handled in print and online editorial offices in Germany. He attempts to offer »a generally comprehensible point of access to questions of journalistic visual communication« (16). His success in this is not entirely consistent.

Koltermann – a communication studies expert, journalist and photographer – presents the results of a research project he led as part of the »Visual Journalism and Documentary Photography« degree program at Hannover University of Applied Sciences and Arts. At the practical heart of the research were interviews and »on-site visits« (16), as well as critiques of newspapers and images, in order to take stock of image editorial practices and reflect on the relationship between photography and journalism.

Koltermann's study addresses a gap in research up to now. To conduct it, he uses a qualitative, journalism-influenced mix of methods from empirical social research. The results are interesting but, by their very nature, capture only a moment in an extremely dynamic market that is shaped by digitalization and the increasing use of artificial intelligence.

In the first section of the book, Koltermann starts by presenting insightful data on photo and image editors at German newspapers (cf. 19–26). This is followed by the results of a content analysis that examines images from 24 issues of six German national and regional daily newspapers from the year 2019 (cf. 27–33), including in relation to different types of image, their sources and image credits.

The fourth section is made up of transcripts from interviews with 15 people who are or were involved in the process of journalistic image production in one way or another (cf. 34–114). The interviewees include Sabine Pallaske from Mittelstandsgemeinschaft Foto-Marketing, Monika Plhal from the European Press Photo Agency, Marcus Hormes, in 2020 head of a local newspaper editorial office for the *Trierischer Volksfreund*, and Thomas Geiger, former Chair of the Image Journalism group at the Bayerischer Journalisten-Verband. This gives readers the opportunity to see the attitudes and experiences of these experts for themselves and to draw their own conclusions. But they are left to do so largely alone.

Koltermann follows this with a description of his »on-site visits,« documenting brief reportages on nine editorial offices (e.g., the image editorial office of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*), academies (like the »Basics of image editing« workshop at the Emerge Akademie), and events (such as the European Publishing Congress) (cf. 115–153). His descriptions provide brief insights into the working and training practices of image editors at the time of observation, between February 2020 and May 2022.

In 13 image critiques, Koltermann uses individual articles to address current questions in journalistic image communication (cf. 154–190). These are thoroughly researched, well documented, and comprehensibly analyzed. For example, he illustrates normative errors and failures in image communication and highlights ambiguous or even false contextualization as a result of image selection or the image-text relationship. This provides clear orientation for his readership.

Finally, Koltermann compares front pages from selected print media on six events of national or international significance, including the start of the war on Ukraine in 2022, the results of the German federal election in 2021, and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (cf. 191–216). The analyses are easy to follow, the results insightful. Although the front pages analyzed report on the same event, their interpretations differ – in most cases, contextualization is the deciding factor.

In the appendix (cf. 217–279), Koltermann provides a considerable collection of literature recommendations, systematically arranged by publication type, and an extensive directory of links. This extends from links to service providers on the image market, links to software for editorial offices, and websites for image verification, to a list of internet addresses of associations and institutions that make an outstanding contribution to photo journalism.

In painstaking detail, he has also put together a useful appendix on legal regulations and ethical norms, such as on credits, labeling requirements for manipulated photos, and dealing with digital metadata. A comprehensive glossary rounds off this diligent work.

All in all, the book is multilayered and highly detailed. Koltermann presents numerous pieces of the jigsaw of image editorial practices in print and digital journalism in Germany. However, he frequently fails to link these pieces together and combine them to form a coherent overall picture.

A provocative question to finish: Why was this book published in the first place? Koltermann himself notes (cf. 16) that it is a selection of texts that – with four exceptions – have already been published together on the website www.bildredaktionsforschung.de between 2019 and 2022, and remain freely accessible there.

Given this background, the book can be seen as printed documentation of the completed research project, with the addition of useful information for reference and more detailed examination of the topic – although this is also all available via the aforementioned website.

About the reviewer

Dr. Kristina Wied, Dipl.-Journ., Academic Director at the Institute of Communication Studies at the Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg. Her research interests include journalism research (media content and newsrooms), visual journalism (especially photos and moving images) as well as social media communication.

Translation: Sophie Costella

This review first appeared in rezensionen:kommunikation:medien, 4 April 2025, accessible at: https://www.rkm-journal.de/archives/25405

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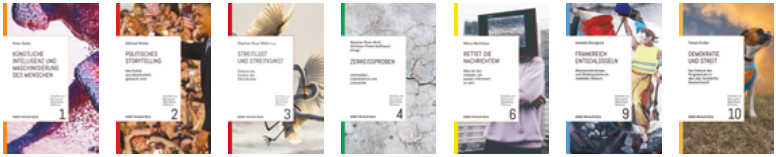

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Kommunikationswissenschaft

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