

Research Paper

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Policies of deterrence

The impact of anti-Semitism resolutions on journalism in Germany

Abstract: Since the German Bundestag passed the so-called »BDS resolution« in May 2019, the issue of anti-Semitism in Germany has not only been a subject of political and legal debates, but increasingly also of media discourse.^[2] The resolution, which condemned the BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) campaign against Israel and its settlement policy as anti-Semitic (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2019), is not legally binding. Still, according to the Bundestag cross-party initiative, it is intended to have a normative effect. The resolution has had a direct impact on public debates, for example through restricting public spaces to discuss the BDS campaign (cf. GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2020: 4ff., Tröger 2019).^[3] Since then, similar resolutions at the federal level have reinforced this development.

Keywords: news coverage Middle East, anti-Semitism resolutions, Germany, media freedom

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- 2 The motion »Resolutely opposing the BDS movement – combating anti-Semitism« [BDS-Bewegung entschlossen entgegenzutreten – Antisemitismus bekämpfen] was adopted by the Bundestag on May 17, 2019.
- 3 For instance, city councils across Germany decided to not rent out city-owned spaces for events that might address – even remotely – the topic of BDS (cf. TRÖGER 2019).

This paper examines the impact of the so-called anti-Semitism resolutions that have been passed by the Bundestag in November 2024^[4] and spring 2025^[5] on journalism in Germany. In doing so, the article is based on the conviction that, »in view of Germany’s special historical responsibility,« it is necessary to »recognize, highlight, preserve, protect, and promote Jewish life in Germany in [its] diversity« (in MICHAELS et al. 2024). Part of this task is to question government initiatives that aim to combat anti-Semitism and to find comprehensive ways to achieve this goal while simultaneously guaranteeing political freedom and open debate. News media play a central role in publicly communicating these discussions. However, critical journalistic contributions on the resolutions and their interpretive framework (e.g., MONTAG 2024; WHITTLE 2024) have been ignored by politicians. The possible consequences of the resolutions for journalistic practice, for example in public service broadcasting, have hardly been discussed in public. Accordingly, this article examines how political decisions to combat anti-Semitism, as expressed in the resolutions, impact journalistic practice and the structuring of public debates.

This question is becoming increasingly relevant as the situation in Israel/Palestine has dramatically worsened: With its terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, Hamas killed over 1,200 people and abducted around 250 hostages; with its subsequent widespread bombing of the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military has injured, displaced, and killed several hundred thousand Palestinians to date (cf. KHATIB et al. 2024; Spagat et al. 2025). Numerous human rights organizations and various United Nation (UN) institutions have criticized the increasingly escalating starvation of the civilian population in the Gaza Strip (e.g., UNITED NATIONS 2024; MEDICO 2025; HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL 2024) and have accused the Israeli government of genocide (e.g., UNITED NATIONS 2024; AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 2024a). This assessment is shared by a large number of international genocide researchers (e.g., BARTOV/WAKIN 2025) and, most recently, by the two Israeli human rights organizations B’Tselem (2025) and PHRI (2025). In December 2023, South Africa instituted proceedings against Israel before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on suspicion of genocide in Gaza, and the ICJ initiated subsequent proceedings. In November 2024, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, among others (cf. ICC 2024a). He and other defendants are accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity (ICC 2024b). However, German Chancellor Friedrich

4 The resolution »Never again is now: Protecting, preserving, and strengthening Jewish life in Germany« [Nie wieder ist jetzt: Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland schützen, bewahren und stärken] was adopted on November 7, 2024, and encompasses anti-Semitism in art, culture, and media.

5 The resolution »Resolutely countering anti-Semitism and hostility toward Israel in schools and universities and safeguarding freedom of discourse« [Antisemitismus und Israelfeindlichkeit an Schulen und Hochschulen entschlossen entgegnetreten sowie den freien Diskursraum sichern] was adopted on January 29, 2025, and refers to anti-Semitism in the education sector.

Merz publicly announced that Netanyahu could visit Germany – despite the ICC ruling – without legal repercussions (e.g., HANDELSBLATT 2025). In light of these events, the question arises as to what the political and legal conditions are that enable Merz' actions, and how these conditions might impact journalists who aim to report critically on them as well as on Israel's military actions and humanitarian violations. What political, social, and journalistic spaces exist for such reporting, which ones do not exist, and why?

Within the field of journalism, these issues are at the center of professional debates – for instance at journalism conferences (e.g., the annual Netzwerk Recherche conference), panel discussions, networking meetings, and in sporadic independent journalistic investigations (e.g., in SCHNEIDER 2025). According to a study of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) (2025), the war in Gaza has been »the most difficult topic« that the 60 journalists surveyed in Germany have ever worked on (in MEY 2025). Not only is the working atmosphere »extremely tough,« but journalists point to »massive pressure, self-censorship, and eroding journalistic standards« in editorial offices (in MEY 2025). Others refer to interventions by the Israeli embassy (RSF 2025: 18; cf. also RESCH 2024) and criticize language regulations that go beyond conventional standards in other wars (in SALFITI 2024). One example is the 44-page »Glossary of Reporting on the Middle East Conflict. For internal use. As of October 18, 2023« of the German national public broadcaster ARD. According to the glossary (2023), attacks by the Israeli army are by default [in der Regel] to be described as »reactions« or »counterattacks« on military targets (3-4). Accordingly, a first content analysis of the widely viewed ARD evening news program Tagesschau shows that Israel's military actions are presented less as active and autonomous actions and more as contextualized and thus legitimized defensive measures. Palestinian violence, on the other hand, is consistently decontextualized and emotionalized (GOLDMANN 2025a). Similar patterns can also be found in other leading media outlets in Germany (GOLDMANN 2025b).

Journalists such as Yossi Bartal, Fabian Goldmann, Hanno Hauenstein, Kristin Helberg, Tilo Jung, Julia Neumann, and Charlotte Wiedemann question such narratives by including various perspectives on the war and by criticizing its German media coverage (see also ZABOURA 2025). At the same time, the editor-in-chief of the Jewish newspaper *Jüdische Allgemeine*, Philipp Peyman Engel, proclaims that the »level of disinformation, conscious or unconscious, in anti-Israel reporting ... has long since reached its limit« (ENGEL 2025). Regardless of the specific perspective, public criticism of the one-sided media coverage of the war in Gaza in Germany is growing (ZAPP 2024). The long-term study Media Trust 2024 illustrates this: »In 2024, Germans are most critical of media coverage of the war in the Gaza Strip, which was surveyed for the first time. 27 percent trust the reports mostly or completely« (FAWZI et al. 2024: 11). Yet, the German academic

community, for instance in communication studies, hardly comments on the topic at all (in STRIPPEL et al. 2025).

This article reflects on and discusses issues of journalistic practice in the context of current policies in Germany. It is based on five expert interviews with Stephan Detjen (DEUTSCHLANDFUNK), Prof. Andreas Engelmann (University of Labor, Frankfurt/Main), Prof. Carsten Reinemann (University of Munich), Nadia Zaboura (visiting scholar at Free University [FU] Berlin), and local journalist Miri Watson (*Schwäbisches Tagblatt*).⁶ In addition, the article draws on existing surveys of journalists (e.g., RSF 2025; SCHNEIDER 2025).

The anti-Semitism resolution and anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel

The motion »Never again is now: Protecting, preserving, and strengthening Jewish life in Germany« was passed by the German Bundestag in November 2024. The resolution states that »there must be no room for anti-Semitism in the arts, culture, and media« (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2024: 3). To this end, it must be ensured »that no organizations or projects are financially supported that spread anti-Semitism, question Israel’s right to exist, call for a boycott of Israel, or actively support the BDS movement« (2). Accordingly, the resolution calls on federal, state, and local authorities to review cultural and academic projects for »anti-Semitic narratives« (2) before releasing funding. »In order to ensure the most effective fight against anti-Semitism,« the resolution further calls for »consistent use of repressive measures« (3), for example in criminal law and in residence, asylum, and citizenship law. Andreas Engelmann, professor of law at the University of Labour, describes the resolution as a »shadow constitution« [Schattenverfassung] (ENGELMANN 2024): on the one hand, it is not legally binding, but on the other hand, it provides a powerful political framework for instrumentalising accusations of anti-Semitism – including with reference to journalism (see also TRÖGER 2024a).

As in the BDS resolution and in previous years, the resolution is based on the working definition of antisemitism developed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) (cf. GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2024: 2–3). This

6 The journalists were selected based on the type of media outlet and journalistic practice (Detjen [national public broadcaster], Watson [private local newspaper]); the academics were selected based on their research field and thematic expertise (Reinemann [communication studies], Engelmann [law], Zaboura [Israel/Gaza coverage]). The author joined a panel with Reinemann on the role of German communication studies in the context of the Middle East discourse (STRIPPEL et al. 2025). In addition, there were several off-the-record conversations. All interviews were held in the fall of 2024 and spring of 2025. It was extremely difficult to find interviewees who were willing to give non-anonymous interviews on the record. All interviewees (also off-the-record) were critical of the resolutions for various reasons. Many thanks to the experts who were willing to give non-anonymous interviews.

definition was developed by the IHRA at a conference in Bucharest in May 2016; it was widely disseminated and thus became the politically validated language in Germany. The IHRA working definition expands the concept of anti-Semitism and shifts the focus to anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel [israelbezogener Antisemitismus]. Accordingly, anti-Semitic manifestations »might include the targeting of the State of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. However, criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country might not be regarded antisemitic« (IHRA 2025). This framework definition was later supplemented by eleven concrete examples (cf. AMBOS et al. 2023). According to those, »claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor« or »comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis« (IHRA 2025) are considered to be anti-Semitic. The claim of genocide against Palestinians in Gaza can therefore be interpreted as being anti-Semitic if, for example, it draws parallels with Nazi Germany.

At the same time, the question arises as to how criticism of one warring party such as Israel can be compared with criticism of other warring parties when both the historical context of the conflict, and the military and humanitarian situation in Gaza are unprecedented. According to the IHRA (2025), here, context matters – based on the »non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism« (IHRA 2025), one needs to account for overall context (see also AMBOS et al. 2023; STERN 2021). The Research Service of the German Bundestag has since »denied any legally binding character« of the definition (MONTAG 2024). Nevertheless, it provides the language for the resolutions of the German Bundestag. Attempts to differentiate »legitimate« criticism of the Israeli government from »illegitimate« criticism of the State of Israel often end up in linguistic rules, diagrams, and visual guidelines (e.g., AMADEU ANTONIO FOUNDATION 2016: 15). Legal scholar Christoph Möllers calls these attempts at definitions »boxed in« (in BOLWIN 2024).

The question of legitimate journalistic work and criticism

Various experts have criticized the IHRA definition and the political and institutional history of the resolution (e.g., ASSMANN 2025; in WHITTLE 2024), including the co-author of the definition Kenneth Stern (2021, in CORTELESSA 2020; in LENZ 2024). They point, for instance, to distorted concepts of anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel and their instrumentalization, or they emphasize the validity of alternative concepts and definitions of anti-Semitism (e.g., in MICHAELS et al. 2024). Other experts defend this interpretation, for example in the context of postcolonialism, using the works of Edward Said and Judith Butler as case studies (PFAHL-TRAUGHBER 2025). How difficult it is to distinguish

between legitimate and illegitimate critique, especially for journalism, becomes clear in concrete examples, such as Israel's settlement policy: From the perspective of the ICC, the UN, the European Union, and many Western states, including Germany, Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank is illegal because it violates international law (cf. FEDERAL FOREIGN OFFICE 2025). Their criticism is based on international law and is directed against the actions and policies of the Israeli government. Under the right-wing nationalist leader Netanyahu, this government has intensified its settlement policies and legalized settlements; the government legitimizes its actions partly on religious grounds and with reference to Israel's right to exist. Accordingly, the government interprets resistance to the settlements as being inherently anti-Semitic because it views criticism of settlements as delegitimizing the State of Israel – even though the state itself continues to occupy and settle foreign territory (cf. HIDALGO 2022). It follows that the question of critique is a question of legal and discursive grounds.

By adopting the definition of anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel as the core of the BDS resolution and the so-called anti-Semitism resolution of November 2024, the German government (and thus public discourse in Germany) is increasingly adopting the interpretative framework and interpretative power of the Israeli government. The legal basis of international law, on the other hand, loses out in the chosen interpretation and application of anti-Semitism – to the detriment of principles of international law such as the UN Charter of universal human rights of 1945, which emerged from the horror of World War II and the Holocaust. So far, the German government has attempted to resolve this paradox through a political practice of uncompromised loyalty to the State of Israel. The resolution of November 2024 exemplifies this – it focuses Germany's historical responsibility on the State of Israel while at the same time undermining Germany's historical responsibility for universal principles of international law and their observance. This discursive shift explains, at least in part, why Chancellor Merz feels emboldened to invite Netanyahu to Germany, *despite* and contrary to the international arrest warrant issued by the ICC. By adopting the concept of anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel in the resolutions, the political leeway of the Israeli government has increased (regardless of its respective political agenda). This reduces the scope of discourse on the question of whether and how this leeway can be publicly and thus journalistically criticized in Germany.

Nevertheless, prior to the resolution's adoption, several scholars, lawyers, and journalists have criticized its defining framework and political implications (e.g., MONTAG 2024). For example, in the national newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), a group of scholars pointed out that the resolution did exactly what it sought to prevent, namely »restricting Jews to a particular view or way of life and portraying them as a homogeneous group representing uniform positions« (MICHAELS et al. 2024). Respectively, the independent communications

studies researcher and FU visiting scholar Nadia Zaboura states that the standardizations, generalizations, and the lack of precision due to definitional inaccuracies, which are inherent in the resolution's language, hardly allow for legitimate criticism:

Anyone who criticizes Israel is quickly labeled an anti-Semite in Germany. Here, it is important to clearly distinguish between unsubstantiated, i.e., instrumentalized accusations of anti-Semitism and rightful criticism of actual anti-Semitism: The former repeatedly involves a collective equation of the State of Israel with Jews – even if criticism is directed against government actions and not against Jews. *According to the IHRA definition, this equation is problematic.* [Highlighted by the author, M.T.]

In consequence, the group of scholars in the *FAZ* suggested alternative language for the resolution, underlining Jewish plurality and ensuring the resolution's compatibility with the German Basic Law and international law. Open letters (e.g., *Wir begrüßen*, 2024) and various human rights organizations supported these suggestions (in *AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 2024b*). The German Bundestag rejected them.

Resolution for universities and research

Instead, the Bundestag passed another resolution. The motion »Resolutely countering anti-Semitism and hostility toward Israel in schools and universities and safeguarding freedom of discourse« was passed in the spring of 2025 (*GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2025*). One reason for this resolution was the increase of anti-Semitic incidents in Germany. According to the Federal Association of Departments for Research and Information on Antisemitism (*RIAS*), there were 8,627 such incidents in 2024. »This represents an increase of almost 77% compared to 2023.« (*RIAS 2025: 10*) Also *RIAS* works based on the definition of anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel, which was the most frequent form of anti-Semitism in the report – with a total of 5,857 incidents, or just under 70 percent (11). These incidents include, for example, the damage to property with symbols or content interpreted to be anti-Semitic (e.g., stickers such as »From the river to the sea – Palestine will be free«^[7]), as well as threats and verbal or written statements (e.g., graffiti of the red triangle – a symbol associated with Hamas to mark enemies) (29). According to the report, 450 of these incidents took place at educational and academic institutions (11).^[8]

7 German jurisprudence is inconsistent regarding the criminal liability of this slogan (*BROCKHAUS et al. 2024; BROCKHAUS 2025*).

8 A second study by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (*BMBF*) from 2025 concludes that anti-Semitic attitudes among university students remain unchanged. Approximately six to seven percent of students hold anti-Semitic views, meaning that anti-Semitism is less prevalent among students than in the general population (cf. *BMBF 2025*).

The resolution was the German government's response to these developments and figures (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2025: 1). It emphasizes that »anti-Semitism and hostility toward Israel have no place in schools and universities« (1) and refers, for example, to protests and protest camps against the war in Gaza at German universities, where »anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic slogans« (1) were being spread. To counteract this trend, the resolution proposes specific means and measures on how anti-Semitism should be researched and taught at universities according to fields and disciplines (3ff.). With regard to the BDS resolution (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2019), it emphasizes that BDS supporters »have no place in German educational and research institutions« (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2025: 6).

Once again, the resolution is not legally binding but serves as an appeal to other authorities. These authorities are to base their assessment of possible anti-Semitic incidents on the Bundestag's »perception of reality« (cf. MANN/YONA 2024); they then are to apply the law in accordance with its interpretation. The resolution thus establishes a powerful discursive framework according to which German administrations can legitimize and delegitimize academic discourse and funding. For example, the resolution's emphasis »that research excellence and anti-Semitism are mutually exclusive« (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2025: 6) might impact decision-making processes for funding universities under the Excellence Initiative.⁹ The first consequences of the resolution showed already: Felix Klein, the Federal Government's Commissioner Against Anti-Semitism¹⁰, is calling for universities to be monitored by the intelligence service Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (EWERT et al. 2025). Several Jewish and non-Jewish scholars who criticize Israel's policies or describe the actions in Gaza as genocide have been disinvited, and events have been cancelled (cf. REINECKE 2024). Initiatives such as the »Archive of Silence« are attempting to document these incidents (cf. ARCHIVE OF SILENCE 2025).

Various scholars criticize the resolution, its defining framework, its stipulations regarding research and teaching, as well as the threat it poses to freedom of research protected by the German Basic Law (e.g., ASSMANN 2025; KRISOL 2025; in GRIMM et al. 2025). Klein, however, sees no conflict with the Basic Law. He underlines that he is fulfilling a mandate that has been »formulated by the German Bundestag in several resolutions« (quoted in SANDER 2020).¹¹ Freedom of expression – for example, with regard to BDS – remained intact. According to him, the

9 The Excellence Initiative is aimed to promote top-level research and to improve the quality of German universities and research institutions. In the first funding period (January 1, 2019 to December 31, 2025) a total of 57 Clusters of Excellence (EXC) are being funded with an annual budget of 385 million Euro. In addition, in the first funding period (2019 to 2026) ten Universities of Excellence and one University Consortium of Excellence are being funded with 148 million Euro annually (DFG 2025).

10 This office was created by means of a Bundestag resolution in 2018 (HEYER 2020).

11 According to the Bundestag resolution from 2018, this mandate is to contribute across departments to »raising awareness in society of current and historical forms of anti-Semitism through public relations work and political and cultural education« (cited in HEYER 2020). For this purpose, Klein has eleven employees and a

issue at stake is taxpayers' money and the question of whether »we finance artists and intellectuals who question Israel's right to exist« (cited in DETJEN 2020b). To distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate critique, Klein uses the so-called 3-D test that has been in circulation since 2003. He, thus, asks whether Israel is being *demonized* and *delegitimized* and whether *double standards* are being applied (cf. SHARANSKY 2004). With this test, »the matter« – such as the case of Cameroonian historian and political scientist Achille Mbembe (see below) – is seemingly made empirically verifiable and »clear« (cited in HEYER 2020).

Yet, the scholarly debate on the matter shows that it is not so clear-cut (cf. HIDALGO 2022). Political scientist Peter Lintl and sociologist Peter Ullrich, for instance, criticize the test for being »schematic and undifferentiated«: delegitimization, demonization, and double standards are communication strategies used by various sides in the Middle East conflict and many other conflicts. In this respect, the test does not help to identify specifically anti-Semitic semantics (LINTL/ULLRICH 2024: 91). According to the author of the test, the then Israeli Minister for Social Affairs Natan Sharansky, criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic, if it equates Israel with apartheid and does not recognize it as a Jewish state (cited in DENZ 2008: 138). Respectively, also the aforementioned ARD glossary (2023) for journalists states: »Israel is not an apartheid state. To claim otherwise demonizes and delegitimizes the Israeli state (see 3-D test).« (24) Following Sharansky, international legal norms need to be viewed critically in this debate. At the 2008 Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism conference, he emphasized »that ›human rights‹ had become a tool in the fight against Israel« (cited in Denz 2008: 138). »Many enemies of Israel wanted a ›democratic state for all inhabitants‹ and explicitly ›not a Jewish state‹.« (cited in DENZ 2008: 138) How journalists, however, should describe a state that – according to Sharansky – is not a state for all its inhabitants but also not an apartheid state, the ARD glossary does not specify.

Despite this paradox, the 3-D test serves to legitimize commissioner Klein's political actions. With the help of the test, he accused the postcolonial theorist Mbembe of anti-Semitic reasoning because Mbembe compares the Israeli occupation to the apartheid regime in South Africa. In consequence, Klein asked for Mbembe to be disinvited from a public event in Germany (in HEYER 2020). In doing so, Klein ignored the crucial fact that comparing (not equating) case studies are important means of knowledge production in scholarship (cf. GESSEN 2023). At the same time, he delegitimized the work of renowned academics, politicians, and Nobel Prize winners who argue similarly from historical or legal points of view (e.g., CARTER 2006). For Klein, this does not seem to be a contradiction. »All three ›Ds‹ apply to Mbembe,« he says (cited in HEYER 2020) and

budget of one million Euro at his disposal. Klein is assigned to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, but no one there is authorized to issue directives (HEYER 2020).

thus bases his political actions on a decontextualized and academically removed interpretation of the historical presence.

The question of media

The sort of intelligence service scenarios that Klein calls for with regard to universities do not yet exist for media in Germany. Nevertheless, Carsten Reinemann, professor of communication studies at the University of Munich, speaks of a possible »chilling effect«: »Journalists or editorial offices could avoid certain topics or present them in a one-sided manner for fear of public pressure or political sanctions.« According to the RSF study (2025), this is already the case (see also RESCH 2024). Reinemann sees the resolution as an attempt of the state to intervene in a process to define discursive norms. This process should be dynamic and characterized by plurality, thus, requiring constant social negotiation. »When anti-Semitism, criticism of Israel, and *Staatsräson*¹² are mentioned in the same breath, it establishes a problematic interpretive framework,« says Reinemann.

This interpretative framework is not an abstract problem – especially for publicly funded media such as public service broadcasting. Here, the resolution provides a gateway for content guidelines and staff decisions (e.g., through commission and committee work). This is because resources, funding, and jobs could be made dependent on how critically or uncritically journalists report on various widely debated issues, such as Netanyahu’s invitation to Germany, German arms exports to Israel (GUELER 2025), or the recently decided halt to new arms export licenses (e.g., SCHILLER 2025).¹³ The assessment of what constitutes legitimate or illegitimate criticism is then based on a set of rules that deviates from the principles of international law, which applies otherwise. How journalists should deal with this exclusive situation remains a mystery. Because while they can demand human rights, for example, from Russia, China, the US, and Germany, they risk being accused of anti-Semitism (related to the State of Israel) when it comes to Israeli settlement policy or Israel’s human rights violations in Gaza.

Stephan Detjen, lawyer, historian, and head of the Berlin studio of Deutschlandfunk, a national public radio station, fears that this will lead to increasing »regulation« of editorial work at public broadcasters. »Open

12 The term *Staatsräson* or »reasons of state« describes the primacy of state interests over all other interests, or the necessity of the state as opposed to individual reason. After the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, German state representatives voiced unwavering support for Israel. Then Chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasized in the German Bundestag: »(A)t this moment there is only one place for Germany. The place beside Israel. That’s what we mean by saying: Israel’s security is German *Staatsräson*« (cited in WIENER 2024).

13 In 2023, the German government approved arms export to Israel worth 326 million Euro; in 2024, the figure was 161 million Euro (in GUELER 2025). On August 8, 2025, the German government decided »until further notice« not to supply Israel with any military equipment that could be used in Gaza (cited in BÖHM 2025). Arms exports already approved for the current and coming years are not affected by the ban.

directives from above, fear of reactions from supervisory bodies and politicians, and indirect pressure to conform« could create a problematic climate in editorial offices on a topic that is highly controversial. When in doubt, journalists then might shy away from expressing their opinions, addressing sensitive issues, or giving a platform to marginalized voices. In the fall of 2024, the General Secretariat of the ARD (see above) sent an email to all editorial offices advertising a seminar on »Anti-Semitism in Media.« This seminar was organized by commissioner Klein in collaboration with the German Cultural Council – according to Detjen, from a »completely one-sided point of view.« At conferences and workshops, other journalists speak of similar training courses and events, and increasing activities on the part of anti-Semitism commissioners.

According to Zaboura, journalists talk about »fear, isolation, internal conflicts, even threats to their careers« when they are trying to address the suffering of the people in Gaza or the actions of the Israeli military. This impacted both *white* journalists and journalists of color, with the latter also facing racism. Zaboura's observations are similar to the findings of the aforementioned RSF study. In it, TV reporter Sophia Maier, who has set herself the goal of showing the suffering of both sides, talks of »new dimensions of hatred that I am experiencing. This has also been the case for other colleagues since October 7, 2023.« After Maier addressed the impact of Israeli military attacks on the civilian population in Gaza, she received insults such as: »Die, you filthy pig,« »Anti-Semitic pest of Nazi descent,« and » Hamas cunt« (RSF 2025: 19). The resolution does not appear to be decisive for such hostility, but it does provide a quasi-legal basis for accusations against journalists of reproducing anti-Semitic narratives.

In this context, Middle East expert Prof. Kai Hafez also points to the lack of expertise on the history of the conflict (in STRIPPEL et al. 2025: 7). Many journalists and academics in Germany feel that the Israel/Palestine conflict is too complicated to be able to take a critical stance (in TRÖGER 2024b). »This knowledge deficit can be found both in society as a whole and in German editorial offices – and it is being exploited politically,« concludes Zaboura, »also through media reporting that, out of ignorance, fear, and the reproduction of racist stereotypes, repeatedly evades the basic journalistic claim of controlling power through journalism« (see also Zaboura in MEDIENMAGAZIN 2025: 10ff.). Zaboura names international politics as an example: When right-wing forces around the world, such as the governments of Hungary and the US, as well as the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD), present themselves as Israel's greatest friends while simultaneously exploiting anti-Semitism for political purposes, Zaboura believes it is the task of journalism to address this issue critically. Journalists need to reflect on these dynamics and create spaces for broader deliberative debates as part of German democracy. However, such comprehensive views are currently lacking on a broad scale – both in journalism and academia.

Criticism in media and academia

Such discursive omissions, and the normative shifts in the resolutions are forcing federal and state institutions, universities, cultural institutions, editorial offices, and journalists to take a stand on the question whether criticism of Israeli policies and the representation of human suffering in Gaza are worth exposing themselves to social pressure, possible repressions, and budget cuts.

Andreas Keller, deputy chairman and higher education expert at the German Education Union (GEW), comments on this in relation to academia: »Anti-Semitism is [...] a crime. However, it must be possible to criticize the policies of the Israeli government, for example with regard to the current war in Gaza, without being blacklisted by the Ministry of Education.« (cited in GEW 2024) The resolutions provide the political basis for such blacklists. Legal actions against them are hardly possible because the resolutions »only look like laws, but they are not,« emphasizes Detjen. This means that the resolutions have no legal effect and are therefore »not litigable. If they were passed as laws, they would be unconstitutional.« This is because infringements of fundamental rights protected by the German Basic Law, such as the freedom of expression and academic freedom, require a firm legal basis and are subject to a review process developed by the Federal Constitutional Court. The court determines whether an infringement is appropriate, necessary, and proportionate – even in cases as important as combating anti-Semitism. In the case of the resolutions, this basis does not exist because the expanded definition of anti-Semitism (related to the State of Israel) is ambiguous and often contextual (DETJEN 2020b; ENGELMANN 2024).

Nevertheless, based on the resolutions, commissioner Klein calls for more restrictive measures in the arts and education, for example by means of »tougher action against protests at universities« (in DER SPIEGEL 2025). Whether such restrictive interventions are actually conducive to combating anti-Semitism and help »safeguarding freedom of discourse« (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2025) is doubtful, especially in light of the situation in the US. The Trump administration's fight against anti-Semitism serves as a pretext for attacking academic freedom and higher education as such (cf. JACOBSON 2025; TOLAND 2025). It is thus important to ask how the practice of increased control in Germany could be similarly instrumentalized under changed political conditions.

All experts interviewed for this article consider the infringements of fundamental rights based on the resolutions as highly problematic. Reinemann emphasizes this with regard to academia: »Our task is to critically analyze processes and enable pluralistic perspectives.« Academics must therefore defend themselves against any such inadmissible interferences and authoritative provisions. According to him, the same applies to journalism.

Pressures on journalism at the local and national level

Miri Watson is a reporter working for the local newspaper *Schwäbisches Tagblatt* in the university town of Tübingen. She is one of 60 journalists interviewed for the RSF study. Watson says she tries to »cover major political issues locally, for example by talking to people whose families live in Israel or Gaza.« She writes about local protests, pro-Palestinian camps at the University of Tübingen, and the city's new district partnership with the Israeli district of Hof HaCarmel since May 2024. »I have always made a point of presenting different perspectives, which has been met with criticism from some colleagues. Some fear that I could unintentionally reproduce anti-Semitic narratives. In some cases, I have been directly accused of that.« Watson recalls an »open letter to the editor-in-chief demanding that I no longer write about Israel/Palestine.« Although there is »no formal gag order,« there is pressure by colleagues, some of which is carried out publicly. Watson describes the emotional strain as high and the public defamation of her work as exhausting. Other journalists report similar experiences (e.g., in RSF 2025).

For local journalists in particular, social pressures and conflicting roles can become problematic. Readers often know their faces, names, or even where they live; sometimes they meet in the same bars and restaurants (cf. GRIEBAU 2023: 247ff.). »I am not anonymous,« says Watson. »That changes the perception of risk.« As a result, the fear of direct confrontation or even hostility can influence editorial decisions (RSF 2025). »When I write about certain topics, I sometimes get strong reactions – letters to the editor, emails.«

Watson believes that the so-called anti-Semitism resolutions have no direct influence on these dynamics. »Formally, the resolutions don't impact us.« Since they were passed at the federal level, her newspaper did not report on them: »There were no local angles.« Nevertheless, Watson sees a danger that such resolutions could reinforce existing uncertainties about the term anti-Semitism, making it even harder for journalists to address the issue in a nuanced way. »These resolutions shape our perception and delegitimize voices that refer to different definitions of anti-Semitism,« she says. In the newsroom, however, »such topics are hardly ever discussed.«

Also Detjen points out the small number of journalists in newsrooms who actually recognize the problem as such. The vast majority simply says, »I am against anti-Semites,« without asking about social or historical contexts or reflecting on questions of definition. One example is the above mentioned anti-Semitism statistics published by RIAS (RIAS 2025). According to Detjen, these statistics are »totally problematic« because they provide figures without sufficient background information. If every »settler colonialism« sticker is counted as an anti-Semitic incident and Klein then presents these figures at the Federal Press Conference (cf. JUNG & NAIIV 2024: 41ff.), it requires journalists

who understand the context and can critically classify both the numbers and the language (e.g., HESSE 2025). Too often, this is not the case, Detjen says. Those who do attempt such contextualization are »marked to such an extent that it overshadows everything else.« Detjen, who serves as chief correspondent for public national broadcaster Deutschlandradio in Berlin and describes the German Middle East discourse as a »side beat« of his work, recounts how politicians approached him at the Federal Press Ball about his supposed »pro-Palstinian stance.« »Suddenly, you're just the one who takes a position on the issue – because it's so unusual,« he states.

The Detjen case

For Detjen, a turning point was his public dispute with Felix Klein, the Federal Government's Commissioner Against Anti-Semitism. When Klein accused historian Achille Mbembe of anti-Semitic reasoning in spring 2020 (see above), Detjen wrote – what he calls – a »sharp commentary« on Deutschlandfunk. Klein, he wrote, was a »discursive gatekeeper« and »civil religious guardian of the faith« who was using his state mandate to »banish an internationally renowned scholar from the German discourse« (DETJEN 2020a). In doing so, Klein »is adopting a strategy used by lobby groups that instrumentalize an unbounded concept of anti-Semitism. Political or scholarly criticism of Israel's occupation policy is thus systematically being delegitimized« (DETJEN 2020a).

This critique was followed by a public debate: In an interview with the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Klein defended his actions, the BDS resolution, and his criticism of Mbembe's alleged anti-Semitism. He described Detjen's »gatekeeper« analogy as a »shabby argument!« »So unbalanced, and this on public broadcasting.« At least, according to Klein, the author was now getting »due pressure« via calls for his dismissal (cited in HEYER 2020). According to Detjen, there were no such calls (also in DETJEN 2020b).

Detjen responded in an article for the national newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), in which he argued from a legal perspective why the BDS resolution was problematic. Although the resolution fell short of an outright ban and functioned merely as a warning – comparable, for example, to food warnings – German jurisprudence requires the strictest standards of due diligence for such warnings. These criteria, however, did not exist in the case of the anti-Semitism resolution due to definitional ambiguities. Detjen concluded that when »the line between the necessary fight against anti-Semitism and the suppression of politically legitimate criticism is being blurred,« the fear of being accused of anti-Semitism inevitably increases (DETJEN 2020b). He further argued that Klein's handling of criticism regarding his leadership role did little to dispel

these fears (Detjen 2020b). Klein subsequently intervened, contacting the program director of Deutschlandradio to complain about the FAZ article. Klein later had to apologize for these actions; but according to Detjen, the personal attacks continued nonetheless.

Looking back, Detjen describes this dispute and Klein's behavior as an »interesting process« that exposes the broader mechanisms behind the resolutions. »A government official attacks a journalist using outrageous methods,« he says. This is »totally being noticed« by colleagues. The underlying message, according to Detjen, is clear: »If I express criticism, the federal government will come after me.« As an established journalist who covers many topics and is »actually highly respected,« Detjen himself does not feel threatened. Yet he acknowledges that his voice carries a »special weight.« For younger journalists or those in more precarious positions, however, the implicit warning could be enough to discourage them from expressing similar criticism. Although senior government officials repeatedly assured him that Klein's actions did not reflect the federal government's official stance, Detjen warns that this could change under a different administration, leaving such abuses of authority unpunished. »My mistake was that I didn't make more of a fuss about it,« he concludes.

Free media between theory and practice

For communication studies researcher Reinemann, the matter is clear: »Journalists must report, research, contextualize, and stand up to pressure. When editorial offices hold back for fear of reactions from certain media outlets or political camps, that is cause for concern,« he says. In practice, however, reporting on Israel/Palestine over the past two years has looked quite different. The RSF study underscores this emphatically:

Freelance journalists explain that, given the uncertainty in editorial offices and their fear of being accused of »anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel« by other media outlets, they have begun to avoid topics that are perceived as sensitive. Quite a few also feel pressured by frequent and massive interventions by the Israeli embassy or the German-Israeli Society at editorial offices. [...] Many journalists also express fear of being exposed in the [tabloid] newspaper BILD. [...] Similar accusations have been made against influential pro-Palestinian influencers and activists for inciting hatred against journalists from public broadcasters. (RSF 2025: 18–19)

Such reports are sobering. They raise fundamental questions about media freedom. At the same time, they highlight the need for social, academic, and journalistic debate on the political possibilities and limitations of critical media coverage of the Israel/Palestine conflict in Germany. This remains the case despite the German government's increasingly critical stance on human rights

violations in Gaza and recent shifts in media reporting. Alignments between political agendas and media coverage nevertheless appear to persist (see Bennett 1990).

Over the past two years, journalists have held back from reporting on Israel/Palestine or criticizing Israel out of fear of losing their jobs. They point to cases in which employment contracts were not renewed because of their reporting or because of private social media posts (18). According to journalist Armin Ghassim, this mainly affects journalists of color and those with migrant backgrounds (in NETZWERK RECHERCHE 2025: 25; 20ff.). Detjen states that such direct dismissals remain the exception. However, visible political positioning could influence hiring decisions and the employment prospects of freelance journalists. Freelance reporters such as Hanno Hauenstein (2024a), Fabian Goldmann (in REIMANN 2025), and others (in SCHNEIDER 2025; RSF 2025) describe losing assignments, lacking editorial support, being informally excluded, or even being removed from the topic by their editors. It follows that a number of German journalists have turned to writing for international media (e.g., HAUENSTEIN 2024b). Watson warns that this trend could render already underrepresented voices – such as those of journalists of color or without German citizenship – even less visible.

Conclusion

The so-called anti-Semitism resolutions of the German Bundestag mark a significant shift in the relationship between political regulation, journalistic practice, and public discourse. By adopting a broader definition of anti-Semitism – in particular, anti-Semitism directly related to the State of Israel – the discursive references of German politics and journalistic debate are shifting. Politically defined loyalties toward the State of Israel are taking precedence over universal norms of international law. This gives state actors such as the Israeli government under right-wing nationalist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who legitimizes Israeli military and geopolitical actions in Gaza with Israel's right to exist, the power to define what is to be considered anti-Semitic in Germany. As a result, also the journalistic discourse runs the risk of distancing itself from international legal norms (for instance, the validity of human rights for the people of Gaza) and of applying human rights selectively and exclusively to certain countries and populations. These normative and discursive ruptures may have incalculable consequences for trust in journalism, media and democracy in Germany.

The case of Stephan Detjen exemplifies how informal political interventions can influence editorial processes and exert structural pressures on journalists. This undermines the democratic balance between independent, critical media

work and political power. The widespread reluctance of journalists and academics to engage with the resolutions further points to a climate of uncertainty, which results not least from a politicized interpretation of anti-Semitism.

All experts interviewed for this article recognize anti-Semitism to be a serious problem in Germany and at the same time criticize the current resolutions as an inappropriate and counterproductive instrument for combating it (see also MICHAELS et al. 2024). The protection of Jewish life and the defense of democratic public discourse require the precise, contextualized use of norms and language as well as journalistic working conditions that enable critical reporting. The so-called anti-Semitism resolutions do not support either. Instead, they create a gateway for arbitrary state control through quasi-legal regulations. This arbitrariness runs parallel to the applicable law; it becomes manifest in self-censorship in media, art, and research, the cuts of funding and threats thereof, or the end of media careers.

Journalists have little influence on these conditions, but they can feel their impact – *directly*, for instance, in public media through the distribution of resources, funds, and jobs; *indirectly*, for instance, in private media companies through fear or editorial self-censorship. This is why broader social awareness of the problem is needed together with comprehensive academic, civil society, and journalistic debates to protect and strengthen institutionalized editorial spaces.

The resolutions, as well as the actions of the respective state actors, undermine such debates. First, because the resolutions provide a powerful discursive framework for instrumentalized accusations against journalists who criticize the policies of the Israeli government of reproducing anti-Semitic narratives. Second, because the resolutions rely on state power and repression. They thus provide blueprints for political forces that – in the future – could gain access to both these processes and the respective structures of control (e.g., lists, regulations, institutions), such as the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD). The resolutions benefit the AfD and other extremists because they divide rather than unite, and they rely on exclusive rather than universal rights. The resolutions further ignore other marginalized groups in Germany (e.g., Islamophobia, anti-Palestinian racism, and other forms of group-focused enmity). Instead, by contrasting Judaism and Islam or Israel and Palestine in binaries and by externalizing anti-Semitism in part onto Arab migrants, they tend to promote such group-focused marginalization. They thus undermine the emphasis on the need to combat *all* crimes against humanity. In the light of these issues, it is necessary to question both the effectiveness of the resolutions in combating anti-Semitism, as well as their impact on critical journalism in Germany based on universal human rights.

Translation by Mandy Tröger

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