

Debate

Leipziger Mediengespräche

»Online hate speech has real-world consequences«

Resilience, regulation, networks, and participatory formats as strategies against hate in journalism

Abstract: »The central question is: To what extent should regulatory intervention be applied – and to what extent can we strengthen the resilience of those involved?« With these questions, Michael Haller inaugurated the first Leipzig Media Forum, hosted by the European Institute for Journalism and Communication Research (EIJK). Drawing on the experiences of journalists and researchers from Germany and the U.S., the discussion highlighted approaches focused on regulation, media literacy, resilience-building, and participatory projects linking journalism and the public. *Journalistik/Journalism Research* documents the discussion in an edited version based on the audio transcript. The challenges journalists face due to hate speech, hostility, and platform logic were discussed by the guests at the first Leipzig Media Forum in late April 2026 at the Media Campus Villa Ida in Leipzig-Gohlis, moderated by Gabriele Hooffacker (Leipzig University of Applied Sciences, HTWK). Prof. Stine Eckert (Wayne State University, Detroit), Prof. Michael Haller (European Institute for Journalism and Communication Research, EIJK), Dr. Judith Kretzschmar (University of Leipzig), and Michael Krell (Dresden University of Technology) spoke about the situation in Germany and the U.S. and presented concrete solutions.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Actually, everything could be so wonderful with participatory formats. We want to talk to one another – journalists with citizens. The internet offers great opportunities for this. And what do we have instead? Ever since discussion forums have existed, we've had flame wars. Ever since

Wikipedia has existed, we've had edit wars. And we have hate speech – which particularly affects journalists right now. We want to ask: What can be done? What can we do about it?

Stine, we're eager to hear what you can tell us about the situation in the U.S. You were born in Zeitz, studied in Leipzig, and are now a professor in Detroit. You're currently in Munich for a research stay and are here with us today. Have you noticed at your university in Detroit that there are restrictions under the second Trump administration – particularly in the fields of journalism and research, or regarding issues affecting journalists?

Stine Eckert: Yes and no. It varies greatly from place to place, depending on the university and the state. We're in Michigan, a state with a Democratic governor, so we have a bit more protection.

However, all federal funding from Washington, D.C., related to diversity was already cut or eliminated last spring. This affected funding for professors – regardless of their department, including communication studies.

As far as research content is concerned, my university, Wayne State University, is trying to preserve the substance. We are also fortunate that a new Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies has been established. It is interdisciplinary in nature and is currently supporting my research here in Germany on genderqueer journalists.

Overall, the situation is mixed. Michigan is in a comparatively good position, but colleagues in states like Ohio, Indiana, Florida, Texas, or Arizona must expect significantly harsher measures.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Michael Krell is a researcher at the Dresden University of Technology. I recently read your article »Good country, bad city« in the national weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, which deals with the image of modernity as the enemy in contemporary right-wing extremism – a theme with roots stretching back to National Socialism. You study far-right extremist activities in the German state of Saxony. Have you personally experienced hostility as an author?

Michael Krell: I've been traveling extensively in Saxony for several years, including for journalistic work, and I focus primarily on far-right protests and actors, such as the group »Freie Sachsen,« the COVID-19 protests, and other groups.

I myself have experienced relatively little direct hostility so far. That's probably also because I'm hardly active on social media.

Through my research, my journalistic work, and also through volunteer activities, I have a lot of contact with journalists in Saxony who cover right-wing extremism. And it's clear: hostility is part of everyday life.

This happens in various ways – for example, on the street when reporting on far-right protests. It's actually normal to face hostility there. And in recent years, especially since the pandemic, a lot of this has shifted to the digital sphere.

Protests have been organized via platforms like Telegram, and that's also where many attacks take place. Journalists are frequently attacked personally there and exposed by name and face. This has led some to give up their work.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Michael Haller represents two worlds – journalism, for example at *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit*, and journalism research.

You have published a book titled: *Der Kampf um die Presse- und Medienfreiheit. Journalistinnen und Journalisten als Wegbereiter der Meinungsfreiheit und Demokratie.* [The struggle for press and media freedom. Journalists as pioneers of freedom of expression and democracy.] It covers figures ranging from Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, and Carl von Ossietzky to Rudolf Augstein.

Marx was forced into exile, Ossietzky was tortured and murdered by the Nazis, and Augstein spent 103 days in prison in the Federal Republic of Germany simply for daring to criticize then German Secretary of Defense Franz Josef Strauß. What does this tell us about the relationship between journalism and repression? Have the forms of pressure changed today?

Michael Haller: Yes, of course. Digitalization has drastically altered the ways in which pressure can be exerted.

Today, virtually anyone can feel empowered to harm others with little effort. This is a new dimension for which we, as a constitutional state, were not sufficiently prepared. While we have criminal laws and jurisprudence that generally function, new spaces have emerged that are not yet adequately regulated.

The central question is: To what extent should regulatory intervention be applied – and to what extent can we strengthen the resilience of those involved?

Allow me to share a brief historical anecdote: In 1641, the English Parliament abolished the system of prior censorship that had previously been in place under King Charles I. Suddenly, there was radical freedom of the press. However, the people of London were emotionally charged by previous conflicts – full of anger and frustration.

A flood of leaflets, insults, and conspiracy theories ensued – comparable to today's hate speech on social media. The scale was so extreme that freedom of the press was restricted again just one year later.

It was only after further conflicts that a stable form of freedom of the press emerged fifty years later. Perhaps this is a fitting analogy for our current situation: We are, in a sense, still in this early phase and are searching for a regulatory framework that allows for both freedom of expression and protection against harm.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Thank you very much for that analogy. At the same time, there were many small principalities in Germany with strict censorship. There, too, were printers and publishers of critical works, though they tended to operate in secret.

Michael Haller: Yes, exactly – there was very strict pre-publication censorship in the German principalities.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Let's return to the topic of citizen participation. Dr. Kretzschmar, you are involved in the project »Citizens doing journalism – Strengthening trust in the media for a democracy in transition.« What is this project researching?

Judith Kretzschmar: At the »Center for Journalism and Democracy at the University of Leipzig,« we have been conducting research on media skepticism and distrust for several years. Our study »Von Lügenpresse und abgehobenen Eliten« [On the »Lying Press« and out-of-touch elites] has shown that much of this distrust stems from a lack of knowledge.

Building on this, we launched a combined practical initiative and research project in collaboration with the German Journalists' Association of Saxony – funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. In this project, we bring citizens together with journalists. They work together for three months: They get to know each other, exchange ideas, discuss, and jointly produce journalistic pieces that are ultimately published. This personal contact builds trust. And that is precisely what is crucial to countering hate and mistrust. After all, the problem is not limited to the internet but affects the culture of debate as a whole.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Stine, you've done research in the U.S. on how journalists deal with hate. Are there support structures there?

Stine Eckert: Yes, but they are limited. In my research, I found that there is hardly any support from the police or lawyers. Those affected primarily turn to NGOs.

In a current project, I conducted interviews with staff from eight NGOs together with two of my doctoral students. We examined how they provide help – both individually and at the societal and political levels.

Our findings show that the situation has steadily worsened over the past ten years – from the first Trump administration through Biden to the current phase. The attacks have become more intense both in terms of frequency and severity.

In addition, many NGOs themselves are under pressure, both financially and legally. Some have had to adapt their strategies and, in some cases, are deliberately working less visibly to protect themselves.

Support for those affected covers various areas: psychological assistance, legal counseling, technical support, and opportunities to connect with others in similar situations.

Many journalists initially feel isolated. Exchanging ideas with others helps them develop strategies.

Gabriele Hooffacker: How does the work of journalists change when they have to, so to speak, step back or act more cautiously? In the past, there were certain topics where it was foreseeable that attacks might occur – such as right-wing extremism. Has this expanded in the meantime?

Stine Eckert: Yes, definitely. Many topics are now highly polarized; they have become »hot-button issues.«

This leads journalists to think much more carefully about who reports on what. And even before they start, they weigh whether they should reduce their own visibility to avoid becoming a target.

There are now significantly more training programs and guidelines being developed by NGOs – often in a very short time. While such materials used to take several months to produce, they are now created within a few weeks.

These materials also address specific groups, such as journalists of color, trans people, or people with a migration background, who are particularly affected.

At the same time, some journalists are withdrawing entirely from certain subject areas or reducing their visibility because the strain is too great. Newsrooms are often not yet sufficiently prepared to support their staff.

Another important point: In the U.S., some of the attacks now come directly from the state – not just from anonymous online actors. This changes the situation significantly.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Thank you very much for this insight into the U.S. Now let's turn our attention to Saxony. Mr. Krell, you have vividly described the pressure under which journalists work there. What parallels and differences do you see?

Michael Krell: One clear parallel is that many journalists are withdrawing from social media or thinking very carefully about what they reveal about themselves publicly. In Saxony, I've mainly worked with freelance journalists who specialize in right-wing extremism. They cover demonstrations, meet with key figures, or conduct investigative reporting.

This reveals a close link between online and offline threats. That's an important point: digital hate speech has real-world consequences in everyday life.

We have very active far-right actors in Saxony who deliberately employ anti-media strategies. One example is the »Freie Sachsen« group, which had a strong presence during the COVID-19 protests and regularly organized demonstrations. Initially, these events received almost no media coverage. Only a few journalists were on the scene – and it was precisely these individuals who were then specifically targeted.

A concrete example: A journalist from Dresden worked under a pseudonym for a long time and reported via social media. There were deliberate attempts to uncover his identity – including through a barrage of complaints filed to gain access to his data through court orders.

When his name became known, he was publicly confronted, insulted, and eventually targeted at his home – for example, with stickers on his front door. As a result, he temporarily stopped working.

This shows that these intimidation strategies work. Many give up because the strain is too great.

Women are particularly hard hit. They experience significantly more hostility, especially online – such as stalking or death threats. This also leads to fewer women working in this field.

Gabriele Hooffacker: So, filing a police report can actually be counterproductive?

Michael Krell: Yes, that's often the case. Many freelance journalists don't file a police report at all – even in cases of insults or physical attacks.

The problem is that protective measures often don't work. There's a lack of anonymity, and personal data repeatedly ends up in court proceedings and thus potentially in the hands of the perpetrators.

Freelance journalists, in particular, often lack institutional safeguards. They have to provide their home address, which further increases the risk.

On top of that, the police and the judiciary aren't always sufficiently aware of these issues. It happens that personal data ends up in files that can be accessed later. That's why many weigh the pros and cons: Is filing a report even worth it, or will it make the situation worse?

Gabriele Hooffacker: That sounds like a very ambivalent relationship with the state – on the one hand, support; on the other, risks.

Michael Krell: Exactly. Things have improved somewhat, for example through media protection teams or training for the police. But it remains ambivalent.

On the one hand, there is greater awareness of the need to protect journalists. On the other hand, there remains the risk that personal data will be disclosed through legal proceedings. This uncertainty means that many do not consistently cooperate with government agencies.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Could more dialogue – for example, between the police and journalists – help?

Judith Kretzschmar: Yes, that's definitely one approach. Our research shows that skepticism toward the media often stems from a lack of understanding.

Many people simply don't know how journalism works – what rules apply, what boundaries exist. This leads to frustration, mistrust, and in some cases, aggression. We've also found that people who know journalists personally have significantly more trust in the media.

That's why we're starting right there – we bring both sides together. Citizens work alongside journalists on topics that interest them personally. This collaboration fosters closeness and understanding. And that's exactly what can help break down mistrust.

So we bring citizens and journalists together and have them work together over a period of three months. At the beginning, the citizen journalists learn the basics of journalism: working methods, principles, and also limits. Afterward, they develop their own topics that affect them personally and implement them together.

This phase is very intensive. The participants really get to know each other, understand each other's perspectives, and work closely together. This builds trust – and that is exactly what we are studying scientifically.

In total, we are working with about 70 groups across Saxony, meaning roughly 350 to 400 citizens. We are observing the effects of this collaboration, both on the participants and on the journalists.

Our hypothesis is that two factors are decisive: on the one hand, the decline of local journalism, on the other hand, a lack of media literacy and a growing distance between the media and the public. Both contribute to mistrust, which in the worst case manifests itself as hatred and violence.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Are there also conflicts between citizens and journalists in the project?

Judith Kretzschmar: Yes, definitely at the beginning. Trust doesn't develop immediately. In the first workshops, it's often a matter of cautiously feeling each other out. Sometimes we even have to establish rules of conduct together. But the groups are small, and over time a respectful collaboration develops.

After the first few weeks, WhatsApp groups often form, and many stay in touch even after the project ends. So the beginning is difficult, but the development is very positive.

Gabriele Hooffacker: That's an important approach: building rapport and starting a conversation, especially at the local level.

Michael, you also work on strategies against hate, including in the »Fit for News« project. How can we raise awareness about what journalism actually is?

Michael Haller: I find Ms. Kretzschmar's approach very convincing.

We're working in a slightly different direction; we combine communication and media education. In our project, we teach educators about media literacy and how journalism works in this context, so they can pass this knowledge on to their students.

The goal is to teach students certain criteria, such as: How can you recognize credible journalism? How does it differ from other forms of media communication?

The problem, however, is that we encounter resistance, particularly in parts of East Germany. Teachers report that some parents protest against such content because they believe it amounts to »propaganda for the mainstream media.«

This shows how deeply rooted the mistrust is in some places. Many children adopt these attitudes from their parents, and that makes educational work more difficult.

Gabriele Hooffacker: That reminds me of a project we carried out at HTWK Leipzig [Leipzig University of Applied Sciences]. There, too, were political reactions, including parliamentary inquiries. How can such resistance be overcome?

Michael Haller: The biggest challenge is scaling up. Pilot projects often work well, but how do you expand them?

Education authorities are sometimes hesitant here because they don't want to be suspected of representing certain political perspectives. As a result, much depends on the commitment of individual schools and teachers.

At the same time, it is clear that a lack of knowledge about how the media system – and journalism in particular – works leads to deep-seated mistrust, which intensifies especially in times of crisis, such as during the pandemic or now due to the wars of aggression in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Gabriele Hooffacker: I would now like to open the floor to the audience.

Question from the audience: I have a question for Ms. Kretzschmar: How do you get citizens on board with your project?

Judith Kretzschmar: We were able to get journalists on board relatively easily through the German Journalists' Association.

It was more difficult with the general public. We work primarily in rural areas and use various methods: social media, flyers, and local partners.

When local stakeholders support the project, people are more willing to participate. Word of mouth often does the trick.

Interestingly, most participants are women between the ages of 40 and 60. We had actually expected to reach more critical older men, but that hasn't been the case so far.

In the long term, we hope to engage more skeptical groups as well.

Michael Haller: A few years ago, we carried out a similar project with local newspapers. Readers were surveyed and involved in discussions with editorial teams.

The results were very interesting, but in practice, hardly anything changed. The editorial teams did not implement the findings in their day-to-day production.

This shows that it's not enough to just present results. Direct collaboration is key – just like in your project.

Judith Kretzschmar: Exactly. That's why, as researchers, we deliberately stay in the background. It shouldn't be a project »imposed from above,« but rather a collaborative process.

It's also interesting that many participants initially criticize the absence of certain topics in the media. But when they do journalistic work themselves, they realize that these topics do indeed come up – just not in the way they expected.

That changes their perspective enormously.

Gabriele Hooffacker: We have set out to develop strategies against hate. We've already heard some impressive examples of this. Mr. Krell, you're actively involved in the »Between the Lines« initiative. What is the focus of this initiative?

Michael Krell: This initiative is active wherever there is a need to support and protect journalists covering right-wing extremism. It was founded in Dresden during the COVID-19 pandemic under the motto »Civil Society Protects Press Freedom.« Specifically, we support journalists who report on right-wing extremist actors at rallies or during investigative assignments.

We actually go on-site with them – not as a professional security service, but to provide support simply by being there. We act as a second set of eyes. When you're looking through a camera, filming, or taking photos, it's easy to lose sight of your surroundings. Our volunteers accompany the journalists, observe what's happening, and actively approach disruptive individuals to de-escalate the situation.

Another aspect is advocacy. We serve as a voice for journalists when dealing with entities such as the police or prosecutors' offices, highlighting the specific needs of journalists in this field. We work to ensure that authorities handle the situation more effectively and also offer training for this purpose. Members of our initiative participate in police events to share knowledge on how to effectively protect journalists covering right-wing extremism.

Gabriele Hooffacker: There is also the »Schutzkodex.de« [Code of Protection] initiative, in which several major publishers have joined forces. While they claim to protect freelance journalists as well, they primarily focus on their full-time employees. Does this protection actually reach freelance journalists?

Michael Krell: Unfortunately, not really. The problem is that as a freelance journalist, you're always putting in the work upfront. You spend a long time researching and often expose yourself to danger before there's even any feedback from major media outlets. Ultimately, it's a financial question of how much support freelancers receive.

Those who work for national public broadcaster ARD or major media houses still have a certain level of protection thanks to the institution's name. But especially at the local level, the code of protection has virtually no impact. There, everything depends on individual initiative: Do journalists seek help on their own, pursue further training, or find volunteer initiatives like ours? So far, there are hardly any overarching, comprehensive programs available.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Where else could we start? Stine Eckert, do you have any examples of strategies against online hate?

Stine Eckert: Yes, I have two examples. One organization told us that they launch counter-campaigns as soon as a woman journalist comes under fire on social media. They then spread appreciative, positive messages within their network. These NGOs are very well connected with one another; they form an entire ecosystem and try to counter negative content with positive messages. In addition, they do public relations work to set the record straight and prevent reputational damage.

At the local level, we spoke with an NGO that managed to secure funding for a full-time »safety officer« position. This contact person works one-on-one with journalists on safety protocols. This is particularly important at the local level because reporters are known there and don't simply »fly off« again after the assignment, as they do at the federal level.

Funding often goes to prestigious programs rather than to »overhead« – that is, the work behind the scenes. Even in newsrooms like the *Detroit News*, which I know from my work, there are often no dedicated points of contact for online hate. Journalists are told they should maintain a social media presence for the brand, but when things turn negative, support is often lacking. Such full-time positions or solidarity campaigns are important strategies to demonstrate: This is not acceptable, and as a society, we do not accept it as the norm.

Gabriele Hooffacker: It's exciting to influence the platform's logic by flooding it with friendly messages. We know, after all, that the algorithms actually tend to promote chaos.

Michael Haller: I'd like to add to that. The reach of national news media fluctuates between 30 and 60 percent – except during crises like the outbreak of war, when it rises sharply for a short time. The reach of local newspapers, however, is steadily declining. This raises the question of hate speech beyond the realm of journalism.

In our work with young people, we see confirmation of what surveys show: that more than 60 percent have had frightening experiences with hate speech »in the last three weeks.« The result is that many no longer dare to participate in comment sections for fear of defamation.

What can be done? In my view, a »two-pronged approach« involving three strategies is needed:

1. **Regulation:** We need tools like the Digital Services Act (DSA) at the EU level. Even though many journalists criticize the Act, it is a thoroughly effective means of encouraging those affected to take action against defamation on the platforms of major tech companies. So we're heading in the right direction, even if there's still a long way to go.
2. **Influencing algorithms:** We need to examine how emotional prioritization works. Currently, algorithms (e.g., on TikTok) heavily reward aggressive content. There is ongoing discussion about how to require platform operators to conduct regular tests in order to, so to speak, rein in their algorithms. The next step would be to allow users themselves to decide what they want to be »flooded« with and what they want to be spared.
3. **Sovereignty and resilience:** We don't need censorship, but we need sovereign citizens. We must educate young people to be more resilient so they

don't react emotionally to every provocation. Programs like »Fit for News« in schools address this very issue: Classrooms shouldn't just impart knowledge; they should be a place for educating students to become critically thinking, self-assured citizens.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Stine Eckert, are there similar approaches in the U.S. when it comes to regulation?

Stine Eckert: Much of the regulatory action comes from Europe. While the operating companies are based in the U.S. or China, they only react when Europe threatens substantial fines. A potential game changer in the U.S. could be the reform of »Section 230,« which currently exempts platforms from liability for content.

In California, there are now lawsuits leveraging the »personal injury« claim. Since the First Amendment (Free Speech) covers almost everything in the U.S., young people are now trying to address the issue through the lens of mental health. If social media is classified as a public health issue, that could massively increase the liability of the owners. That would be an important lever to ensure responsibility isn't simply shifted onto citizens.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Are there efforts to turn away from these platforms entirely and use self-organized structures like the »Fediverse«? When Elon Musk took over Twitter and turned it into »X,« there was a surge of interest there.

Stine Eckert: In the U.S., this is hardly an issue. The platforms are deeply embedded in the culture there and are often considered attractive employers. The discourse on alternative, public-service platforms is more of a European one. In the U.S., the already thin public media sector (NPR, PBS) has recently been cut back even further.

Michael Haller: In Europe, however, this idea is gaining momentum. Several initiators and working groups, such as those at the Weizenbaum Institute, are developing concepts for a »public service platform« – an ad-free super-platform based on a subscription model to remove the pressure to commercialize. It's not yet ready for Brussels, but the plans are becoming more concrete.

Gabriele Hooffacker: If we meet again in five years: What will have changed by then? Michael, would you like to start?

Michael Haller: Let's compare it to road traffic: In the first decades of the last century, it was completely unregulated and highly dangerous for those involved.

It only became safer with the development of traffic regulations. Although traffic volume rose steadily, the proportion of fatal accidents declined. That took us half a century! I imagine it will be similar for the internet. In five years, we will hopefully have further regulations that respect individual freedom of expression but draw the line where others are endangered or harmed. Just as we have driver's licenses in road traffic, it is also essential to teach »communication skills« in schools – especially practicing fair interaction with one another on interactive media platforms.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Judith Kretzschmar, have people learned in the past five years to no longer view journalists as enemies?

Judith Kretzschmar: Certainly not everyone, but I hope to be able to demonstrate in five years how important citizen journalism and participation are at the local level. My hope is that debates will move back from the anonymous online world into physical society, where people must once again be able to tolerate differing opinions in person.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Mr. Krell, will we still need protection initiatives in five years?

Michael Krell: As someone who studies right-wing extremism, I find it hard to be optimistic. If things don't get much worse, that would already be a significant achievement – especially given the political developments in eastern Germany. A nightmare scenario would be an environment in which free journalism on these topics is virtually impossible.

On a positive note: We need institutional investment in »safety officers« and better state-provided victim protection that actively shields those affected from threats, rather than exposing them to further danger through bureaucratic hurdles.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Stine Eckert, what do we need in the next five years?

Stine Eckert: When it comes to AI, we must be careful not to make the same mistakes we did with the early internet or social media. We need early-stage capacity building and regulation (such as the EU AI Act) before forms of hate like deep-fakes or gender-based violence spread even further. I hope we have learned from past technological pitfalls so that we can better protect marginalized groups.

Gabriele Hooffacker: Thank you very much to our guests and the audience.