

## Projects

Klaus Ott

# Out of the newsrooms, into the schools

Journalism needs stronger roots in society

**Abstract:** Given the economic struggles of traditional media, the growing influence of digital platforms, and, in some cases, declining public trust, journalism must become more transparent and open to dialogue. Journalists themselves need to become more visible within society – and this begins in schools. Personal interaction fosters trust. Classroom workshops, educational initiatives, and direct encounters with journalists can strengthen media literacy and deepen understanding of democratic processes.

**Keywords:** Preserving newspapers, strengthening journalism and democracy, building trust through personal dialogue, workshop discussions

Are newspapers the dinosaurs of the media world? Will regional daily papers, in particular, follow the path of the prehistoric giants that vanished millions of years ago? What would this mean for journalism, press freedom, and ultimately for a free, open, democratic society? And how can the press – and with it journalism and democracy – be preserved? These questions may sound dramatic, perhaps even somewhat exaggerated. Yet at their core they reflect very real concerns and profound challenges.

Journalists who regularly visit schools often report the same experience: very few young people have ever read a newspaper – whether in print or digital form – or even know much about what a newspaper actually is. Many young teachers, too, have little connection to journalism. Here, we are referring specifically to journalism that adheres to established professional standards, such as the Code of Ethics of the German Press Council. Anyone who speaks with staff at regional newspapers or within the publishing industry will hear, at least unofficially, how dire the situation has become. The overwhelming majority of

(print) subscribers are now of such advanced age that many are unlikely still to be subscribers within the next decade. And with them, the subscriptions themselves will disappear. Yet print subscriptions often remain the industry's most important source of revenue.

So what should be done? Clearly, high-quality journalistic content must be distributed – appropriately adapted in form and style – across all relevant digital channels, though not on platforms that are no longer suitable for constructive public communication, such as X. There is no shortage of talented young journalists and »digital natives« already pursuing these paths. But this alone will not save the press. Nor will it secure the future of public broadcasters (such as ARD, ZDF in Germany) and other media organizations committed to careful research, rigorous reporting, and a clear separation between news and commentary – in short, institutions that provide the reliable information on which a free and democratic society depends.

The media industry must think ahead – and rethink itself fundamentally. It is no longer sufficient for journalists simply to carry out their traditional tasks. Equally important today is the need to engage directly with the public: to explain how journalism works, what freedom of the press means, and why independent media are indispensable for democracy. This outreach must take place wherever people can be reached – in schools, workplaces, sports clubs, and other areas of everyday life.

In short, journalism must be more firmly anchored within society itself. Those who demand transparency from others – which remains one of the core functions of the press – should also strive to be as transparent as possible. In this way, journalism can not only provide credible reporting and reliable information, but also strengthen public trust.

This insight has also increasingly shaped academic debates. In April 2025, Bernhard Pörksen, professor of media studies at the University of Tübingen, summarized the challenge in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* with the striking statement: »Serious journalism of the future will be transparent and dialogical – or it will not exist at all.« (Pörksen, 2025) The magazine had invited Pörksen to contribute a series of media critiques, which he used to advocate for a »renewal« of the relationship between journalism and its audience.

According to Pörksen, journalism is under enormous pressure: from Big Tech oligarchs, the continuing migration of advertising revenues toward digital platforms, and growing populist attacks on the media. In such a situation, he argued, nothing is more important than stable relationships of trust with audiences and the »fundamental solidarity of a readership willing to pay« for independent journalism.

Pörksen proposed concrete ways to rebuild trust between journalism and its audiences. One of his suggestions was that readers should regularly discuss

*Spiegel's* reporting directly with members of the editorial staff. Key moments from these debates could then be documented and published in excerpts on the magazine's website. Pörksen referred to this format as a »Digital Audience Conference« and derived from it what he called an »imperative of transparency«: »Give your readers every conceivable opportunity to assess the quality of the information you provide!«

Much is already happening in this area. *Die Zeit*, for example (a German weekly), regularly meets with its subscribers – not only during the newspaper's annual »Long Night« events. The public broadcasters ARD, ZDF, and Deutschlandfunk have launched »So geht Medien,« an educational initiative intended to equip people for the challenges of the digital media world. Numerous daily newspapers provide teaching materials and organize workshops for school classes. The nationwide network »Journalismus macht Schule« (JmS) [Journalism goes to school] seeks to expand such efforts through a broad alliance between media organizations and educational institutions. These initiatives are important and encouraging. Yet they can – and must – be only a beginning.

High-quality media, indispensable to democracy, must be embedded within society. They should explain, as fully as possible, what they do, how they do it, and why; make the craft of journalism transparent, along with the standards that govern responsible reporting; and persuasively show why a free and critical press is among the essential pillars of democracy. None of this can be taken for granted anymore. Least of all in an era when enemies of an open, tolerant, and free society exploit every available tool – including the media – to stoke hatred and division, to sow doubt across broad swaths of the public, and to enlist them in the service of authoritarian, anti-democratic ends.

The effectiveness of »going out and talking« about journalism has long been established. Volker Lilienthal, holder of the Rudolf Augstein Foundation Chair for the Practice of Quality Journalism at the University of Hamburg from 2009 to 2025, presented, shortly before his retirement, the results of a study on school-based workshops (Lilienthal, 2022). According to the report, the classes visited felt »their interests were addressed and their questions answered.«

Assessments diverged, however, on whether participants' understanding of media – its functions, effects, and risks – had truly deepened. In an online survey, just under half of the journalists who went from newsrooms into classrooms rated the knowledge transfer as very successful. The remainder found it only somewhat or less successful. By contrast, a majority of students felt »their knowledge of media and journalism had expanded.« Teachers' evaluations were also predominantly positive – though not quite as emphatic as the students': more than two-thirds believed the workshops had achieved their aims.

Anyone who has visited schools frequently or organized and facilitated such events will not be at all surprised by the varying results. Students are often

somewhat reserved when a guest arrives, but they are clearly interested nonetheless. This holds true even for trainees who are a bit older. In April 2026, the »Journalismus macht Schule« network organized workshop discussions for aspiring police officers at a Bavarian police training center in Eichstätt. The reporters Annette Ramelsberger (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*) and Jan Kandzora (*Augsburger Allgemeine*) described in four discussion sessions how they report on the police and the justice system. Not every discussion session was marked by many questions, but the results of a subsequent survey conducted by the police among their trainees were positive. A good 60 percent found Ramelsberger and Kandzora's insights interesting, and a good 33 percent found them »somewhat interesting.« Even more telling are the many individual statements, which are credible in that the prospective police officers were allowed to speak anonymously – that is, they did not have to provide their names in the survey. Here are three of many examples:

»I think the discussion was very informative.« Annette Ramelsberger »showed us how demanding a journalist's job is and how extensive their work can be.«

»We got a good look at how journalists work, what their daily routine is like, and how they come up with their articles.«

»We got a transparent look into the work of a journalist, something we wouldn't normally have the chance to see.«

Micha Fuchs from the Training and Continuing Education Division of the Bavarian Riot Police Headquarters organized the project day in Eichstätt. According to him, the training managers of the Bavarian police drew the following conclusion from these findings: »Retain the discussion with journalists as a core component. It generates the most significant added value. We also recommend small discussion formats, real-life case studies, and ample time for questions.«

Organizing such initiatives is both simple and demanding. It is simple because many teachers warmly welcome support from the media industry in fostering news and information literacy – so that students are not left defenseless before the torrent of content streaming onto their phones. Simple, too, because numerous education professionals in ministries and school authorities, teacher-training and continuing-education centers, state media authorities, civic education centers, and the Federal Agency for Civic Education actively champion these efforts. Simple, because companies, clubs, associations, and adult education centers eagerly enroll; because libraries and universities are glad to take part; and because none of it costs media companies a cent.

Except, of course – and this is where it gets difficult – the staff. Downsized newsrooms in newspapers and elsewhere have to figure out how to fill the pages and broadcasts. After all, research and reporting must be done – preferably in-depth – despite having fewer people. And at the same time, »going out and talking« is becoming increasingly important. It must become a fixed, preferably

daily or at least weekly part of the job. Pörksen calls for a dialogue between traditional media and the public »in the spirit of a grand, vibrant, never-ending conversation.«

### About the author

**Klaus Ott**, 67, was an editor at the German national daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* for decades and has visited many school classes, as well as organized such initiatives for the sz at and in collaboration with schools, universities, libraries, and other institutions. He is now retired but continues to work as a freelancer and, since October 2025, has served as chairman of the network »Journalismus macht Schule« (JmS), which he co-founded. For JmS, he also organized the workshop discussions with young Bavarian police officers described in the article.

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