Comunicação e Sociedade, vol. 18, 2010, pp. 227-235

The contradictions of journalism in Germany*

Hans J. Kleinsteuber**

The year was 1908. It was the first time that German journalists realized what power they actually have. The catholic-centralist member of the national parliament Dr. Adolf Gröber called them during a debate on colonial policy publicly 'Saubengel' (something like 'swine rogue'). All of them reacted spontaneously and decided to boycott any reporting from the *Reichstag*. Political communication came to a still stand until the chancellor intervened, because he planned to give a crucial speech. Herr Gröber had to apologize and information about parliamentary affairs went on as usual.

The recent state of journalism reflects one way or another always the collective historical experiences of the culture in which journalists operates. The German experience is – of course – quite a mixed one. In terms of media technologies it was sometimes on top, in terms of content it lagged usually behind. Germany was shaped by its flourishing cities and the communication links they established across Europe. But its history also includes the tradition of a strong and authoritarian state that kept freedom of expression low and collapsed in the catastrophe of the Nazi era. What is the situation today?

1. History

Following most descriptions, the success story of mass media was made possible by the invention of the art of printing as it was developed in the German city of Mainz around 1445, connected to the name of Johann Gutenberg. An investor had 'laid forward' the capital to produce the first printed version of the bible. The money turned out to be not enough and the project was taken away from Gutenberg. The capitalist later earned all the profits and a publisher is still called a *Verleger* in German (somebody who 'lays forward'.)

* This text corresponds to the communication in the Conference: «Journalism in Europe: who needs regulation?», organized by the CECS, on May 15th, 2009.

** Professor of Political Science and Journalism at Hamburg University Siegfried Weischenberg and President of the *Deutscher Journalisten Verband* (German Journalism Association). E-mail: hjk@sozialwiss.uni-hamburg.de

The technology of printing quickly spread across Europe. Again in German speaking countries the periodical publication of printed papers began quite early. Newspapers started to appear at the beginning of the 17th century, first in places like Straßburg, Wolfenbüttel, Frankfurt, Berlin and Hamburg. Early publishers often wrote for their own paper, acted as their own journalists. All these publications had to be licensed by the sovereign of the country, meaning that these 'priviledged' papers could only be distributed after passing heavy censorship. In the early years, quite a few of the writers for these papers were so-called correspondents, meaning people who had a full-time position as diplomats, secretaries or merchants who were working freelance and offered their reports to those involved in publication. The printers on the other hand were quite often postmasters. In the 18th century, the profession of the journalist emerged, many of them entered history as prominent figures of literature, in fact many authors of books also worked as journalists. Their contributions often reached high literary quality, whereas the political message was hidden or even missing, as all publications suffered under the authorities' censorship.

This was also the age, when the upcoming, well educated and increasingly wealthy 'bourgeois class' fought for the press freedom, attempting to create a kind of public that was (and still is named) *Öffentlichkeit* in Germany, as it became famous in the writings of (and somehow romanticized by) Jürgen Habermas. (Habermas 1962) The common English translation of this very German term is 'public sphere'. The term *Öffentlichkeit* carries the connotation that Germans discussed in depth political events (e. g. in the famous *Salons*, as Habermas describes them), but showed little interest in political participation. The traditions of political culture proved to be more 'subjective' than 'participatory', meaning that the quality of political communication and discourse was quite high but had little political significance. The notion of the press as a Fourth Estate was only adopted after the Second World War. (Kleinsteuber 1997)

The first time the German press became a factor of importance in politics was during the failed revolution of 1848/49 when papers could be published free of any state interference. Among others, the revolutionary Karl Marx (who had worked as a newspaper editor before) established the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* during those months of unrest and found other radical authors to work for his paper. After the intervention of the military the revolution was quickly crushed, sending Karl Marx and many other journalists into exile.

The German press became professional and commercial in the second half of the 19th century. The first Press Law of 1874 granted some limited press freedom and - even more important - offered a degree of stability to the emerging newspaper industry. Journalists now became fully employed workers in press offices, characterized by internal hierarchies and a high division of labour. This expansion created many new jobs in the fast growing newspaper industry, the new professionals often brought with them a rather low educational level (at least compared with the intellectuals of the 18th century) which contributed to their low social status (Max Weber calling them a 'paria caste'). The beginning formation of trade organizations for publishers and trade unions

for journalists and print workers accompanied this process. As a reflection of the general political situation much of the press was closely affiliated with political parties and/or social classes and carried a specific *Weltanschauung*, a typical world-outlook.

At the end of the *Kaiser* era (1918), Germany had a fully developed media system with high quality newspapers in Berlin and other centres of the country, a world news agency *Wolffs Telegraphisches Korrespondenzbureau* (W.T.B.) and beginnings of academic media research with contributions to what was called *Zeitungswissenschaft* (Newspaper Science). This already established system was transferred into the Weimar Republic of the 1920's, a time of sophisticated journalism (in Berlin up to 140 dailies were published) and startling media concentration. This was the time, when Max Weber proposed to do empirical research work on journalists and demanded a systematic inquiry into their socioeconomic situation. At the end of the Weimar republic the newspaper group of the mogul Alfred Hugenberg, politically on the extreme right, paved the way for the Nazis; Hugenberg himself served in Adolf Hitler´s first cabinet (1933) before he was isolated.

The Nazi era ended all promising developments in German media. Immediately after Hitler´s seizure of power, the top personal of established radio system was forced to resign and replaced by party propagandists. Journalists very soon experienced extreme repression, especially those on the political left and of Jewish origin. A *Reichspressekammer* (a chamber for media workers) with enforced membership was established. Jews and opponents of the regime were barred from entering the *Kammer* and became jobless. As a consequence, Jews, who had been strong in German journalism, and many others were thrown out of the profession long before they ended in concentration camps, many were forced into exile. (Frei/Schmitz 1989) Journalists and publishers, who remained in business, demonstrated little courage, opportunism was the common behaviour. When the war ended (1945), the new occupation forces outlawed all media activities. Germany had the unique chance for an 'Hour Zero', for a complete new beginning in media and journalism.

The main object of the new military rulers of West Germany was to help establish a new democratic press that made disasters like the Nazi dictatorship impossible. It was no easy task to find journalists who had not disqualified themselves by what they had done before 1945. The allies started to hand out licences to young journalists who knew the country but were not infected by Nazism (which, as it turned out later, was not always the case). Most of the print media that are leading today were started during the years before 1949, including *Der Spiegel, Die Zeit, Stern, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung* and many others. After 1945 print journalism mostly continued the pattern of *Weltanschaung*, of an ideological profile of each newspaper. When British press officers came into Germany they realized that journalistic traditions were quite different (apart from the degenerations of the Nazi years). It was unfamiliar to Germans, e.g. to separate the reporting of facts from commentaries. During those years, the model of Anglo-American journalism gained prominence, *Der Spiegel* still looks like *Time Magazine* and *Die Welt* even started out as the newspaper of British

occupation forces and only later was sold to a German publisher. All in all, the influence of those first years after the war was crucial for the basics of today's situation of journalists.

2. Journalism after 1945

In broadcasting, the allies introduced the public service system, mostly following the British BBC as a role model. A special factor of the German way to public service became the centrality of the *Länder*-states in broadcasting. At the time, when the allies began to hand over the broadcasting organizations in their respective zones (1948/49), *Länder* authorities were firmly established, whereas the Federal Republic just emerged in those months. Later the Federal Constitutional Court decided that domestic broadcasting is the final responsibility of the *Länder*.

The *Länder* politicians wrote into their respective broadcasting laws - that constituted the broadcasting organizations - a strong presence of political parties. This offered the respective *Land*-government the possibility to exert the leading influence but usually the main opposition party provided for some strength of its own. The result was a system of proportional representation in the broadcasting organizations, meaning that the *Intendant* (General Director) of the *Anstalt* (broadcasting organization) was picked by the leading party, his representative (the Vice *Intendant)* was selected by the second strongest party and so on. This also meant that often the *Intendant* was selected on political terms and had little prior experience in journalism. Basically public service broadcasting was seen as the shared spoil of the two large political formations, the conservative ('black') and the social democratic ('red') party. The principle of proportional recruitment was going down the hierarchy of the broadcaster, including the heads of departments and reached often as far as the average journalist.

There were several implications of the proportion principle. Firstly it meant, that a journalist in broadcasting had to think about his/her party 'ticket', had to rally party support early for his personal career. The parties carefully monitored news and public events and complained as soon as they had the feeling that their political 'enemy' was represented more often or more favourably. It was (and still is) common that a politician is interviewed by a journalist that is considered to represent the same ticket. As a result, news reporting tended to be balanced in every respect, looking like *Hofberichterstattung* (reporting from the 'political court') and keeping it boring. A certain kind of criticism was integrated into this 'corporatist' model of reporting though. Especially certain TV magazines with political background reports were coming from certain *Land*-broadcasters, favouring the its own side and continuously attacking the other side. Today, one successful TV magazine features an ironic form of balancing; it is based on two anchorman who continuously criticise each other, reflecting the two major party lines (*Frontal*). Part of this binary system is that small parties have little influence in this variation of 'packaged' reporting. It is practiced differently during election campaigns, when parties are allotted free air time in relation to their last election results.

In principle, the proportion policies described above have not disappeared in public service broadcasting, but fierce competition from commercial radio and TV meant that news had to become livelier to be attractive to audiences. In consequence, elements of infotainment have entered news programming and viewers demand a faster tune and less talking heads. As a consequence, politicians follow the American example and prefer to go straight into entertainment, a strategy for which Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (since 1998) is a good example. He has appeared in a soap opera, in TV-films and in the top Saturday evening quiz show.

Parties are not just important as political actors, their activities are closely interwoven with other organizations in society, like trade associations, trade unions, different civic associations and churches. This creates the German brand of corporatism. In fact, the system of the two dominant parties is also reflected in commercial broadcasting today, where nearly all TV channels of importance are controlled by two 'sender families'. One is headed by the media mogul Leo Kirch, who controls his 'family' of TV channels out of the conservative *Land* of Bavaria (and is member of Bavarias conservative party CSU), the other is led by Bertelsmann and includes the CLT/Ufa-channels, which operate out of the Socialdemocratic *Land* Northrhine-Westfalia (NRW). The two 'family companies' constitute with their print affiliations the two largest media companies of the country and enjoy close links into politics. Both are employing former top politicians as well as journalists with party leanings in their business; curiously enough, the present Socialdemocratic Minister President of Northrhine Westphalia, the largest of all *Länder*, started his career as a journalist and office head of one of Bertelmann´s newspapers.

3. How to become a journalist?

Journalism training in Germany reflects the fact that everything had to start anew after 1945. During the Nazi-years, journalists were forced into a framework of regulations, controlled by the Fascist party. The regime totally controlled access to the journalistic profession. Based on this devastating example, there was only one option left after 1945. The profession of journalism is not protected, not limited to any examination and everybody may use the term journalism to describe his profession. This fact has to be taken into consideration when statistics are presented about journalists working in Germany. Media professionals of course found other ways of limiting access to their profession; e.g. the press card is issued by professional organizations to their members only or those that prove that they earn at least half their living by writing for the media. A good example of the typical German practice to keep state influence low is by leaving decision-making to subsidiary institutions.

Another element of the complete openness of the profession is reflected in training. Traditionally the path into journalism started with a *Volontariat*, an apprenticeship of 12 to 24 months as member of a publishing office, mainly based on learning on the job. Some training is done outside the office in centres that a jointly run by the publishers and journalist organizations. One of these is the *Akademie für Publizistik* in Hamburg

that offers courses of intense training for *Volontäre* and has also moved in further education for already practicing journalists. The *Volontariat* used to be quite open, but has been limited by joint agreements between journalist's organizations and media employers over the years.

During the 1950's and 1960's quite a high share of journalists had not received formal training at all; at that time it was typical for a journalist to have begun university education that was never finished. This has changed very much during the last twenty years; today rarely a career is started without acquiring a university degree (in German always on the Master-level). As a career in journalism is extremely popular, competition for the *Volontariat* is keen and working conditions have become tougher, especially for young journalists.

Over the years, a number of training institutions was established. The oldest and most prestigious is the *Deutsche Journalisten Schule* in Munich. It was established in 1959 and closely cooperates with the local media and today with the University of Munich. American Journalism Schools had served as a model. Other Journalism Schools have followed that are run by media organizations. Especially interesting are the schools that belong to large publishing houses, the best known being the *Henry Nannen Schule* of Gruner+Jahr (Bertelsmann) and the *Axel Springer Schule* of the Springer Corporation. They both concentrate on training on the spot, offering to gather experiences in different type of media as they are run by diversified media conglomerates. Everybody may apply, but access is extremely competitive. Other organizations like churches and professional unions are also involved in training. (Fröhlich/Holtz-Bacha 1997)

At universities, after 1945 first the field of *Publizistik* evolved, a German version of media studies, with some roots going back before 1945. It offered a somehow theoretical version of communication that had little relevance to journalists. Starting in the 1960's, universities prepared to offer journalism as an academic field. Today's variety is startling: it may include a major field, to be finished with a diploma (e.g. Dortmund), journalism as part of communication studies (e.g. Munich), journalism as a minor field (e.g. Hamburg), journalism as postgraduate studies (e.g. Mainz) or as further studies for already practicing journalists (e.g. Berlin). This mixture of different curricula reflects the political and cultural decentralization in Germany.

4. The great debate

It does not seem to be a surprise that the central debate about journalists and their work followed – more or less – party lines. The traditionally strongest party was the conservative CDU that lost access to power and had to go into opposition for the first time 1969 until 1982 when a socialdemocratic-liberal coalition (SPD-FDP) took over. The Conservative Party soon began to blame the media for the situation. Basically two lines of arguments arose: public service broadcasters were accused to be very much under the control of the Socialdemocrats and therefore utilized to the spread the leftish gospel ('Rotfunk'). This argument was clearly one-sided as several of the public service

broadcasters, especially in the South and the Second Channel ZDF very much remained under CDU-control of their respective *Länder*.

The second argument was that a clear majority of journalists was supportive of the SPD-party and consciously – or perhaps sub-consciously – argued in favour of the party of their choice. They were able to create a 'spiral of silence' as Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann called it, a long-time counsellor of the CDU and Chancellor Helmut Kohl. (Noelle-Neumann 1993) This argument was based on assumptions about public service, but also sometimes included the print media. Which was a shaky argument, as most of the print press was clearly leaning towards conservative positions. The tabloid paper *Bild* was at that time (and still is) by far the most read paper (4 million copies), being produced in the offices of the largest printing company of Germany (and Europe), established by Axel Springer, who was an outspoken conservative.

The academic argument about German journalists went like this: in the ongoing tradition of *Weltanschauung* journalists behaved mainly as 'missionaries' that did not spend much time in investigate research, instead they preferred to preach their political opinion to their readership. The opposite could be found in the United Kingdom, the argument went, where journalists see themselves much more as 'trackhounds'. (Körber 1985, 1986) Studies with critical messages about the activities of German journalists often came from the Communication Department of Mainz University, where Noelle-Neumann taught. This argument was often repeated by the conservative party as well as publisher organizations. The latter using it to defend themselves against claims of journalists unions to introduce some 'press freedom' inside the media, to increase the personal margins that a journalist could enjoy (the journalists lost out completely on this). Of course the journalist organizations rejected the thesis of the 'missionaries', claiming it to be openly ideological. In terms of political outcomes, the argument is difficult to uphold. In 1982, still at the time of an ongoing public service monopoly, a conservative-liberal coalition (CDU-FDP) took over and stayed in power until 1998.

5. The German journalist: empirical evidence

The ongoing debate about the German journalists led to the design of several empirical studies on the facts of German journalists. The so far most extensive research was conducted in 1993, based on a net sample of 1,500 respondents in the print and electronic media. Journalists were asked about socioeconomic facts, individual motives, perceived system constraints and reflections on the structures of their work. (Scholl/Weischenberg 1998)

These are some of the results. The 'typical German journalist' is male, has a university degree and is 37 years old. For 10 years, he has had a full time job as a newspaper reporter in one of the traditional departments politics, economics, culture, sports or local and has been permanently employed for 8 years. His monthly net income is about DM 3,900 (1993), it is highest with public service broadcasters and news agencies, sub-average salaries are paid by commercial radio stations. He is a member of a journalists

union or association. About 60 percent of journalists entered the profession the traditional way and had practical training before they were permanently employed. Every tenth journalist has no journalism-specific education at all; naturally the level of formal professional skill increases among younger journalists. As it used to be fashionable to leave university without a degree, overall 18 percent of those did so who spent some time at the university. Comparative studies including journalists from the West and the East (former German Democratic Republic) demonstrate that both groups differ considerably, e.g. Eastern journalists are less familiar with advanced methods of investigate reporting.

There are also some cross-cultural differences if journalists if they are being asked about their attitudes towards certain journalistic practices that may be found on the bourderlines of legitimate behavior. German journalists tend to give answers that suggest that they are less prepared to use controversial practices to gain relevant informations. To give one example: Asked if they would get a job in a company only to gain internal information, the reactions differ widely: 63 percent of American journalists said ´Yes´, 80 percent of British journalists and only 22 percent of journalists from all parts of Germany. If the question is only asked in the old West, then 46 percent give the answer ´Yes´. (Esser 1998, 1997) Following the same line, German journalists say, they would not quote out of secret government documents or pretend to be somebody else to gain information (only 19 percent of Germans would do so as compared to 47 percent in the UK).

6. Conclusion

If the thesis of the ideological bounded journalist is tested empirically, it turns out to be a gross and weakly proved finding and can be clearly rejected. Like in other countries the German journalists‘ communication intentions are based on permanent observations of their own professional aims and of their effect. The thesis of the ‘missionary‘ proved to be academically unacceptable. The German journalist follows much more the mainstream of international journalism than the argument assumes. There is a vibrant tradition of investigative writing in Germany, including the Hamburg magazine *Der Spiegel* and TV magazines like *Panorama* that uncovered quite a number of political scandals and forced politicians to retire from their job. One of the well known ‘heroes´ of investigative reporting was author Günter Walraff, who hired as a journalist and worked at the office of the BILD 1977 under cover to write a book about their policy of faking stories.

If the figures on German journalists are compared to those of other countries, the German situation does not seem to be exceptional. One might claim that there is a tendency towards convergence among journalists and journalism in Western countries. (Weaver 1998) Of course, national differences exist and German journalists have to carry a burden of a difficult past. If figures on investigative practicies differ, the answers seem to reflect an ongoing orientation towards orderly behavior in the authoritarian

tradition. Nevertheless, they do will it, if necessary. Another reason for this might be that the reflection on media ethics in Germany has only just started; journalists enjoy little popularity and are cautious to talk about their professional practices. (Thomaß 1998)

During the summer of 1998 the location of the German capital moved from the sleeping town of Bonn to the largest city in the country: Berlin. In Bonn, political communication was centered around a family of correspondents, reporting for papers with headquarters far away. Today the new government quarter in Berlin is spotted with newspaper offices and journalists follow every step of the politicians. The competitive struggle among newspapers to become the German *Washington Post* is still unresolved. If one takes the vibrations of Berlin it does not seem to be accidental that at the end of 1999 journalists started to uncover the so far most serious scandal in Germanies postwar history. Details became public of an illegal web of 'black accounts' around leading figures of the CDU and especially former Chancellor Kohl. Part of the leadership of the CDU had to be replaced. Reporting, it seems, is becoming much faster and more investigative as Berlin is the new capital. Most observers agree that during this far reaching scandal, the media - no matter what their general political leaning is - have been reporting in-depth and have done an admirable job in terms of the media as a Fourth Estate. And that is what they are for.

Bibliography

Esser, F. (1998) *Die Kräfte hinter den Schlagzeilen. Englischer und deutscher Journalismus im Vergleich*, Freiburg: Alber Verlag.

Esser, F. (1997) "Journalistische Kultur in Großbritannien und Deutschland. Eine Analyse in vergleichender Perspektive" in Machill, M. (1997) *Journalistische Kultur. Rahmenbedingungen im internationalen Vergleich*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, pp. 111-136

Frei, N. & Schmitz, J. (1989) *Journalismus im Dritten Reich*, München: C. H.

Fröhlich, R. & Holtz-Bacha, C. (1997) "Journalistenausbildung in Europa" in Kopper, G. (ed.) (1997) *Europäische Öffentlichkeit. Entwicklung von Strukturen und Theorien*, Berlin: Vistas, pp. 149-182.

Habermas, J. (1962) *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Neuwied: Luchterhand (English edition: *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1991).

Kleinsteuber, H. J. (1997) "Vierte Gewalt. Ein Schlüsselbegriff im Verhältnis Medien und Politik", *Gegenwartskunde*, 2, 159-174.

Köcher, R. (1985) *Spürhund und Missionar. Eine vergleichende Untersuchung über Berufsethik und Aufgabenverständnis britischer und deutscher Journalisten*, München: PH. D. Diss.

Köcher, R. (1986) "Bloodhounds or missionaries: Role definitions of German and British journalists", *European Journal of Communication*, 1, 43-64.

Machill, M. (1997) *Journalistische Kultur. Rahmenbedingungen im internationalen Vergleich*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1980) *Die Schweigespirale*, München (English edition: *The Spiral of Silence*, Chicago, 1993).

Scholl, A. & Weischenberg S. (1998) *Journalismus in der Gesellschaft. Theorie, Methodologie und Empirie*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Thomaß, B. (1997) "Diskurse über Ethik im Journalismus. Ein Vergleich zwischen Frankreich, Großbritannien und Deutschland" in Machill, M. (1997) *Journalistische Kultur. Rahmenbedingungen im internationalen Vergleich*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, pp. 95-109.

Weaver, D. (1998) *The Global Journalist. News People Around the World*, Cresskill NJ: Hampton Press.