

Standing Firm in Times of Populism

Journalism between attitude and independence

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The Fourth Estate—the press and news media—possesses considerable political and social influence on citizens, even though it does not formally hold political power. This endows journalists with a particular ethical responsibility in their reporting. At the same time, they can only fulfil this particular role if their independence from interference is granted.

In recent years, the success of right-wing populist parties and movements has turned out to be a particular challenge to journalism. Populist rhetoric frequently attacks journalists' work and credibility: it is a common strategy to question media reports in order to spread mistrust and exacerbate rifts in society. But populist success also shakes journalists' self-understanding to the core: How should they cover attacks on a system they defend or when they themselves have become a target? How can they defend their credibility? Does their role change when the political landscape changes?

The complexity of the role and shape of journalistic activities can only in part be captured by Ivor Shapiro's very broad definition: "Journalism comprises the activities involved in an independent pursuit of accurate information about current or recent events and its original presentation for public edification". Most notably, the media has undergone a profound transformation, turning into a "hybrid system" of interdependence between digital and traditional media, as Andrew Chadwick described it.

Nevertheless, the following recommendations are formulated to be of relevance for various forms of journalism (newspaper, online, radio, television), though to different degrees. The challenges that journalists in all fields of media face in light of populist developments are comparable, and so may some of the solutions be.

KEY INSIGHTS

NEWS OUTLETS NEED TO INCREASE THEIR FOCUS ON AND RESOURCES FOR REPORTING ON LOCAL ISSUES.

INCREASING DIVERSITY IN NEWSROOMS WILL LEAD TO MORE INCLUSIVE COVERAGE THAT WILL APPEAL TO MORE OF THE POPULACE.

JOURNALISTS SHOULD FOCUS ON COUNTERING FALSE INFORMATION WITH FACTS AND INCREASE TRANSPARENCY ON SOURCING AND ETHICS.

STRUCTURAL INSIGHTS—MACRO LEVEL

LOCAL JOURNALISM

In the US, the number of newspaper employees between 1990 and 2016 decreased from 455,000 to roughly 183,000. Cuts in the journalism sector have hit local newspapers particularly hard. Similar developments have occurred in many European countries. This is problematic on at least two levels: First, readers are generally most interested in what concerns them the most personally, i.e. local news. Reducing these sections not only increases the social rift between the core and peripheries, but also opens spaces for new and less-reliable media outlets that may pursue political interests. Second, journalists lose their “eyes on the ground”. They no longer have a direct connection to people’s daily realities, so these become less visible on the national and international levels.

Some best practices to counter this trend have had

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considerable success in the German context and also managed to use the hybrid media system in a productive manner:

- Local newsletter formats such as the one from the Berlin-based German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel*: These online newsletters cater to individual districts of Berlin with specific local news and are sent via email. They enjoy significant popularity and reach.
- Television programmes in rural areas such as the German news programme *Morgenmagazin*, which regularly visits local towns or reports on local issues.

In sum, more local broadcasting and making use of technological advances may prove to be key in reaching the peripheries and gaining back credibility there.

REPRESENTATION FOR DIFFERENT SECTORS OF THE POPULATION

Another structural issue is the under-representation of certain segments of the population in journalistic work environments. A lack of diversity in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and social and educational status can be found for instance both in Germany and the US. It is likely that

rather homogeneous newsrooms will cover societal and political topics in a different way than diverse ones, leading to a further alienation from some sectors of the population. But more importantly, established structures of predominantly white, middle-class journalists of whom many are male do not open doors to those attempting to participate and get their voices heard. In Germany, where there appears to be a still-significant rift between the former eastern and former western states, this dimension of representation also merits special attention.

Suggestions:

- Initiatives or quotas to increase diverse representation could be a measure to counter the homogeneous make-up of news rooms.
- The diversify journalism project can serve as an example of how to achieve more visibility of journalists that belong to underrepresented groups. This way, the common argument that it is difficult to find qualified members of minorities can be countered.

CHALLENGES OF (INVESTIGATIVE) JOURNALISM—MICRO LEVEL

ADDRESSING YOUTH MUCH IS MORE DIFFICULT THROUGH “TRADITIONAL MEDIA”

A recent case that caused preoccupation in Germany before the EU parliament elections exemplifies a problematic rift between consumers of new media and traditional journalistic sources.

What started as a mere YouTube video has become a political phenomenon: A video titled “Die Zerstörung der CDU” (The destruction of the Christian Democratic Union) by German YouTuber Rezo has now received more than 14 million views and was picked up by most German and some international news outlets.

Rezo’s ability to mobilise large audiences to reach out to their peers with the aim of influencing their voting intentions is astonishing. This reach is unparalleled by traditional media outlets. However, while these new formats outperform the readership of traditional media, they lack its journalistic ethics and objectivity. Videos like Rezo’s do not aim to be objective but rather to transmit a clear message. If this is what makes these formats appealing to a younger audience, how can traditional outlets adapt to this situation? And equally important, how should these outlets position themselves against YouTube and others?

The Rezo case makes clear that journalists should be mindful about the dynamics of social media. Additionally, it is important to treat these actors with the respect they deserve: Reports on Rezo's blue hair do not create the impression of a truly factual exchange. This very likely triggers further backlash by the young audience against established outlets, especially since it creates the impression that journalists are trying to protect their own turf against these emerging news formats, as seen in the current debate.

Suggestions:

- Address social media actors, like Rezo, on a factual level and avoid reporting on aspects of their presence that do not relate to their arguments.
- Use new technologies with caution; understanding the culture of a platform's community is crucial.

EXPOSING THE DANGERS OF POPULIST POLITICS CAN BE DIFFICULT

The recent Austrian political crisis exemplifies another difficulty journalists encounter when dealing with populist politicians: the question of which sources should be used and in which way.

IBIZAGATE

In contrast to the Reza case, in "Ibizagate" journalism has ultimately exemplified its power, in contrast to its impact on the youth. Hans-Christian Strache, then Austrian Vice-Chancellor and chairman of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) had to resign after being caught on camera trying to meddle in future Austrian elections with the support of a person he thought to be the niece of a Russian oligarch. The secretly recorded video was published showing Strache and FPÖ deputy Johann Gudenus discussing an exchange of positive news coverage for public construction contracts.

The footage was published by Der Spiegel and Süddeutsche Zeitung, which vetted the video for

authenticity. It remains unclear who set up the trap. Rumours include intelligence agencies and negative campaigning efforts by the Social Democratic Party. These rumours allow the FPÖ to undermine the video's credibility and use it to strengthen their victim-narrative, in which the elites try to sabotage them with shady tactics.

Ibizagate illustrates a common challenge: Reporting on politicians' incompetence and misbehaviour is a worthwhile attempt to disenchant right-wing populists, yet it also highlights the narrow ridge between successfully changing people's opinions and reinforcing them. The way this video was obtained and eventually published remains questionable, especially since the recording was done in 2017 and probably intended to be published in the context of the Austrian national elections. It is complex for journalists to attempt to report on this populist misbehaviour without providing them with further material to fuel their victim-narrative. Proving the material's authenticity should be a major concern to avoid feeding into this narrative, as this is the easiest way to highlight the processual objectivity of the media.

Suggestions:

- Journalists should try to underpin the authenticity of the material they obtained through undisclosed sources by publishing their vetting process.
- Journalists should try to expose incompetent political behaviour on a factual level but be mindful that this may backfire if they do not closely follow ethical journalistic standards. ■

REPORTING ON POLITICIANS' MISBEHAVIOUR HIGHLIGHTS THE NARROW RIDGE BETWEEN CHANGING OPINIONS AND REINFORCING THEM.

FURTHER READING

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Shapiro, I. (2014) 'Why Democracies Need a Functional Definition of Journalism Now More than Ever'. *Journalism Studies*, 15(5), 555-565. doi: 10.1080/1461670X.2014.882483.

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