

Comments on the German Tradition of News Journalism

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The first Bible was printed with moveable type 550 years ago and the first newspapers appeared 400 years ago. The places where that occurred – Mainz, Strasbourg and Wolfenbüttel – belonged at the time to the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and as such the language in which the newspapers were written and read was High German. The cradle of the press, therefore, stood incontrovertibly in Germany.

It is, however, a mistake to think that the cradle of journalism must therefore have also been in Germany. The mistake is furthered by the fact that the terms ‘media’ and ‘journalism’ are often confused, especially in critical contexts. “The press lies!” “Television was caught napping again!” We are in the habit of complaining this way when journalists neglect their duties and fail in their tasks. At the same time, the newspaper and the television, and thus the media, are only necessary material prerequisites so that journalists can practice their profession. The journalistic profession itself consists of something immaterial, for example, of the consciousness of being supposed to bring to light everything worth knowing and sticking to the truth in doing so or of the ability of discovering what is hidden and process what is sparse or complicated to make it intelligible.

Development of Journalism with an Anglo-Saxon Lead

Journalism as a profession, as a collection of knowledge and skills, duties and rights, behaviour-determining values and norms that serve the task of overcoming the spatial and social barriers of societal communication and creating public discourse does not have its origin in Germany. It lies in the old Western democracies, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries. In the first decade of

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the 18th Century Daniel Defoe, the British author and the prototype of the journalist, was already fighting journalistically for a sober and independent war reportage and against legal restrictions on press freedom (see Pöttker 1998), which can be considered a characteristic of modern, professional journalism (see Pöttker 2004).

By this time also in Germany already there had been magazines for several decades that went beyond the collection of highly disparate news correspondence coming in from distant places, which had been common in the periodical press up to that time. But significantly, it was a *political* sensibility and consideration in the manner of ‘Stammtisch’, that differentiated these German periodicals, often named for the messenger god Mercury, from the informative correspondence collections that formed their basis (see Habermas 1962, 1989; Weber 1994: 148-153). The subjects of these published reflections and opinions were social events as matters of political regulation, the subject never was the activity of journalists itself. Some publishers, on the basis of bad experiences, believed that it was necessary to stress that they did not want to interfere in the ‘affairs of state’ of the ministers or anticipate their business (Weber 1994: 143). Nevertheless, already in the late 17th Century German publishers imagined themselves in the position of politicians instead of, as in the Western democracies, developing their own professional self-image. There it was important to provide the information so thoroughly, aptly, precisely and interestingly that the public could make its own judgments and take up its position as politically sovereign.

One phenomenon in which the disciple role of the German-speaking countries can be seen in the development of modern journalism, and recognizable from early in the process, is the emergence of standardized forms of presentation such as news, commentary, reportage, or the interview. Anyway this entire book is devoted to the news paradigm and follows the emergence and diffusion of the news form of representation in four regions of the world. The *interview*, therefore, has been chosen here as a complementary illustrative example. As an investigatory technique, it is probably as old as journalism itself. But where and when the interview began to be a sculpted, journalistic form of presentation and gained acceptance in professional practice was the subject of historical-empirical research whose results not only refute academic myths, but also make possible a comparison between the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon journalistic cultures (see Grzella/Pfingsten 1993, 1994).

It is curious that the authors of these revealing studies reach the conclusion “that the interview...gained currency as a method of investigation and as a genre at approximately the same time worldwide” (Grzella/Pfingsten 1994: 112). Because if their findings are viewed closely, there appears to be a clear lead in the North American development of journalism over the German and Austrian in the second half of the nineteenth century. The ‘time lag’ already emerges from the titles of their papers. “The Interview: Genesis of a journalistic form of presentation in the USA from 1830-1872” is the title of one, whereas the other is entitled “Genesis of a Journalistic Form of Presentation: The interview in Vienna and Berlin between 1860 and 1900.” The titles appropriately sum up the results of sifting through thousands of newspaper editions. The authors, concurring with other press historians on both continents, identify the first text that was clearly sculpted in question-and-answer format as occurring in the mid-1830s in American papers. James Gordon Bennett, publisher of the *New York Herald* permitted his questioning of a female witness to the murder of a prostitute to be printed word-for-word (see Grzella/Pfingsten 1993: 4f). By contrast they found the first interview published in a Berlin or Viennese newspaper occurred in 1860, and then only as an acquisition from a correspondent of the London *Times* (see Grzella/Pfingsten 1994: 36ff). Furthermore, according to the results of this research, the interview reaches its peak in the American press in the 1860s and 70s (see Grzella/Pfingsten 1993: 48f.), whereas it first achieves its quantitative high point in German and especially in Austrian newspapers between 1891 and 1900 (see Grzella/Pfingsten 1994: 37ff.). Finally, as a further indication of the German delay in the development of this component of professional journalism, it can be observed that the English word ‘interview’ was adopted by the German language and was immediately employed as a professional journalistic term (see Grzella/Pfingsten 1994: 87ff).

The earlier emergence of the interview in the USA is consequently revealing because it is, from the beginning an integral element in the development of the ‘penny papers’, such as the *New York Herald* (founded in 1835), that considered the entire population to be customers and readers, irrespective of their political views and education. The ‘penny press’ exemplifies the emergence of a journalism that increasingly relies on facts, rather than on a party program, and on comprehensibility and other communicative qualities rather than on long-winded discourses. This emergent type of journalism, in disentangling itself from political interests is only driven by commercial and journalistic interests. It is this new journalism of the mass press that gives rise to

the news paradigm. But so does the interview, which partly asserts itself parallel and complementary to the news as a form of presentation, indicate the news paradigm's state of development. Since communication is an universal element of human life that is ever able to cast new light on events and because the presentation of communication in the question-and-answer format makes the information easier for the public to digest, the interview thus presented a communicative quality.

Experts of the interview expressly attribute its genesis and acceptance in North America to the development of a modern journalism that wants to be interesting to the whole public and independent of party politics: "The development of the mass press with its need for authentic and at the same time simply-woven human interest stories aligned with entertainment *and* the almost simultaneous emergence of a non-aligned political journalism independent of state power gave rise to the modern interview in the USA" (Haller 1991: 24). Also in the study of the German-language press, the function of the interview for a journalism freeing itself from politics becomes clear: "It [the interview] was increasingly used to look for new information and to verify data. Politicians especially found such critical considerations to be a threat and an imposition. With that the claim that politicians merely abused the interview for their own promotional goals is also refuted" (Grzella/Pfingsten 1994: 113). So it stands to reason that it is possible to interpret the 'time-lag' in using the *interview* as an indicator of the traditional connection of German journalism to party politics.

Germany: the phenomenon of journalism as politics

In academic literature, there is no difference of opinion on the point that German journalism remained bound to 'Weltanschauungen' and political intentions much longer than journalism in the Anglo-Saxon countries. While the opinion lead and party oriented press of the latter was gradually replaced in the 1830s "by a fact-oriented, largely neutral press that had almost completely given up its political postures by the end of the century" (Donsbach 1999: 491), this was not the case in Germany. There, journalists continued to be inclined "to contribute to the creation of public opinion with critical-advocatory articles on literary, philosophical, or political topics...to fight for their ideas in newspapers and magazines" (Ibid.).

That the consensus on the continuing tradition of German partisan journalism only rests on the names of a few researchers from the same school of thought - chiefly Wolfgang Donsbach and Jürgen Wilke – does not reduce the plausibility of this thesis upon which our chapter on the diffusion of the news paradigm in Germany is also based. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the thesis is essentially supported only either by studies of individual journalists from the period before 1850 (see Wilke 1993) or by the results of journalism surveys in the Federal Republic of Germany, post-1945 and after the occupying powers had asserted the Anglo-Saxon news model as the official pattern (see Donsbach 1999: 507ff.); these journalism surveys moreover operate with the self-image alternative of *either* ‘objective observer’ *or* ‘critical watchman’ – the possibility that journalists describe themselves as critical watchman who fulfil his task *by* objective reporting is excluded and by that it is assumed that the Anglo-Saxon news paradigm would not be compatible with the journalistic function of the ‘fourth estate’.

Relatively rare, if one disregards media-historical data on the newspaper ownership of parties, unions, and churches, are journalistic-historical empirical investigations for the epoch of the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. This seems to be an especially important period for the question of the German tradition of political partisan journalism in comparison to the West. After all the authentic interview had also gained acceptance in Berlin and Viennese newspapers by the 1890s. And Karl Bücher, the German press economist and historian had already formulated in 1914, in view of the war propaganda in the British, French and German newspapers, the ideal of a sober and distanced journalism that considers its task “to serve the truth and only the truth and to have a moderating effect on the enflamed popular passions” (Bücher 2001: 221). That points to the urgency of viewing in a more differentiated manner, than previously undertaken, the tradition of political partisan journalism in Germany. In doing so it would be necessary to ask not only about the meaning of opposing tendencies, but also whether they can be traced back to Anglo-Saxon examples or independent developments.

On the other hand there are still strong arguments in favour of the continuation of the tradition of political partisan journalism. Max Weber, who likewise had experiences with the German press at his disposal, expressly classified the journalist, in his famous 1919 lecture “Politics as a Profession”, as a modern example of the ‘demagogue’ – working under the Western figure of the professional politician - the ‘party officer’ in fact. Weber, in no way made this classification with

a critical intent, but in an emphasized recognition of the journalistic, as compared to the scientific, achievement (see Weber 2001). Such a description of journalism, in Anglo-Saxon social science, as a special case of politics would have been scarcely conceivable. At the same time, the conclusion of Weber's model analysis on the real German journalism of his time is certainly obvious, but naturally not incontrovertible.

Explanations for the German Tradition of Political Partisan Journalism

In order to characterize the tradition that differentiates journalism in Germany from the development in the Anglo-Saxon countries at least until the middle of the twentieth century, conventional explanations for the phenomenon of political partisan journalism are to be presented in the absence of empirical data, and finally, a few theoretical considerations of it are to be offered.

Donsbach names two reasons, namely the *Enlightenment* with its inclination toward philosophical, cultural and political admonishment as well as the *later-realized press freedom* in Germany (see Donsbach 1999: 490ff.). The tradition of tracing political partisan journalism back to the Enlightenment and illustrating it with exemplary journalistic personalities from this period such as Wilhelm Ludwig Wekhrlin (1739-92) (see Wilke 1993) is not very convincing. This is primarily because there had also been a period of Enlightenment in the Anglo-Saxon countries and in France in which the humanistic missionary desire and political zeal were hardly weaker than in Germany.

It is more plausible to point to the different traditions of press freedom. The freedom of the press had already been achieved in England through the abolition of the Licensing Act (1644) and the subsequent passing of the Freedom of Press Act in the same year of 1695 and was anchored in the United States since 1791 by the First Amendment to the Constitution. By contrast, censorship in Germany only gradually subsided after the unsuccessful bourgeois-democratic revolution of 1848, and the protracted development of press freedom was interrupted by major setbacks until late in the twentieth century. It has only been recognized and anchored in all of Germany since 1990. Political partisan journalism, as far as that goes, may be explained by the fact that for much longer than in the Western democracies, censorship made it impossible for German journalists to

express their “Weltanschauungen” and political opinions, which from the beginning has been easily misunderstood as the impartial core of journalism (see Wagner 1998). Since German journalists were only freed from the shackle of censorship comparatively very late, the desire to gain publicity for one's own convictions was set that much more intensively in motion. The German tradition of political partisan journalism since the mid-nineteenth century can, as a consequence, be interpreted entirely as an overdue and thus more intensive fulfillment of a long-obstructed need.

A more plausible explanation, which posits the delay of German society in the process of modernization in general (see Plessner 1959), seems even more efficient. Modernization is primarily a process of the progressive differentiation of institutions and professions. Systems theories speak of “partial systems” that are concentrated on a particular social task toward which they direct their activities with increasing endemic logic and autonomy.

If journalism is counted among these systems of action that gain autonomy in the process of modernization, the oft described ‘other way’ of Germany, the ‘delay’ of German societal development, must also mean a deficit of professionalism in journalism in contrast to that found in those societies which were most advanced in modernization. Journalism expressed in terms of systems theory, because of the general backlog in functional differentiation, cannot as a partial system have disentangled itself from other systems of action, such as politics, to the same extent. Viewed in this manner, the close connection of journalism to politics represents only one, but an especially important, sector of the comparatively limited autonomy of journalism in Germany. This connection is also manifest in journalism’s traditionally stronger overlapping with other partial systems and their logic (economics, sports, literature, science, war, etc.). In many of these areas the journalism in societies that are late in modernising, Italy and Russia no less so than in Germany, come under reasonable suspicion of being less independent and of orienting less on its own qualities such as correctness, relevance or comprehensibility than, above all, journalism in the Anglo-Saxon culture.

The zenith of the political partisanship of German journalism was achieved under the Nazi regime. The fusion of the overburdened subjectivity of German journalism with political propaganda may be interpreted as the paradox at which the highpoint also revealed the dangerous

characteristic that lowered it to criminal levels. It is only too clear that the Western occupying powers wanted to break this tradition after the total capitulation of Germany in the Second World War. Whether and to what extent they were successful is now, as it was then, an important question of journalism research.

A Desideratum: German journalism before and after 1945

The year 1945 represents a radical caesura for the chapter of our book dealing with Germany. The diffusion of the news paradigm is the most important component of modern Anglo-Saxon style of journalism and remains as an excellent indicator of its global diffusion. In this light there should, therefore, be a more conscious effort in the future to provide the answers to two uncertainties about the historical development of German journalism. First whether, to what extent, and for what reasons there had already been a journalism in Germany that was anchored on the ideal of objectivity and on factors of comprehensibility such as brevity prior to 1945; and secondly a more thorough investigation as to whether, to what extent, and for what reasons the old tradition of partisan journalism, at the least subliminally, persists.

In this section we must be more modest. Rudolf Stöber sketches the media background of German journalism development up to 1945, which is little-known internationally. Bernd Blöbaum asks how lasting the incision of 1945 has been. He is able to show that the Western Allies did succeed in imposing the news paradigm on German journalism, but that this is not completely anchored in the structures of editorial organization even today.