



The biggest filter bubble ever

In their reporting, the media rely to a large extent on a few news agencies from New York, London, Paris and Hamburg, whose political independence is in question. Alternative views from Moscow or Beijing are hardly ever heard. Journalists who nevertheless take these perspectives into account are sharply criticized.

PAUL SCHREYER, 26. Februar 2020, 0 Kommentare

When the German newspaper *Berliner Zeitung* – one of the leading daily papers in the German capital – recently began, under new management, to include information from the state-owned Russian news agency Tass and the Chinese agency Xinhua in its reports, this was met with fierce criticism. *Der Spiegel* journalist Ulrike Simon wrote indignantly of „state propaganda directly from the Kremlin“.

The Russian news agency would be „treated as a normal source, on a par with dpa and Reuters“, which would be „disturbing“ because in countries like Russia or China, democratic principles would be as little valid as free press. According to Simon the situation was aggravated by the fact that the *Berliner Zeitung* had used the Russian news agency as a source for a report on Syria, of all things.

A few days later the German daily *WELT* followed with similar criticism. According to the newspaper, which is part of the Springer group, the action taken by the *Berliner Zeitung* caused „irritation in the industry“:

„In addition to independent sources such as the 'New York Times' or the British news agency Reuters, it also includes sources that are connected with authoritarian governments and reflect their views in a supposedly objective form.“

The editor of the *Berliner Zeitung*, Michael Maier, countered that it was „reasonable for readers to be presented with the greatest possible variety of sources“:

„It's not a question of whether the journalist finds the Russian government nice or not, but whether he or she can reliably find out what the official position of the Russian or Chinese government is on a topic.“

The vociferous criticism of the *Berliner Zeitung's* new approach exemplifies a widespread view among journalists: according to this assessment, in the West we have primarily free, independent media that strive for objectivity – whereas in the undemocratic East, on the other hand, authoritarian propaganda would dominate, which journalists should avoid at all costs.

This blanket assessment, however, gives rise to problems, especially when reporting on international conflicts such as the war in Syria.

An example: According to a [report](#) published in 2018 by the Scientific Service of the German parliament, Russia's wartime deployment in Syria was covered by international law, whereas the warlike activities of the USA and other Western allies were not, or are in dispute under international law. If such a – very important – circumstance is regularly referred to only in reports of a Russian news agency, for example, but not, or only exceptionally, in Western agency reports, then ignoring the Russian reports from a journalistic point of view is hardly justifiable – at least if international law is to be a standard for reporting.

This is a single example, the problem goes much deeper: Those who only accept Western reports as journalistically acceptable are walling themselves in a dangerous filter bubble. And that is exactly what many leading media do. If one studies the [imprint](#) of *Der Spiegel*, Germany's leading news magazine, for example, one learns that the magazine uses the following news services: AFP, AP, dpa, Los Angeles Times / Washington Post, New York Times, Reuters and sid (sports information service). Thus *Der Spiegel* uses exclusively agencies from Western countries, supplemented by three American newspapers.

The situation is similar for *Tagesschau*, Germany's leading television news program. According to the [imprint](#) there, the journalists use AFP, AP, dpa, Reuters, KNA and epd. KNA and epd are the abbreviations of *Katholische Nachrichten-Agentur* and *Evangelischer Pressedienst*, two small German church agencies, each with less than 100 employees. The dpa (Deutsche Presse-Agentur, Hamburg) is already a major player with 700 employees and a turnover of almost 100 million euros.

However, the international news giants [AP](#) (Associated Press, New York), [AFP](#) (Agence France-Presse, Paris) and [Reuters](#) (London / New York) are decisive for *Tagesschau*, *Spiegel* and all other leading media. These three agencies are large corporations, each with around 3,000 employees and annual sales of between 300 and 500 million dollars. They almost completely dominate the orientation of reporting in Western media. But are they also politically independent?

The Reuters Case

Reuters employs about 2500 journalists all over the world. Originally based in London and [owned](#) by British, Australian and New Zealand newspaper owners, the agency was acquired by Canadian company Thomson in 2008. Its boss David Thomson, one of the richest people in the world with assets of almost 40 billion dollars, is

the grandson of Canadian newspaper magnate Roy Thomson, who expanded into the British market after the Second World War and owned more than 200 newspapers in Canada, the USA and Great Britain.

Thomson's acquisition of Reuters in 2008 posed a problem, as Reuters bases its claim to journalistic independence on so called „Trust Principles“, which have been in place since 1941. The first two of these principles state that Reuters „shall at no time pass into the hands of any one interest, group, or faction“ and that „the integrity, independence, and freedom from bias of Thomson Reuters shall at all times be fully preserved“. This is in obvious contradiction to a takeover by a billionaire. A company spokesman commented on this in 2007, in view of economic difficulties:

„The future of Reuters takes precedence over the principles.“

A similar conflict occurred once before in 1984, when the owners decided to take Reuters public. In order to continue to enforce the Trust Principles and the independence promised in them, a „Reuters Founders Share Company“ was founded at that time, to which a special „founder share“ and associated special voting rights were transferred.

But who watches over this promised independence? Who runs the „Reuters Founders Share Company“? At present there are 16 people, some of whom, as a closer look reveals, are anything but „independent“. For example, the board includes long-time British diplomat Michael Jay, who was Personal Representative (Sherpa) for British Prime Minister Tony Blair at the G8 summits in 2005 and 2006. Other members include oil manager Vikram Singh Mehta, who worked for Shell for over 20 years, and investment banker Lawton Fitt, who previously worked for Goldman Sachs for 20 years, most recently as Managing Director and Partner.

One may ask: How independent are such top managers and government employees when it comes to questions of critical journalism – critical especially of corporations and governments? Whose interests do they represent when in doubt?

Earlier this year it was also revealed that Reuters was covertly funded by the British government in the 1960s and 1970s, „at the behest of an anti-Soviet propaganda unit linked to British intelligence“, as was admitted with a few decades' delay. The government had disguised the financing at the time by passing the money through the BBC – which therefore seems to have been also in the picture.

Links to Western government interests continue to the present day, even if the payments are now flowing in a different direction. In 2018, for example, the media group Thomson Reuters donated more than 50,000 dollars to the Atlantic Council, a transatlantic lobbying organisation that is financed largely by the British and American governments and numerous corporations, including those in the arms industry. In 2017, more than \$100,000 even flowed from Thomson Reuters to this think tank, which is engaged in massive PR for the benefit of NATO and Western governments.

Footnote: The owners of Axel Springer

At the end of 2019, Reuters apparently found itself in difficulties again. It was reported that the Springer Group was interested in a takeover. Springer, one of Germany's largest and most influential media groups (publisher of the best-selling European tabloid newspaper *BILD-Zeitung* and *WELT*), apparently wanted to become more involved internationally. But who is actually the boss at Springer at the moment?

With 42.6 percent of the shares, the main shareholder is still the widow of the founder, Friede Springer. In the meantime, however, the US financial group KKR has almost caught up, with 42.5 percent. At Springer, therefore, nothing can be decided without the Americans, who are juggling completely different sums and who are politically well wired. KKR currently manages funds amounting to almost 200 billion dollars, and boss Henry Kravis was a major donor to President George W. Bush (and previously to his father) and the right-wing conservative hardliner John McCain. In addition, KKR has been running a so-called „Global Institute“ for several years, where the line between big money and politics has become seamlessly blurred. The financial group has purchased the following consultants there, among others:

- **David Petraeus**, previously in 2007 commanding general of all US troops in Iraq, 2008-10 head of US Central Command (leading the war effort throughout the Middle East) and 2011-12 head of the CIA
- **Vance Serchuk**, previously senior national security advisor to Senator Joe Lieberman, worked on Iran and Russia sanctions legislation, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Asia-Pacific strategy
- **Ken Mehlman**, former Chairman of the Republican National Committee and Campaign Manager of President Bush's 2004 re-election campaign

All these political and war professionals are now advising a financial group that invests worldwide and to a large extent owns media such as the „independent and non-partisan“ *BILD* and *WELT* newspaper.

AFP: „Instrument of French influence in the world“

Even the news agency AFP is anything but politically independent. Its board of directors includes representatives of the major French media as well as several representatives of the French government, including delegates from the foreign and economic ministries. The agency is largely financed by subscriptions from state institutions. According to Michel Françaix, Member of Parliament, who wrote a report on the future of AFP in 2014 on behalf of the government, the agency is an „instrument of French influence in the world“.

Clearly: The difference between the French AFP and the Russian Tass, for example, in terms of their respective roles in the state structure, is not categorical but rather gradual. Both Paris and Moscow see their respective national news agencies as important ambassadors, who are, to varying degrees, also controlled and paid for.

„Ruin“ AP

The Associated Press (AP) is the largest news agency in the world. Like AFP or dpa, it is jointly operated by the national newspaper publishers. There is no direct political influence, but there are informal threats. In 2009, the then head of the AP, Tom Curley, made it public at an award ceremony that, in connection with reporting from Iraq, senior US military commanders had made it clear to him that he and the AP would be „ruined“ if the news agency insisted on its journalistic principles. To what extent such pressure will or will not be yielded to, naturally remains in the dark.

The AP is formally independent, but at the same time, just like the other agencies, it is closely embedded in the private media system with all its entanglements. For example, AP's current CEO, Steven Swartz, is also the

head of the Hearst media group, which owns dozens of newspapers and the rating agency Fitch, whose assessment of the creditworthiness of states and corporations also has political implications.

To cut to the chase: Of course, state-run news agencies like the Russian Tass or the Chinese Xinhua are hardly capable of journalism that is detached from the interests of the respective rulers. However, it is dangerously naive to blanketly insinuate such independence from domestic power elites to Western agencies. This independence, as described, is often not given. In the current media system, shareholders – i.e. the wealthy – play the main role. If journalists rely exclusively on agency reports from New York, London and Paris, they get a picture that reflects the economic interests that prevail in these cities and countries. Anyone who thinks that this is a reflection of „the world“ loses, one must fear, increasingly touch with reality.

In fact, the inclusion of perspectives from Moscow, Beijing and other centres of power is not only desirable but necessary for a comprehensive understanding of global conflicts of interest. Without such an understanding, it will hardly be possible to find viable and peaceful solutions.

Note: *When I asked German public television ARD why their news program Tagesschau, in the interests of the greatest possible objectivity and diversity of opinion, does not regularly access non-Western agencies, a spokeswoman replied that the Russia correspondents of the ARD would of course also consider the Russian agencies. The spokeswoman left open why agencies such as Tass or Xinhua are not also used in general reporting on an equal footing with Western agencies.*

The journalist Ulrike Simon, quoted at the beginning of this article, replied to my question that it would be okay to quote Russian and Chinese agencies, but not that they were „treated as independent news agencies on an equal footing and thus treated as trustworthy sources“. She explained that the governments of Russia and China „spread propaganda, imprison journalists who are not opportune and present themselves as enemies of freedom of the press and freedom of expression“.

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