

# News Enlightenment in Germany:

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*by Miriam Bunjes and Christiane Schulzki-Haddouti*

## **Introduction**

“There shall be no censorship,” says the German Basic law in Article 5 postulating freedom of expression, arts, and sciences. There are, nevertheless, topics that do not make it into the news: patients in need are left alone in hospitals because long-term social insurance does not pay for special assistance, there is less severe juridical punishment for the rape of disabled people, and there is an environmentally friendly alternative to the soil- and groundwater-polluting brake pads customary in trade – topics, that over the years, have affected many people in Germany but have not been covered by the media. Why?

Compared to the USA, there is less concentration of publishers in Germany. Whereas the US media system is predominantly free-market liberal, the German media system possesses a strong public service broadcast, which was established after the Second World War – expressly to convey press freedom. Press ownership is more and more concentrated, and private broadcasting is by now the stronger pillar in the broadcasting system, with content dominated by entertainment. Nevertheless, there still is a multitude of products, ownerships, topics, and analyses. Therefore an all-encompassing influence of the government and related groups does not seem likely to be the dominant reason for the under-representation of certain topics in the news. Instead, there is another severe problem which is obviously linked to under-reporting: In general, research is not regarded as a basic quality of journalism in Germany and therefore has a rather low significance in work routine and training in publishing houses, journalism schools, and universities. This bad habit is on the rise because of the ongoing economic media crisis, especially in the newspaper business. Fewer editors are supposed to produce more content. Producing crossmedia products displaces research in the work routine: there are more articles with fewer sources, especially in local papers, the media closest to the population. The loss of quality leads to not reporting: less obvious stories, because they are not promoted, are easily overlooked, there is no manpower for background stories, research with an open outcome is regarded as a luxury. This, of course, makes journalism vulnerable to the

Public Relation strategies of any kind of interest group or – drastically verbalised – to censorship.

One of the aims of the German “Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung” is therefore to watch and analyze developments in German journalism that lead to a structural under-representation of topics in order to correct and improve news media coverage in publishing houses and raise a public debate about economic and ideological structure in journalism and journalism education. We want to show gaps and problems in established media and encourage journalists and publishers to publish the left-out and therewith gain as much publicity as possible.

Reflecting the reasons for not-reporting should help to identify problematic structures that can also depend on the journalist as a professional individual, on awkward work-routines, problems in the journalism education system, work ethics or on the nature of news and news selection itself. By analyzing the unreported you also gain knowledge about the reported – and therefore about the state of German journalism.

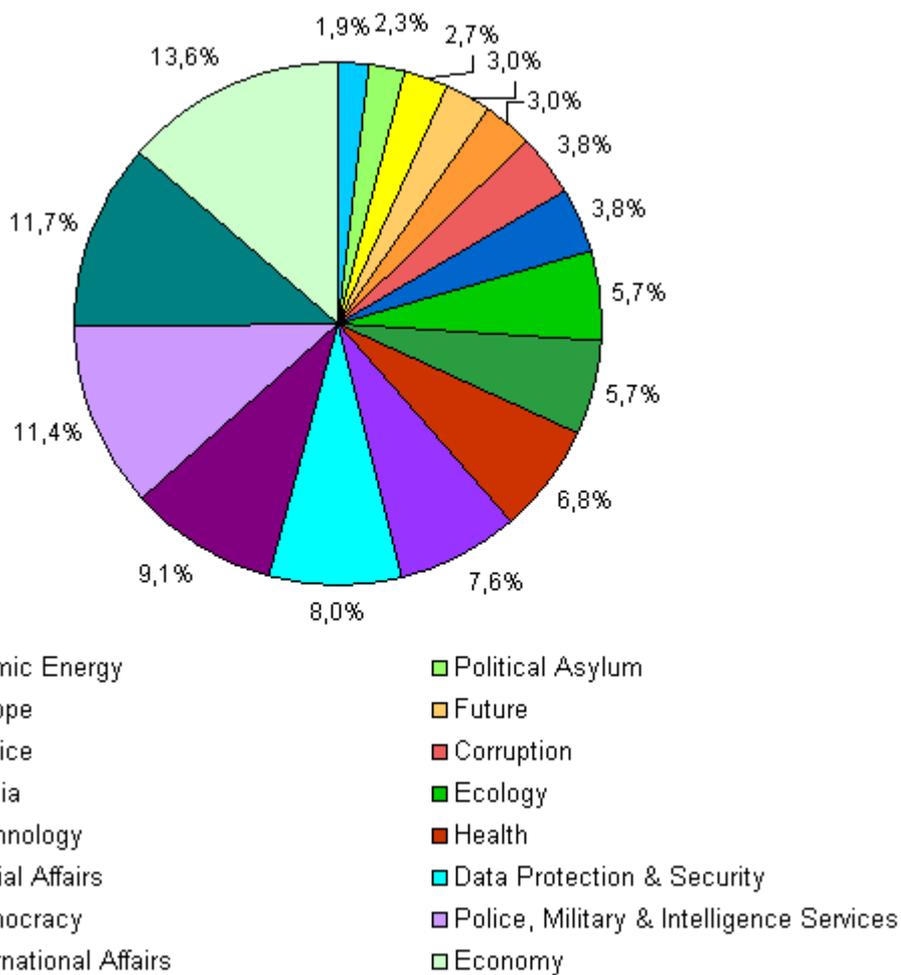
In order to offer a broad view, this essay takes a look at the top German stories published by the Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung from 1997 to the recent list of under-represented stories in 2009. What kind of stories do German media fail to cover over the years? What does that say about the German media? And last but not least, what are the consequences for our work for “Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung”? Up to today, the “Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung” (INA) has published an annual Top 10 list of silenced news topics. The INA was founded in 1997 by the communication scholar Peter Ludes after he read about Project Censored in the USA. The founder’s motivation was: structures that lead to the under-reporting of specific news exist in German journalism as well. Because of the wide variety of causes for not publishing stories, the INA chose the name Nachrichtenaufklärung (News Enlightenment). Underexposed news should be spotlighted. Whenever a list of under-reported news stories is published, the reasons for under-reporting are discussed as well – in order to criticize the media constructively.

The news stories are carefully checked by journalism and media students at the Universities of Dortmund, Bonn and the Macromedia College Hamburg. Within the seminars, the main facts are validated and discussed as regards their relevance for the German population and their presence in German media – the INA is also a means to teach research, an under-represented subject in German journalist education. News stories that turn out to be true, that affect a great deal of people, and, at the same

time, that are not adequately covered by the media are presented to a jury every year. The jury – usually about 15 members – consists of journalists as well as communication scholars and representatives of the student seminars in order to ensure a holistic view on relevant topics. The jury meets annually and discusses the research presented at the seminars.

Proposals for relevant but silenced news stories come from citizens, NGOs, scholars, journalists and various interest groups. We get about 150 proposals a year – basically after publishing our Top 10 list. The publication gets a lot of attention from the media, but still the initiative is unknown to many Germans. Meanwhile many journalists have started researching the left-out stories – which means, after some time, at least some of the stories are not left-out anymore.

Since 1997, the INA's jury named 121 under-reported stories. After a topic analysis it becomes obvious that there is a trend in not-reporting: Almost 14 percent (13.6%) of all stories in the Top 10 lists are stories about economy. We used 16 categories in total: Economy (13.6%); International Affairs (11.7%); Police, Military & Intelligence Service (11.4%); Democracy (9.1%); Data Protection & Security (8%); Social Affairs (7.6%); Health (6.8%); Technology (5.7%); Ecology (5.7%); Corruption (3.8%); Media (3.8%); The Future (3%); Justice (3%); Europe (2.7%); Political Asylum (2.3%); and Atomic Energy (1.9%). Multiple Choice of category was permitted.



### Topic Analysis of INA Top Stories, 1997-2009

The economy as such is, of course, not under-represented in German media: There are stock-market reports in almost every newspaper, stock-market quotations are even part of the evening news, and local newspapers inform their readers about new regional investments. What was left out over the years were the more complicated and controversial stories: pharmaceutical- industry infiltrates patient organization blogs with surreptitious advertising in 2008 – a topic demanding extensive research. In 2009, the jury nominated “Church finances not controlled”, another complicated topic, which – like almost every INA topic – is inconvenient to work on because it is controversial. Most of all, the stories were not current in a way an event is: like the financial crisis, which developed over years mainly uncovered by global media, those topics describe a problematic condition. As journalists tend to overemphasize topicality they focus on short-term aspects such as events, regardless of whether they are staged or real. Therefore the media lacks a holistic perspective, and journalists

seem to have lost track of long-term consequences for society: Over the years, they constantly neglect analysis – a fundamental task of journalism in a democracy. Complex and controversial correlations are left-out as well in reporting about international affairs (11.7%) and democracy (9.1%), fields that dominate journalism in general. But programs and articles are predominately filled with current quotes and actions of the political elite – that German laws violate an UN Convention with regard to forcing people into psychiatric clinics (No. 1 on the Top 10 list in 2009) is missing in German media, as well as news coverage about the European Union’s progress towards becoming a military union (No. 5 in 2004).

Permanent candidates on the INA Top 10 lists also include stories about social affairs (7.6%) and health (6.8%). The current No. 1 story gives a striking example: Half a million people in Germany are dependent on professional care in their daily lives. But when they go to hospital they have to do without help. In clinics with severe shortage of nursing staff, behaviour requiring additional care time is treated with tranquilizers. The state of affairs is known to the government but the existing law is insufficient. There has never been a public debate, because there is no media coverage – though the story is relevant to a huge number of citizens as regards future demography. At the moment the aggrieved party is without a powerful lobby with professional public relations strategies – an alarming reason not to report.

Left-out are also topics in the fields of technology, ecology, civil security, corruption, media, future, justice, Europe, political asylum, police and atomic energy.

In contrast, the recent Project Censored Yearbook (Huff et al. 2010) and website ([www.projectcensored.org](http://www.projectcensored.org)) report that in “58% of all nominated stories, issues found to be most censored by participating members, fell within five categories: the Internet, corporate malfeasance, the military, health, and the environment. Project Censored is increasingly moving toward thematic analysis in this book and plans to continue in this direction in the future. Following connections between the stories is a key component in gaining accurate and contextual knowledge about the increasingly complex world in which we live.

Why does it seem so difficult to report about complex and controversial topics, and how come journalists tend to overlook topics concerning old, poor, or sick people? Studies show that journalists predominantly have an elite family background (cf. Ziegler 2008, Weischenberg 2006). Almost every journalist comes from a middle-class family and is friendly with other journalists or economic and political leaders.

That can induce a limited view of society, even though the individual and professional intention is different, as social co-orientation narrows professional awareness.

In order to explain the reasons for under-reported news in general there are several factors to consider (cf. Schulzki-Haddouti, Bunjes & Jacob 2009). Digitization of news, for instance, has changed many rules of the media game. Barriers for publishing are falling, and the media are losing their gatekeeper functions (cf. Bruns 2005, Neuberger 2005, Meier 2007). Young users and heavy readers increasingly turn to online media and ignore the content bundling of traditional providers (Kolo & Meyer Lucht 2007). A de-territorialization of communication space overcomes the traditional range of coverage. Ad revenues are declining as clients invest in online advertising, which is no longer controlled by publishing houses. In this process, traditional mass media is struggling to learn the new emerging rules for decentralised and networked online publishing.

Consequently, time and money seem to run short. As ad revenues are declining, many news organisations are reducing their staff and hiring fewer freelance journalists.

Consequently, journalists have less and less time for research (Weischenberg 2006). Editorial staff has been re-organized at various newspapers in the last few years as an answer to economic pressure. A recent study showed that the establishment of new newsroom models does not necessarily correlate to better journalistic quality (Grittmann 2009).

Public relations activities are gaining influence in newsrooms. A study has shown that editors tend to publish public relations material without further questioning (cf. Haller 2005, Lilienthal 2009). The main reason for this is that journalists have had to reduce their research time as they have to fulfill more and more tasks that are not genuinely journalistic but organizational.

As mentioned above, research as journalistic routine is not a core module in journalistic education, as the curriculum of most institutions focuses on production methods. Many trainers take research competencies for granted and therefore do not focus on research methods.

In respect to society and politics, journalism has lost quite a few privileges in the last few years. Various new legal regulations have weakened the protection of whistleblowers and research material (Schulzki-Haddouti 2008). More and more actions for injunction are filed to suppress unwanted publication. Compared to the US law, the newly established German Freedom of Information Act has many exemptions. Many requests are not answered, and the process of proliferating state

documents is prolonged and consequently more expensive (Redelfs 2009). Recent changes in copyright law have weakened the copyright holders in favour of publishers.

Another thing must not be kept quiet: the INA does not choose topics from a representative sample. We get the topics from NGOs, individual scholars and citizens, and the Internet. That can lead to a serious bias, because socially committed institutions and persons tend to be very active for initiatives like the INA. There can well be under-reported but relevant news in different fields with a less committed lobby.

Much under-reported news could be found on the internet or in the blogosphere, but we seldom receive appropriate proposals. On the one hand, the blogosphere is simply too large to be monitored by a handful of students during the semester. If they tried, they would have to apply specific filters for the aggregation of under-reported news. But how should these filters be developed and matched with mass media reporting? The danger of neglecting specific topics would be still eminent, as these filters would be presumably based on historical findings and could therefore have a blind spot with regards to current and future developments.

Finally, we have to admit: the INA is still not a professional working organization. There are research courses at the mentioned institutions where several teachers coordinate their work. But there is no professional watchdog maintaining the steady and continuing management of our initiative. Due to this lack of professional organization, we have not been able to improve our existing network of experts in order to obtain more proposals and to widen the perspective of our regular issue providers.

## **Conclusions**

Our present main and pragmatic aim is to support the field of research in education. We are convinced that this is a key competence of journalism today and tomorrow. In this sense we want to open up to the further education market to reach more journalists in publishing houses.

As regards digitization, we have to rethink our ways of gaining proposals for under-reported, or as we say in German, “neglected” news as well as our way of communicating our annual findings. We could implement certain research filters in order to find relevant news based on our Top 10 topics in the last thirteen years. Meanwhile, we have to reach out proactively into society to obtain previously

unthought-of topics. One method could be to push our existing network of supporters and experts via open social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn or privately managed networks like Mixxt – and, of course, continual curation. We have to consider, though, that our small organizational and financial foundation would not support these efforts right now, as supporting social networks demands a steady and reliable commitment.

We also have to rethink our annual publication routine. Is it advisable to publish our findings once a year when it gets harder and harder to get public attention and support? Can we maintain our network if we do not curate it on a regular basis? Do we have to find new formats, such as dossiers, beside our Top 10 list? And, if so, how can we organize and implement these new formats in a professional way?

We are still convinced that these measures would be worthwhile, as the abovementioned factors continue to deteriorate professional reporting – something that is so essential for a vivid democratic society. But there is still a long way to go.

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