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Propaganda and Censorship in the Digital Corporate State

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1. Public sphere and inverted totalitarianism

The three referents in the title require explanation - just like the thesis that their combination conveys in this article. In short: Like every government, the German one wants to steer and control what is said publicly about it and about reality in the country (cf. Meyen 2018). In the Internet age, this only works by cooperating with digital corporations. This liaison is rooted in the knowledge that one's own scope of action depends on public approval and public legitimation. "Relations of domination" are today more than ever "relations of definition" (Beck 2017: 129, 132). Power is held by those who succeed in placing their interpretation of reality in the public sphere (cf. Havel 1989: 19). This includes fading out or marginalizing everything that could endanger one's own position – in Germany at the moment, for example, this relates to debates about social inequality, which has reached an all-time high worldwide (cf. Piketty 2020), mass immigration since 2015, the policies surrounding Corona or Russia.

In this country, the interest of federal and state governments in presenting their work in a good light encounters a journalism that is committed to journalistic diversity via state press laws, state treaties and professional ethics (cf. Rager/Weber 1992). This means that journalism should allow everyone to have their say – all topics and all perspectives. Horst Pöttker (2001) has described the production of publicity as a "social mandate". This "mission" is rooted in the pluralism model: In society, there are many and sometimes conflicting opinions and interests, which are initially on an equal footing (the interests of individuals and outsiders as well as those organized in parties or associations). The struggle for compromise and societal agreement relies on the public sphere: "In principle, no social group, not even an individual, but also no object, no topic, no problem may be excluded from it" (Pöttker 1999: 219f.). Phrased in a different way: In complex, differentiated societies, the public sphere is the "last common place where that which concerns everyone can be negotiated." And even though "no decisions are made" here, acceptance and "collective validity" are impossible without public preparation and public visibility (Stegemann 2021: 16).

Essential to this are mainstream media such as the *Tagesschau*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* or *Der Spiegel*, which produce a "second, non-consensual reality" - the collective "memory" of society, which must be assumed in all communication. Only the mainstream media spread information "so widely that in the next moment one must assume that it is known to everyone (or that it would be associated with loss of reputation and is therefore not admitted if it was not known)" (Luhmann 1996: 43, 120f.). We use Mainstream media because we want

to know what others think they know (especially those who decide about our lives), and because we need to know the defining power relations in order to survive. Who has succeeded in bringing their issues, their perspectives and, above all, their morals to the big stage, and who has no place on that stage? Consequently, whom should I join if I do not want to be isolated (cf. Noelle-Neumann 1980), and whom do I better avoid?

The interest of governments in controlling public communication is inextricably linked to propaganda and censorship. Propaganda is defined in this article with Andreas Elter (2005: 19f.) as all attempts by government agencies to convey "a certain, unambiguously colored view of things [...] and thus to maneuver the public discussion in the desired direction". This necessarily includes suppressing, delegitimizing, or limiting the scope of all positions "that challenge the dominant narrative and at the same time have the potential for widespread dissemination" (Hofbauer 2022: 7) – censorship. Put another way: Propaganda and censorship are two sides of the same coin. Those who want to impose their "view of things" (Andreas Elter) must fight the competition and, if possible, eliminate it. Censorship is an "instrument of domination to enforce economic interests, political power and cultural hegemony" (Hofbauer 2022: 237).

The fact that media research shies away from calling propaganda and censorship by their names when analyzing contemporary Western societies is the result of a systematic deconceptualization. In academic texts, just as in political education, censorship is generally only mentioned when it comes to forms of government that can be described as 'totalitarian', 'dictatorial' or 'undemocratic' - Hitler's Germany, the Soviet Union, Russia, China, North Korea (for an illustration cf. Toyka-Seid/Schneider 2023). "There is [to be] no censorship": this sentence from Article 5 of the German constitution describes reality through this lens, as long as there is no censorship authority or even a corresponding ministry. The literary scholar Nikola Roßbach, for example, academic companion of the Temple of Forbidden Books at Documenta 2017, bypasses the terms state, pre-screening, and bans in her definition, but instead uses adjectives that amount to the same thing and absolve Germany of any suspicion: "In my understanding, censorship is a comprehensive, structurally and institutionally anchored control, restriction, or prevention of expression intended for publication or published" (Roßbach 2018: 19).

The purpose of this smokescreen is revealed a little later: Roßbach wants to dismiss censorship as a "polemical concept" from the "political circus," to be heard above all from the "populist side" and from the right (used here in each case synonymous for all those who should not speak out), but also "from right-wing populist leftists". To make this a "classic case of self-victimization" or even a "cross-front" of anti-democrats (ibid.: 82, 88) falls short, however, if only because "the boundary between what is permitted and what is forbidden" is contingent and consequently "may not be questioned" (Stegemann 2021: 161). Censorship itself automatically becomes a taboo for the censors. Otherwise, they get into justification trouble. This explains, for example, why a phenomenon like "cancel culture" can be relegated to the realm of fable and the debate about it dismissed as a perfidious feint by the already powerful (cf. Daub 2022, Thiele 2021).

The flipside has been dealt with in a very similar way. In hegemonic usage, propaganda is now always what others do – Nazis and communists preferably, but also otherwise anyone who can be classified as 'opponents' and 'enemies' (cf. Arnold 2003). Moreover, the concept of propaganda has long had such a negative connotation that it puts the result before the

analysis – one-sided, not legitimate, and apparently effective even if one concedes that people (such as in the GDR at the time) may withdraw from the public sphere and distrust all news in the respective leading media (cf. Fiedler/Meyen 2011: 17f.).

Communication studies has forgotten that it was born as propaganda research. Yet it does exactly the same as its inventors, who were commissioned by the government, military and intelligence services in the USA to find out how to get into people's heads: Psychological warfare. The state and billionaire industry-related foundations (Rockefeller, Ford) paid hundreds of social scientists starting in 1939 to win the battle for public opinion as well. One result: henceforth people spoke of communication rather than propaganda (cf. Simpson 1994, Pooley 2011). This did not change what one was looking for, but it allowed to distinguish one's own 'good' intentions from the 'bad' ones of the Germans and later the Soviets or the Russians (cf. Meyen 2021: 63–75).

In this way, the terms censorship and propaganda have been turned into a blunt sword. Critics of the media and society can no longer use them, at least in the German-speaking context, without immediately being confronted with the accusation of exaggerating excessively or even playing into the cards of the 'right-wingers'. In this article, this risk is taken for two reasons. First, everyone can examine the arguments and then decide for themselves whether it is justified to speak of propaganda and censorship in the sense defined above. Second, classics such as Walter Lippmann, Edward Bernays, or even Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (1948, cf. Zollmann 2019) had no problem at all with calling a spade a spade. Lippmann (2018: 84) knew already one hundred years ago that news are anything but a "mirror of social conditions." Walter Lippmann dreamed of a government of experts masquerading as popular rule, and for this to happen, it must specifically influence public opinion – via the "images according to which whole groups of people" act (ibid.: 75). His disciple Edward Bernays, a few years later, logically considered propaganda "a perfectly legitimate activity." Without "public consent," Bernays wrote in 1928, already in the spirit of medialization research (cf. Meyen et al. 2014), "no major undertaking" can succeed anymore. This consent, Bernays was sure, must and can be organized – by "PR consultants" like him. His definition is consistent with what I advocate in this paper: "Modern propaganda is the steady, consistent effort to shape or create events with the purpose of influencing the public's attitude toward a company, idea, or group" (Bernays 2018: 28–32).

Lippmann and Bernays did not live to see the "union of state and corporations" for which Sheldon Wolin (2022: 221) was able to use the label "superpower" in the noughties. Wolin, like Walter Lippmann, considered "democracy" to be a "largely rhetorical function within an increasingly corrupt political system" (which, however, he criticized rather than defended) and spoke instead of a "coalition between the corporations and the state" – an "inverted totalitarianism" which, while using "the authority and resources of the state" as it once did in Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, gains "its dynamism by combining it with other forms of power" (such as the churches) and links the "conventional form of government" with "the system of 'private' governance represented by modern corporations." Somewhat more briefly, "corporate power" is now also political. In the Cold War era, the state and corporations had become "the principal sponsors and coordinators of the forces represented by science and technology," and thus also the source "for creating and spreading a culture that educates consumers to embrace change and private pleasures while accepting political passivity" (Wolin 2022: 60–63).

For Sheldon Wolin, “inverted totalitarianism” is a “new kind of political system” that is “apparently driven by abstract totalizing powers, not by personal domination,” and whose “total power” is harder to detect than Hitler's or Stalin's if only because this system does not need to build camps and does not need to “violently suppress dissent as long as it remains ineffective” (ibid.: 118, 134). Wolin says: For control, it is enough to “create a collective sense of dependency” (ibid.: 192) as well as to use whatever methods of “intimidation and mass manipulation” are available today (ibid.: 56). Inverted totalitarianism then is “collective fear” plus “individual powerlessness.” Job, retirement, health care costs. Plus pressure at the workplace, the stress of everyday life, the constant fuss about some political scandal or other (ibid.: 352). The result is a “society that is used to exchanging new habits for old ones, adapting to rapid changes, uncertainties and social upheavals, and allowing its fate to be determined by distant powers over which it has no influence” (ibid.: 116).

Sheldon Wolin largely ignores the mainstream media - just like digital capitalism, which for the doyen of U.S. political science, born in 1922, was at best a pipe dream when he wrote his last major book after 9/11. A good two decades later, the “revolving door between the centers of power on both coasts” (between Washington and Silicon Valley) has become almost proverbial (Zuboff 2018: 150). Personnel are shifted from here to there, balls are passed to each other in election campaigns, and, as will be shown in this paper, they work hand in hand when it comes to retaining the power of definition in the political battles of the present and controlling the “side-effect publics” that address what the mainstream media hide or distort. In the spirit of Sheldon Wolin, Ulrich Beck (2017: 172f.) has spoken of a “risk-averse coalition of progress,” “consisting of experts, industry, the state, political parties, and established mass media,” which can ignore or play off against each other issues such as climate change, nuclear power and financial speculation, genetic manipulation, nanotechnology and reproductive medicine, terrorism, and digital surveillance, as needed in the public debate. O-Ton Beck: “This implies: The politics of invisibility is a first-rate strategy for stabilizing state authority and reproducing the social and political order, for which denying the existence of global risks” matters greatly (ibid.: 134).

Beck did not trust the traditional mass media to fulfill the mission of the public sphere, not even in Western states. “The mode of this nationally organized, public form of media power is exclusive, that is: one produces it specifically, one can allow it, suppress it, etc.” (ibid.: 172). With a view to a world at risk, which was his life’s topic of interest, he consequently called for a reform of the definitional relationships, hoping for the Internet – for a public sphere that could not be easily controlled by the powerful, that discussed other topics as well as in a different form than the leading media, and that relied, among other things, on a “countervailing power of independent experts” (ibid.: 146).

Ulrich Beck was an optimist. When he wrote his book on the “Metamorphosis of the World” (which was to be his last) in the mid-2010s, the relationship between governments and Google, Twitter and Co. was at best in the dating stage. In the meantime, the marriage has been consummated. We live in a digital corporate state that floods the public with its messages (Propaganda, section 2), exploiting the logic of the new means of dissemination (Interlude: Twitter’s public sphere, section 3) and also making platform operators delete counter-perspectives and opposition figures or make them difficult to find (Censorship, section 4). Part of Beck’s concept of defining power relations is that even within a governing coalition or, thought of more broadly, in “that subterranean network of financial,

intelligence, and military interests that guides national policy," "no matter who happens to be in the White House" (Talbot 2017: 505), there are struggles for interpretive authority. Such battles, which rely on resonance in the journalistic field and are therefore also fought there, explain, for example, why Chancellor Scholz had a significantly worse press than his ministers Baerbock and Habeck in the first months of the Ukraine war (cf. Maurer et al. 2022).

2. Propaganda

Without delving into such differentiations, this section will show what government agencies are doing to win over the public. In addition, it will at least be suggested that these efforts meet with little resistance, and not only because of the alliance with media corporations. For one thing, the balance of power between the propaganda apparatuses and journalism has shifted considerably since the 1990s, and for another, the leading media are now dominated by the same habitus that governs government agencies and corporate headquarters (see Klöckner 2019).

There are three ways to "move the public debate in the desired direction." First, a government can pay (as well as resource and perhaps already train) personnel to feed newsrooms with what they are looking for anyway – exclusive information and images, interlocutors, and material from which news can be made (for example: scientific studies or live access during police operations). This personnel also sits at the trigger when it becomes necessary to use what Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988: 18) called, in German, "flak" – barrages that put everything under fire that could get in the way of the employers. Second, this government can change its own work in such a way that 'good press' becomes more likely – via the recruitment of top people suitable for the media, via the events and occasions that Edward Bernays already talked about (a rather harmless example: the central festival for the Day of German Unity, which is held in a different state capital every year and reliably produces coverage), and (less harmlessly) via prioritization that puts public image above everything else and, in case of doubt, even above law and order (cf. Thorbjørnsrud et al. 2014). Third, any government can help it along with money – with direct subsidies, which are always good for a scandal in Austria, for example, and were nevertheless almost introduced in Switzerland in a referendum in February 2022, or with indirect subsidies (advertising, tax breaks, carpooling).

The federal government exhausts all of the above possibilities to the hilt. It pays a whole army of propaganda people, creates or shapes events with the help of these people that serve the sole "purpose" of influencing "public attitudes" 2018: 28–32), and pumps money into publishing houses and broadcasters. The first issue alone would deserve an entire essay – partly because it is difficult to separate from the second issue. When resources are reallocated toward public relations, an organization's performance inevitably becomes more media-savvy – most likely at the expense of the tasks for which ministries or subordinate agencies were originally created.

A prime example of this prioritization is the German government's Press and Information Office, with its more than 500 staff positions and three former top journalists in position of spokesperson (Steffen Hebestreit, Wolfgang Büchner, Christiane Hoffmann). This agency,

located in the Chancellor's Office and thus quite obviously an instrument of power for the head of government, was controversial from the outset (cf. Morcinek 2004), but neither Konrad Adenauer nor his successors allowed themselves to be swayed by public criticism here and thus also promoted, at least indirectly, the creation of parallel departments. In addition to a press office with "33 experts," the Foreign Office now has a commissioner for strategic communication (Peter Ptassek at the end of 2022), who is assisted by "around 40 staff members" to protect the minister and her actions from slander and, if worst comes to worst, to counter with stories of her own (Meier/Monath 2022). Correspondents exist in every ministry, in every party headquarters, in every state government, and for every politician who moves near the center of power. There is a method to the transfer from the editorial offices to the authorities and staffs, which is represented not only by the three journalists named above but also by their predecessor Steffen Seibert. In this way, politics buys know-how, contacts and goodwill, which is not only fed by the reputation of the former colleagues, but also has to do with the prospect of one day being called to the other side.

The departments or people whose names or job titles include terms like public, press, media or marketing are only the obvious part of the propaganda apparatus. Claudia Roth, Minister of State for Culture and Media in the current government coalition, has a budget of 2.39 billion euros in 2023 – four percent more than in 2022. In addition to museums owned by the federal government, film productions and a cultural passport for 18-year-olds, this pot primarily funds projects and programs along government lines. Roth's agency uses it to finance not only causes for coverage, but also personnel who can and will speak out accordingly. This applies analogously to the many commissioners who have been installed on a full-time or honorary basis at different administrative levels (responsible for issues such as foreigners, integration, discrimination, racism, women, queer, lesbians, gays, disability, anti-Semitism, ziganism, climate, sustainability), who have to justify their existence through mainstream media presence and thus also draw imitations in companies or culture and education.

In addition, there are organizations such as the Zentrum Liberale Moderne or the Amadeu Antonio Foundation (tip of an NGO iceberg), which support government narratives with flak (here quite openly called "opponent analysis" or disguised as the fight against hate speech and fake news, right-wing extremism and anti-Semitism). The Zentrum Liberale Moderne, founded in 2017 by Green Party politicians Ralf Fücks and Marieluise Beck, has received nearly 4.5 million euros for a total of 24 projects from 2018 to 2022 (see Lübberding 2022). The federal program "Demokratie Leben!" ("Live Democracy!"), one of the umbrella initiatives for related spending (located in the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs), will cost taxpayers 182 million euros in 2023, 16.5 million euros more than in 2022 and 31.5 million euros more than in 2021. "Measures to strengthen diversity, tolerance and democracy" have a total of 200 million euros dedicated to them in this ministry's 2023 budget. Money from the budget of the German government's Press and Information Office will go to the German Atlantic Society (2023: 700,000 euros), the Society for Security Policy (600,000), the Center for Liberal Modernity, the Aspen Institute, the Europa Union and the Progressive Center (500,000 each).

In Sheldon Wolin (2022: 147) one can read how it is possible to integrate even scientists and intellectuals "seamlessly into the system" and to prevent dissent without having to "harass" or "discredit" critics. Wolin explains: Through "a combination of government contracts, corporate and foundation funding, joint projects by university and corporate

researchers, and wealthy individual donors." Peter J. Brenner (2022) has spelled out this strategy for Germany, compiling a long list of "institutes for research on democracy and right-wing extremism" that assist "government power" at taxpayer expense in the struggle for "discourse hegemony." For universities, this flow of money has consequences that go beyond the reinterpretation of terms, rules of language such as gendering, and the prioritization of social problems. Even without insight into the inner workings of universities, it should be clear that legions of scientists are rushing to answer the questions, theories and methods to which the "coalition" of big business and the state (Sheldon Wolin) is devoting its budgets via the EU Commission or the BMBF. A few get their turn, and many others continue without funding, so that the investment is not entirely in vain. Those who win money need proof of success – publications in specialist journals and (either via this detour or interviews) a presence in the mainstream media.

Diverting taxpayers' money to media companies was taboo in post-1945 West Germany (unlike in Austria). In a large and densely populated circulation area with a flourishing economy and without the competing advertising and information channels that developed on the Internet from the 1990s, subscriptions to public authorities and advertisements from ministries or offices also played a minor role. All these parameters changed during the Corona crisis at the latest. More cautiously, the slump in the advertising market and the ubiquity of aid and rescue funds have allowed the media industry in 2020 to push the issue of state support, overturning the taboo of press subsidies. Under the guise of "digital transformation," 220 million euros were included in the federal supplementary budget this summer, most of which was to be paid out before the end of 2021, tied to circulation. The bigger the newspaper, the more money. This plan died at the end of April 2021 "because of constitutional concerns," but the main counter-argument was not state neutrality, but distortion of competition. The online platform *Krautreporter* had threatened to go to court if only print publishers were funded, and also refused to accept reallocating the budget to "Corona emergency aid." The publishers' associations reacted "shocked," spoke of a "medium catastrophe" (Meyen 2021: 166f.) and are now concentrating their lobbying on the issue of local media diversity ("nationwide coverage," Röper 2022: 302).

The sum of 220 million euros would have largely absorbed the slump in the advertising market of the daily press. Sales in this market in 2020: 1.712 billion euros – 367 million less than in 2019. In previous years, the average decline was around 150 million euros (Statista 2023). Public budgets are therefore increasingly attractive to the advertising departments of media groups. In 2021, the German government bought ad space for around 64 million euros as part of its "Corona communication" alone. Television and radio together received 28 million euros in the same period (Thoms 2022). This does not include the Corona and vaccination campaigns of state governments and local authorities, for which the business community in the respective circulation areas was also mobilized in some cases, advertising with a different thematic focus, and everything that corporations and foundations give to publishers beyond conventional promotion in order to advertise specific political goals.

In journalism, such efforts meet with little resistance for two reasons. First, the most important media houses in Germany have long been of corporate size and are thus themselves part of the "coalition between the corporations and the state" that constitutes "inverted totalitarianism" in Sheldon Wolin's (2022: 221) terms. The German press landscape is characterized by monopolies and concentration, as well as by a few publishing houses

(often family-owned) that not only feed all other channels and otherwise outgrow their core business, but in some cases also sell their editorial services to 'competitors' such as Madsack's Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, which supplies more than 60 regional papers in seven German states (cf. Röper 2022, Ferschli et al. 2019). Public broadcasting is not a counterargument here. With a revenue from contributions of almost nine billion euros a year, ARD and ZDF are among the largest media companies in the world (cf. Hachmeister/Wäscher 2017) – corporations that have to act as corporations and that are closely linked to politics and the state in almost every respect (cf. Mirbach 2023: 128-178, 250-272).

And second, journalism in Germany is a socially homogeneous field dominated by the "habitus of the middle class" – "oriented toward conformity," programmed to "accept power relations" (Klöckner 2019: 33), and closely linked to decision-makers in the state, political parties, and business through social status, educational background, and life situation. The similarity of social position and habitus not infrequently turns into real proximity in everyday life. Contact (press conferences, receptions, travel) creates sympathy and thus often at least understanding (cf. Meyen 2021: 176-198). Uwe Krüger (2016: 105) has coined the word "responsibility conspiracy" for this community of values: Journalists know what is good and what is bad (pretty much the same as what the rulers think is good or bad), and they believe they have influence over people. So reality is "reduced by the parts" that "do not fit the attitude" and what seems to promote the desired goal is emphasized (Meinhardt 2020: 87) – sometimes utilizing information, contacts and material from the propaganda apparatus and sometimes not.

3. Interlude: Twitter publicity

Anyone who wants to steer and control public communication today must submit to the logic of digital platforms. This is especially true of Twitter, a channel that within a few years has become the central point of contact for the most important players in "inverted totalitarianism" and has become an indispensable part of everyday life, especially in the media-political-academic complex, even if some protagonists gave up their accounts in the heated debate about Elon Musk's takeover in the fall of 2022. In Germany, Twitter has always been a minority phenomenon. Four percent of those over the age of 14, says the ARD/ZDF online study of 2022, use Twitter daily and ten percent at least once a week. This includes those who only read and click now and then for reach. Ten percent. Typically male, most likely under 50 (cf. Koch 2022: 472f.). Even in the U.S., where it is common to follow the greats of film, pop and professional sports, not even one in four adults says they use Twitter. The profile of this bubble: young, affluent, educated (cf. Ungar-Sargon 2021: 104).

We also know from the USA that the vast majority of tweets come from a few (cf. Odabaş 2022) – from people who have a mission and the resources to promote it. Companies, government agencies, commissioners, entrepreneurs of themselves, NGOs, activists of every stripe, parties. In the fall 2021 federal election, almost every one of the MPs who ran again, and almost every one of those who were then new MPs, had a Twitter account. Particularly active (in this order): Left, Greens, SPD, FDP. Those elected all follow more or less the same accounts. *Tagesschau*, *Der Spiegel*, the government spokesperson, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Zeit* each have over 60 percent. In addition to the leading media, the news agency dpa and top

politicians like Christian Lindner or Annalena Baerbock, the "state satirist" and "head of the authorities" (May 2022: 46) Jan Böhmermann is also very high up in this ranking (see Schmidt 2021).

Twitter determines what can be incorporated into the reality of mainstream media – which topics with which voices and with which morals. The use of Twitter and the observation of the trends there determine the everyday work in many editorial offices today. Anyone who wants to enter the professional field today learns, at the latest during their traineeship or at journalism schools, that nothing beats a well-groomed Twitter or (beyond political journalism) TikTok and Instagram brand. Rule of thumb: the more followers, the greater the chance of being commissioned or hired (cf. Ungar-Sargon 2021). The older ones can hardly avoid this trend. Three out of four members of the Federal Press Conference have a Twitter profile – again, mainly the younger ones and thus also those with less professional experience. Journalists who are mentioned by members of parliament in their tweets consider Twitter to be particularly important (cf. Nuernbergk/Schmidt 2020). Robin Alexander, deputy editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *Die Welt*, has proudly described how he transforms confidential information into tweets that are then used by politicians to push their perspective with reference to the top journalist (cf. Precht/Welzer 2022: 114f.). Following this pattern, the chancellor's office organized mainstream media backing for their lockdown policy: Government spokesman Seibert explained the plans to selected journalists prior to talks with the prime ministers of the German states, thus ensuring the necessary public pressure (cf. Ismar 2021).

Contemporary journalism must find its topics and views on Twitter also because tight resources and high frequency publication demands make it increasingly rare to get in contact with reality and talk to real people – especially those you don't usually meet on digital platforms. Such conversations would also be dangerous, because like any brand, a Twitter profile demands consistency. I can't celebrate Fridays for Future there today and burn Greta Thunberg tomorrow. In the Twitter editorial department, two souls combine who are dependent on each other: the media entrepreneur who encourages his employees to ensure the distribution of his own contributions, and the editor who wants to make his mark and rise even further and therefore always asks first how things look from the very top (cf. Klöckner 2019).

Brand management is the opposite of the raving reporter, who first allows himself to be surprised by what he sees, hears and experiences, and then shares his findings with his readers, listeners, viewers. This is another reason why the tweeting journalist already knows the story he wants to tell when the research begins. What's more, he only sees the stories that resonate with his brand. Conversely, it is hardly possible to get through with criticism of the powerful or even to find journalists who raise fundamental questions even beyond details or animosities. On Twitter, everything that could be said against laws, plans or people is immediately available – published, if you will, by everyone. Journalism has lost the privilege of calling for politicians' heads and has therefore mutated into their attack dog.

The consequences of the Twitterization of journalism go beyond the loss of the function of criticism and control. First, the obvious: Morality is conquering the leading media alongside politics. Twitter is the breeding ground for a journalism that is primarily hung up on "language and symbolism" (Wagenknecht 2021: 26) and on affiliations. Twitter sees every topic through the lens of morality and therefore demands opportunities for identification if

one wants attention and thus reach. It's always about me, the group I want to belong to or the one I reject wholeheartedly. Nothing triggers stronger emotions, nothing gets others to share, like, comment faster. In a nutshell, it's about team sports. "The game is called: US against THEM" (Precht/Welzer 2022: 110). Twitter also makes measured consideration disappear and with it all differentiation, all questioning, all weighting. All of this doesn't fit into 280 characters even if you link photos, videos, or text panels (cf. Homburg 2022).

The rise of Twitter as the editor-in-chief of the leading media (Ungar-Sargon 2021: 103) and as the pace maker of public discourse is a temptation for all those who have ways and means to govern this channel. Today, Twitter is the place where it is decided what reality is and how we are all to think about it. That is why Twitter is firmly in the hands of the establishment and part of the "coalition" of the state and monopoly corporations to which Sheldon Wolin (2022: 63) has given the name "inverted totalitarianism." Anyone who did not want to believe how closely the Obama and Biden administrations were and are intertwined with Twitter (cf. Malone 2022) or that the "censorship of the Hunter-Biden laptop affair" and the "unprecedented political intervention" (Hofbauer 2022: 183) against Donald Trump at the beginning of 2021, in which the U.S. president lost his million-strong following in one fell swoop, can be traced back to this network of relationships was proven wrong at the latest by the publication of the "Twitter Files" (cf. Schirrmacher 2023).

4. Censorship

Hannes Hofbauer (2022: 124f.) dates the birth of the censorship regime of the present to November 28, 2008. The EU framework decision of that day was about "the definitional sovereignty over genocide" and thus "de facto" about the bans on discussions and taboos in matters of war and guilt, for example in Yugoslavia or in the successor states of the Soviet Union. In Germany, this topic popped up once again when Section 130 of the Criminal Code (incitement of the people) was amended accordingly at the end of 2022. By the end of the noughties, it had become obvious that the traditional means of propaganda would no longer suffice to maintain interpretive sovereignty. The platforms Xing (launched in 2003), Facebook and Vimeo (2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006) and WhatsApp (2009) were on their way to becoming mass phenomena at the latest after the introduction of the iPhone (2007). This also meant that from now on, alternative interpretations of reality were available to anyone at any time and any place (cf. Vorderer 2015), without professionalism in the processing or the quality of the evidence immediately providing information about which view of things could claim validity. Those who are craving definitional power (such as governments, the EU Commission, or multibillionaires whose position and business also depend on public sympathy) had to start fighting competitive narratives and unwelcome information now at the latest.

In addition to legislative initiatives such as the 2008 "Framework on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law" and the EU's 2022 Digital Services Act, three other ways were explored to achieve this goal. First, control of the Internet was institutionalized – for example, in the "East StratCom Task Force," established in March 2015 after the "regime change in Ukraine" with the aim of enforcing one's "own narrative" (Hofbauer 2022: 129), or in the European Digital Media Observatory

(EDMO), where academics and fact-checkers have been working together since 2020 (more on these institutions in Section 5). Second, political and economic power have made their alliance public – as can be read, for example, in the "Twitter Files" just mentioned and in the "Code of Conduct against Disinformation" agreed on by the EU and the digital economy in 2018 and renewed with further signatories in 2022. This code obliges platforms to fight "dissenting positions" by all means (Hofbauer 2022: 143, 204). And third, the corporations have taken matters into their own hands and established an Internet police force, which includes the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN, settled at the Poynter Institute in the U.S. in 2015 with the help of Ebay founder Pierre Omidyar, cf. Graves 2018), the U.S. company NewsGuard, which puts up green and red labels on the net (cf. Schreyer 2022), and the Trusted News Initiative (TNI).

To stay with this last example: The TNI, launched in summer 2019 under BBC auspices, brings together the Who's Who of Western opinion factories: News agencies (AP, AFP, Reuters), broadcasters (Canada's CBC in addition to the EBU and BBC), major newspapers (*Financial Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Hindu* from India), major Internet companies (Microsoft, Google, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, First Draft), and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, an academic institution at Oxford University sponsored primarily by media conglomerate Thomson Reuters. What is agreed upon here, as this list should make clear even when skimming it, becomes a truth to which all those who work in the leading media must bow, because the reach and working methods of every German local editorial office are now also determined by platform logic. Already at the TNI founding event in July 2019, Tony Hall, then director general of the BBC, warned of a possible Trump re-election and vaccination opponents. Then on March 27, 2020, TNI members announced that from now on they would alert each other when "misinformation" or "conspiracy theories" emerged on Corona to prevent any further spread. And on December 10, 2020, a few days after the BioNTech-Pfizer substance was approved in the UK, it was decided to suppress anything that might downplay the Corona threat and argue against vaccination. In doing so, the TNI took its perspective on the issue from the same sources as governments (see Woodworth 2022).

The example is treated in such detail here not only because of the enormous interpretive power of the TNI, but also because it shows that the four censorship paths mentioned can only be separated analytically. Without the pressure of the legislator, manifested in well-equipped observatories with scandalizing powers and resulting in more or less voluntary self-restrictions (every restriction costs traffic, data access and thus profit), the Internet police might not exist in this form. More specifically: Why would Facebook pay "cleaners" in Manila (the title of a 2018 documentary by Hans Block and Moritz Riesewieck) and YouTube train "employees of NGOs or authorities" as "trusted flaggers" if there were no common interests and no interaction with political power?

The most important German censorship laws are the NetzDG, in effect since October 1, 2017, and expanded since February 1, 2022, for the large platforms (two million users or more) to include a reporting obligation for "potentially criminally relevant content" (Biselli 2022), and the State Media Treaty, which on November 7, 2020, turned the state media institutions into "control institutions for the digital publishing world." Since then, the "legislator requires website operators, bloggers and media intermediaries" to check the truth (under the heading of "journalistic diligence"), although the "definition of truth or its

disregard should not be a sovereign task" (Hofbauer 2022: 144f.). Hannes Hofbauer (2022) documents in detail how the two most important voices of the German-language counter-public (the Russian state channel RT and the platform KenFM, which had 500,000 subscribers on YouTube) were shut down and how leading media and professional associations either remained silent about this or even applauded it.

Hofbauer (2022: 135-138) quite correctly interprets the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) as a "state push" that has allowed Internet corporations to mutate into "censorship machines." The two main problems: The terms "hate crime" and "fake news" (the targets of the law) are characterized by "interpretive malleability." And: the "new censor regime" is located "somewhere between the Berlin Ministry of Justice and U.S. corporate headquarters" and is thus "hardly tangible." Even the extension of the deletion obligation to include a reporting obligation does not solve this dilemma. The "Central Reporting Office for Criminal Content on the Internet," which started in February 2022 at the Federal Criminal Police Office with about 200 employees, received only just under 3,900 reports by the end of November 2022 instead of the expected 250,000 (cf. Biselli 2022). This corresponds to the situation before the introduction of mandatory reporting. On the high-reach platforms Facebook and Instagram, there was only a low four-digit number of NetzDG complaints in each case in the second half of 2020. The interpretive battle during this period focused on the Elite Channel (over 800,000 complaints on Twitter) and videos, which are apparently still considered to have the greatest impact (over 300,000 reported videos on YouTube). The federal government's response to a corresponding inquiry by the FDP gives an idea of the share that "complaints offices" and other tax- or group-funded institutions had here.

5. Conclusion and outlook

Since the mid-2010s, the EU, the NetzDG, and the State Media Treaty (section 4), in conjunction with the government initiatives outlined in section 2 and the declarations of war from the highest levels, have ensured a social atmosphere that places Internet activities beyond the mainstream media under general suspicion, provides a protective cloak for all official narratives, and allows the business of flak shooters to flourish, among whom the so-called fact checkers once again stand out. "It has been said recently that we are living in post-factual times," Angela Merkel said in September 2016 in a speech on refugee policy. "I guess that means people are no longer interested in facts, they follow feelings alone." At the inauguration of the BND headquarters in February 2019, she also said, "We must learn to deal with fake news as part of hybrid warfare." In her government statement on October 29, 2020, she then prepared the country for lockdown in the same tone of voice: criticism of the Corona measures was essential, "but lies and disinformation, conspiracy and hatred not only damage democratic debate, but also the fight against the virus." In this context, the fear of a "cyber 9/11" has been present in the control centers of the Western hemisphere for a good two decades, orchestrated also by high-profile simulation games that equate the Net with an "enemy weapons system" (see Corbett 2021).

Fact-checkers - an arm of the new "discursive police" (Foucault 2014: 25) - are particularly well disguised in this regard. Who should object to people taking another serious look at what someone has just cobbled together? The promise contained in the name of these

organizations (the truth, checked again) is perfidious because it suggests that in complex societies there can be unambiguity and certainty of orientation without any personal research effort. This explains why, in addition to IFCN member *Correctiv* (founded in 2014 with money from the Brost publishing family), private initiatives such as the website *Volksverpetzer* and fact-checking departments have been able to establish themselves under the umbrella of traditional media institutions (at dpa, Bayerischer Rundfunk, *Tagesschau*). As a rule, all these editorial departments 'check' exclusively what contradicts the reality of the mainstream media and thus the government and corporate propaganda.

If Sheldon Wolin (2022) is correct in his analysis of "inverted totalitarianism," then no media revolution is conceivable without a fundamental renewal of the social framework. As long as the state and corporations make common cause, it will not be possible to establish a communication channel that cannot be hijacked by the actors with the greatest material, human, and ideational resources – by actors who, if worst comes to worst, can also deploy intelligence services (an influence that has been neglected in this article but is nevertheless relevant, cf. Alford/Secker 2015, Talbot 2017, Ulfkotte 2014). Calls for selective expropriations (publishing houses) and reforms (public broadcasting), for breaking up monopolies and establishing European or civil society alternatives (digital platforms) therefore come to nothing. For critical social research, there are three tasks in this situation: Educating about propaganda and censorship, establishing and supporting independent channels (which is what the institute publishing this article stands for, among others), and working on drafts for a media order that, on the one hand, allows journalism to fulfill its mission of publicity and, on the other hand, limits the access of interests of all kinds or at least makes it transparent.

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