

“Censorship” is back

How a free society is giving up freedom

by Robert Seidel

The brief explosive confrontation between the Russian media group “Russia Today Deutschland” (RT DE) and German Foreign Minister Heiko Mass (SPD) in mid-March highlighted the alarming state of press freedom in the EU, especially in Germany. Behind this controversy lies the creeping introduction of a dictatorship of opinion.

Selecting and judging information by yourself

The goal is not to drive the Russian media group out of Germany by means of an outright ban, but through financial isolation. No other bank should open an account for RT after its account at *Commerzbank* was shut down.¹

In addition to RT, many local, independent and investigative journalists, such as *Bernd Reitschuster* or *Ken Jebsen*, who work in the internet, find their lives made increasingly difficult. What is the reason for this? Are German citizens no longer able to select and judge information by themselves? Is the government afraid of certain kinds of information? These questions aim at the very heart of any free society.

Top down: censorship comes via NATO...

The TV news coverage of the 1999 Kosovo war can be described as a grave sin in German media history. While the war, contrary to international law, was increasingly being criticized in public and losing popular support, the official spokesman of the Bundeswehr was replaced by *Jamie Shea*, a media specialist sent by NATO. From then on, the information was not only worthless in terms of content, but also highly manipulative. In the early 2000s, critical reporting was still tolerated in the public media. In 2001, for example, the Westdeutsche Rundfunk (WDR) broadcasted the report “It all started with a lie”, detailing how leading politicians systematically deceived the

German population in order to participate in this war.²

... and Brussels

Subsequently, freedom of expression has been systematically heckled implementing the EU structure. On 19 April 2007, the Justice Ministers of the EU member states agreed that racism, anti-Semitism and genocide denial were criminal offences. The use of a term such as “racism” can be and is now being broadened or reinterpreted according to political intent and used as a political weapon. What might have looked reasonable to some, at first, is now a leverage for turning political positions into criminal offences. At the time, urgent warnings had been issued about the consequences we are currently experiencing.³

Stasi experience desirable

Private or state-sponsored organisations, such as the *Amadeu Antonio Stiftung*⁴ – and therefore not the judiciary – are now responsible for prosecuting actual or alleged racist or anti-Semitic statements in Germany. The spectrum has also been broadened to include so-called “hate speech”. By dragging people and organisations into the blur of groups considered “radical” or expressing “unsavory” ideas in the future, this foundation criminalizes them. In this way, the foundation functions as a kind of primary “censorship authority”. Among others, Facebook is one of its clients. This American company then deletes the pages that are reprimanded by the foundation.

Interestingly enough, the Amadeu Foundation is headed by a person who was once an unofficial collaborator of the Stasi.⁵ So, it seems, this lady not only has the necessary know-how, but she also enjoys the appropriate political protection today.⁶

EU censorship authority

On the grounds that foreign powers (read: Russia, China) influence and affect civil societies through the media, further directives have been

“The press must have the freedom to say everything, so that some people don't have the freedom to do everything.”

Alain Peyrefitte 1925–1999

issued at EU level instructing governments to ban certain news and press agencies or media portals. Two years ago, journalist and author *Hannes Hofbauer* already described the consequences we are seeing now: “Anyone who reads the ‘*Report on the implementation of the action plan against disinformation*’ presented by the European Commission on 14 June 2019 will be appalled to discover that the establishing of an EU-wide censorship authority is already largely completed. Soon, according to the still somewhat hidden message, the dissemination of information that Brussels deems false and dangerous will be punishable by sanctions up to an account freeze and a travel ban.”⁷

Facebook silences critics

In order to cover the entire web, internet platform operators have already been forced since 2018 to exercise censorship themselves via the German Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG=Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz): “The law obliges private social networks with more than two million users to remove or block access to ‘obviously illicit content’ within 24 hours of receiving a complaint. For ‘illicit contents’, the deadline is one week. If platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat fail to comply with the regulations, they face horrendous fines of up to 50 million euros.”⁸ For their part, Facebook, Google, etc. now hire private companies that claim to be able to distinguish between “correct” and “incorrect” (read: “illicit”) opinions.

Mandated censors

One of them is the organisation *Correctiv*. This organisation presents itself as follows: “Targeted disinformation is used to divide our society, to disseminate hatred or to do business dealings. One-sided or false information creates distorted world views. *Correctiv.Faktencheck* opposes this and denounces disinformation, rumours and half-truths on a daily basis.”⁹ Other authors, such as *Norbert Häring*, see things differently: “[...] what *Correctiv* does is of a completely different, sinister nature. Operators of social media platforms, especially Facebook, are under pressure from those in power to suppress critical opinions and alternative facts. *Correctiv* gets paid by Facebook to put a negative stamp on unwanted posts. This negative stamp has the

effect of censoring a message in an obscure way, with the operators of the major social media thus ensuring that it is less widely distributed. This is a fairly effective form of censorship.”¹⁰

The benefit of the doubt against the defendant

In recent years, it has been possible to observe how arbitrarily “corrections” have been made.¹¹ It is only through a tedious legal process that internet forum operators, accused of having published “inappropriate” messages, can defend themselves. This is a reversal of the principles of the rule of law: now it is up to the accused to prove his innocence.¹² The fact that George Soros’ institutions and other large private foundations are among *Correctiv*’s backers does not increase confidence in this “organisation”.¹³

For some internet companies now involved in the media or in politics, it is also convenient to be able to eliminate unwelcome competitors themselves, as was seen, for example, with the closure of the news platform *Parler* in the United States. From one minute to the next, 20 million users were arbitrarily, i.e. without a court decision, cut off by Google, Apple and *Amazon*.¹⁴

“Voluntary” self-regulation

In Germany, the media industry now carries out direct censorship. The publishers’ and journalists’ associations allow themselves to be instrumental in supporting and encouraging censorship through “voluntary self-regulation criteria” or “press codes”. Their originally reasonable guidelines, have been adapted to the spirit of the times, i.e. to the current guidelines of the state. Some journalists or media outlets are now threatened with exclusion if they do not adhere to these strict guidelines.

It is evident that small, unwanted competitors can also be harassed in this way. Thus, the competitive pressure that small, independent online platforms (such as *KenFM*, *Reitschuster*) exert on the large, established media is very likely to play a role that should not be underestimated.¹⁵

Berlin censorship

The fact that the German public media institutions (ARD, ZDF) can no longer be critical is

hardly a secret today but nevertheless, worth mentioning here. Until the early 2000s, they could be allowed to produce critical contributions, but then they came under increasing pressure from “political correctness”.¹⁶ Since directorships and finances are politically allocated, this can be easily explained. However, it becomes problematic when the “new” journalistic standards of the public media authority are declared generally valid. Then, freedom of opinion is turned upside down, as it is limited to the “playing field” defined by the state.¹⁷

Recently, there is even a danger that public media institutions will turn into state-controlled psychosocial actors. Journalist *Alexander Wendt* (“Publico”) describes the proposals of MDR [Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk] director *Karola Wille* to launch a “network for the common good”. Public media institutions would not only select or sanction certain opinions on this basis, but would also actively exert a mass psychological influence on society.¹⁸

Direct state funding of small “independent” private media is also absurd if they do not have a guarantee of real independence in content, as practiced today.¹⁹

New interstate media treaty

The situation is similar with the media authorities in the Länder. As “non-governmental” institutions, they have always been concerned with issuing broadcasting licences and ensuring the protection of minors. However, because of their proximity to the government, they are also an extension of government policy.

The situation has seriously worsened as a result of the new interstate media treaty (Medienstaatsvertrag MStV) dated 7 November 2020. Shortly thereafter, in March 2021, authorities in charge of the medias in the Länder demanded that 13 independent online media adhere to “journalistic rules”.²⁰ This written request was singularly lacking in concrete references to individual “offences”. The only purpose was, obviously, to put the portals under public pressure and to discredit them in general. In doing so, the media institutions explicitly referred to the new interstate media treaty. Through Google, Facebook and YouTube, they now have the possibility to ban certain portals on the internet. The German journalist *Tilo Gräser* describes these current developments in detail and highlights the

problematic nature of the new interstate media treaty.²¹

State-sponsored fake news

In the meantime, the EU has started to combat inappropriate – i.e. inconvenient – opinions also with the help of secret services or “associations close to governments”, and to actively intervene in the media sector.

Because of the critical coverage of the Ukrainian crisis by some alternative media,²² the EU felt compelled to actively intervene in the media sphere. German writer and lawyer *Wolfgang Bittner* writes: “The European External Action Service does not hesitate to spread fake news on a large scale when it comes to Russia. In 2016, a special unit called the *East StratCom Task Force* (Strategic Communications Team East) was created to deal with 'large-scale organised propaganda' by Russian authorities in EU countries. European Commission experts are certain that Moscow's goal is to destabilize the European Union and engage in 'hybrid warfare' using targeted disinformation and uncertainty.”²³

“Institute for statecraft’s integrity”

It is not surprising, then, that the cyber entities that surround state intelligence services are involved in government censorship efforts. As part of a public relations campaign on vaccinations, journalist *Whitney Webb* describes the various intelligence agencies such as the UK’s “Institute for Statecraft’s Integrity” or the CIA-affiliated agencies that have recently been deployed on the internet.²⁴

No freedom without freedom of press

One of the marks and characteristics of free Western societies and democratic states in general is the freedom of expression and, linked to it, the freedom of the press. They remain an existential foundation of every democracy, because without them, no democratic process of free opinion formation is possible. It is precisely these preconditions that are highly threatened today. It is a warning sign when individual publications, such as the independent website *Rubikon*, already take the precaution of planning their future publication from exile.²⁵

In *infosperber.ch*, the Swiss journalist *Rainer Stadler* reminds us of the foundations of any

democratic state: “In this sense, liberal states should use the strength of the Enlightenment tradition and trust mature consumers to be able to distinguish credible from unreliable information – regardless of the platforms on which it is found.”²⁶

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

¹ RTDE: <https://de.rt.com/inland/114540-umgang-mit-rt-in-deutschland-moskaubring-harte-gegenmassnahmen-gegen-deutschen-medien-ins-spiel> on 17 March 2021 and Ulrich Heyden: <https://www.nachdenkseiten.de/?p=71261> on 5 April 2021

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtkYRlXMNU> (download from 26 March 2021), first broadcast WDR on 8 February 2001

³ For example, Hofbauer, Hannes. «Verordnete Wahrheit, bestrafte Gesinnung. Rechtsprechung als politisches Instrument». Pro Media Verlag, Vienne 2011.

⁴ Self-representation: <https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/ueber-uns> on 22 March 2021

⁵ Vera Lengsfeld: <https://vera-lengsfeld.de/2019/02/13/anetta-kahane-alias-im-victoria-die-perfekte-weichzeichnerin-in-eigener-sache> on 13 February 2019

⁶ Hubertus Knabe: <https://hubertus-knabe.de/der-fall-kahane> on 4 July 2019

⁷ Hannes Hofbauer: <https://www.nachdenkseiten.de/?p=52733>

⁸ Johannes Stern: <https://www.wsws.org/de/articles/2018/01/03/netz-j03.html> on 3 January 2018

⁹ Self-representation of Correctiv: <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck> on 22 March 2021

¹⁰ Norbert Häring: <https://norberthaering.de/medienversagen/correctiv-anti-journalisten> on 30 May 2020

¹¹ Roger Letsch: https://www.achgut.com/artikel/correctiv_die_faktenchecker_vom_dienst on 23 December 2019

¹² Ken Jebsen: <https://kenfm.de/kenfm-verlaesst-berlin> on 10.27.2020

¹³ Wolfgang Effenberger: <https://kenfm.de/correctiv-die-selbsternannten-wahrheitsrichter> on 19 May 2020

¹⁴ Glenn Greenwald: https://www.rubikon.news/artikel/die-digitalen-supermaechte?fbclid=IwAR1BYdq_ZqWx-W_HL_DTJ4IBgC3AXTrR5eHmTILhPeTXeLmziJFNhs-ZioDkM on 2 February 2021

¹⁵ Thilo Gräser: <https://multipolar-magazin.de/artikel/neue-zensurbehörde> on 22 March 2021

¹⁶ cf. Hermann, Eva. «Das Medienkartell. Wie wir täglich getäuscht werden». [The media cartel. How we are deceived daily]. Rottenburg 2012

¹⁷ Thilo Gräser: <https://multipolar-magazin.de/artikel/neue-zensurbehörde> on 22 March 2021

¹⁸ Alexander Wendt: <https://www.publicomag.com/2021/03/nur-ein-vorschlag-nicht-wahr-aber-wer-will-ihn-ablehnen/> on 12 March 2021

¹⁹ Alexander Wendt: <https://www.publicomag.com/2021/03/nur-ein-vorschlag-nicht-wahr-aber-wer-will-ihn-ablehnen/> on 12 March 2021

²⁰ Thilo Gräser: <https://multipolar-magazin.de/artikel/neue-zensurbehörde> on 22 February 2021

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Ulrich Heyden: <https://www.nachdenkseiten.de/?p=71261> on 5 April 2021

²³ Cf. Bittner, Wolfgang. «Die Eroberung Europas durch die USA» [The conquest of Europe by the USA], p. 168s., as well as in the Göttinger Tageblatt on 24 February 2016, p. 2.

²⁴ Cf. also Marcus Klöckner: <https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Unabhaengige-Medien-und-Medienvertreter-im-Dienst-des-Strategischen-Kommunikationsteams-Ost-3376363.html> on 30 October 2015

²⁵ Withney Webb: <https://www.rubikon.news/artikel/propagandakrieg-fur-big-pharma> on 24 November 2020

²⁶ Jens Wernicke: <https://www.rubikon.news/artikel/die-zukunft-beginnt> on 27 March 2021

²⁷ Rainer Stadler: <https://www.infosperber.ch/medien/stoerfaktor-staatsmedien> on 28 March 2021