

# **COUNTERING** **POPULISM IN PUBLIC SPACE**

## **COLLECTION OF EXPERIENCES** FOR PROMOTING A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE OF DEBATE

Media professionals' handling  
of anti-democratic populism

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# COUNTERING POPULISM IN PUBLIC SPACE



IN COOPERATION WITH



## COLLECTION OF EXPERIENCES FOR PROMOTING A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE OF DEBATE

### 1. BACKGROUND

**D**as Progressive Zentrum promotes the improvement of knowledge-sharing, particularly among young adults, regarding the way journalism deals with anti-democratic populism and its representatives in the public space. This paper builds on the expertise and experience of media professionals. During the "workshop for promoting a democratic culture of debate" on 14 December 2018 in Berlin, they identified challenges, pointed out problems and discussed solutions. These recommendations for solutions are not universally applicable or exhaustive, but instead illustrate different paths and decisions that were compiled, justified and formulated in this collection of experiences. Further information and helpful tips with illustrative material can be found at: [www.countering-populism.de](http://www.countering-populism.de)

Under the project "Countering Populism in Public Space" around 20 media professionals from broadcasting, TV, print and online media as well as blogs developed this collection of experiences in joint forces with *Das Progressive Zentrum* on the confident and conscious approach towards anti-democratic populists in the public space. This project is supported as part of the federal programme "Demokratie leben" [Live Democracy!], by the *Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth* (BMFSFJ). We would also like to thank the *neue deutsche medienmacher\*innen* for their substantive support.

In our democratic society, media professionals are assigned to the dual role of factual informants and critical observers. They are to provide the public with information to enable decision-making among citizens. On the other hand, they

should also convey subjective perspectives and the rivalry between various political positions as foundations upon which citizens can form a political opinion. In this regard, political information not only includes news coverage, but also the discussion and questioning of central political actors, such as the federal government or the different parties.

Over the past few years, media professionals have been faced with greater challenges than they were previously used to in the German context. A number of actors have exploited existing media formats for their own posturing, deliberately ignored respectful ways of behaving, and reduced social discourse to certain issues. They made misanthropic statements and historical revisionism more socially acceptable and cast values and definitions believed to be consensus, in a different light. This resulted in discourse being increasingly punctuated by negative phenomena: False statements, targeted provocations, playing down right-wing extremist violence, wholesale recriminations of migrants and glorifying the idea of a "homogeneous people", as well as the polarisation between the supposed "people" and "elite" ("Those at the top"). Together these characteristics form the essence of anti-democratic populism. In the following, we refer to drivers of this development as "anti-democratic populists".

## 2. COLLECTION OF EXPERIENCES

### A. STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE MEDIA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

**H**ow has journalism's *raison d'être* changed due to strident anti-democratic populists? This was the first question, the participants in the working group were confronted with.

**"IT IS LIKELY THAT TODAY'S JOURNALISTS FIGHT MORE OF AN INTERNAL BATTLE THAN WAS PREVIOUSLY THE CASE: THEY FIND THEMSELVES CAUGHT BETWEEN A PERSONAL SENSE OF JUSTICE AND A NEED TO ACT AS AN OPPOSING FORCE, WHILE ALSO MAINTAINING THEIR NEUTRALITY AS JOURNALISTS."**

**THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT OF MEDIAL PROFESSIONALS HAS EXPERIENCED RAPID CHANGE OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS - JUST LIKE JOURNALISM'S *RAISON D'ÊTRE*.**

The technical and social transformation hit the media industry head-on. Besides an increase in populism, this is also due to fundamental changes to the media landscape and news consumption. The consequence is a "structural transformation of the media". Social media is eroding the former transmitter-receiver models. Participants increasingly observe that audiences no longer "go to the transmitter" and "glean information" there, but instead they expect the transmitters to place their content in the audiences' "feeds" (for example on Facebook or Instagram). However, what is shown at what point and with which visibility in social media, is no longer merely subject to media professionals' editorial choices, but to the algorithm of the respective platform, too. Hence, journalistic actors compete directly with others for attention on the platforms - this also includes anti-democratic populists. While there is no longer control over the way your own article is disseminated, you also need to consider that the platform favours polarising articles with high levels of interaction, which it "awards" with further visibility. This is the case even if the substance of the article provides neither substantively accurate information nor news content nor journalistic added value.

Some media professionals even adopt the way in which anti-democratic populists communicate, by using buzzwords and populist formulations so as to generate attention and

reach for their own articles (see: "**The difficulty of resisting the incentive for quotas**"). However, participants reported that the development also indicates positive effects: Given that populists pursue such vehement media bashing, an increasing number of journalists are now scrutinising their own way of working. On top of that, one workshop participant contended that "democratising" the media landscape by expanding news services (such as blogs and citizen journalism) leads to a heightened desire for professional journalism with the "highest standards" and secure information.

In spite of changes to their *raison d'être*, media professionals agree: Media **continues to form the Fourth Estate** and to bear responsibility as a supervisory body vis-à-vis the legislative, judiciary and executive power - without regard to changing parameters of journalistic practice. The general question of journalistic confidence is however worthy a discussion. There are ever more requirements for up-to-date reporting, for example as regards research skills and research quality in times of "Fakes News", but also with respect to precise formulations, the so-called wording. This often engenders excessive levels of uncertainty and caution during the reporting stage. According to participants in the working group, this is not conducive to success.

**"MANY JOURNALISTS TOOK THE FLOOD OF CRITICISM MORE SERIOUSLY OR MORE TO HEART THAN WOULD HAVE BEEN NECESSARY. YET, WE ARE ONE STEP FURTHER: A CONSCIOUS DECISION IS TAKEN ABOUT WHAT AND WHAT NOT TO REPORT."**

The uncertainty plaguing media professionals also became clear in the working group: Some participants enquired whether there was any basis in the accusation that journalists constitute a "**left-wing elite**", as often claimed by anti-democratic populists. It is perfectly possible that the majority of the media professionals, as private people, can be associated with a rather liberal, left-wing or progressive spectrum. A large share of the working group believes that an inherent feature of journalism as an occupation is to critique the system as well as the "elite" and "status quo", irrespective of the journalist's political orientation. This results in a lower number of "staunch conservatives" entering the profession of journalism. Furthermore, from the perspec-



tive of *anti-democratic populists*, media professionals are "left-wing" by nature; but reality shows that those defending basic democratic values are neither left-wing nor right-wing and instead simply democrats. Other participants also pointed out that there are indeed well known and influential conservative media professionals, which is why politically positioning the entire occupational group as "left-wing" is both over-simplifying and false.

### CITIZEN AS A PERSON - A JOURNALIST BY PROFESSION

Media professionals emphasise the functional separation between the personal role as a citizen and the occupational function as a media professional. Hence, as a citizen, there is no reason why you cannot privately participate in a demonstration. However, you should clearly demarcate your own political or activist actions from professional practice. As helpful as it may sound to **separate private from professional matters**, it is difficult to observe in practice (for example on Twitter). In addition, journalists are - vice versa - often required to differentiate journalistic practice from their personal stance. For instance, it may be necessary to meet with anti-democratic populists in their familiar environment as part of journalists' work, without such a "constructive discussion" having to represent political proximity to the interviewee.

### MAKING YOUR OWN WORK TRANSPARENT

Media professionals from print and online journalism including those active on the blogger and YouTube scene were of the opinion that parts of society are losing faith in media professionals or have already lost it completely. Participants proposed measures that allow greater transparency of media professionals' own work as a solution to wholesale rejections of the latter.

**"IN ORDER TO COUNTER THE MISTRUST SHOWN BY PARTS OF SOCIETY, JOURNALISTS MUST EXPLAIN THEIR WORK AND THEIR FORMATS TO A FAR GREATER EXTENT: WHAT IS A COMMENTARY? WHAT IS A COVERAGE? WHERE IS AN OPINION EXPECTED, WHERE NOT? THERE NEEDS TO BE CLARIFICATION ABOUT HOW THE MEDIA WORKS."**

A way of achieving **greater transparency and traceability** could be by posing the question "How do we work?" at the bottom of the website. This provides insights into the principles and fundamentals of your own work: "The media company is becoming a glass house". Role models cited here were transparency blogs, such as those published by **Tageschau**<sup>1</sup> or **ZEIT Online**<sup>2</sup>. Another proposal, inspired by a local editorial office in the USA, envisaged making a list of all sources used at the end of the online articles. Unfortunately, these portals as well as subsequent news corrections usually only reach a fraction of the audience that can be approached via original messages. On the other hand, broadly promoting citizens' general and online-specific media competence, may contribute towards a better understanding of journalistic work; this should start as early as the school years.

### JOURNALISTIC ETHICS AND TOPIC PLANNING

Media professionals suggested that **topic planning** should not only focus on the currently most polarising themes, but also on issues that have a greater impact on the everyday life of the population (for example nursing care, education policy, climate protection or infrastructure). Therefore, making it possible to thwart a "distortion of reality" due to anti-democratic populists continually repeating one single topic. This led to the question as to whether journalists need new strategies to determine the "actual" relevance of topics. According to a participant, it is essential to diversify topics beyond mere sensationalism; this would facilitate discussions in the public space beyond those placed on the agenda by anti-democratic populists. Another recommendation was to place opinions and statements in their historical or political context and to inquire about their origins to an even greater extent than in the past (see **"The duty to contextualise"**).

One participant also called for a media shaped by democratic values to oppose misanthropy at all costs. This also includes the discussion about whether it is wise to rescue drowning people, for instance.

There was also a proposal for **"solution-oriented reporting"**. For instance, it is not the task of media professionals to encourage fatalism, but rather to discuss sustainable solutions besides the problem description and classification. Reporting that looks ahead and enquires about solutions for current challenges prioritises a progressive journalistic *raison d'être* over a primarily negative, deficit-oriented and prob-

1. The Tageschau blog wants to provide "Nachrichten hinter den Nachrichten" and insights into day-to-day work. Online: <https://blog.tagesschau.de>

2. The Glass House Blog "wants to communicate internal debates about the work of journalists to the outside world from time to time". Online: <https://blog.zeit.de/glashaus/>

lem-centric coverage. The intensified debate on practical solutions may also counter the attractiveness of simplistic, often misanthropic "solutions" propounded by anti-democratic populists, such as the suggestion of tackling the multi-faceted challenge of illegal immigration by building a wall or a border fence.

## B. JOURNALISTIC WORK WHEN DEALING WITH ANTI-DEMOCRATIC POPULISTS

The participating media professionals spoke about both negative as well as positive experiences in direct dealings with anti-democratic populism. They also collected information on how to confidently deal with challenging interlocutors.

### THE ACCUSATION: ARGUING IN A MORALISING WAY

"MORALISING GIVES THEM THE WINNING HAND."

In many cases, provocations by anti-democratic populists with justifications in line with "I need to exercise free speech while I still can", attack the moral foundations of our liberal democracy and open society. An excessive, in other words, "moralising reaction" is therefore perceived emotionally rather than factually. As a result, arguments often lose their validity. According to a working group, adopting an **exclusively moralising stance** towards interviewees, is often the wrong way of doing things. A balanced, argumentative, calm and clear approach to critical questions would be promising, however. The **Stern interview with Thilo Sarrazin**<sup>3</sup> from a September edition in 2018, which was largely conducted in an emotional and reproachful manner, was cited as a negative example. In contrast, a number of participants mentioned the **ZDF Summer Interview with the AfD parliamentary party leader, Alexander Gauland**<sup>4</sup>, as a positive example. Overall, German journalism has experienced a learning curve as regards factual argumentation over the past few years.

The working group also came to the consensus that it would be a fallacy to simply assign anti-democratic populists to a certain party. Instead, statements and positions must be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

### THE INFLUENCE OF YOUR OWN WAY OF WORKING

"I AM DEVELOPING A KIND OF FEAR ABOUT WRITING EXCLUSIVELY GOOD OR BAD ABOUT POPULISTS. WORRYING ABOUT HAVING TO EXPLAIN WORK HAS AN IMPACT ON YOUR WORK."

Discussions were also held about the extent to which anti-democratic populists "should be granted intellectual space" to exercise their own work. Is it appropriate to adapt your own way of working in reaction to challenges posed by populists?

"WHY SHOULD WE TREAT POPULISTS DIFFERENTLY? PREVIOUS JOURNALISTIC DECISIONS WERE NOT SIMPLY MADE ON A WHIM, YOU ALWAYS HAD REASONS. THAT IS SOMETHING I FIND EXTREMELY DANGEROUS. THAT THEY EXERT SUCH AN INFLUENCE [ON OUR WORK]."

No, instead the usual editorial criteria should determine whether and how reports are made about populists, according to one suggestion. As regards editorial decisions, there should be no criterion that merely stipulates deciding in favour of or against a party.

A number of participants believed that a **"special status for populists"** devalues previously existing fundamental journalistic principles, ways of working and criteria. If there are ambiguities, for example, further targeted questions have to be asked during the interview. However, it is critically noted that "stubbornly reflecting the highest quality standards" to some extent hampers critical journalism by making it "predictable" and possible to "exploit".

"PAYING ATTENTION TO LANGUAGE, DEBUNKING WORD CONSTRUCTIONS AND BRINGING CLARITY TO PROPAGANDISTIC STATEMENTS DO NOT REPRESENT NOVEL CHALLENGES FOR JOURNALISTS."

3. Stern discussion (08/09/2018): "Hassprediger oder Aufklärer? Thilo Sarrazin über seine umstrittenen Thesen zum Islam" by Arno Luik, <https://www.stern.de/politik/deutschland/thilo-sarrazin--interview-ueber-seine-thesen-zum-islam-und-sein-neues-buch-8347588.html>

4. ZDF Summer Interview (12/08/2018): "Gauland hält Klimapolitik für sinnlos" by Dominik Rzepka, <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/heute/alexander-gauland-im-zdf-sommerinterview-100.html>

## THE DUTY TO CONTEXTUALISE

Even for factually correct statements, journalists should invariably ask themselves whether contextualisation is necessary, in other words, whether a report is to be placed in a historical, political or factual context.

Hence, a report about facts does not provide the reader with any added value if, when viewed in isolation, it conveys a roughly contradictory image when compared with a broader consideration. For instance, a "difficult situation" was cited to be the reporting of "good deeds" by populists in certain policy fields (e.g. transport policy), who fundamentally champion anti-democratic positions, however. **Contextualising** a fact is necessary if a simple report about a fact does not sufficiently inform the reader about the reasons why it happened.

## THE QUESTION WHO CAN SPEAK ABOUT WHAT AND WHEN

"WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR EXPOSING FRAMES!"

Media professionals controversially debated whether the strategy of "substantively exposing" anti-democratic populists (for example as "purely single-issue groupings") is expedient. The example cited was an interview on the topic of "digitalisation", whereby the anti-democratic populist interviewed was neither able to bring forward a programme nor a position. This "exposure" was judged useful by some and not conducive by others. The latter argued that "unmasking" anti-democratic populists does not achieve anything, because populist parties are not selected based on their professional competence, but instead on their emotional approach to the topics of asylum, migration, refugees and security. The question of **who is to be questioned about which topics**, was the subject of animated discussions. On the one hand, the media professionals deemed it important not to always invite agitators (in particular) to their "home game topics". On the other hand, persons without an opinion, knowledge or programme on a topic are also incapable of making a useful contribution, for example in panel discussions on the nursing crisis, on the other.

"PARTIES WHO HAVE FEDERAL POLITICAL SPOKESPERSONS IN ALL COMMITTEES AND SUBJECT AREAS SHOULD ALSO BE INVITED TO AND CONSULTED AT THESE DISCUSSIONS."

"YET, A TALK SHOW IS NOT CASTED ACCORDING TO PARLIAMENTARY STRUCTURES."

Inviting someone to a talk show on a specialist subject might be carried out either due to professional expertise or to political responsibility in a certain remit. Both are legitimate. Should a party or person lay claim to represent the "whole people" and a responsible political position, they must therefore be able to state an opinion about different topics. If they are unable to do so, this is equally a valuable insight for the population.

## WHERE IS THE "RED LINE" OF A DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE?

In the discussion surrounding directly dealing with anti-democratic populists, the recurring question was to what extent efforts for "equal treatment according to journalistic standards" would have to be maintained once a "red line" has been crossed. When has the point been reached at which anti-democratic populists are to be classified as an acute danger to the democratic order and reported on accordingly? The media professionals were unable to reach a consensus to this end. Instead, there was broad support for the objection that journalists ought to internalise Basic Law, fundamental and human rights along with liberal/democratic values and visualise historical contexts more than ever before.

## VIDEO INTERVIEWS

A specific challenge posed by **video interviews** is that anti-democratic populists are often supported by colleagues who film both the interview and the interview team - behaviour that may be seen as an attempt to intimidate and control. In this context, the result is a **"pressure to justify"** each editorial decision. In many cases, complaints are received about the cutting of sequences - a perfectly common editorial process, for example when politicians do not answer questions they are supposed to. The populists, on the other hand, publish their own video and accuse the editorial office of "spin" and "manipulation". They also cut the material, but they use particularly "convincing" sounding statements in a way that robs it of its context. Here it is useful to justify the editorial deci-

sion and to illustrate the journalistic criteria in doing so - ultimately, journalistic work not only involves holding a camera to it, and instead is characterised by an enlightening selection of information. Another challenge is the criticism levelled by left-wing audiences who bemoan the fact that anti-democratic populists are even given the chance to speak during documentaries. The proposal was, in response to such accusations, to briefly and unemotionally justify the selection if the tone of the commentary so permits.

## C. GUIDELINE FOR ACTION IN YOUR OWN EDITORIAL TEAM

## THE USEFULNESS OF GUIDELINES

Whether your own organisation requires guidelines for dealing with anti-democratic populism, was the subject of controversial debates among the working group. In light of pre-existing guidelines, media professionals proposed that they ought to be jointly renegotiated (on a regular basis).

**"GUIDELINES HINDER A QUALIFIED AND BALANCED DECISION ON A CASE-BY-CASE BASIS."**

**"JOURNALISTIC GUIDELINES ARE HELPFUL IN MAKING EDITORIAL DECISIONS BOTH TRANSPARENT AND TRACEABLE."**

not simply conceive guidelines as individual measures, but rather to embed them in a process that also includes organisation-wide training. In any case, **guidelines are to be understood as a recommendation** and not a specification. Others pointed out that while their organisation has no written guidelines, there is a widely shared understanding of the above-cited challenges. Verbal exchanges, whether in the corridor or at thematic conferences, were viewed by all participants as an effective means of building long-lasting consensus and awareness.

**"NECESSITY DICTATES THAT WE PUT SOMETHING IN WRITING BECAUSE MUCH REVOLVES AROUND HOSTILITY TO DEMOCRACY AND POPULISM. WE HAVE A LOT OF "DO'S AND DON'TS". IN CONCRETE TERMS, THE GUIDELINE MEANS: WE ARE NOT DOING THE WORK OF THOSE ON THE RIGHT-WING."**

## EXPERIENCES WITH AND WITHOUT GUIDELINES

Several media professionals reported on the existence of guidelines for dealing with anti-democratic populists. They were, however, only partially aware of these two- to three-page documents within their own editorial staff, which is why they have very little effect. Suggestions were made to

One participant mentioned a helpful guideline<sup>5</sup> jointly discussed with the editorial team that is available to all in an ongoing process to be evaluated and updated. Hence, it has already been provided to each intern as an aid. A few of the points included in the guideline are:

5. An illustration for this is the editorial code of BuzzFeed News: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/shani/the-buzzfeed-editorial-standards-and-ethics-guide>



- ▶ An attempt is being made to focus reporting on those affected rather than on the culprits.
- ▶ Statements are always subject to a fact check.
- ▶ Coverage about "targeted provocations" such as a tweet deliberately formulated in a misanthropic way, should be exclusively contextualised and classified.

### NEED FOR GUIDELINES, INSTRUCTIONS AND EXCHANGE

There was a broad consensus about the fact that guidelines or further training opportunities on the themes of online moderation, community management and hate speech would be warmly welcomed. These themes did not receive enough attention and on many occasions, there was a lack of resources to adequately support online channels.

Representatives of public service broadcasting described their situation as a field of tension between the mission to provide political education and strengthen democratic culture on the one hand, as well as the commitment to reporting in a "neutral" way - even about anti-democratic populists, on the other. Other media professionals, for their part, reported a great need for discussion if the editorial board shares the view that anti-democratic populists are to be treated like all other actors.

**"THIS CHARGED RELATIONSHIP PRESENTS MANY EMPLOYEES IN PUBLIC BROADCASTING WITH A MAJOR CHALLENGE FOR THEIR EVERYDAY JOURNALISTIC WORK. THAT IS WHY MANY WISH TO HAVE A TYPE OF GUIDELINE OR RECOMMENDATION."**

### D. PARTICULAR CHALLENGES IN THE AREA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

What are the particular challenges facing social media when dealing with online discussions, critical feedback and even hostility? These questions were discussed during the second phase of the workshop.

#### A RAISON D'ÊTRE AS THE BASIS

The media professionals proposed that at first online editors themselves must answer the questions "Who are we?" and "What do we want to achieve with social media?" Determining this *raison d'être* may then make it possible to develop a

strategy of how to communicate online (rather formally and distanced or approachable and personal) - for instance with your own posts and comments.

#### MORE TIME NEEDED FOR INTERACTION

The media professionals advocated increased interaction between them and the media consumers. This exchange is both desirable and necessary. While comment columns, emails, tweet links and shares with your own messages are quicker and easier to create than the classic letter, time for reactions from the editing office and the **exchange with the readers/audience** is too short. Editorial offices also have far too little time to deal with queries on moderation behaviour in the discussion fields below articles ("Whom do I reply to?" "Which reaction is appropriate" etc.). If resources allow it, an online column "Look behind the scenes", explaining your own journalistic work, could promote the relationship between readers and media professionals (see **"Making your own work transparent"**).

It is common practice (particularly in volunteer work) for authors to moderate the comment columns of their own articles. This is, however, especially problematic in view of self-protection. If other colleagues moderate the discussion, the hate messages do not directly affect the author. The participants emphasised that close interaction in the comment columns creates a connection by building a **"community"** of commentators. This community also helps in the event of trolls and hate speech, provides argumentative support and demonstrates solidarity in case of attacks<sup>6</sup>. This results in space for constructive and democratic debates. However, this usually only works after the operators of a site have provided input, in the form of active and integrating moderation.

**"CONTINUAL AND RESPONSIVE INTERACTION IN THE COMMENT COLUMNS MAY MOTIVATE THE READERS AND AUDIENCE THEMSELVES TO PARTICIPATE IN THE DISCUSSION."**

All participants criticise how a host of media companies overlook the integral role played by social media and how, no different to the offline space, it requires temporal and personnel resources. A lever for more resources may be the meticulous documentation of many comments and actions

6. The online helpdesk of the *neuen deutschen medienmacher\*innen* is recommended for this. This provides a plethora of practical assistance when specifically dealing with hate speech online: <https://helpdesk.neuemedienmacher.de/>



during work time in social media and their presentation to decision-makers for promoting understanding about the importance of the task.

"EVEN THOUGH IT IS A 24/7 JOB, IT IS NOT ACCOUNTED FOR IN THE BUDGET, ESPECIALLY IN ESTABLISHED AND MORE COMPLEX STRUCTURES SUCH AS IN PUBLIC BROADCASTING."

#### HATE STORMS, BOTS AND FAKE PROFILES AS CHALLENGES

"THE POINT WHERE A TROLL IS NO LONGER A PERSON BUT RATHER A PROGRAMMED SPIN IS WHEN THE MODERATOR BECOMES POWERLESS. YOU ARE NO LONGER ABLE TO ARGUE, ALL YOU CAN DO IS TO DELETE."

What is necessary is either good training or a lot of experience in moderation on social media, in order to clearly identify organised hate and shit storms. In reality, there is only a negligible amount of users behind the many hate comments on the internet<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, it is important for media professionals in online editing to analyze how many real people are involved, whether hate speech conceals serious criticism and how fake accounts can be quickly identified and blocked. "**Bot Floodings**" are described as a common problem: Specifically controlled attacks on certain content. It is not always easy to identify bots because the spelling and formulation are often remarkably similar to that by some users who are in fact sympathisers of anti-democratic populists. However, their identification by media professionals is not the only important aspect. The readership should also be able to recognise as quickly as possible whether you are dealing with bots or human discussants.

**YouTube** is considered a problematic platform since comments are very animated and fake profiles often post hateful comments below videos. At the same time, participants described YouTube as a channel with very young users, who often have only minimal media competence when it comes to political online debates and the approach towards hate speech. If young people get an overview of political discussions on YouTube, they could quickly conclude that the right-wing trolls in the comment columns represent the majority of the population.

"IT IS A MAJOR CHALLENGE TO DISCOVER THAT SOMETIMES 2000 OUT OF 2500 COMMENTS COME FROM ACCOUNTS THAT HAVE ONLY JUST BEEN CREATED."

The participants described a potential solution to be automatically identifying and flagging bots or "real people". Profiles verified as belonging to a person could be identified with a "small tick" or similar.

However, the working group said that the most important aid, when dealing with shit storms, is **solidarity** with one another. If someone receives hostile comments on an article, or is confronted with verbal affronts right through to threats, and factual exchange is not possible, it is vital to show solidarity with the person under attack.

#### THE TONE OF THE MODERATION

According to a few participants in the working group, humour is imperative for ensuring a pragmatic and successful online moderation. Thus, "troublemakers are not assigned the role of the victim", and it may even be possible to answer in a manner that is "relaxed", albeit well-intentioned.

The organisation should come to a clear agreement or design a strategy when it concerns misanthropic and punishable statements on their own websites. As a rule, these statements should be reported to the online platforms used and the profiles of offending users should be blocked. Whereas feedback or constructive contributions are "rewarded" with a substantive answer by the editors, destructive comments merely received a reference to netiquette. One participant disagreed and suggested not engaging in "tone policing" wherever possible. If a comment starts with "Hey douchebag", but is followed by substantive criticism, you should not reject this "offer of discourse" with a reference to the correct tone.

"IF AN OFFER OF DISCOURSE IS IGNORED MERELY BECAUSE THE FORM IS NOT CORRECT, I FIND THAT DIFFICULT."

7. Five per cent of accounts active in hateful speech generate 50 per cent of the Likes for degrading comments, Cf.: Philip Kreißel, Julia Ebner, Alexander Urban, Jakob Guhl (2018): "Hass auf Knopfdruck. Rechtsextreme Troffabriken und das Ökosystem koordinierter Hasskampagnen im Netz", Institute for Strategie Dialogue (ISD), [http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ISD\\_Ich\\_Bin\\_Hier\\_2.pdf](http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ISD_Ich_Bin_Hier_2.pdf)

## PROGRESSIVELY UNDERSTANDING EXCHANGE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

A few participants see it as a great failure that exchange with readers and audiences in social media is largely viewed through a "problem perspective". This means that the potential for direct exchange and effective, direct political education is not taken into account. They proposed considering the comments on your own article as a type of "offer of discourse". Following the publication of an article, the editors see it as their duty to moderate this and to remain in contact.

**"A PROGRESSIVE UNDERSTANDING OF THE ON-LINE EXCHANGE WOULD BE TO CONCEIVE COMMENT COLUMNS AS EXEMPLIFYING PLACES FOR POLITICAL EDUCATION IN LIEU OF INVARIABLY VIEWING THEM FROM A "FIRE-FIGHTING" PROBLEM PERSPECTIVE."**

**"OPINION FORMATION, DIRECT INTER-ACTION AND A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE CAN COMMENT ON THEMES AND EXCHANGE WITH ONE ANOTHER. THIS IS ACTUALLY ABOUT POLITICAL EDUCATION."**

## THE DIFFICULTY OF RESISTING THE INCENTIVE FOR QUOTAS

The majority of participants found that the polarising thematic approaches, as well as the aggressive language of anti-democratic populists, would provide a commercial incentive. For instance, a story on refugees with a populist slant promises to reach a broader audience than the sober research on environmental protection. The problem is that populist approaches to themes usually attract more attention. More people tend to read the article and more people talk about it. This quantity does not bear testimony to the quality, correctness and importance of the headline, however. It is also the case that the authors of an article rarely write the associated heading of the article; someone else in the (social media) editorial team usually writes it. This largely determines whether the article attracts a high level of interest among the readership. If a social media editor escalates the heading of an author's article in a way that it is regularly clicked on, this heading may distort the sober and high-quality content of the text to the displeasure of the author.

## E. DEALING WITH LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC IMAGES

### FRAME-CHECKING: ANALYSING LANGUAGE AND "TRANSLATING WORDS"

It is vital that media professionals have a basic understanding with regard to the functioning of frames. Advanced knowledge about the various "lines of attack" from political speech frames and images is also desirable. Hence, conservative frames imply a different world image than progressive ones. Your own language and its associations, as well as that from others, must be reflected here. A "neutral framing" is never possible, but you can decide in favour of one that is fair and democratic. Besides this, "political framing" (for promoting a political agenda) differs from a "journalistic framing". The latter should provide an explanation to the audience using metaphors. Particularly with respect to themes such as integration problems, participants described it as a challenge to write in a language that openly defines problems, but is also solution-oriented and does not negatively devalue groups of people. If it is unclear, for example, how to label a certain group of people, it may help to consult the affected group itself about an adequate self-description.

There was major disagreement over the question regarding linguistic affinity. Thus, there were discussions about the extent to which "perceived fears" should be taken into account. Positions faced were "We must meet the people" (while also taking perceived fears seriously) on the one hand, and "We are not missionaries" (journalistic tasks do not include persuasion or creating peace of mind) on the other. This field of tension between responsibility for language and the incentive for high levels of attention must be discussed in a more critical and honest way, so that it can be resolved.

## F. THE NEED FOR FACT CHECKING

**"FACT-CHECKING IS CARRIED OUT BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER A REPORT."**

Fact-checking, in other words, checking verbal and written statements against researched facts, was described by participants as a central part of journalistic work. In this way, false statements are corrected and correct statements are underpinned with additional information where necessary. There was consensus within the group that time available

for continual and at the same time rigorous fact-checking will become less in the wake of structural changes in the media landscape<sup>8</sup>. In addition, reference was made to the problem that corrections of statements did not receive nearly as much attention as the false statements preceding them.

**"WORK ON THE TEXT CONTINUES EVEN AFTER PUBLICATION."**

Prior to an interview, it helps to research the interviewer's digital environment. Questions that can be clarified include: "What claims/positions/statements can be expected? Can they be proven? Can they be debunked?" Particularly in an ever more fragmented media landscape, it is important for journalists to obtain information across the entire debate by observing the various sub-publics. Therefore, in addition to classic newspapers, portals and magazines, a contemporary press analysis also needs to take account of less apparent platforms that are in fact highly frequented by a few sections of the population.

**"WE MUST ALSO MOVE IN THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT EXPERIENCED BY THE PROTAGONISTS. WHAT KIND OF MEDIA, INFORMATION AND BLOGS DO THEY PROBABLY REFER TO? WHEN I TALK TO A POPULIST ABOUT THE TOPIC OF MIGRATION, IT COULD BE A CURRENT ARTICLE ON "TICHYS EINBLICK" [TICHYS INSIGHTS]<sup>9</sup> OR SIMILAR THAT THEY WANT TO BOMBARD ME WITH."**

The participants agreed that it is legitimate not to publish false statements from an interview. Otherwise, they have to be categorised, for example, via written comments in the article, a pause and superimposition of a correction in the video or of a counter voice attached to the false statement.

**"THE POINTS WE LIST HERE MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO DEAL WITH ANTI-DEMOCRATIC POPULISTS."**



8. This problem is also described in detail in the report "Mediating Populism", see **recommended reading**.

9. "Tichys Einblick" is a German populist national-conservative monthly online magazine.



### 3. RECOMMENDED READING



- Neue deutsche medienmacher\*innen (2018): **"Glossar der neuen deutschen medienmacher\*innen. Formulierungshilfen für die Berichterstattung im Einwanderungsland"**, [https://www.neuemedienmacher.de/Glossar\\_Webversion.pdf](https://www.neuemedienmacher.de/Glossar_Webversion.pdf)
- Neue deutsche medienmacher\*innen (2017): **"Wetterfest durch den Shitstorm. Leitfaden für Journalist\*innen zum Umgang mit Hass im Netz"**, <https://no-hate-speech.de/de/video/neues/leitfaden-fuer-journalistinnen-zum-umgang-mit-hass-im-netz/>
- Philip Kreißel, Julia Ebner, Alexander Urban, Jakob Guhl (2018): **"Hass auf Knopfdruck. Rechtsextreme Trollfabriken und das Ökosystem koordinierter Hasskampagnen im Netz"**, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), [http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ISD\\_Ich\\_Bin\\_Hier\\_2.pdf](http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ISD_Ich_Bin_Hier_2.pdf)
- Sophie Gaston, Peter Harrison-Evans, Philipp Sälhoff, Joris Niggemeier (2018): **"Mediating Populism"**, <https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/mediating-populism-studie/>
- **Mediendienst Integration vom Rat für Migration e.V.** supports journalists in the research on differentiated and anti-racist reporting, <https://mediendienst-integration.de/>

## 4. ON THE AUTHORS

The "collection of experiences for promoting a culture of democratic debate - media professionals' handling of anti-democratic populists" resulted from a collaboration between Das Progressive Zentrum and the *neuen deutschen medienmacher\*innen*. During a workshop with 20 media professionals from print, online, broadcasting, TV as well as blogs and YouTube channels, working groups discussed well-known challenges and potential solution approaches.

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*Das Progressive Zentrum* (DPZ) is an independent and non-profit think tank based in Berlin. DPZ aims to foster new networks of progressive actors from different backgrounds and to promote innovative politics as well as economic and social progress. To achieve this goal, *Das Progressive Zentrum* involves mainly young thinkers and decision-makers from Germany and Europe in its progressive debates.

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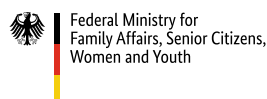
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