

Internet

Freelance Media Watchdog: A Portrait of Stefan Niggemeier



His criticism has made him famous: since 2004, Stefan Niggemeier has been watching Germany's biggest tabloid newspaper like a hawk in his BILDblog.de. He has long been keeping an eye on other media, too. Meanwhile, Niggemeier – a qualified journalist – has become media watchdog.

"My first up-close-and-personal encounter with the *Bild* newspaper came in Copenhagen in 2001", explains Stefan Niggemeier. At the time, he was reporting on the Eurovision Song Contest from Denmark for German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Germany's representative was the pop singer Michelle, whose Eurovision diary – supposedly written herself – appeared each day in *Bild*. "One morning I was standing next to Michelle as she opened up the newspaper and said 'Nothing of what it says here is true!'" remembers Niggemeier.

Niggemeier wrote a snide commentary which, looking back, he calls his "first quasi-BILDblog entry". In it, he described how the diary note about Michelle's first rehearsal was written by a *Bild* editor before the rehearsal had even taken place: "He knows Michelle better, as it were, than he knows himself. He imagines what she's thinking."

"Media need criticism"

Named and shamed, the *Bild* journalist struck back. "Later, he lambasted me", says Niggemeier. "That just isn't done! One crow doesn't peck another crow's eyes out." Even today, Niggemeier can't believe how his colleague reacted: "As in all other areas of public life, media need criticism." Journalists have to report critically on other jour-



Niggemeier likes the fact that he has meanwhile become known in the industry as a "media watchdog". "All the same, I do not hold a particular office, nor am I any sort of supervisor", he stresses with a laugh. For him, the title entails neither a particular pecking order nor exclusivity: "Anyone can take on this job."

From school newspaper to serious national daily

Niggemeier grew up in the outskirts of Osnabrück, and was always fascinated by media criticism. At 16 he subscribed to *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and read with great interest the reports about Leo Kirch, the Munich media mogul who at the time was expanding his empire. "I found this very alarming."

Although Niggemeier knew early on that he wanted to be a journalist, he did not have a career clearly mapped out in his head. At secondary school he worked on the school newspaper, and on leaving school wrote for the *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung*. He then attended the German School of Journalism in Munich and did work experience at *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Now nearly 40, Niggemeier writes regularly for the Sunday newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* (FAS) and occasionally for the daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ).

Blogging all day long



Haften für eigene Zitate an fremder Stelle

Der Sportartikelhersteller Jako hat also den Blogger Frank alias Trainer Basde abgemahnt, weil der sich abfällig über die Marke geäußert hat. Der Blogger kochte den Eintrag und unterschrieb eine Unterlassungserklärung. Doch das das Unternehmen fand einen Teil seiner „Schwachhähne“ später an anderer Stelle im Netz wieder: auf der Seite eines Newsaggregators namens „Jewstin“, der automatisch mit kurzen Anrufen auf ungeprüfte Internetseiten verlinkt. Damit hat Basde zwar nichts zu tun, aber Jako

Niggemeier also spends a lot of time online. As a blogger, he not only provides material for the FAZ.net television blog, but also has his own Internet pages. He is supported by other bloggers, as there is plenty to do. Since April 2009, BILDblog.de has seen itself as "a watchblog for German media" – and no longer the entire German press.

keeps an eye only on *Bild*, but on the entire German press.

What is more, Niggermeier's virtual reference work *fernsehlexikon.de* provides in-depth entries about individual programmes as well as a news blog and answers to specific questions. The media journalist has also created a personal blog – at stefan-niggemeier.de – as a sort of "playground". This blog also involves media criticism, which at times leads to problems distinguishing between the different sites: "Although some of the topics overlap with those on *BILDblog.de*, my blog offers a more detailed commentary."

Award-winning criticism

"My work and my leisure time merge to a great extent", says Niggemeier. "Blogging has a tendency to take one over and sometimes fills an entire day." The time is well spent, however: for the Berlin-based freelance journalist, the media criticism business model is amazingly successful. Time after time, he wins awards. Both BILDblog.de and stefan-niggemeier.de have landed the renowned Grimme Online Award, among other prizes.

It is difficult to measure, however, whether Niggemeier makes any real difference to the media he criticizes. "Internal discussions may perhaps be triggered or influenced", hopes the journalist. Niggemeier has at least noticed that there was less product placement in *Bild* after "BILDblog.de" had repeatedly documented examples of this type of surreptitious advertising.

Communication, distance, confrontation

For Niggemeier, however, it is the reactions of readers that are blogging's "real reward". "It is an addiction for me, an insatiable appetite for attention", he wrote in a 2007 FAS article "About Blogging": "Or, to put it more positively and less egocentrically, for communication." The direct feedback he gets from his blogging still gives Niggemeier great satisfaction, and he sees the virtual comments he receives back as a luxury. "I really like writing for the dailies, but I get much less feedback from it."

His lust for communication notwithstanding, Niggemeier also has a need to "set himself apart from the crowd". He feels very much at ease outside the group: "I like to stand on the sidelines rather than right in the middle." Niggemeier prefers to observe from a distance and is not keen to be pigeonholed. He sees himself as belonging neither to the journalist camp nor the blogger camp. "I love finding a comfortable spot for myself between all the different stools."

Niggemeier also does not enjoy going to events in order to make useful contacts: "I am not a good networker." Independence, says Niggemeier, is everything to him. He feels that the desire to keep a certain distance is probably not a bad trait for a journalist. "A person who does not spend every evening socializing with the people he writes about will also have the freedom to approach stories objectively and say 'Hang on, something isn't quite right here!'"

Dominik Reinle

has a degree in sociology and works as a freelance journalist in Cologne, for the Internet section of German broadcaster Westdeutscher Rundfunk, among others.

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