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“Dissolve the Interlocking” – Lutz Hachmeister on Politics and the Media



In May 2010, Federal President Horst Köhler resigned after a radio interview. What influence does reporting have on politics? What is the relationship between politicians and journalists? An analysis by media researcher Lutz Hachmeister.

Mr. Hachmeister, what was the media’s share in the resignation of President Köhler?

A weighty one, though we have to decide in each case what “the media” are. But several opinion-leading papers had a share in it. Early in his first term in 2004, the media pressed Köhler into a particular role, which he was happy to accept: the statesman who is above the operation of normal politics and gives the parties moral instructions, a new shining light in German politics. I always found this grotesque.

I don’t think it was the journalistic withdrawal of love, which always follows inevitably, that caused Köhler’s resignation, but the communication-psychological effect brought about by this yo-yo game of praise and damnation shouldn’t be underestimated.

“They play into one another’s hands”

What is the basic relationship between politics and reporting?

It is that of a close interlocking, a daily bazaar where it is less a matter of hard news than of rumors, moods and conjectures. Politicians believe that they are dependent on appearances in the media in order to keep themselves and their positions constantly before the public. Journalists in turn are always in need of new material, even if only small snippets of alleged news. To this extent, they play into one another’s hands. This is usually to the detriment of real research.

In your eyes then politics and journalism are accomplices?

Yes. In Berlin you see again and again the same cliques of politicians and journalists sitting together. Then of course there are the not quite public circles and discussion groups. This already existed in Bonn, as in the capital of every developed country. But in Berlin it’s been raised to a higher power and accelerated; in the Bonn years there was still no Internet, no instant messaging.

Work, family, country

Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the established media represented predominantly left-liberal values. What is the attitude of the opinion-leading journalism today?

There’s been a generational change. The last generation of journalists that was politicized in the traditional sense was shaped by the debates in the 1980s over nuclear power and upgrading Nato armaments. Since then established journalism has moved in the middle-class center. I once expressed the new values formula in this way: Work, Family, Country.

This can be seen in, for example, a comparison of the title themes of the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* over the last ten years: they are less and less about official politics and more and more about a respectable middle-class life: lifestyle, family, raising children. I don’t want to criticize that at all; perhaps it will give rise to a different political understanding.

Media control is possible in the long term

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Who has the edge in the struggle for the social power of interpretation – politics or the?

Here you really have to define more precisely which media and politicians you’re talking about. In addition there are groups of influential ministry officials, political advisers, politically active foundations and pressure groups, which aren’t sufficiently taken account of in traditional analyses. Politicians certainly have the impression that it’s increasingly difficult for them to withstand the superior force of a constant media bombardment. But there are enough examples to show that, with restraint and your own decision making, the journalistic class can be levered out.

However, politicians can hardly do much against a prevailing mood in the media. Those who have strayed onto a slippery slope in general media reporting will have a hard time regaining their balance. You can see this at present with the FDP, which because of the economic crisis suddenly no longer finds any media support for its plans for a general tax cut. But as a rule, politicians succeed in the long run in blocking media demands and bringing them to naught with the help of a clever strategy.

It’s about maintaining the system

What role does the economy play in this power structure?

The media groups are firmly anchored in the prevailing economic system – how could it be otherwise? Even that journalistic front company, East Germany, no longer exists. The editors-in-chief and media managers are in an economic situation in which they feel quite comfortable and they want to maintain their status. But now there are these economic and technological threats. Technological in the form of the Internet and the competition of bloggers and citizen journalists, economic in the form of the loss of advertising. The effect on the reporting of the mainstream media is that it repeatedly demands the status quo: things should remain as they were in West Germany, which functioned quite comfortably for 40 years.

That means that commitment to entirely new social models is not very pronounced. Journalism and politics now generally restrict themselves to patchwork thinking that is concerned to maintain the system. In the development of new journalistic products and formats, you see that no one dares any great leaps. The big news is then that there’s a new political talk show with Günter Jauch or something like that.

With courage and confidence

What should the ideal interplay between the media and politics look like?

Both systems have to learn to end their complete functional interlocking – to stop falling into the same nervous ritual. It’s comical to see how politicians propagate not appearing so frequently on talk shows, and then there they sit again. It must be some magnetism. For political decisions, politicians need to take the time for a dialogue with civil society, and then make decisions on the solid basis of their craft.

Journalism should do research again and not weary the public with a constant barrage of alarmist or fashionable commentaries. We need a new model for training professional communicators in the twenty-first century – this discussion has gone to sleep. The goal of such training, which in my opinion can’t be done at some professional school, would be to produce journalists who aren’t too influenced by pseudo crises and technological trends, but rather practice their profession with more courage and confidence. To my taste, there’s too much melancholy and swan song in the melodies sung by journalists today.

*Dominik Reinle
Conducted the interview. The author has a degree in sociology and works as a freelance journalist for the Internet Editorial Staff of West German Broadcasting and others. He lives in Cologne.*

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