On The Development of the Impartiality Maxim in German Journalism

Philomen Schönhagen*

The first issue of the Wienerisches Diarium – later known as the Wiener Zeitung – hailed in a style of reporting that would concentrate on "the substance of all the latest, most remarkable and true news of the world received by this editorial office in writing, without oratorical or poetic elaborations, or prejudices, conveying nothing but the truth in accordance with the reports received."1

At first sight the above announcement may not strike the reader as out of the ordinary. Yet from today's point of view, and paying tribute to the venue of Vienna, it is a most suitable, albeit unusual introduction to the chosen topic. Announcements like it were typical of and widely used in early journalism. And there is more to them than meets the eye. In fact, they all bear within them one of the most central issues of journalism in general, which is the idea of impartiality. They even reveal some of the rules of conduct established to that end, announcing as they do a kind of reporting which is to the point and truthful in accordance with the principle of "relata refero." 2

This is interesting inasmuch as it is frequently said that up until the Second World War there was virtually no journalistic impartiality in Germany or rather in German-language printed media. Wolfgang Donsbach wrote in 1992:

"The press in Germany tended to be conditioned by party policy until well into this century, in fact until after the Second World War. The majority of newspapers in the Weimar Republic were conditioned by party politics or by philosophical institutions." 3

The latter is known to be true, however, on closer inspection of the history of journalism it is hardly reasonable to deduct from it the theory that in Germany there "never was a tradition according to which journalism was committed to or had to commit itself to objectivity and neutrality."4

Donsbach continues by saying that:

"in the USA, this commitment between the press and interest groups began to disintegrate in the early 19th century, more than 100 years before it did in Germany."5

In actual fact, Germany or rather German-language printed media have a much longer tradition of journalism to look back on; it can be traced to the time the first periodical papers were published in the 17th century, some of its roots reaching back as far as the antecedents of those

Translated by Mag. Verena Tomasik.

1 Emil Löbl: Kultur und Presse, Leipzig 1903, 50.
2 Extended version of a paper presented at the symposium on 55 years of Austrian Press Agency which was to be held in Vienna on September 18, 2001 but which because of the terrorist attacks in the USA has been postponed until May 13, 2002.
3 According to this principle news are to be related as they are received. I shall refer to this below. The principle is closely linked to another rule of reporting which is that of references. Kaspar Stiebel, in one of the earliest known commentaries on newspapers, discusses these rules at great length, see also Kaspar Stiebel: Zeitung, Lust und Nutz. Complete reprint of the original edition of 1695. Gert Hagedorn (ed.) Bremen 1969, pages 57 and 27, see also Philomen Schönhagen: Unparteilichkeit im Journalismus. Traditions einer Qualitätsnorm. Tübingen 1998. Higl against Bremi: Parteileichtheit und Zeitungswein, Zur Rekonstruktion einer medienpolitischen Diskussion an der Wende vom 17. zum 18. Jahrhundert. In: Wolfgang F. Haag (ed.): Musem, Medien, Politik. Karlsruhe 1976, 202-203. Emil Löbl points out that the Wienerisches Diarium / the Wiener Zeitung - maintained these principles for a long time (see also Kultur und Presse, 50).
6 Donsbach, Instrumente der Qualitätsmessung, 65.
papers. Besides, contrary to the above quoted and widely diffused conception,7 the principle of impartiality in American journalism can be traced back to well before the 19th century, i.e., to the first colonial papers of the first half of the 18th century. In Germany, there is proof that the concept of impartiality existed for several centuries in a row, particularly with local papers. Due to lack of space, the following cannot claim to be more than a rough sketch of this tradition of journalistic impartiality, with very few examples to support this theory. However, all of it is based on a full analysis of early journalism and local press, particularly that of the late 18th and the early 19th century.8

1. Impartiality in German-language Journalism in the Early Days

The term impartiality in the context of periodical papers is first expressly used for the title of two weekly papers in 1623. One was the Zurich paper Neun Partheysche Zeitung und Relation which appeared under the same name, its founder being an avowed unpartisan, having written its first issue in the year 1137. It was probably also published in Zurich. Another paper, also under the same name, was probably also published in Zurich. A later issue of the latter of that same year also carried the title Neun Partheysche Zeitung und Relation, and another version yet bears the expression "one einichin affekct"9, referring to its impartial reporting style in a way similar to that of the Wiener Dniamais mentioned above.

As early as 1621, a weekly paper was published in Frankfurt which bore the interesting title: unaltered, continuous paper on news which are received ordinarily, sent in by correspondents and divulged without a trace of passion...10 Incoming news were to be disseminated without passion, that is, free from passionate sympathy, independent from personal attitudes or convictions, neutral in other words.6 The term unversgreiflich refers to the same concept: "...impartial, without the right to anticipate the judgement of others" or "the opinions of others."11 A newspaper published in Ozing in 1625 assured its readers that all its news was printed "truthfully and impartially."12

The Sonnägliche Zeitung in its title of 1688 substantiates its support of neutral reporting by saying that "everyone should be satisfied as far as possible", meanng that all readers had to be satisfied in their diverse needs for information and orientation. The latter is best achieved by being neutral. The Hamburger or Hesstischische Correspondent, a highly successful and widely read paper of the 18th century, in its first issue of June 22, 1712, uses similar words to justify a programme of impartial reporting.13 Martin Welke writes that the editors of that paper, following the principle of "audiatur et altera pars"...[published] comments without regard to their origin, statements by the parties in power are printed alongside those of the opposition (...). Consiously holding back in own opinion the 'Correspondents' places controversial political views alongside each other so that everyone can form their own opinion.14

All of the above are typical references to and programmatic announcements of the journalist profession of the early days, as found in many titles and introductory remarks to papers in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. The list of examples is endless. Early writers, such as Kaspar Stiedler, in their essays on journalism also gave careful consideration to the aspect of impartiality and the principles advocated in the titles of newspapers, e.g., research into and transparency of literary sources, unprejudiced reporting, "relata refero" and "audiatur et altera pars". Relevant literature has many examples to prove that journalists were not simply paying lip service to these programs but rather were practicing impartial reporting on a daily basis. This was not only the case with the first two known weekly papers of the 17th century but as Thomas Schröder writes,15 quite apparently so with numerous papers of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries too. The best-known example in this context is probably Johann Friedrich Codreas' Allgemeine Zeitung first published in 1798. Thus, contrary to Donsbach's theory quoted above it has to be said that impartiality was quite evidently a central principle of early journalism in the 17th century. But what exactly did individual newspapermen, in other words the editors, understand by this principle?

2. The Traditional Concept of Journalist Impartiality

The above mentioned introductory remarks were written by editors and publishers, who not infrequently were one and the same person, and were published in first editions, New Year's editions, epilogues, editorials, and others more.16 They are considered their own personal statements and constitute valuable sources for reconstructing the views of those who practiced journalistic impartiality at the time. A comprehensive analysis of more than 1,000 German-language papers from three centuries shows that the concept of impartiality in practice relied on four central rules which are briefly outlined below:

8 The findings on early journalism are based primarily on extensive studies of literature, those on local journalism of the 18th and 19th centuries are also based on the author's own analysis of more than 1,500 newspaper editions carried out for the doctorate thesis, see Schönhagen, Unparteilichkeit im Journalismus, 56.
9 The claim for impartiality of the so-called mass relations, the antecedents of weekly papers, is first found in 1599 in Straßburg. The latter is best achieved by being neutral. The Hamburger or Hesstischische Correspondent, a highly successful and widely read paper of the 18th century, in its first issue of June 22, 1712, uses similar words to justify a programme of impartial reporting. Martin Welke writes that the editors of that paper, following the principle of "audiatur et altera pars"...[published] comments without regard to their origin, statements by the parties in power are printed alongside those of the opposition (...) Consiously holding back in own opinion the 'Correspondents' places controversial political views alongside each other so that everyone can form their own opinion. Johann Friedrich Codreas' Allgemeine Zeitung first published in 1798. Thus, contrary to Donsbach's theory quoted above it has to be said that impartiality was quite evidently a central principle of early journalism in the 17th century. But what exactly did individual newspapermen, in other words the editors, understand by this principle?
"Audatur et altera pars": the objective of this principle was to provide universal news whereby all the knowledge and conscious experience prevailing in societies (also local ones), as well as all the different points of view and opinions were given equal consideration throughout. Today this principle is often referred to as pluralism, a term which does not full justice to the universality of news reporting. It should be noted that this principle did not apply to individual newspaper articles but to news coverage as a whole.² It also did not include journalists’ own opinions as expressed in commentaries and the like.

Separation of news and (journalistic) commentary (editorial): this considered a sign of neutrality on the part of the news supplier and a guarantee for “impartial” news representation. Newspapers of the 17th and 18th centuries in particular, for the most part did without commentaries,² which was partly due to the strict censorship regulations valid at the time. Those commentaries which did appear were clearly separated from the actual news and were marked accordingly.

Transmission of primary sources, i.e. the originators of reports or statements: this principle had two objectives in mind: One was to maintain the reliability of sources and the other was to provide maximum orientation for readers. Sound judgment of reports and statements was almost impossible without knowing the originators and their interests, motivation, etc. (This was not true for experts who had other, relevant criteria to rely on).² Besides, there was a strong link between transparency of sources and the principle below, as in those days it was said that news reporters were not responsible for the contents, or rather for the truth or correctness of news, but for relating these news correctly ("relata refero"). In stating the origin of a piece of news the reporter automatically conferred responsibility for the content to the originator. The reporter’s responsibility for correct reproduction was covered by the following principle:

- Exact or “faithful” reporting:² news, even when condensed and adapted, were to be reported in an "unadulterated" way, i.e. honestly and faithfully, in accordance with their original meaning.² This applied to all news regardless of their origin (equal treatment in principle). In addition coverage was to be to the point: "without passion" or "affect".

The above rules went hand in hand with a very specific conception journalists had of themselves which in actual fact constituted the basis or prerequisite for all of these rules: journalists saw themselves a neutral reporters who pursued their profession "without passion", in other words, without taking sides with any one party. The Frankfurter-Kayeber, Oberpostamtzeitung, in its 13th edition of 1781 wrote:

"Journalists have to be «nonmoralists, they must not be friends or foes of any nation, must examine the source of all news and without reserve must relate to their readers the naked and bare truths.²"

The editors of the Göppingener Wochenblatt, in one of their issues of 1850, quite explicitly described the functions of a neutral and impartial reporting:

"It is not a party paper and therefore will continue to portray the views of different parties as before, and will protect itself from any restrictive influences. Even at the risk of being reprehended for confusing matters it will not deviate from this position because it believes that a local paper, if it wants to serve the freedom of press in any way at all, can bring enlightenment to the people by showing them different views and deductions therefrom and by leaving it to the people to decide upon their correctness.²³"

The editor of the Chemnitzer Bote, in 1848, was even more to the point in saying that:

"The editor, like the chairman of a major assembly of different parties, is to give everyone the right to speak, so long as they do not transgress the basic boundaries of moderation.²⁴"

Background and Motive

It is often assumed that impartial or objective journalism (only) came to fruition under the influence of democracy;²⁵ in reality, however, that principle was formed in the days of absolutism. What in effect was it that caused or motivated this concept of journalism? Was it simply a reaction to strict censorship? This theory is supported by several facts, one being the bayerische Pressemandat of September 6, 1799, during the reign of Maximilian IV, Joseph, which laid down that the facts were to be reported in as simple a way as possible, without adding personal judgement, but stating all references.²⁶ Yet, on closer inspection, the influence of censorship seems rather ambivalent. There are several indications that the principle of impartiality was practiced even where censorship was "mild",²⁷ but also that it went through despite the opposition of censorship.²⁸ Hans Wagner quotes a number of examples to demonstrate that

²² quoted from Oskar Bechtle, War und sein Bodenamt, 100 Jahre Göppingener Zeitung, 1821-1921, Leipzig 1921, 1-6.
²³ quoted from a caption in the jubiläumsausgabe of 75 Jahre Chemnitzer Tagblatt (17. 7. 1923), 25.
²⁵ This claim corresponds to the ancient "messenger formula" which in ancient orient had called for the "façtual reproduction of a message and one that conveyed the general sense of the message" (Jum Assamet: Das buaweide Guadulin, Schrifft, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen, München 1990).
²⁶ Interestingly, the current code of the German press council (Gesellschaft für die Reproduktion von News, Information, und Dokumenten) according to the sense of their message, see http://www.pressestatut.de [read on 22. 10. 2001].
²⁸ Wiegert, Journalismus 1. Auftrag, 107.
³⁰ Wiegert, Die Hamburgische Correspondent, 45 f. (as well as Berns, Parteilehnlichkeit und Zeitungswege).
On the Implementation of Rules of Conduct

A detailed analysis of local papers of the 18th and 19th centuries shows that the individual rules of conduct implied by the principle of impartiality were essential to editorial programmes and daily newspaper life. Particular emphasis was placed on the principle of universal reporting, as a consequence of which papers were turned into forums of local communication where lively and often controversial discussions were held among citizens on all issues concerning them. People even went so far as to consider these discussions their civil right. As a rule, editors' commentaries—mostly background information or explanatory notes on the practice of reporting rather than expressions of their own opinion—were clearly visible at a glance, readers were able to get a rough idea of which sources had been used. It is also quite interesting to note that some papers provided information on the "accessory circumstances" of individual news, i.e. the situation statements arose from, the motivation and interests behind them, etc., as these were in many cases considered more important for the assessment of information and the formation of opinions than the factual information itself. Uncertain sources were expressly marked as such. The claim for exact and unadulterated news reporting was translated into a set of individual rules on reporting which were published in the papers, often in combination with requests for citizens' contributions. Some rules concerned the length and diffuseness of contributions, others were set up to avoid insult and abuse, etc. and all of them assured equal opportunities for everyone to access the paper as a forum. Reporting standards were explained and justified regularly on the basis of individual cases.

A survey of local papers also proved that the motives for impartial reporting were primarily of a pragmatic nature. Any idealistic motives there might have been behind the concept, as in the case of the Dortmund paper Westfälischer Anzeiger by Arnold Mallinckrodt, were counterproductive, if anything. Mallinckrodt's enlightening intentions proved a significant hindrance to impartiality: "Unenlightened" ideas were either not published at all or were heavily commented and in some cases even put to the pillory of journalism. In one particular instance a reader had sent in a contribution on miracle healers. The editors in their commentary immediately demanded the names of those who sought help from such "bungaliers" so that they could publish them, because "publicity punishes slowly but surely;"

3. Impartiality in 18th Century American Journalism

As briefly mentioned above there are indications that a similar concept of journalist impartiality existed in early American colonial papers of the first half of the 18th century. It is true that these papers, which in 1704 postmasters who had been granted the official permission of English governors to publish, were awarded little attention in literature and were dismissed as "empty news registers." However, as Hazel Dicken-Garcia points out they used the same journalistic standards as Elizabeth Mallett's Daily Courant, the first "successful daily newspaper" in England. The latter, in her first edition of March 11, 1702, professed almost the same principles as those typical for German-language papers with the exception of universal reporting. That aspect, however, was quickly added by her successor the following month. He assured readers that reports would be published as he received them without inclination either to one side or the other. And this would be done by, representing the same Actions, according to the different Accounts which both Sides give of them [...].

Just as the editors of German-language papers before him Thomas Fleet, editor of the Boston Weekly Rehearsal professed impartiality and universal reporting by urging readers to contribute and by publishing rules for such contributions.

Stephen Boten's comments on the printing tradition in early colonialism provide useful information in this context. He claims that for economic reasons printing too was characterized by the principle of impartiality.

This attitude was referred to as freedom of press, i.e. "the liberty of the press". [...] A press was 'free' in this formulation, only if it was ‘open to all parties'.

Printers subsequently applied this same principle to the papers they published— and for the same reasons too. They feared that they would otherwise lose potential subscribers and printing orders. As in the German tradition of impartial editors of relevant American colonial papers also had a particular conception of themselves. Up until the revolution they saw themselves as "passive, detached observers, neutrally relaying information and opinion to others." It was only with the revolution that printers and newspaper editors began to take sides with different parties, many of them involuntarily so, as Boten reports. Following this stage of "partisan...

46 Examining historical material for faithful reporting is quite difficult as original statements made by individuals are not available for comparison with the reports printed in papers and the individuals cannot be interviewed as to their statements. Consequently it is only possible to draw indirect conclusions. (see Schönhagen, Unparteilichkeit im Journalismus, 82).

47 As mentioned above secondary sources were referred to begin with, particularly with a view to their programmatic aspect. In all, 1,500 titles were examined. In a further step implementation was asserted with original material (three titles with more than 1,500 editions between the late 18th and mid 19th centuries). For procedures nft results see also Schönhagen, Unparteilichkeit im Journalismus.

48 One exception was one of the papers examined as an example for original material for which (due to stiff censorship and its wide range of distribution) only pursued event-oriented reporting (announcing festivities, reporting on accidents, fires, etc.) to which the principle of universal reporting did not apply, see also Schönhagen, Unparteilichkeit im Journalismus, 218 ff.

49 As mentioned earlier this has hardly been looked into, not even by relevant studies such as the one by Böcking, just the facts. 11 ff. While he does point out that standards such as "Süren, detachment, nonpartisanship, and balance" had been discussed prior to 1830 and also refers to several newspapers of the 18th and 19th centuries, yet he does not only to supplemental without further examination that prior to 1850 these standards had not been implemented.


51 see Ehrfecht's essay in his "Unparteilichkeit im Journalismus...


54 see Boten: Printers and the american revolution, 20-22.


56 Neutral printers were often exposed to violent attacks. Ultimately, partisanship seemed inevitable, and in many cases also paid off, considering the changes in politics and society. (see Boten, Printers and the american revolution, 21 ff., 32 ff.)
4. Conclusions and Theoretical Implications

Both in Germany and in America there is a proof of a tradition of impartial journalism which can be traced back to the beginnings of (periodical) newspapers and which is therefore substantially older than commonly assumed. The principle of impartiality is closely linked to the way journalists see themselves as neutral reporters or "detached observers", and is put into practical terms by a few central rules of conduct. It is primarily for economic and pragmatic motives that papers have been striving to meet the most diverse interests and demands for information, communication and orientation on the readers' side. The principle of impartiality is really a principle of pragmatic journalism.

The concept of impartiality is very practically oriented which is why it makes all the more sense to take up this journalistic tradition once more, particularly in view of the issues and problems of journalism today. At the same time it provides one possible solution for the theoretical discussion on journalist objectivity: Provided the concept of impartiality as applied in practice is taken seriously, the claim for journalistic objectivity is no longer a claim for objective portrayal or realization of the truth, which in view of constructivist ideas is quite impossible anyway, but rather a claim for impartial reporting of the different points of view, the different interpretations of reality, and the different truths apparent in society. Journalist objectivity therefore is not a problem that needs to be solved by theories of cognition but instead is a sign of quality of editorial reporting. According to Luhmann journalism has set itself the task of reporting so that society can observe itself. Ortried Jarren is even more to the point in using the term "discourses of self-communication", which mass media are there to relay. It is by this act of relaying or reporting that society is enabled to communicate on itself and find a common definition for social reality, which again is only possible through communication. Impartiality ensures that all parties and interests are given the chance to participate and all the different points of view and the different truths are granted access to the discourse arranged by the mass media. In doing so it guarantees maximum orientation and information for everyone.

Dr. Philomen SCHÖNHAGEN (1966)
Since 1993, scientific assistant at the Institute for Communication Sciences (journalism) at the University of Munich, 1997, doctorate thesis on impartiality in Journalism, research areas: theory and history of social communication and its media, history and theory of journalism, communication phenomena on the Internet.

*M Z 4/2001*
APA Symposium
on Values in News
(Agency) Journalism

Institutional Communications
in 17th and 18th Century

Impartiality Maxim in Journalism

Anglo-American Influence
on Post-war Journalism

News Agencies –
Developments and Types

News Agencies in Eastern Europe

Portraits
Content

Mr “Z’s” Good and Bad Memories
Contemplative travels through the history of institutional communications in Vienna from 1621 to 1851
Wolfgang Dukkwitsch

On The Development of the Impartiality Maxim in German Journalism
Philomen Schönhagen

Official Reporting
On the History of Governmental Policies for News Agencies in Austria
Wolfgang Pensold

News Values in Transformation?
About the Anglo-American Influence on Post-war Journalism
Jürgen Wilke

State News Agencies:
A Time for Re-Evaluation?
Terhi Rantanen / Oliver Boyd-Barret

East European News Agencies and the Transition to Democracy
A Research Report by the International Press Institute, end of 2001
Johann P. Fritz

Portraits:
Kent Cooper – News Visionary
Stephen H. Miller
Alfred Geiringer
Michael Nelson