

**Keynote Speech "The Role of the Media in Society"  
as part of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation event  
"The Role of the Media in Arab Societies" on June 14  
2011, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, Dr. Johannes  
Beermann, State Minister and Head of the State  
Chancellery of the Free State of Saxony**

(check against delivery)

Address,

Allow me to begin with a quote from Niklas Luhmann, one of Germany's best-known sociologists: "Anything we know about our society, or even about the world we live in, we learned through mass media."<sup>[1]</sup>

A bon mot among journalists summarises this sentiment as follows: "It is amazing that every day just enough happens to fill a newspaper." Of course, the saying is quite self-deprecation, as journalists are the ones who make the newspapers. Or, to expand on this, as we are

talking about the role of the media in society, journalists also make the news programs on radio and television, and are responsible for the editorial content on the internet.

In a society dominated by mass media, our understanding of the world is shaped by a selection made by others. The advantages and disadvantages of this structure are debatable. However, as long as the structures remain as described, journalists bear a great responsibility, of which (I hope) they are always aware.

On the other hand, society needs bodies to make this selection. This is the only way we can protect ourselves against information overflow or even information overkill.

The big bang in information terms was indisputably the invention of printing with movable type by Johannes Gutenberg, a goldsmith from Mainz. He revolutionised the way we accessed information, which had previously been the preserve of a few privileged groups for centuries. Before that, monks copied books in

monasteries, and a diligent scribe took several months to copy a book. Thus, knowledge was archived in a few repositories to which very few people had access. Even those who could read in the Middle Ages had few opportunities to increase their knowledge of their own accord.

With his invention, Gutenberg radically democratised access to knowledge at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. 40 years after his invention, there were printing presses in

110 cities in six countries. Another 10 years later, over 8 million books had been printed.

The first daily newspaper in Germany was published on July 1 1650 in Leipzig – a city in the present-day Free State of Saxony. Information became available ever faster and at less and less cost for ever more people.

The invention of the telegraph speeded things up even more. Whereas before, messengers on horseback took several days to relay a message, telegraphy reduced this time to a few hours or just minutes.

Telephone, radio and not least television have made access to information faster and faster. And in the last 15 years, we have been experiencing another development in this area, with as yet unforeseeable consequences: The internet is taking over large parts of our daily life.

Some cite the development of computer technology or the invention of the internet as the dawn of the information age. I believe that the invention of printing in

Europe was the origin of this development, which sometimes leaves us breathless today.

Neil Postman, an American media theorist, expressed this as follows: "What started as a liberating stream (of useful information) has turned into a deluge of chaos."<sup>[2]</sup>

Since the invention of printing, global knowledge has increased constantly and at an ever faster rate. Around 1800, the knowledge in the world doubled roughly every



100 years. Researchers state that today, mankind's knowledge doubles every five to seven years.

This is why we need experts to explain and report this knowledge and the intricacies of our world to us as a society. I believe this responsibility lies with journalists, among others.

However, there is one thing we cannot forget. Collecting, preparing and distributing information costs money.

Well-educated journalists and functional editorial teams

are required for reliable research of information and professional presentation. That does not come for free.

In my opinion, the "free lunch mentality" which prevails in the internet is a challenge, or even a threat to this structure. I am sure that this topic will crop up in our debates over the next few hours.

I will return to the subject in a minute. But first allow me to say a few words about the structure of the media landscape in Germany.

Until 1984, the public service broadcasters – which broadcast television channels jointly within the ARD group, and ZDF (Second German Television) dominated the broadcasting market in Germany.

As it was initially only possible to broadcast radio terrestrially, the only channels available were public service channels as a result of the scarcity of transmission frequencies in Germany. The German

Federal Constitutional Court confirmed this structure in its broadcasting judgements. It rejected commercial channels as long as it was impossible to broadcast a variety of private channels, thus creating a diversity of opinions. Private television and radio channels were not permitted until 1984, when cable television was developed and introduced.

What does the term “public” in public service channels mean? The legislation of the Federal States governs the organisational structure of Germany’s public service broadcasters in Germany precisely: The legal form and

purpose of the organisation are stipulated. The managerial responsibilities (artistic director) and supervision responsibilities (administrative and broadcasting councils) are governed. The public service broadcasters have a duty to provide a basic service based upon a legally-defined programming mandate. A variety of social groupings must be given an opportunity to air their voices. Supervisory committees are in place to guarantee their influence. The broadcasting councils comprise representatives of parties, trade unions, churches and associations. In spite of this, public service

broadcasters are obliged to maintain political and economic neutrality.

The public service broadcasters have a secure source of income – the license fee based upon the findings of an independent commission. Every household in Germany pays this fee. That permits independence from government influence, as taxation principles are not applicable.

By contrast, the private broadcasting companies in Germany are financed solely by advertising. That makes them dependent on the advertising market, which in turn is susceptible to economic cycles. While the state broadcasting authorities receive over seven billion Euros each year from license fees, the advertising income of private channels totals approximately 4.4 billion Euros.

In recent times, the internet presence of state broadcasting authorities has been the subject of particularly heated debate. As a result, the fee-financed

web services provided by the public service  
broadcasters have been limited.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

the average German uses media like printed  
newspapers, magazines and books, radio, TV and audio  
media as well as the internet for over ten hours a day –.  
Based on the current statistical life expectancy for  
German men, ten hours a day means to them spending  
32 years of their lives consuming media. Of course, this



has to be taken with a grain of salt – there are TV addicts whose TVs are on all day, and those who have learned to consume media in moderation. Also, people read newspapers at breakfast, TV news provides the backdrop for dinner, CD players are often switched on when people are reading and radios are used as background noise when driving – without this simultaneous use, there would not be enough hours in a day.

Ultimately, all these kinds of media provide information. And providing information must be considered the key function of mass media.

The media should ensure that people understand the political, social, economic or environmental situation. Consumers must understand democracy and learn about politics to allow them to participate in these processes. To guarantee that this is the case, the media should report as comprehensively, objectively and understandably as possible. Their social functions

include imparting behaviours, roles, standards and social values. They help people orient themselves in a world which is becoming increasingly complex. And not least, the media should allow media consumers to relax and forget the worries of everyday life.

Public communication through the media must be a platform for open exchanges of opinions from diverse social and political players. Public communication through the media ensures a justified expectation of rationality in problem selection and processing.

At its core, public service broadcasting also has an integrating function. This means that it should appeal to all social classes and support social cohesion.

If the media are to fulfil the responsibilities I have just described, journalists must be able to research and report freely.

The media is also responsible for providing comprehensive information, reporting on the diverse opinions and representing its own opinions. Freedom of the press/media and freedom of opinion are two sides of the same coin; there is a good reason why they are laid down in the same basic rights article in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany. Each of these freedoms is inconceivable without the other.

The Federal Constitutional Court has reaffirmed the particular importance of freedom of the press for

democracy in Germany: "A free press, not subject to government authority or censored is a key element of a free state; in particular, free, regularly published political press is essential for modern democracy."<sup>[3]</sup>

A well-known German journalist put this more simply: "Freedom of the press is the stuff of live for democracy"<sup>[4]</sup>

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Finally, I would like to give a cursory overview of the diverse characteristics of the media society in Germany:

- An extremely competitive media system has emerged.
- The content is aligned to an increasing extent with the attention spans of the audience.
- The growing focus on the advertising market and audience interests cannot but have an impact on the content of the media. Cultural factors and the educational interests of social organisations and political parties appear to be taking a back seat. <sup>[5]</sup>

- The media landscape has become increasingly diverse, both quantitatively and qualitatively. (for example, the increase in the number of television channels alone in Germany over the last 40 years)
- The media is not only becoming more diverse, it is also becoming more differentiated: There are magazines for target groups, specialist channels and internet-specific media.
- Information is being transmitted to a wider audience and faster. The internet in particular means that the media are always "switched on". Where previously the



editorial deadline in newspapers or the close of broadcasting on TV gave journalists and media consumers a break – now the only thing that matters is being first on the market with the information. There is often not enough time to check sources and make sure information is reliable. Word of mouth on blogs often exceeds the reach and impact of reputable news sources. And in the Web 2.0 era, when everyone can communicate with a mass audience with just a few mouse clicks, the internet has blurred the boundaries. In the net, individual and mass communication are

suddenly the same thing. The internet has overcome the one-sidedness of communication: Recipients can easily take on the role of the sender.

- Which brings us back to the question of guaranteeing the quality of information content. Financing internet portals is a critical topic in Germany, too. The private providers, in publishing houses and boards of management, are working on how to reverse the free culture in the internet. Internet users are seldom willing to pay for content in the internet, for example when they want to retrieve an article from the archive.

However, without reliable financing, the quality of journalism – both in classic media formats and the internet – cannot be maintained. We look forward to finding out what solutions can be found for these challenges.

A German media researcher, Ottfried Jarren, described the fundamental consequences of the developments presented here as follows:

"A particularly competitive and increasingly global media system is developing, which remains independent of

national political parties but is highly influenced by economic players. This development means that the political, or at least national government control over the media is dwindling."<sup>[6]</sup>

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to finish with another quote from Neil Postman. "Introducing a new medium is like a Faustian bargain. It gives us something - speed, efficiency and innovation. But we must also pay a price."<sup>[7]</sup> Determining

what this price is remains one of the most crucial questions of our modern media society. I hope we can come closer to finding the answers today.

Thank you for your attention.

## **The Courier pigeon**

Even in ancient times the military knew and used this fast way of information. In Noahs Arche it was a pigeon that was sent out to gather information about the flood. the day she did not return Noah knew the flood was gone.

**Manipulation of Information:**

In 1191 the city of Akkon was besieged by crusaders. Sultan Saladin sent a courier pigeon to the citizens of Akkon. The pigeon carried a message that he will arrive in the city with his army within the next three days. The crusaders intercepted the pigeon, read the note and replaced it. The note now said that Sultan Saladin would

not be able to come and help the people of Akkon, then they let the pigeon go. When the people of Akkon read the false note they became very disheartend and it was easy for the crusaders to conquer the city.

### **Information is important for the economy:**

In the nineteenth century Nathan Maya Rothschild, a banker, received the news by a courier pigeon that napoleon had lost the battle of waterloo, earlier than



even the british government learnt about it. When Rothschild started selling his shares people thought he had information they did not have and sold their shares as well. The stock rate collapsed and Rothschild bought the shares back and the stock rates rose again. This was the original case that was later on pictured in the famous movie "Wall Street"

The conscious usage of information is a kind of participation in politics and economics, culture and

education today in the times of the internet you do not have to be a rich banker or an important politician.

Everyone has access to any information in the world – if he is able to read and to understand.

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[1] Luhmann, Niklas: The Reality of Mass Media, 3rd Edition, Wiesbaden 2004, S. 9.

[2] Postman, Neil: Informing Ourselves to Death, DIE ZEIT, October 2nd 1992.

[3] BVerfGE 20, 162–230, "SPIEGEL Judgement", August 5th 1966.

[4] Hans Leyendecker

[5] Ibid. P. 28.

[6] Jarren, Ottfried: "Media Society" – Risks for Political Communication. APuZ B41-42/2001, P. 13.

[7] Cf. Heuser, Uwe Jean: Thinking like the Internet Wants us to, DIE ZEIT, September 23rd 2010.