

Where has investigative journalism gone?

Journalists during the coronavirus pandemic

by Sonja L. Bauer, head of the editorial team at "Berner Landbote"*



(CH-S) In the following presentation, journalist Sonja Laurèle Bauer analyses the role of the media, especially editors, during the coronavirus pandemic. She gave this slightly abridged presentation in Bern at the symposium "Corona – Fakes & Facts" on 6/7 April 2024. What demands can be placed on good journalism and what was lacking during the pandemic.

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[...] "It's part of the job of media professionals" – to put it in the words of the editor-in-chief of a Bern newspaper – "... to also illuminate inaccessible government rooms and closed official offices." Yes, he's right. Absolutely! "A functioning society depends on publicising what belongs in the open." I find it all the more difficult to explain why this did not happen at a time like the coronavirus era, and especially in 'his' newspaper, as well as to a large extent on Swiss television and in other media.

The role of the Fourth Estate

I was and am powerless and at a loss. It is not my intention to pillory my colleagues. I have no right to do that. But to ask: isn't especially the fourth estate in the country that must scrutinise politics

and society? To seek the truth? To ask questions? To analyse? To be sceptical? To endure doubt? The writer *Emil Zola* put it this way: "It is my duty to speak. I do not want to be an accomplice."

In one of his lectures during the coronavirus period, the philosopher *Gunnar Kaiser* said: "What would Plato have said? He would have asked. He would have kept on asking until his counterpart had to say: "I don't know".

Huxley and *Orwell* would be turning in their graves if they knew what was happening. Where are the intellectuals? They would ask themselves: What did we write all our books for ...

I asked myself: Where was the investigative journalism when it came to coronavirus, the measures and vaccination? Have some of our colleagues become too complacent, too gullible, or simply too disinterested?

Let's think of *Niklas Meienberg*, the uncomfortable historian and journalist who was born in 1940 and died in 1993. He published reports and texts on contemporary history. Ruthless and blunt. They contributed significantly to shaping public opinion in Switzerland in the 20th century. Where has this courage gone?

"Money for being tame?"

This equanimity, even to be unpopular, if it serves to find the truth. I still ask myself today: Did some journalists get money for being tame? For remaining silent? Are journalists not allowed to bite the hand that feeds them? Was that the point? Sometimes it can help the cause to gnaw a little longer on the bone, to dig a little deeper.

I was labelled courageous because from the beginning of the measures I wrote against the locking away of old people, against the isolation of young people, the thousand-fold and sickening

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("Mental leap") have appeared in the "Anzeiger Region Bern". Over the past 25 years, she has written numerous reports, portraits, and reviews for various German-language print media, including the "Berner Zeitung" and "Bund". In September 2024 her new book "Schattenspiel im Sternenlicht" will be published in the Lokwort-Verlag. Her Homepage: www.geschichtenatelier.ch

nose testing – in my case it was around 50 times. In any case, I knew that I was healthy, unlike my vaccinated interviewees who were sneezing all over the place – the compulsory vaccination, where it had long been known that you could catch the disease even if you were vaccinated.

Together at the table without a mask – alone on the street with a mask

Flashback, Corona four years ago: I remember a meal in a castle where nobody was there except our group, just before the lockdown. It wasn't compulsory to wear masks while eating at the table (we were right next to each other, close anywhere else), but someone wanted to go to the toilet. So as soon as a colleague got up, he put on his mask, crossed the empty room, only to keep on breathing at each other at the narrow table on his return from the loo.

This act, like countless others, was so absurd that I was amazed that nobody questioned it. "There is no right to obedience", said publicist *Hannah Arendt*.

Don't you also ask how it is possible that people obey even when it obviously makes no sense? Not just recently, but throughout world history. The history books do not tell us how things really were, but how they were portrayed by those who had the power of interpretation.

"Punish one, teach one hundred"

But why did even the journalists obey? Why did they agitate against dissenters, turning them into nutcases? The media can glorify a person – and kill it. They must have felt something like power. I can't explain it any other way. They were writing from hearsay, so to speak. That can't be true. "Punish one, teach one hundred", I read recently in the context of the book "Democracy in quicksand".

How many people had themselves vaccinated even though they didn't want to, because they bowed to the pressure. Because they didn't have the strength to resist.

Because many were vaccinated, they still don't understand how difficult the time was for those who didn't allow themselves to be "vaccinated" against the coronavirus: they had no access to restaurants, concerts, etc., were excluded and often antagonised. Their offence: They resisted ...

To this day, the coronavirus era has not been dealt with. Neither politically nor in the media.

The "framing" continues. Differentiated opinions – listening to one side and the other and reflecting on them; empathising with other ways of thinking – hardly exist anymore.

Some journalists and politicians continue to engage in polemics, as happened again recently in the "Berliner Zeitung" in a preview to today's event. The different people and their different attitudes were summarised in three words: "left-wing renegade", "right-wing extremist" and "anti-abortionist" ...

Dividing Society

Although journalists in particular should know that the world is too complex for there to always be simple solutions to difficult problems. This is how society is being divided. Breaking off the discourse leads to unsatisfactory political decisions because the fire of criticism was avoided in advance and the opportunity to mature was missed.

That's why I advocate admitting mistakes; for more awareness and less polarisation. On both sides. Connecting, not dividing. Respectful and objective: the tender plants of reason cling to the spine of a country.

Few journalists did any research

The few journalists who did more detailed research during the coronavirus period, for example on the issue of vaccination, and expressed their doubts, were lumped in with the "conspiracy theorists" and "right-wing extremists" by their professional colleagues without them doubting for a single moment.

Just like the medical professionals, some of them eminent experts in their field. They were denounced. Why did some of the journalists do this? Because they felt safer in the group, more invisible in the crowd, like fish in a school?

Or, on the contrary, because they wanted to raise their profile by arrogantly devaluing those who thought differently?

What really stunned me personally at first, then made me almost faint: How many media outlets talked shop about conspiracy theories without scrutinising the content of an opinion? Groups of people, even though they had completely different scientific or political opinions, were unceremoniously pushed into one and the same pigeonhole because that of the "conspiracy theorists" presented itself. Well-known artists no longer dared to express their views be-

cause otherwise they would be defamed in public. Scientists and doctors were denounced because they dared to say things that didn't fit in with some people's concept.

Freedom of opinion is a human right!

For democracy to be possible at all, social, political, and scientific discourse is indispensable. If it is no longer possible, democracy dies!

Once again: Doubting and scrutinising is the mandate of our guild. And, by the way: the ability to criticise and interpret distinguishes human intelligence from artificial intelligence. It still does up to now. Which is not insignificant for the future.

Dealing with doubt and our own fears takes time. How much are we prepared to invest in this?

The postulate of the editor-in-chief quoted at the top was not fulfilled by many journalists. The aim was to write eagerly and politically correctly, to please and not to question. The aim was to be uniform – but that is dangerous ...

As an experienced journalist, this made me angry. I hope that reflection and professional responsibility will help us find our way back to our professional mission, even when it becomes uncomfortable. The safe side is not always the right side ...

Just like Long-Covid, vaccine injuries are still hardly an issue. The "Berner Landbote" alone has heard from dozens of people affected. Even today. We cry about world history – but two years ago we all wrote a new chapter. Being critical of government regulations cannot be a crime.

A guilty conscience as a form of manipulation

Singing, for example, was banned in churches, even in daycare centres. What did that do to the children? Could it be that the coronavirus era played a major role in the fact that young people are doing so badly today? Was corona the prelude to psychiatric centres being overcrowded?

My then 14-year-old son lied at school because he didn't dare to say that he hadn't been vaccinated. He decided not to do so himself. Because we talked about it, because we dealt with the issue. Because I encouraged him not to trade his freedom for fear. And I asked him not to believe when people tried to persuade him that it was his fault when others died ...

Nota bene: Conveying a guilty conscience is one of the ten points of manipulation, according to Noam Chomsky.

As part of my job, I used to visit old people in nursing homes. One old woman asked me, at four meters distance, to please, please pull down my mask so that she could see a face before she died – she died alone, but not from coronavirus.

mRNA injection without asking parents

Children were asked to decide at short notice on the playground whether they wanted to be vaccinated – at the age of 12, despite the peer pressure we all know about. Manipulation was intentional, it was used. As far as I know, most children under 18 must ask their parents if they want to get a tattoo – getting an mRNA injection was done without permission.

Why were my colleagues not moved by this? Not even when it had long been clear that vaccinated people were also contracting coronavirus and that the vaccination was making some people ill. Were these people not taken seriously? Were they ignoring them? What presumption.

How often did the media say after the coronavirus era that we first had to learn from our mistakes? But no! Some mistakes don't have to be made in the first place! Because certain things are known in advance.

If more people in the media had paid attention, many things would not have happened. Anyone with any common sense knew that people could die not only from coronavirus, but also from isolation, loneliness, fear, and stress. There was domestic violence, suicides, job losses, despair. Everything was acceptable – even by the media. How hard society has become, how out of touch ... people were broken ...

"Berner Landbote" – independent reports on corona

Daniel Beutler's report on 30 June 2021 that the coronavirus vaccination could be harmful (written in the subjunctive tense) was the start of a series of reports in our newspaper.

I am grateful that the "Berner Landbote" has always been a truly independent newspaper that also gave room to critical views on measures and vaccination.

The sledgehammer of propaganda language is still used to gain confirmation and prevent self-reflection. Although we live in a Christian

value system, it was not practised during the coronavirus period.

I would like to thank Daniel Beutler for the invitation and for his very *honest, factual, intelligent*, and *in-depth* reporting in our newspaper.

Yes, most people seem to have little interest in the background these days. They simply consume brief information. This often has little to do with knowledge. Investigative journalism has become a luxury for a minority that craves knowledge rather than consumption and is not afraid to leave the lulling safety of groupthink and filter bubbles.

Let's seek discourse

There is no such thing as science. Science is always discourse. "*We don't know*", this admission is an achievement. A society that only shouts loudly in crises, but at the same time ignores the arising feelings – like anger, powerlessness, fear – should not be surprised when the world becomes deaf. Unheard individuals die. There are several ways to solve a problem: through a willingness to think in complex ways, not through mere obedience or fear.

Diversity and pluralism must be valued: Opponents of opinion are not enemies. Let's forget about pigeonholes. Let's listen to each other. Let's learn from each other. Let's retain self-determination.

Let's seek discourse. Debates can be loud, but they are also lively. A society must be able to withstand this. Quote: "If there is no noise of conflict in a state, then you can be sure that there is no freedom there." Unfortunately, I don't know who said this.

With *Antonio Gramsci*: "We need the pessimism of the mind and the optimism of the will."

With *Martin Heidegger*: "The greatest danger, that of losing oneself, can be as silent in the world as if it were nothing at all."

Let's examine what we think. Let's write to media professionals about what we have scrutinised. Let's remain courageous, empathetic, differentiated – and free.

Doubt and ignorance line the path to knowledge. I end with the motto of the Enlightenment: *Dare to know*. Have the courage to use your own mind. [...]

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")