

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Politicians as opportune witnesses? How German (print) media reported on public service media after the rbb scandal

Politiker*innen als opportune Zeug*innen? Die Berichterstattung über öffentlich-rechtliche Medien in deutschen (Print-)Medien nach dem rbb-Skandal

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Public service media (PSM) throughout Europe are confronted with significant structural and media policy-related challenges. In Germany, the debate surrounding PSM has (once again) intensified in 2022, following allegations of nepotism and wasteful spending at Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (rbb). This debate is also covered in the media. Private-sector media companies occupy a special position in this debate. It is believed that they have a vested interest in criticizing PSM, referring to the crowding-out argument that PSM is pushing them out of the market (Sehl et al., 2020). Accordingly, they can engage in (second level) agenda setting through certain selection decisions. For example, they can instrumentally introduce certain topics into the debate on PSM or quote certain individuals in line with their editorial policy. In this debate about PSM and calls for its reforms, however, this type of reporting does not necessarily result from direct (economic) concern, but above all from the fact that the ideological divide over how PSM should be structured in a digitalized environment touches on the core of the traditional left-right divide (Campos Rueda, 2023, p. 3847). While there are left-right differences in the attitudes of the population towards PSM (e.g., Campos Rueda, 2023; Schulz et al., 2019) and while previous research has traced how the media have interpreted crises surrounding PSM (Scheufele et al., 2023), little research has been done to date on the extent to which a left-right distinction and a systematic preference for corresponding actors is also reflected in the reporting of media with different political orientations.

2. Theoretical background

To address this research gap, this paper draws on the theoretical concept of opportune witnesses by Hagen (1992), which allows for an analysis of how media outlets may systematically favor actors whose positions correspond to the outlet's political stance. The presence of opportunistic witnesses can be demonstrated by the fact that media outlets tend to adopt and publish the positions of actors who are in line with their editorial political agendas (Hagen, 1992, p. 456).

In this instance, a distinction is made between two construction principles. The first principle is that media outlets systematically favor certain arguments that correspond to their political orientation or the interests of their publishers, regardless of who they come from (argument level). The second construction principle is that media offerings systematically favor the arguments of certain groups that correspond to the general political orientation of the publication, regardless of the direction of the specific arguments (actor level). Since Hagen's pioneer study in 1992, the concept has been frequently used to examine news bias in (political) reporting (e.g., Anter, 2021; Kemner et al., 2008). However, a review of the literature reveals a paucity of studies that examine both principles. The studies

that exist on this subject tend to find that the presence of opportunistic witnesses is more evident in the selection of actors (construction principle 2) than in the selection of arguments (construction principle 1).

3. Research aim

Accordingly, the present study focuses on how German (print) media with different political orientations report on PSM and which actors they allow to have their say. The study builds on the concept of “opportune witnesses” (Hagen, 1992) and uses the rbb scandal as an example. It analyzes which spokespersons for political parties appear in which media and what criticisms and reform proposals they express. The study then examines whether the selection of political spokespersons aligns with the editorial line and, in a subsequent step, whether the statements and demands of these political spokespersons are consistent with their official positions, and to what extent this is in line with the principle of “opportune witnesses”. Thus, the following research questions are to be answered:

RQ1: Which individuals and groups are represented in the discourse surrounding PSM in the (print) media? To what extent are political spokespersons quoted in the media?

RQ2: Which political parties do the political spokespersons represent, and to what extent does this correspond to the political orientation of the (print) media? (actor level, construction principle 2)

RQ3: What a) criticism and b) demands for reform are voiced in the individual (print) media? (argument level, construction principle 1)

RQ4: What a) criticism and b) demands for reform do the political spokespersons express?

4. Method

To answer the research questions, a quantitative content analysis was conducted on 543 articles from German (print) media outlets with different political orientations (*Bild*, *Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), *Spiegel*, *tageszeitung* (taz) and *Business Insider*) from June 23, 2022, to January 31, 2023.

A specific search string was utilized to retrieve a total of 543 articles from seven private-sector media outlets. The investigation period commenced on the day the business magazine *Business Insider* published allegations against former rbb director Patricia Schlesinger, thereby (once again) igniting the debate concerning reforms of PSM.

The articles were coded through a three-step process. First, the Lasswell formula (1948) was employed to identify all direct and indirect speakers in the articles. This identification process was conducted in an initial qualitative step. The ques-

tion asked was: Who says what about PSM? (2) Thereafter, the respective functions of the speakers were quantified with the aid of a code book developed using an inductive-deductive approach. In the third step of the analysis, the articles in which political actors appeared ($N = 166$) were filtered out, and a new category system was created to analyze which points of criticism and demands for reform were expressed by the political actors. The categories were derived from considerations of Scheufele et al. (2023) on crisis interpretations of PSM and from the material itself and referred to at a higher level to five categories: Content, personnel, financing, structure, and control.

5. Results

The results of our study show that the debate surrounding PSM mainly presents and incorporates the positions of PSM representatives (RQ1). Concurrently, media-specific patterns emerge in the selection of speakers: While PSM representatives are given more space in the *SZ* and *Business Insider*, political actors receive little coverage there compared to other media outlets. In *Welt* and *Bild*, this ratio is reversed, and PSM representatives are given less space than expected. In contrast, political spokespersons are significantly more present in these media outlets. The results suggest that the discussion of criticism and demands for reform is a topic in which the presence of different actors depends, at least in part, on a newspaper's general political orientation (RQ2). Media outlets that tend to be classified as conservative, especially *Bild*, give the conservative CDU/CSU more frequent opportunities to express their views, while (print) media that tend to be left-wing/left-liberal, especially the *SZ*, give the CDU/CSU less coverage as spokespersons in their reporting. The presence of opportunistic witnesses and thus the systematic favoring of certain individuals or arguments can be demonstrated in part at the actor level (construction principle 2), but not at the argument level (construction principle 1).

We find no systematic preference or omission of certain points of criticism or demands for reform (RQ3) at the argument level (construction principle 1), because the debate on reform demands and points of criticism did not focus on individual aspects of PSM. This suggests that there was probably no uniform position on the issue on the part of the (print) media, which is why they tended to orient themselves toward party affiliations rather than specific lines of argument. From a media policy perspective, it is also interesting that political parties do not systematically bring specific interpretations of the crisis and thus points of criticism and demands for reform into the discourse (RQ4). It has been observed that most critiques tend to center on personnel matters, often leading to the articulation of specific demands for modifications in this area.

6. Discussion

Our findings indicate that the debate surrounding PSM is influenced, at least partly, by the political orientation of the respective newspapers. Conservative outlets, particularly *Bild*, tend to give the conservative CDU/CSU greater visibility, where-

as left-leaning or liberal (print) media, especially the SZ, feature these voices less frequently. This supports earlier arguments about ideological differences in attitudes toward PSM (e.g., Campos Rueda, 2023).

Thus, the presence of opportune witnesses can be observed partly on the actor level (construction principle 2), but not on the argument level (construction principle 1). This aligns with previous empirical findings (e.g., Hagen, 1992). According to Hagen (1992), such heuristics arise particularly when issues are new and attitudes are not yet clearly formed. In such cases, journalists tend to rely on communicators whose values align with their outlet's editorial stance.

This reasoning also explains why no systematic preference or omission of particular arguments or reform demands was found. Since the debate did not focus on specific aspects of PSM reforms (e.g., online activities or funding), the analyzed media outlets had likely not yet developed a unified position and therefore oriented their reporting more toward party affiliations than toward specific lines of argumentation.

The study is limited by a short observation period and its focus on a single scandal, which may have emphasized personnel-related aspects. Moreover, the sample includes only major private-sector (print) media outlets; future research should include PSM and other media types for broader comparison. Nevertheless, the study contributes to existing research by providing a content-analytical perspective on ideological differences on PSM and by examining both construction principle 1 (argument level) and construction principle 2 (actor level) of opportune witnesses in PSM coverage.

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