

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Common good or private property? The positions of the German-language press in the debate on the suspension of coronavirus vaccine patents

Gemeinwohl oder Privateigentum? Die Positionen der deutschsprachigen Presse in der Debatte über eine Freigabe der Corona-Impfstoffpatente

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1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a broad public debate briefly emerged in 2021 regarding the release of the coronavirus vaccine patents. The call for this measure came from the Global South, which was undersupplied with vaccines: A temporary suspension of patents ('TRIPS waiver') was intended to enable increased vaccine production and a better supply of vaccine doses to the local populations in Africa, Asia and South America. A TRIPS waiver would have legally allowed WTO members to pause the granting and enforcement of patents related to COVID-19 for the duration of the pandemic. This would have given countries with a low gross domestic product per capita the opportunity to produce coronavirus vaccines independently and possibly stop the pandemic sooner. However, several high-income countries immediately rejected the proposal (Aryeetey et al., 2021).

We take this case as an opportunity to examine whether the press – which sees itself as independent of politics and business or even as the 'fourth estate' – is backing the capitalist principle of (intellectual) private property in this global crisis, or whether it is standing up for democratic values such as the public good (public health), solidarity and equality (fair and equal access to vaccines).

Western societies have lived in a combination of democracy and capitalism for some time, but the two systems of order have always been in a fundamental state of tension (Kocka & Merkel, 2015; Streeck, 2013, pp. 90–97). The contradictions arise from the fact that unequally distributed property rights are a necessary condition under capitalism, while equal citizenship rights are fundamental to democracy. Similarly, the pursuit of profit and particular interests in capitalism collide with the democratic goal of the common good (Kocka & Merkel, 2015, pp. 313, 320). The public debate on the possibility of suspending the coronavirus vaccine patents is a suitable case study for the conflict between capitalism and democracy, since patents as a form of intellectual (private) property are a central element of contemporary capitalism (Zukerfeld, 2017).

We take it as an opportunity to analyse which positions the German-language press adopted in its opinion articles regarding the possible suspension of coronavirus vaccine patents, including which sides they supported and which arguments they used.

2. Theoretical background

We draw on the communication studies tradition of the critical political economy of the media to conceptualise the function of the media within the capitalist social order (e.g., Fuchs, 2017; Golding & Murdock, 2000; Herman & Chomsky, 2008; Holzer, 1994; Knoche, 2025; McChesney, 2008; Mosco, 2009). This theoretical tradition attributes a system-stabilising role to the media due to their embeddedness in political-economic contexts.

In our study, we follow Horst Holzer (1994, pp. 202–203) by focusing on the so-called ideological function of the media to safeguard the capitalist economy, according to whom the media have the task of supporting the central principles of the capitalist order and concealing social problems associated with capitalism, such as social inequality and crisis phenomena. Holzer has paradigmatically elaborated a total of four core functions of the mass media for the German-speaking world (Holzer, 1994, pp. 202–203, 208; see also Sevnigani & Polkowski, 2022, pp. 394–395).

The question posed by our study is based on the assumption that the mass media, as private-sector or public-sector actors, represent a building block of the political-economic context of domination and, as a logical consequence, contribute to the stabilisation of the capitalist order (Holzer, 1994, p. 201).

3. Method

Against this theoretical background, we examine the positions of the German-language press in this debate, which challenged a central principle of cognitive capitalism regarding the protection of intellectual private property. We operationalise this function as a pattern of thought and argumentation that defines private property, here vaccine patents, as a central pillar of the capitalist production process.

We analyse opinion pieces on the potential release of vaccine patents to determine whether a release was rejected or supported in the German-language press and what arguments were used to justify the respective position. In addition, we are interested in how emotionally charged the topic was presented and whether the patent issue was also discussed as the systemic issue that we theoretically construe it to be.

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of articles from the most important national daily and weekly newspapers and news magazines (print and online) in Germany, Austria and German-speaking Switzerland. We restrict ourselves to opinion-emphasising forms of presentation, such as commentaries, editorials, columns, guest contributions and glosses. In contrast to news reports, which are based on the principles of neutrality and objectivity, commentaries and related forms of presentation offer a free space for journalistic expression of opinion and reveal the media's stance. Here, the 'voice of the media' and the editorial line are clearly articulated (Eilders, 2008; Neidhardt et al., 2004). Opinion-orientated articles also have an outstanding function in the formation of public opinion (van Dijk, 1998) and thus have great potential to influence politics and the public (Day & Golan, 2005; Golan & Munno, 2014; Sommer & Maycroft, 2008).

As the period of investigation, we chose 5 May to 4 June 2021 – the four weeks following US Trade Representative Katherine Tai's announcement of her support for a TRIPS waiver. The sample consists of 57 articles. The analysis followed the inductive-qualitative approach of 'empirically guided category formation' (Früh, 2007, own translation). In addition to substantive arguments, we included stylistic devices of emotionalization, as van Dijk (1998) emphasises that these are particularly relevant in opinionated articles. We focused our attention particularly on emotionalised adjectives and nouns as well as metaphors and comparisons (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 1989; Thibodeau et al., 2017).

4. Results

The study reveals that the German-language press was largely against releasing the patents. Opinion pieces against the suspension of patents were twice as common as those in favour of the suspension. At the same time, clear differences between individual media were visible, depending on their editorial line. As expected, the conservative press tended to position themselves against the release, while progressive media were more in favour.

The arguments against a suspension predominantly corresponded to the assumed function of stabilising capitalism, as argued here, with recourse to various justifications that intellectual property in the form of vaccine patents should not or cannot be touched. Surprisingly, pro-capitalist thinking also dominated the pro-suspension side, as the arguments here were largely based on the assumed economic benefits. The analysis shows that capitalist profit orientation and economic logic dominated the discourse, and there was hardly any counter-discourse that deviated significantly from it. Although this was a global public health crisis, German-language journalism rarely placed democratic values, such as the common good and solidarity, above profit.

Stylistic features of emotionalization were used significantly more often (around twice as often) in the arguments against release. On the one hand, this can be explained by the fact that the tabloid media, where emotionalization is part of the standard repertoire, positioned themselves strongly against the release. On the other hand, this finding can be interpreted as a conscious or unconscious attempt to convince people not only with facts and rational arguments, but also with other rhetorical means, of the harmfulness of patent suspension and that patents should remain in the hands of private owners and at their sole disposal.

Furthermore, we show that the vaccine patents were discussed in the context of the capitalist economic system in more than a quarter of all articles, which emphasizes that the topic was often considered a systemic question. The contextualization of the topic in a pro-capitalist stance once again points to a function of the media to stabilise the capitalist order.

5. Limitations and conclusion

Our study is largely in line with critical political economy conceptualisations of mass media as supportive of the capitalist system. Fulfilling a power-securing function comes at the expense of the media's democratic responsibility to advocate for the common good.

In line with similar studies, however, this content analysis has limitations. We could consider only a short period in which the debate happened, and only opinion pieces were examined. It is possible – yet unlikely – that arguments may have developed in a different direction at a later stage or in other journalistic genres.

Furthermore, the content analysis cannot provide any information about the specific causes of the strong use of pro-capitalist argumentation patterns. It remains unclear whether these originate from the ideological viewpoints of individual journalists, whether they are (also) the result of orientation towards colle-

agues, politics, business or experts and/or whether targeted external influences or the respective media owners have contributed to this (cf., Eberl, 2020, pp. 3–5; Hoffmann, 2023, p. 7). Moreover, it is not possible to conclude on media effects based on our data. It cannot be concluded that recipients adopted the viewpoints disseminated in the analysed content.

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