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**Moritz Gathmann** is a freelance journalist in Berlin, and reports from Ukraine for Der Spiegel magazine and Spiegel Online. Before that he was a freelance correspondent in Russia for several German newspapers and magazines.

It seems that it was some time around 1848 when German people started to think that the press was lying to them – pretty much the same time that the word “presse” was being used to talk about the media. No one has ever really trusted the news they read – even if they base all their ideas on that news. In the early 20th century, many Germans – including intellectuals – used the word **Lügenpresse** to describe any press they didn't like (particularly foreign reports of German World War I atrocities). So it was natural for the Nazi party to adopt the word (Adolf Hitler used it to describe the Marxist press in Mein Kampf). Now Trump supporters have adopted it too, to describe what they used to call “mainstream media”.

**SECOND THOUGHTS** What has the word Lügenpresse come to mean in Germany?

**SCHLAGER** I think that the mainstream media in Germany does have a big problem. I think the general loss of trust in the media is justified. I can understand it. I couldn't stand here and say: Lügenpresse shouldn't be used as a word. I wouldn't use it myself, but I can understand why other people use it, out of anger, out of a certain helplessness and powerlessness about not being listened to, that they're not even being noticed. That's what people feel when they create these buzzwords, and then of course they use them. I'm not sure where this word came from. Who started using that word in Germany?

**GATHMANN** It came from the Dresden hooligans. They started using it again.

And the word is associated with Nazi Germany?

That's how they described the "Jewish-liberal" press at the time.

The problem is I'm not that up on the history. I can't put it in a big historical context. I'm emotionally involved with it though. It's like that phrase "post-fact era" – that's a word I hate. It's much too charged for me, but I keep hearing it in discussions.

What is it supposed to mean?

The feeling in journalism and politics that facts don't matter anymore, and that everyone just lets themselves be guided by their emotions.

Can you point to an actual case in your work as a journalist when an editor has stopped you writing about a certain issue?

No, but as a reader, as a media consumer, I notice this really strong bloc mentality. I think the German mainstream media is dominated by western journalists who still have that bloc mentality today. East Germans like me are always put in this defensive position. That's just stupid. Maybe it's my fault too, because I hang on to that image a bit, because I say, "I'm an Ossi" and not "I'm German." But that's because I see this bloc mentality – there's a lack of understanding for the East German situation.

Do you see that bloc mentality in the German media, Moritz?

Yes I do, we can't really argue much about that, but I think it's not so much among the correspondents who travel around, but rather among the people sitting at home in the editorial offices. There's a reactivation of old patterns of thought from the Cold War among some German newspapers.

But it's also the same with the AfD. When they had the state elections in March, in Saxony-Anhalt, Baden-Württemberg, and Rheinland-Pfalz. The AfD got 24 percent in Saxony, and 15 percent in BW, but no one talks about the BW result – it's always "the stupid ones from Saxony-Anhalt" sitting in their half-rotting backyards in the east. All a bit degenerate, women all gone and the alcoholics have all stayed home. That really annoys me. It was the same with the incidents in Bautzen.

What annoyed you about how Bautzen was reported? (Two notorious incidents happened in the Saxony town in 2016: a refugee shelter was set on fire in February, and a group of around 80 neo-Nazis scuffled with asylum seekers in the Kornmarkt square in September.)

There was always this polarization. Always wanting to find buzzwords, the shortening. Of course that's our craft, our job. And I think it's great when I find these perfect words to be able to describe something concisely – comparisons and metaphors etc.

But don't you think that the journalists described it adequately, what was happening in Bautzen?

I can give you an example. The Anne Will show with Alexander Ahrends, the mayor, in the same week there was that confrontation on the Kornmarkt. I think he does his job pretty well and he was catapulted onto the national stage. He said two very important things: One: Ahrends spent six hours with (German President Joachim) Gauck in Bautzen and in the mainstream media they only showed the part when the president was being barracked as a traitor. And two: Anne Will, who if you ask me wasn't objective at all, described Bautzen as a far-right stronghold. And Ahrends countered that well by saying: "Bautzen can't be a far-right stronghold, because they elected me." He is independent, but he was brought to power by the Left party and the Green party.

Should we maybe make a distinction: that public media outlets have a certain job, and they should stick to that and that the Bild or the Spiegel intensify things because the privately-owned media doesn't have that responsibility.

So public media should be more objective?

They should have a higher standard of objectivity, dramatise things less, report things more calmly.

And you have the feeling that they dramatise things too much now?

In the newspapers you notice in the choice of what they report what campaigns they're on. For example, when (German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter) Steinmeier was in Kiev, the FAZ found some random anonymous advisor from the presidential office who told them that in Kiev they all think that Steinmeier is an idiot because he's taken in by the Russians. And the FAZ put that on its front page, which made it clear from the start that they were out to discredit Steinmeier. But at the same time I do think it's okay for newspapers to have a certain political stance. When you read the FAZ then you know what you're getting. And I do still admire the public media, especially Deutschlandfunk Radio. I like listening to that – it's calm and it does the job that public radio is supposed to do.

Moritz, I agree with you.

But TV doesn't do that. And German public TV is problematic in its reporting on Ukraine. Last year there was a documentary about Putin on ZDF and it was made like something the Russian station NTW would do.

Would you say it was propaganda for the German government?

Yes, against Putin. There's enough to criticize Putin for, but I don't think public TV should do it with evil-Putin background music with blurry pictures and dark muttering. I don't pay my license fee for that – I might as well watch that on SAT 1. But then the public broadcasters say, "But we have to compete with them."

Moritz, they don't say that very often. That'd be admitting it.

They say it in private.

They don't really admit it. They say things like: "We've got nothing to be ashamed of. We report objectively." That's something that's been bothering me for a while. I've argued about it with people from Kazakhstan. Someone who only ever consumes Russian media will tell me: "Your media is just as manipulated as ours." And then I have to agree with them, and I'd even say: "It's actually a bit worse for us."

Even worse?

The Russian media outlets get told from above what they have to write about. Some oligarch or someone close to the president will pass on something and say, "This is what you'll be reporting." In Germany the journalists are convinced they're not being manipulated and that they have the right opinion. I think that's actually a bit worse, because they're not being told to do it, because they're free.

Well, I would disagree with you on that.

Not all of them, Moritz. But I think there's a tendency among the German media to think we have this received wisdom. There's a certain arrogance about thinking we're on the good side of power. And this lack of self-reflection annoys me.

Well I would say there was some self-censorship when it came to the refugee crisis in the autumn of 2015. If you'd made the case for shutting the border and Merkel was making a mistake, you would have had a problem getting that opinion through. I don't think that's true now, but if you're part of the mainstream there are certain boundaries here and there.

I didn't dare say my opinion on Twitter. I still don't now.

We almost had Russian conditions when it came to the refugee crisis. There were exceptions – the FAZ was critical fairly early, but otherwise it really was a massive soup of similarity. But on all the other issues the German media is way, way beyond the Russian media when it comes to diversity, quality and approaching objective reality.

Okay, I took a bit of a shortcut. I agree. I was mainly thinking of the refugee crisis. And of the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

But the German media has no problem reporting on all the problems of the refugee influx.

Now they don't!

Now they don't!

When did that change?

Yes.

When?

New Year's Eve in Cologne. That was the point when they all started.

Have you ever censored yourself on social media?

Yes, when it came to the refugee crisis, I held back little. I have opinions that I express privately among my friends, but hold back publicly.

I think it's good that you'll admit that, Moritz.

Do you have an example?

I noticed that when I posted a video of refugees coming across the Austrian border to Germany across a field. I said it looked threatening, because there was a huge mass of people. Then I got so many comments from people saying, "That's nonsense, that's just fear-mongering."

I had exactly the opposite experience. I tweeted a picture that a refugee had taken of himself and about 20 refugees all locked in a room by the Hungarian police. I got a lot of comments from American people – Trump supporters I guess – "That's all a lie." "They've got a roof over their heads haven't they?" They were accusing me of being manipulative. But all I'd done was tweet a picture a refugee had given me and posted it with a comment saying where the picture had been taken.



László Mudra

Refugees hold up placards to international media at Budapest's main railway station on September 3, 2015, to draw attention to their plight. They want to travel on to Austria or Germany. Thousands of them set off towards Austria on foot on September 4, and that night Chancellor Angela Merkel made the decision to allow them to pass through Austria and enter Germany.



Ruben Neugebauer

Yakoub from Sudan (left) and other refugees on the roof of the abandoned Gerhart Hauptmann school in Berlin at the end of July 2014. The school was occupied by refugees in December 2012 following a protest march. Since then, various authorities have passed the responsibility for the fate of these people to each other. The school has been slated for clearance by police multiple times.

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Maybe the atmosphere in America is different than in Germany.

I did notice your posts Moritz – because I actually had you down as part of the left-liberal Berlin bubble. But I noticed that you had a bit of a different opinion.

After that, I decided that Facebook is maybe not the right place to express yourself on that issue. You'll probably only get applauded by the wrong people, which doesn't help either.

And then the editors sit in Hamburg or Munich saying, “We can talk about anything.” I feel this inner voice starting up inside me, saying, “Then why don't you write a slightly difficult opinion, that goes out on a limb. Isn't it your duty to do that publicly just once?” Then I wrangle with myself.

Now you're being outed!

Last question – are you optimistic that all this will change? That the media can get out of the self-censoring rut you see it in?

Yes, I'm optimistic. You can admit mistakes, you can forgive. And you can learn the courage to do that. It takes a certain courage to be able to deal with criticism.

I'm optimistic too. I think the creation of a party like the AfD can actually serve our system and our democracy. It leads people to take a position and reevaluate certain things. Like a kind of sparring partner. The grand coalition was starting to get annoying after all these years, because Germany had just become this Merkel republic. Somehow everyone had the same opinions. But now things have become a bit more differentiated, I think that's positive. And if the media notices that and reports it properly and doesn't follow some personal mission and that people with different opinions don't have to be branded as fascists, then that's positive.

People need to admit their mistakes and shouldn't assume people with different opinions are stupid.