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**The suppression of right-wing extremism –
a challenge for society as a whole**

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How can the media respond to right-wing extremism?

Abstract

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Has the press failed in dealing with right-wing extremism? "We were all blind", was the conclusion recently drawn by the author and journalist Christian Fuchs. Never should journalists have trusted the information provided by the authorities as blindly as they did. Never should they have fuelled the stigmatising of migrants by using terms like "doner murders".

This statement is true – and nevertheless falls short of the mark. For the biggest failure of the media is not that they have not uncovered the NSU network but that many journalists have reacted with indifference to the spread of right-wing extremism since the peaceful revolution in Germany. There were big media projects such as "Mut gegen rechte Gewalt" ("Courage against Right-Wing Violence") or "Netz-gegen-Nazis" ("Network-against-Nazis"). Journalists like Andrea Röpke, Thomas Kuban or Andreas Speit have monitored the right-wing scene for years, taking a high personal risk. Apart from the big waves of public outrage, however, there was hardly any continuous reporting on the subject in the majority of the media.

This was despite the fact that it had been known even before November 2011 that right-wing extremists had committed killings in Germany. That neo-Nazis have established zones where in fact nobody but them can make a political appearance any more. That some of them have armed themselves in order to eventually strike. So why was the subject not properly covered by many media?

One reason: Neo-Nazis were a problematic subject for many journalists. Right-wing extremism was highly politicised for a long time not only amongst politicians but also, of course, in editorial offices. Editors who wrote about neo-Nazis were regarded as rather left-wing. Freelance authors who did research work in the scene were always suspected of exaggerating a bit for their own economic reasons.

The journalist Patrick Gensing recently replied to Fuchs' statement: "The blind cannot see" – the editors, however, could have seen. He added that the research done by specialised journalists had in most cases met with a lack of interest, and they themselves had been regarded as left-wing crackpots and do-gooders.

In addition, the belief persisted for a fatally long time that the issue would eventually resolve itself if only the economic situation improved. Or, in other words: Like every other European country, Germany has its neo-Nazis – we must learn to accept this. This is one of the reasons why journal-

ists often had to answer the question of whether they would not add to the status of the neo-Nazis in the first place by reporting on them.

All these factors are at work in local newsrooms as well. In small towns and rural areas, there is the additional problem that journalists often live next-door to those they write about. Not everybody musters the courage to report on neo-Nazis if they afterwards show up at their front door or in the editorial offices – as has been the case often enough.

Apart from the fear of repression, there is the fear of being denounced as traitors. Those who regularly make right-wing extremism a subject of discussion in structurally weak areas are often warned not to stigmatise their own region or even discourage investors - if they have not already held back for this reason.

Another difficulty faced by local journalists is the legal insecurity involved. Neo-Nazis take legal action against everything that can be disputed, however petty it may be. Moreover, the often clandestine local right-wing extremist structures require a considerable amount of research effort and time which is not available in the case of many smaller newspapers. This often means that editors choose to rather not report on these issues.

These obstacles make the press coverage of neo-Nazi activities prone to errors and fragmentary, especially as far as local coverage is concerned. This is a problem above all in those areas where the local press is one of few actors representing the middle of society. In addition, right-wing extremists edge into the market with their own free publications, particularly in structurally weak regions of eastern Germany, trying to weaken the role of the local media as supplier of information, interpreter and mediator.

Many of these problems – cost constraints, fear of repression, pressure to conform – cannot easily be removed at short notice. However, to free the coverage of neo-Nazi activities from its left-wing touch, to keep an eye on the subject beyond the big waves of public outrage – this requires not so much money but consistency regarding the contents as well as a critical distance. At the same time, it is the most important task resulting from the previous handling of neo-Nazis by the press.