

Report of the Annual Conference of the AIPCE 2021

Alexander Warzilek (ed)

Preface

During the pandemic, Press and Media Councils witnessed a considerable increase in the number of complaints. The global crisis also affected the cooperation of the Alliance of Independent Press Council of Europe (AIPCE) – as was the case for many other meetings, our Annual Conference did not take place in 2021. Following this break, the Press Councils' community was keen to reunite, to discuss current ethical problems and to reconnect with different experts of the media world. Because of Covid, the Conference was held online only. This report is a summary of the most important speeches and panels during the AIPCE in Vienna in 2022. Let me point out that the views and positions expressed are those of the speakers and panellists and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the AIPCE. As an annex to this report, you will find a list of all of the experts who are mentioned in this report and who shared their views with the delegates from the Press and Media Councils at the Conference. Further information on the AIPCE is available at www.presscouncils.eu.

Dr. Alexander Warzilek (ed), Director of the Austrian Press Council and Member of the Coordination Committee of the AIPCE

Contents

COVID and the NEW AGE of Collaborative Investigative Reporting	2
Discrimination of Different Social Groups in the Media	4
How to Deal with Alternative Media, Partial Media and Propaganda	6
Satire and Freedom of the Press	7
List of Speakers and Panellists	8

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COVID and the NEW AGE of Collaborative Investigative Reporting

David Barstow, a professor at the University of Berkeley and four-time Pulitzer Prize winner, affirmed that there is a lot of pressure on investigative reporters all over the world. In his opinion, the pressure on journalism derives also from politicians in Western democracies, which is something new and a substantial change. President Donald Trump was very successful with his slogan “enemy of the people” in derailing support for press freedom and for professional journalists. Barstow underlined that you can see it poll after poll after poll, in particular among the members of Trump’s base. However, in Barstow’s opinion, a larger erosion is occurring – this erosion is to be seen in Brazil, Hungary and elsewhere. Journalists should take it quite seriously. To Barstow’s mind, Trump had some significant success in moving public opinion; the leadership that he showed in attacking press freedom in the US was kind of contagious and leaders in other countries adopted literally the identical language and promoting the fake-news idea. It was copied and mimicked all over the globe.

Furthermore, Barstow remarked that social media plays an important role in this context. Social media platforms are amplifying disinformation. They have long known that the problem is much worse than they have told the public and they have really done almost nothing at all to try to combat it. Barstow is convinced that their business model, which is built around clicks and engagement, is the reason for this. According to new research, 140 million Americans a month were viewing content on Facebook that was being generated by troll farms in Eastern Europe. Facebook and its algorithms were pumping disinformation to Americans; it was not the case that 140 million Americans were clicking on or choosing or selecting content from these troll farms, Barstow underlined.

What was really awful about this story was that Facebook researchers themselves had identified this and were writing urgent memos to the leadership of Facebook pointing out what was happening here – this was a terrible indictment. Barstow pointed out that Facebook took no steps whatsoever. To Barstow, it is not just that social media platforms are like the perfect delivery device for misinformation and disinformation, but they are working really hard to amplify disinformation. In his opinion, there was a close relationship between Donald Trump’s campaign and Facebook; Trump was brilliant at exploiting Facebook’s data on all of us as well as targeting messages to voters across the US in both 2016 and 2020. The combination of the attacks on journalists mentioned before and the ease in which politicians are able to spread nonsense, disinformation and propaganda is detrimental. They can count on Google, Facebook, Twitter, Parler, YouTube, Telegram and WhatsApp to spread their propaganda like wildfire, and it takes an incredible amount of effort to reveal a lie and to show what is true and what is false. Barstow is of the strong opinion that it always takes truth longer to catch up to a lie. When you have this dynamic combined with COVID, which had a devastating economic impact on the newsrooms, the ranks of journalists who are out there gathering facts are dwindling. According to Barstow, these new circumstances make the job of journalists all the more difficult, tricky and daunting. Our society is in a contest between a world of truth and a world of lies.

One of the reasons Barstow left the New York Times and came to Berkeley to teach journalism is that he really feels truth desperately needs reinforcements. He is convinced that it needs more young people to take up the challenge of confronting a world built around lies – up is down and down is up, the sky is green and the moon is square. The pandemic confirmed this

new approach; many people thought that COVID was fake and that it was a plot and that the vaccines were a plot too. That it is all an effort by the government to secretly control Americans and poison them. Barstow is convinced that a lot of people have paid with their lives because of how widely those ideas spread around the world. The crucial question now is who is going to win in the long run.

To be brutally honest about it, Barstow noted, if he were a betting man, at this moment in time he would put his money on lies winning out because of the situation that he had just described – the combination of the social media platforms being the perfect delivery amplification device, the business troubles of actual journalism and the increasing numbers of political and business leaders trying to delegitimize the value and the importance of having a free press.

The thing about investigative reporters is that they are kind of hopeless romantics and hopeless optimists, Barstow said. Even though he thinks that the odds are against journalists, he will do anything in his power at Berkeley to try to encourage as many smart, young and passionate people as possibly to fall in love not just with journalism but, even more so, with investigative reporting. The good news that he could report is that Berkeley has a lot of those people flocking to it and they are really hungry to do this work. He thinks a lot of people recognise that it is awful to live in a society that is built around whatever the dear leader says. Who wants to live in that kind of world?

Young journalists know that their profession does not pay a lot of money, Barstow remarks. They know that there are a lot of lay-offs and cutbacks in newsrooms. They know that journalists are often attacked and blamed. Nevertheless, they remain passionate. All they want to do is learn how to do journalism. COVID gave Barstow's department a great opportunity to get students directly involved in producing very meaningful journalism and not just for the college newspaper but, in fact, for the New York Times and for the Los Angeles Times and a large number of other important publications around the USA.

During COVID a great willingness of news organisations to collaborate evolved – not only with each other, but also with journalism school programmes like the one Barstow is responsible for. Of course, there are financial difficulties and everyone wants content and everyone wants more reporters – and in Berkeley they have a small army of reporters, Barstow explained. When the pandemic hit last March in California, Barstow and a few of his colleagues set up a newsroom of 80 student reporters working in teams covering every single county in California and tracking how the pandemic was affecting not only health, but also the economic situation. They published dozens of stories in the New York Times which were written and reported by Barstow's students. Nine of his students have had stories published on the front page of the New York Times. Once other publications saw the output of the student reporters, they wanted to get involved as well. Barstow's team has published, within the investigative reporting programme, over 130 articles in dozens of different news outlets around the country. Barstow also referred to other journalism schools that had been also forming such alliances and collaborations with established traditional news media outlets. Therefore, he thinks this is part of a much larger trend that is happening in journalism.

There is more and more collaboration between news outlets. The old idea that they are all competing against each other is rapidly melting away. He does not think this is just a response to business difficulties, but rather a response to the notion that they, as an idea, as a profession, are collectively under pressure and under assault. They had better act jointly if they

are to have any hope of turning the tide, he stresses.

Barstow criticises that investigative reporting in the US has been dominated for a long time by white men like him. Against this background, news outlets missed an awful lot of relevant stories. Investigative reporting did not have enough women and people of colour to help them to see and to recognize and report stories about, for example, police brutality. All of those forces are pushing this new collaborative spirit forward and he is convinced that it will be a continuing trend certainly in the US and hopefully also on a global level.

He is pleased that investigative reporting is much more team-oriented nowadays than it was. One reason for this is also the fact that investigative reporting today is also multimedia-based.

He is a writer, for example, but not a photographer or a video editor. In his view, the best investigative reporting and more and more regular reporting as well, is very multimedia in its DNA. This requires collaboration and teamwork. During the pandemic, news outlets as well as the department in Berkeley were very cautious about sending reporters out, Barstow stated. They had to undergo extensive safety training, had a severe protocol for interviews and the correct safety equipment. Barstow's students did a story about the sudden uptick of assaults against Asian people as more and more individuals began blaming anybody who was Asian for the pandemic. Another of their stories was about migrant farm workers in California who were being especially hard hit because they did not get the protection other workers got. Another article covered the meatpacking industry – an area where a lot of people became sick because of the working conditions. His students also did a front-page story for the New York Times that documented how people who investigated child abuse claims in California avoided going out to visit children because of their fear of COVID – the investigators did not get proper safety equipment either. Barstow concluded that the journalistic COVID-project made a bunch of his students fall head over heels madly in love with journalism.

Discrimination of Different Social Groups in the Media

Amra Duric from "heute", the biggest daily newspaper of Vienna, pointed out that she was born in Bosnia and came to Austria as a refugee. She studied journalism in Vienna and worked for different media outlets in Austria. As a migrant and a woman, she has noticed a few changes in the media landscape over the last years. To her mind, the attitude of the media towards criminal migrants has changed substantially in recent years. Concerning the terror attack in Vienna in 2020, her editorial department did not show pictures of the terrorist nor of the victims. She also thinks that media outlets in general became more cautious and sensitive towards topics like violence against women and crimes against migrants. Many media outlets take the personal sphere of victims of crimes more strongly into account, especially when the victim is a woman. Nowadays journalists often consult with victim support organisations and counselling centres to consider their perspectives, Duric added.

Terms like shock, horror or romantic drama should be avoided when it is a femicide or an attempted murder. In her opinion, language is very important in this context. Besides that, survivors or family members of the victim should have a voice, if they want it. To avoid discrimination in news coverage, it is also very important to have diversity in the newsroom. Journalists from different backgrounds have different point of views and different approaches towards a story. In Duric's opinion that is a benefit for the readers as well as for the news outlets. Readers can identify themselves easier with a diverse editorial department. However, to become successful as a student and as a journalist, Duric always slightly had the feeling that it was better to repress her personal background in order to be more accepted by her

superiors and colleagues. She thought it is a weakness to have a different background. Still today, she gets e-mails from strangers telling her to go back to her own country. Some colleagues even get death threats – fortunately, this was never the case with her. However, Duric started to embrace her background. Seven years ago, she was the first one at her editorial department with a diverse background. Her newspaper supported her – she was told that her Bosnian background provided a chance to attract another group of readers. Now, therefore, she sees it as one of her strengths.

Catherine Sarikakis, professor for communication at the University of Vienna, stated that when you write a story as a journalist you have to connect to your own background and avoid pretending to stand somewhere in a void. You have to connect with the people you are writing about. Usually, the media discriminates against social groups which are considered outsiders or other than the norm. Unfortunately, this approach is engrained in the DNA of journalism and of regulators, Sarikakis says. She is also a migrant – she has changed countries twice in her life. However, she could always move within a very comfortable setting. That said, she had to adjust as well. Sarikakis has accents in all languages that she speaks and she totally understands what it means to stand out in ways that you have not chosen. Women and migrants, in particular refugees in the last few years, are different from the majority. In her opinion, these two groups have many characteristics in common.

On the one hand it is very difficult to talk about women in a hateful manner in publicly established legacy media, but of course this happens a lot on social media. On the other hand, there are experiences such as that of Amra Duric; it is exactly this background of underpinning hate that is present. The aim of that hate is to silence women, Sarikakis stresses. Research has been carried out at the University of Vienna with Austrian female journalists revealing two strategies. One is to completely withdraw from writing about politics or migration. The second option is to become really vocal about it. In her view, the following fact is of great importance – the women who have the strength and the capacity to be vocal and more visible about these issues usually come from news organisations which take care of them. That means they have good working conditions and work in a culture that is aware and sensitized, Sarikakis added.

Another academic study showed that refugees, foreigners, migrants and especially Muslims are considered as outsiders. To Sarikakis, hate speech is a fluid way of expression, but it has at its core targeting the so-called outsiders, the others of each society. In various societies, those others will be somebody else. For sure, women are the constant factor. Female journalists or women who are victims of violence are easily attacked across cultures. But other than that, who becomes and who is an outsider is very contextual, Sarikakis finishes.

Muriel Hanot from the Belgian Press Council (French speaking) presented a recommendation of her Press Council on how to report in an ethically correct manner on gender-based violence, adopted in June 2021. The idea was to create practical guidelines for journalists, she stated. The background of these guidelines was: the abundant news coverage of a social problem; several complaints and rulings by the Press Council related to this issue; an academic survey on 120 stories published in six newspapers focusing on violence against women in 2018; a recommendation on how to cover violence against women edited by the association of journalists and women's organisations; and an attempt by the Belgian Minister of Media to have a charter adopted by the media outlets.

The guidelines respect editorial freedom and can be considered as a recalling of the basic standards and principles identified in the relevant cases conducted by the Press Council. In

the guidelines, it is pointed out that there is a certain social responsibility for journalists – they should take into consideration predictable impacts of the story on society, the identified persons, the sources and the public.

Hanot further noted that journalists should avoid mentioning converging identifying details (text, image, sound). Special prudence has to be observed when the interviewed persons give different versions of the story. Journalists should avoid victimizing the affected person a second time.

Furthermore, nobody should be presented as guilty before the responsible courts have given their judgements. Finally, concerning their working, journalists should use as an adequate terminology and avoid inappropriate terms. [1]

How to Deal with Alternative Media, Partial Media and Propaganda

Balazs Weyer from the Hungarian Press Council asserted that the Hungarian media landscape has changed substantially within the past 15 years. Approaches towards bias, impartiality and propaganda are unfortunately different today. This has probably to do with the digitalisation of the media and the rise of social media platforms. However, also a new “modus vivendi” in politics plays an important role, Weyer stresses. Some politicians try to actively undermine the credibility of the media. He is quite alarmed by this phenomenon. According to Weyer this does not happen only in Hungary, but is rather a global challenge. Some countries are luckier, and others unluckier, in this regard. In former times, most of the media outlets, even when they had different views on politics, had the same goal of doing an honourable job from their own perspectives. Weyer thinks that this is no longer the case.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of undignified debate today. The whole environment of the media has changed and it has been put into a context that journalists cannot control any longer. People share articles that are produced in all kind of contexts that journalists have no control over. In times of legacy media, journalists also produced the context in a way. The role of editors was much bigger in terms of creating this context. They had control of a linear setting and were able to control the running order of the articles; thus, it was easier to create a balanced perspective of the world in a closed universe, which a newspaper was. Now, all the news pieces that journalists create, have their own life and they are presented in all kind of different contexts and narratives. Politicians have taken advantage of these kinds of changes. For sure, politicians were vulnerable to the media, but now they turned the game completely around. Weyer thinks that today the media has become vulnerable to them. The deeper meaning of that is when you create as many alternate universes as you can, at the end it will be very difficult to tell which universe is real. By this, the politicians totally ruined the credibility of the media, he concluded.

Elin Floberghagen, the secretary-general of the Norwegian Press Council, noted that, although the situation in Norway is very different from the Hungarian one, the Norwegian media sector faces some similar issues. The question of how to deal with propaganda media is, in particular, a very big one. In her opinion, the most important goal is to strengthen independent journalism which shall tell different sides of a story, not harm anybody unnecessarily and be transparent so that the public can hold the press accountable.

[1] <https://www.lecdj.be/wp-content/uploads/12-violences-de-genre-avec-cover-2021.pdf> In French

Another important point is that the public should learn how to differentiate better between propaganda and activism dressed up as journalism, on the one side, and real journalism on the other, Floberghagen points out. The Norwegian Press Council changed its rules on how to deal with alternative or propaganda media back in 2018. Before they handled complaints against all media. Now you can only file complaints against media which are obliged to follow the rules of the Code of Ethics and which is led by an independent editor in chief and is attached to the Norwegian Press Association. The result is that the Press Council handles complaints against well over 95 % of the media. There are a few categories that they do not handle any longer, and one of those categories is a small number of propaganda media with a clear agenda which, of course, do not follow the Code of Ethics. In her opinion, those media just talk to their echo chambers.

Another category are media sites which are run by big companies which perhaps use journalistic setting and presentation but where the content is a way of advertising their services. Within the Press Council, there is an ongoing discussion regarding bloggers, influencers and independent podcasts, Floberghagen remarks. At the moment, they handle only complaints against those who are attached to media companies but not otherwise. Generally speaking, she thinks it is a big dilemma deciding who is in and who is out. On the one side, the Press Council would like as many media as possible to join its regulatory system. On the other side, propaganda media seems to just want to dress up as journalism without having any ambition to really change. Taking them in could potentially weaken the whole system as well as the trust that people can and should have in journalism. So far, she and her colleagues have come to the conclusion that the main goal is to protect those media which want to act ethically.

Satire and Freedom of the Press

Luis Paulitsch, an expert of the Austrian Press Council, presented a number of interesting cases decided by the Austrian Council on satire. The Press Council receives two to three cases every year concerning this topic. According to previous rulings of the Press Council, satire criticises people or events by exaggeration, irony and (biting) ridicule. Distortions, sarcasm and cynicism are characteristic for satirical formats. Therefore, freedom of expression and artistic freedom should be interpreted generously, Paulitsch concluded.

Principally, it is decisive to have some factual basis for the topic covered within satire. [2] One of the decisions presented by him referred to a caricature in which two famous Austrian politicians of the right wing FPÖ party were depicted as rats; the headline was "Rats with Background of Corruption". The factual basis for this illustration was an iconic scene from the so-called "Ibiza-Video", in which the two politicians were secretly filmed offering improper deals to a woman pretending to be the niece of a Russian oligarch (after the release of the video the politicians had to step down and the Austrian government collapsed). The Press Council had to decide whether it was legitimate to depict the two politicians as rats. In previous rulings, the Council pointed out strongly that it is unethical to use the term "rat" for human beings. Metaphors with animals like rats, cockroaches, ticks or louses provoke associations with extermination. Therefore, such a reference is normally an infringement of human dignity.

[2] Decisions 2014/203; 2015/230 and 2017/243 of the Austrian Press Council (published on www.presserat.at).

However, in this specific case, another aspect played a decisive role. A couple of weeks before the caricature was published, another political scandal had arisen. A local politician of the same party published a poem in which refugees were compared with rats. Although the politicians depicted in the caricature had immediately condemned this poem, according to the Press Council they had to tolerate their portrayal as rats for once due to the background of the other political scandal of their fellow party member. Paulitsch noted that it was a rare exception where there was an actual factual basis to justify the depiction as rats. [3]

Fritz Jergitsch, editor in chief of the well-known Austrian satirical website “Die Tagespresse”, stated that for his editorial department it is important that a joke always has to be funny. If this is the case, they also accept provocative statements to some extent. However, they do not publish anything just for the sake of provocation. Satire has to be funny but also a criticism of a grievance. His stand on satire and humour in general is that it really helps people in processing what is going on in the world – in English one speaks of “making light of a bad situation” when one makes a joke. Due to the fact that it is not possible to write objective satire, his editorial department takes up clear positions.

Jergitsch is of the opinion that nowadays there is a fierce pressure on comedy and satire. Social and cultural norms have changed constantly over centuries, but satire and humour always survived. Nowadays, he sees a shift of norms to a more individualistic approach. For example, LGBTQ+ activist groups have firm opinions on what topics should and should not be joked about. He points out that this does not really affect him and his colleagues because they still make jokes about what they think is right or wrong. His team has strong views on LGBTQ+ issues. In his opinion those issues need to be supported and made visible in the public. Therefore, making a joke about LGBTQ+ people would kind of degrade them and he would not go for it. Sometimes he is surprised that especially young people take a strict approach to the question of which jokes are justifiable. Recently he made some jokes on the Taliban and a group of young people told him that he was disrespecting the faith of the Afghan people. There are many groups which are intolerant towards anything they find remotely offensive even when they are not personally affected, Jergitsch affirms.

List of Speakers and Panellists

Barstow, David, professor at Berkley, four-time Pulitzer Prize winner, former New York Times journalist

Duric, Amra, journalist and digital project manager at the daily Austrian newspaper “heute”

Floberghagen, Elin, secretary general of the Norwegian Press Council

Hanot, Muriel, secretary general of Belgian Press Council (French speaking)

Jergitsch, Fritz, editor in chief of the Austrian satirical website “Die Tagespresse”

Paulitsch, Luis, expert of the Austrian Press Council

Sarikakis, Catherine, professor for communication at the University of Vienna

Weyer, Balazs, President of the Hungarian Editors’ Forum

[3] Decision 2019/113.