

## POSITION 2

# Only autocrats conflate journalism with activism

After the revelation of the meeting of right-wing extremists in Potsdam, the AfD claimed that the non-profit research organisation "Correctiv" was spreading government propaganda—one example among many of how journalism is often discredited as activism.

No-one will be shocked to hear this: Journalists are human beings, too. They have views, values, political orientations. They vote, they have children. They are subjects, incapable of being objective. But journalists have learnt to manage their attitudes. These can be articulated loudly and clearly in opinion pieces, commentaries, columns, glosses, editorials, or reviews. They have to be put aside when necessary. Critical distance as well as incorruptible judgement are indispensable for professional journalism. To this end, journalists follow a series of rules and procedures, including the separation of commentary and reporting, as well as fact-checking. This is part of their professional ethics.

Lutz Kinkel, Journalist and former Head of the European Center for Press and Media Freedom

UNDERSTANDING  
MEDIA DEVELOPMENT  
TEAM



## ERDOĞAN'S (MIS)UNDERSTANDING OF JOURNALISM

There is no doubt that many journalists are motivated by the desire to make the world a better place. But their commitment has limits: Journalists uncover grievances, activists try to remedy them. Journalists describe and evaluate politics, activists make politics. They use different means and methods to fulfil their tasks (see below). Fulfilling the respective roles consciously and transparently is central to the credibility of either side. However, when journalism and activism are conflated, alarms go off in my head—as happened when I read the interview that Giovanni di Lorenzo, editor-in-chief of Die Zeit, conducted with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, published July 2017. Here is a short extract:

**Die Zeit:** Mr President, you have not agreed to an interview with a foreign newspaper in a long time. Are you trying to send a signal by talking to a German medium—at a time when relations between your country and Germany are at a low?

**Recep Tayyip Erdoğan:** (...) When we ask ourselves why our relations with Germany in particular have become strained, I say quite clearly: The German media are running a smear campaign against us. For example, by talking to terrorists.

**Die Zeit:** What would be the point of the media, which are independent in Germany, engaging in propaganda against Turkey? What would they have to gain?

**Erdoğan:** I do not believe that there is any such thing as independent media anywhere in the world. Somehow, they are all dependent, whether print or visual media, either ideologically—or they pursue their own interests. (...) We see it all very clearly: They turn their coats. German media are no different. Nobody can deny that.

At the end of 2023, Giovanni di Lorenzo told the Kölner Express that the interview with Erdoğan was "terrible" and a "70-minute battle". Erdoğan met him with aggression and a lack of understanding, Di Lorenzo expected to be thrown out at any minute. "He did not believe I was a journalist, but a representative of the German government, and claimed that we were all in cahoots."

## DISCREDIT FIRST, CRIMINALISE LATER

Di Lorenzo, acting on behalf of the German government? Erdoğan claims as much. He accused the journalist of political activism, even if he did not use the word "activism" explicitly. In Erdoğan's view, independent journalism does not exist. Rather, he considers all media to be biased. It is obvious to him that only the most powerful actor in the country, the government, could possibly control these media activists. By this "logic", Erdoğan is trying to lend credibility to his construct of a cross-media campaign by the "German media" against Turkey.

It is possible that Erdoğan is actually incapable of imagining a different media landscape because his domestic reality has become the norm for him. His regime has suppressed journalism so brutally that Turkey has dropped to 158th place in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom ranking. When Erdoğan speaks, he can hear the echo of his words a thousand times over in the state-controlled media. They do not practice actual journalism, but propaganda. Erdoğan's assessments in the interview with Di Lorenzo might therefore be mere projection.

However, it is more likely that Erdoğan is imputing activist interests to journalists for two other reasons.

Firstly, this framing can be used to declare every (government-)critical journalist a lobbyist. From this perspective, journalism is just a fraudulent vocabulary to sell a hidden agenda. This description undermines trust in journalists and the media—which is entirely intentional. This makes it all the easier for the government to impose its narrative.

Secondly, the accusation of activism makes it possible to criminalise journalists when necessary. Erdoğan's henchmen have had hundreds of media professionals arrested for allegedly spreading propaganda in favour of "terrorism". All it takes is for the media to give "terrorists" the floor, i.e. to interview them. The Turkish state decides who is a terrorist, thus creating an instrument of censorship for themselves to wield.

## READERS TURNING INTO FOLLOWERS

Erdoğan is not the first to employ this strategy in dealing with media professionals: Russia's president Vladimir Putin has media professionals categorised as "foreign agents", Donald Trump calls them "enemies of the people", Slovakian prime minister Robert Fico describes journalists as "dirty prostitutes", the AfD portrays Correctiv's research as state propaganda, and Pegida whines about the "lying press". In their "Feindbild" studies, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) warns that the mistrust-turned-hostility towards journalists increasingly manifests itself in acts of violence.

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What makes activist framing so dangerous is that parts of the population can relate to it. This is hardly surprising, as it legitimises intellectual convenience, political dogmatism, and conspiracy narratives and invites people to cherry-pick their reality. In the worst case, readers, listeners and viewers turn into political followers—who choose ignorance and blind faith in the authorities they endorse.

The most common approach to seemingly substantiate the accusation of activism is media funding. Whoever provides the money has the editorial say, so the simple formula. Yet, it is more complicated than that: Sometimes, the rule applies, sometimes it does not. There are countless politicians and oligarchs in Europe who shamelessly exploit the media they own: Andrej Babiš, former prime minister of the Czech Republic, may serve as a study subject: According to a September 2022 report by The Guardian, Babiš faced accusations of using his own newspapers to undermine the credibility of other media outlets. On the other hand, there are financiers and investors who contractually promise not to exert any influence. One example that I can vouch for is the IJ4EU programme, which is largely funded by the European Commission. More than one million euros per year are channelled into research grants for investigative journalists. They often use the funds to publish critical pieces about the EU administration, for example about its migration policy. Here we have a sponsor paying to have a mirror held up to themselves, for better or worse.

## FINANCING AND EDITORIAL FREEDOM

In countries with a high level of press freedom, cash flows are more complex. Private media usually finance themselves through a mix of distribution revenue, advertising revenue, and the sale of services. Individual donors, such as advertising customers, only have a relative influence in this setup, as revenues are diversified.

### JOURNALISTS

- usually have journalistic training, for example a traineeship
- work for publishing houses, radio stations, or television stations or have set up their own media outlets
- communicate in journalistic formats, including articles, features, and news
- follow the press code of the Press Council in their work
- are bound by the respective state media laws
- see themselves as observers of social life and value neutrality
- do not represent an overt or covert political agenda
- are paid from distribution revenues, advertising revenues, or broadcasting fees
- regard democracy as a basic prerequisite for their full professional fulfilment

Regarding public broadcasters, there are major differences in Europe. Some are paid for by citizens' licence fees, while the respective national government decides on the budget for others. The question of how influenceable the broadcasters are depends largely on political will. The former Polish PIS government turned the public broadcasters into a propaganda machine; the British Tories forced the BBC into a "he said/she said" journalism, which opened the door to unsubstantiated views. In Germany, public service editorial offices are (still) largely free to operate.

In short: Ownership structures and cash flows can be decisive editorial influencing factors, but they do not have to be. The national framework conditions play a crucial role: the appreciation of press freedom, media law, the (self-)understanding of journalists, the industry's ability to self-regulate, and the strength of the trade unions, to name a few key aspects. This is why quality journalism exists where, according to Erdoğan, none can exist: Der Spiegel reveals economic scandals despite advertising money; ARD and ZDF take on politicians even though they are politically regulated; organisations such as Correctiv criticise state bodies even if ministries provide part of the budget.

## TWO PROFESSIONAL SPHERES

In fact, journalists and activists belong to different professional spheres that are clearly distinct from one another:

### ACTIVISTS

- have usually acquired specialised subject expertise, for example during their studies
- work in civil society for non-governmental organisations, social partners, or grassroots organisations
- mobilise through journalistic and activist formats, including flyers, protests, and petitions
- ideally follow the communication code of the German PR Council in their public-relations work
- are bound by the laws governing their forms of action
- see themselves as shapers of social life and value getting involved
- pursue an open political agenda with clearly defined goals
- are paid from donations, membership fees, public project funds, or grants from philanthropists
- regard democracy as a basic prerequisite for their full professional fulfilment

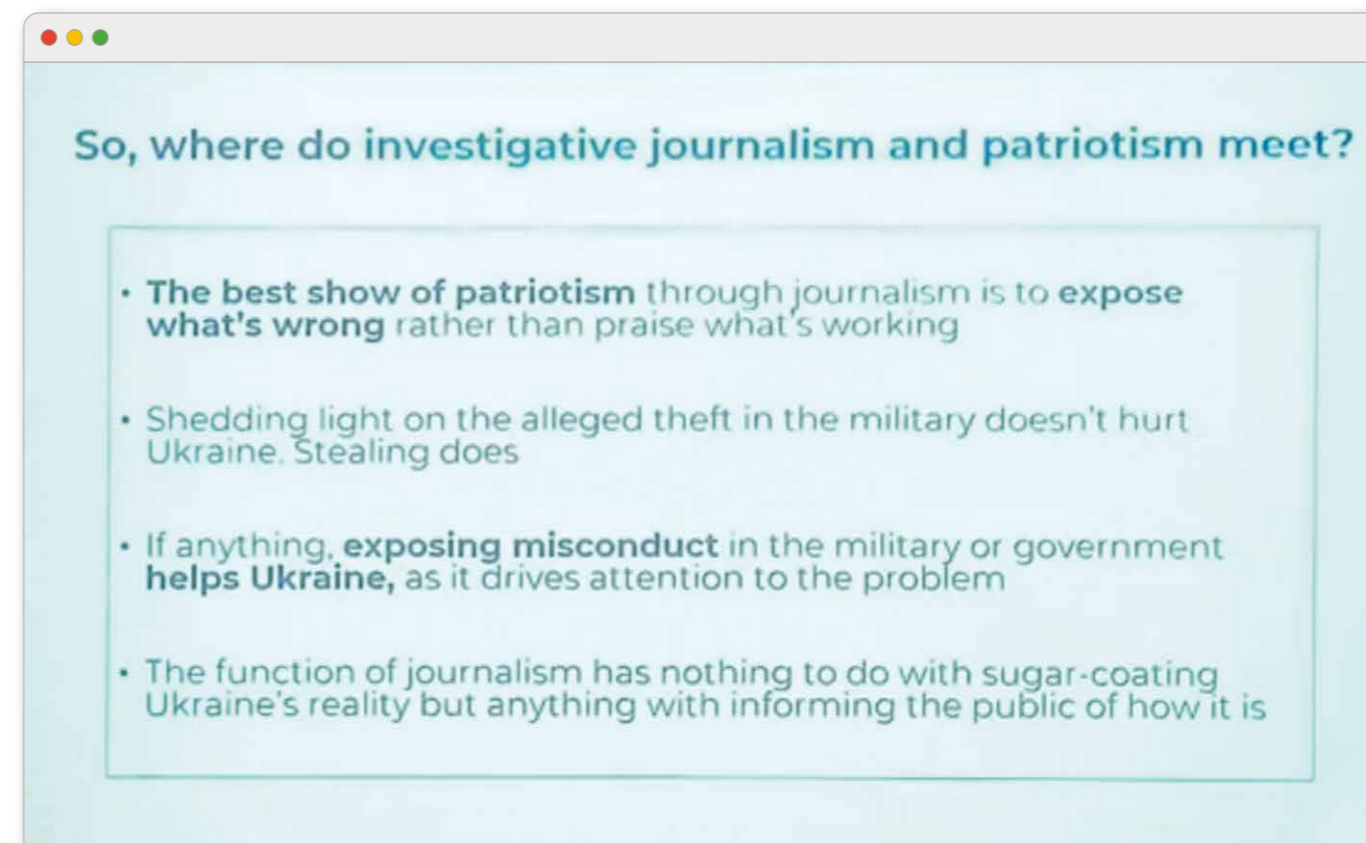
If both sides are aware of their roles and functions, collaboration can be very fruitful. Christopher Hird, Chairman of the Ethical Journalism Network, provides several examples in his book "Investigative Journalism Works: The Mechanism of Impact", which were also discussed at the re:cover conference in Krakow 2023. A recording of the conference panel in question has been uploaded to the ECPMF YouTube channel.

## JOURNALISM UNDER MAXIMUM PRESSURE

One of the most impressive presentations at this conference was given by Anna Myroniuk, Head of Investigation at the Kyiv Independent. Myroniuk described journalistic action in the midst of Russia's war against Ukraine. Together with her colleagues, she uncovered leadership failures, abuse of power, and theft in the Ukrainian army, which led to her being labelled "unpatriotic" by compatriots. She also had to expect that this information would be exploited in Russian propaganda. Journalism, activism?

On the last slide of her presentation, Anna noted why Kyiv Independent decided to publish the findings anyway.

**That is the essence of journalism, the source of its credibility. This is what autocrats like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are afraid of.**



Screenshot from the livestream of Anna Myroniuk's presentation at the re:cover conference in Krakow 2023. © Anna Myroniuk 2023

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