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Bashing the Competition, Indulging in Self-Adulation: Three Case Studies on Swiss Media Journalism

Swiss journalism is often credited with high quality standards and continuity and even a certain amount of complacency. These days, however, continuity is in short supply in media journalism. More and more media departments are being closed: whether the *Weltwoche*, the *Tages-Anzeiger*, the *Bund* or the newsmagazine *Facts* – they have all suddenly decided that their media pages are expendable.

The overall number of print media is also declining. With Swiss media organizations undergoing a process of consolidation, the sector is becoming less and less transparent. As communication researcher Stephan Russ-Mohl already suspected years ago, in these circumstances the economic interests of media companies are bound to shape media coverage more than is desirable. According to Russ-Mohl, it is simply too tempting to indulge in self-adulation and to cross-promote the corporation's media products, while hushing up or – as the case may be – maligning competitors.

Whether or not such tendencies in media coverage in the German-speaking part of Switzerland can indeed be empirically observed was the topic of a research paper prepared at the Università della Svizzera italiana in Lugano, Switzerland. This article presents the most important findings from this content analysis of three case studies.

The Scientific Method

Between September 1, 2001, and November 30, 2003, the author studied eight print media (*Berner Zeitung*, *Aargauer Zeitung*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ), *NZZ am Sonntag*, *St. Galler Tagblatt*, *Tages-Anzeiger*, *Facts* and *Weltwoche*) and analyzed 244 articles using qualitative content analysis. The articles in question were all clearly pertinent to the three lapses outlined in the text. The results of the content analysis were also discussed with several media editors to obtain further information and to facilitate the interpretation of the empirical findings.

First Case Study: *Die Weltwoche*

The first case concerns the re-launch of the *Weltwoche*, which took place in May 2002. A re-launch in itself is nothing unusual, but the fact that a weekly paper is published in a new format and on top of that repositions itself politically (shifting from the liberal left to the right), while at the same time becoming more provocative and unpredictable, is an unprecedented development in the Swiss media landscape. Furthermore, the change in format of the *Weltwoche* was preceded by a tumultuous

restructuring phase in the parent company, the Basler Mediengruppe (*Basler Zeitung*), which caused the re-launch to be delayed.

Second Case Study: *Der Bund*

In the summer of 2003, a series of negotiations commenced over the Bernese daily, *Der Bund*. The paper had been operating with losses for years, causing the NZZ-Gruppe, which held 80 percent of the *Bund*'s publishing house, Bund Verlag AG, to enter into talks about possible investment with other media companies. In the end, the NZZ-Gruppe accepted a bid from the Espace Media Groupe, the majority shareholder of the *Berner Zeitung*, a competitor in the Bernese media market. This deal became known as the "Bernese Model" – an unprecedented set-up in Switzerland, whereby a single media company has stakes in various competing newspapers, and thus controls the local newspaper market.

Third Case Study: *NZZ am Sonntag*

Towards the end of 2003, a scandal erupted at the *NZZ am Sonntag*: Lorenz Wolfers, a Swiss journalist living in the U.S., had been supplying the Sunday edition of the renowned *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* with false news stories. When the fraud was uncovered, the *NZZ am Sonntag* took the bull by the horns, carried out an internal investigation, and published the results in its own paper.

An analysis of the media coverage of these three cases will offer insight into how the Swiss print media report both on their own and on other media organizations.

Heaping on the Praise

The first case already shows that even high-quality newspapers are having difficulties with covering their own news organizations: the newsroom is misused as an "advertising space" for self-promotion. Stories about one's own news organization or newsroom generally do not take a negative angle.

The *Weltwoche* went overboard in this respect: compared with other publications, it produced nearly twice as many articles documenting all the ways in which the change in format benefited the paper, proudly publishing the new circulation and sales figures, citing reports by other media outlets, and announcing prizes awarded. At least the newspaper displayed a certain amount of sensitivity about being the beneficiary of all the good press. Almost all the articles were published as editorials, that is, in a place that is actually intended for "announcements" by the newsroom. Nevertheless, there is an undeniable tendency towards self-promotion: positive reports predominate, press releases are recycled, and, in the process, the editorial becomes just another marketing venue as in "he who pays the piper calls the tune."

Fabrications – Isolated Incidents?

The *NZZ am Sonntag* was the first Swiss print medium ever to report on the failings in a scandal in which it was itself involved. Its decision to come forward with the story may be commendable, but the paper's approach stayed largely on the surface of things. How Lorenz Wolffers' fabrications ended up in the paper in the first place was never discovered. Although the circumstances were indeed reconstructed, they were deemed exceptional. The fact that internal editing procedures must have failed as well was never taken into consideration. Coverage of the incident, therefore, retained a blind spot: there was only one "culprit", the fabricator – case closed.

Even competitors reporting on the incident limited their coverage to reconstructing the circumstances and limiting their criticism to the falsifier. There is a tendency to prefer to pin the blame on a single "offender" in order to detract from any editorial responsibility – instead of admitting that this kind of disaster could happen to other newsrooms, too.

Reporting on the Competition

Analysis of the content also reveals that in all three cases the coverage of competitors contains a particularly high proportion of statements expressing an opinion (52%). Overall, negative statements clearly account for the largest share (27%), compared with positive (14%) and ambiguous (11%) ones. In other words, the premise that negative news is built up if it concerns the competition and swept under the rug if it concerns one's own organization appears to be accurate.

The share of negative statements is higher in all three cases when referring to direct competitors. This was especially apparent in the newsmagazine *Facts*' coverage of its competitor, the *Weltwoche*. Where media companies are not in direct competition with each other, however, the results vary. The most telling example of this is the *Aargauer Zeitung*, which adopted a critical stance in all of its reports.

Generating Synergies

The Swiss media market is dominated by a few large corporations such as Ringier, Edipresse, Tamedia, the NZZ-Gruppe or the Espace Media Groupe. The temptation to cross-promote the corporations' products or projects when reporting on them is great, for this generates positive synergies, which mean a potential increase in revenue. Here, the media journalist must tread a fine line: entrepreneurial spirit and corporate interest conflict with the goal of independent reporting, eagerness to please the boss with the willingness to criticize both the work of others and one's own.

At least vested interests and media ownership are for the most part laid bare in Switzerland. Newsrooms, nevertheless, often serve as vehicles for advertising.

A striking example in this regard is the *Berner Zeitung* and the debate surrounding the “Bernese Model”. With 43 statements, the *Berner Zeitung* has printed more positive comments about the “Bernese Model” than all the other print media put together. It all culminates in a full-page speech by the CEO without any accompanying editorial: it reads like a PR release.



Source: *Berner Zeitung*, 21 November 2003

Not reporting on in-house blunders altogether is another way of producing a “white-wash” effect. This is what the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* did about the Wolfers affair at its Sunday newspaper, the *NZZ am Sonntag*: The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* did not address the possibility of a breakdown of internal editing procedures playing a role any more than the *NZZ am Sonntag* did.

The Chronicler’s Duty versus Media Criticism

In all three cases analyzed, the media journalists in question did not act as media critics, but saw their role primarily as chroniclers. For the most part, they limited themselves to straight news, while criticism only played a secondary role. This can be deduced from the extremely low number of editorials and was also confirmed in personal interviews.

Is it true then that “there is honour among thieves,” as critics of media journalism have long suspected? Only up to a certain point: articles “disguised” as news often have an undercurrent of criticism. Media journalists couch their criticism in very subtle language.

Not a Pleasant Prospect

What are the consequences when print media get rid of their media sections? If the media and journalism treated as cross-sectional topics were to receive the same attention as when there is a designated section set aside for them, there would not be a problem. However, publications with their own column for media coverage do report on the media more often. The *Aargauer Zeitung*, which is the only newspaper with a daily section devoted to the media, published the most articles (on average 14) about the cases analyzed – a significantly higher number than newspapers without a media section, such as the *Tages-Anzeiger* or the *Berner Zeitung* (both on average 9 articles).

These findings are not encouraging. At the same time, though, one must not lose sight of the fact that – as the example of the *NZZ am Sonntag* shows – Swiss media journalism does occasionally ask a few tough questions. And when a media outlet stands to gain from a media-related news topic, it is made public more often than one would think. By publishing announcements about itself as editorials, rather than in the news section, the *Weltwoche*, too, demonstrates an awareness of the issues involved in writing about itself.

For competent, credible media journalism, it is vital that every media outlet has its own media department, and that this department can operate as independently as possible from the publishing director and the PR department. Only very few newsrooms today fulfill this requirement. Yet without public debate about journalism, it is virtually impossible to instill a sense of quality not only in the public, but also in the minds of journalists. The effort to raise the public's awareness of this matter must continue, as much in Switzerland as anywhere else. Readers have a right to information about the media and journalism that is just as readily available as it is about politics, business, or sports.