

The Role of the Mass Media in Western European Social Movements in 1968: The German Case

1. Mediatization and conflict

The 1968 movement is often described as a media phenomenon. Whether it was Benno Ohnesorg's tragic death, the demonstrations against the emergency laws or the Easter riots – the media presence was clearly felt in all these cases. Television, radio and daily newspapers were ubiquitous and accompanied the rebellious students "with journalistic curiosity and a clear sense of what was commercially interesting" (Frei 2008: 126). Wolfgang Kraushaar puts it even more clearly: "Nobody could escape the whirlwind of news," writes the political scientist from the Hamburg Institute for Social Research (2001: 317). It is therefore clear that a proper scientific analysis of that time cannot be done without an examination of the media component.

In the 1960s, the media played a significant role in the lives of German citizens – not only as a means of entertainment, but also as a source of information. In 1965, 70 percent of the West German population had subscribed to one or more daily newspapers; 64 percent could watch television on their own devices (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach 1967: 105; 114). The Bundestag's press commission determined at the time that West German society had become "more open to and aware of publicity" (Hodenberg 2006: 142). In 1964, political information reached over 80 percent of the total population. The reach of daily newspapers was 46 percent (Berg & Kiefer 1978: 93). With such high reach, it is reasonable to assume that the media and everyday life influenced each other and that the overall social situation changed as a result.

In order to theoretically grasp the "increasing penetration of society by the media", the historians Frank Bösch and Norbert Frei proposed the term mediatization (2006: 9). They understand this to mean a process in which media and social developments stimulate each other. The focus of their considerations is the question of the democratic potential of the mass media. In view of the historical experiences of the 20th century, Bösch and Frei propose to see mediatization as an open and ambivalent process that can contribute to both liberal and totalitarian modernization.

The two authors also explain that the term mediatization also refers to "the development of an increasing self-observation of society through the media," with the mass media forming a "part of the public in the broader sense" (Bösch & Frei 2006: 11-

12). In the 1960s, the term public was increasingly reinterpreted in the Federal Republic. "A functioning public was," as Wolfgang Kraushaar writes, "conceived as an instance of democratic control over political rule" (2001: 323). This is another reason why it is necessary to examine the role of the media in connection with the 1968 movement and in particular with the Easter riots.

From Bösch and Frei's point of view, the media "have a high power of interpretation over the perceptions in a society simply through their selection capabilities," although it would be wrong to understand media products "as being directly 'consumed' by society and individuals" (12-13). At the same time, it is probably the case that "the media do not decide what people think, but at least what they talk about" (18). In this respect, the influence of the mass media on public opinion before, during and after the Easter riots should not be underestimated. Against this background, it is necessary to question the role of the mass media and place it in the overall social context.

One of the basic tasks of the media in a democracy is to create publicity. As communication scientists Heinz Pürer and Johannes Raabe write, this primarily means that the media "facilitate an exchange of information between organisations and institutions and citizens [...], thereby simultaneously creating transparency" (1996: 309). In addition, the public task of the mass media includes the political integration of citizens and the critical and control function towards society, the state power and each other.

BILD and SZ were among the most important print media in the Federal Republic in the 1960s. Accordingly, they played a key role in creating publicity during the Easter riots of 1968. The following paper will examine how the two daily newspapers managed this. It will also answer the question of how the opinions of the various social actors were recorded and reflected in the reporting by BILD and SZ. Based on this, it will be possible to determine how the two newspapers carried out their critical and control functions.

The Easter riots were one of the high points of the 1968 protests. During this period, which Norbert Frei describes as an 18-month-long phase of "acceleration, delimitation and radicalization in a variety of political and social contexts that was as unexpected as it was improbable," the Federal Republic experienced the sharpest social and political conflict in its history to that point (2008: 112). The fact that this extremely complicated conflict situation ultimately ended with comparatively little violence was also due to the social institutions that were able to channel the opposing interests of the conflicting groups.

As the sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf points out in his theoretical reflections on the nature of social conflicts, their structural origin is to be found "in power relations" (1969: 114). Following the suggestions of Max Weber and Vilfredo Pareto, Dahrendorf identifies positive and negative power roles and corresponding interest groups in every power association that drive social change through conflict. While the former want to maintain the status quo, the latter try to change it. The conflict between the interest groups ultimately leads to changes in the social structure through the change in the power relations (116). From a scientific point of view, three sets of conditions can be empirically examined: conditions of the organization of interest groups, conditions of conflict between interest groups, and conditions of change as a result of the conflict between interest groups (117).

For a historical study, the conditions of conflict between interest groups are of particular interest. Based on Dahrendorf's scheme, the so-called establishment can be assigned the positive role of power in the context of the 1968 protests, while the extra-parliamentary opposition is assigned the negative role of power. As Dahrendorf rightly notes, "the existence of effective mechanisms for regulating social conflicts" is an important factor that influences the intensity of conflict in a continuum "that ranges from democratic debate to civil war" (117).

Given the considerable media presence and extremely active media consumption among the West German population, it can be assumed that the press was part of such regulatory mechanisms during the 1960s and thus influenced the intensity of the conflict. As already mentioned, the thesis of this paper assumes that BILD and SZ contributed to maintaining democratic discourse through their reporting on the Easter riots. The two newspapers were involved in creating publicity, taking into account interest groups that played positive and negative roles in power. By giving both groups the opportunity to comment on the events, a regulatory mechanism was put in place that helped to stabilize the situation.

In the following, we will use a category-based content analysis to examine how BILD and SZ treated the conflict groups in their reporting. Based on this, we will make statements about the role of the two newspapers in this conflict. Before this can be done, however, the events surrounding the Easter riots must first be embedded in a broader historical context.

2. Easter riots in the context of the 1968 protests

The year 1968 gave a name to an entire generation and is considered one of the turning points in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. In the public discussion about the 1968 protests, many different phenomena that occurred in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1960s are mixed up; this period is often romanticized in both positive and negative ways. The following description of the social and political situation at the time is intended to outline the framework in which the Easter riots took place. Of course, the aim is not so much to comprehensively illuminate events, those involved and backgrounds, but above all to appropriately contextualize the results of the investigation, which only then can they be properly understood and interpreted. To present the contemporary historical framework, mainly more recent historical studies were used, which promise a minimum level of balance due to their temporal distance.

As the Cologne historian Habbo Knoch points out, the political mobilization of the late 1960s was fed by "numerous contradictions and experiences of conflict specific to the German context" (2007: 39). The highly traumatic experience of National Socialism played a very important role in this. After the CDU/CSU and the SPD gained an overwhelming majority of votes in the Bundestag in December 1966 by forming a grand coalition, many in the Federal Republic saw the imminent danger of a return to a totalitarian state. Many students were among them. They combined fear of dictatorship with demands for university reform.

In response to the grand coalition, the non-parliamentary opposition (APO) was formed, which brought together "primarily students, but also schoolchildren, trainees, workers, mostly unionized, employees and intellectuals" (Kraushaar 2001: 319). This very heterogeneous movement was "an expression of a discrepancy that had grown over the years and turned into a political one between institutional orders and social and moral expectations" of the younger generation (Knoch 2007: 39). The APO's criticism was directed both against specific projects of the federal government, such as the emergency legislation, and generally against the establishment, against the conservative, elitist West German post-war society, which, from the APO's point of view, was morally questionable due to its entanglements with the Third Reich.

On June 2, 1967, the student Benno Ohnesorg was shot dead by police officer Karl-Heinz Kurras during a demonstration during the visit of the Persian Shah to West Berlin. As Norbert Frei emphasizes in his broad study of the 1968 protests, this tragic

event "focused and energized" the protest movement (2008: 118). Now the actions of the APO and its driving force, the far-left Socialist German Student Union (SDS), were not limited to West Berlin, but spread to several university cities in Germany. However, given the low proportion of students in the Federal Republic of Germany, it could not be described as a mass movement.

After Ohnesorg's funeral, the SDS held a congress in Hanover, where the now famous controversy between Jürgen Habermas and Rudi Dutschke unfolded. The SDS ideologist Dutschke announced that "the material conditions for the feasibility of our history" were in place, whereupon the critical theorist Habermas accused him of "left fascism" and of accepting manifest violence (quoted in Frei 2008: 120-121). In fact, the issue of violence was a major problem for the protest movement, which was to become very clear during the Easter riots. Initially, however, the protests were non-violent in nature. The APO organized sit-ins, demonstrations and discussion groups. As the Berlin historian Bernd Söseman noted at the end of the 1990s, the "slogans, slogans and language bands of the go-ins, teach-ins or sit-ins" were "placed in the media with great impact and thus widely disseminated" (1999: 684).

The individual actions were bundled into campaigns with an ideological background. One of the most important of these campaigns was directed against the Springer publishing house. In the APO's enemy image of the morally contaminated establishment, "the Springer publishing house played a key role," writes historian Hans-Peter Schwarz, who is close to political Catholicism, in his Springer biography (2008: 428). The protesters were convinced that Axel Springer was manipulating the public through his newspapers and thus making the development of a critical consciousness impossible. Under the slogan "Expropriate Springer!" the protesters attempted to take action against the supposed press monopoly of the Springer publishing house through more or less spectacular actions from the second half of 1967.

The APO's accusations against the Springer publishing house were not entirely unfounded. The group controlled large parts of the press market in the Federal Republic of Germany and West Berlin. About a month after the Easter riots, the Bundestag's press commission stated that "the freedom of the press guaranteed by the Basic Law was being endangered by the level of concentration achieved by the Axel Springer publishing house" (Kraushaar 2008: 162). However, it was an exaggeration to speak of a Springer monopoly. In addition to BILD, *Welt*, *BZ* and other newspapers from the Springer publishing house, there were many print media, several radio stations and two television

channels that did not belong to Axel Springer. Many historians who have studied this topic in detail emphasize that most of the leading journalistic media – including *Der Spiegel*, *Stern*, *Die Zeit* and also the *SZ* – met the protesting students "with openness and goodwill" (Frei 2008: 127).

In contrast, the Springer newspapers were hostile to the student protests from the outset. They repeatedly referred to the protesters in a derogatory manner as "rioters" and "academic hooligans" (115). "The crudeness of the journalistic insults against students was remarkable and is no longer comprehensible from the perspective of the present, much more lenient age," says Hans-Peter Schwarz in his Springer biography (2008: 429). Meanwhile, *BILD* articulated opinions that were held by broad sections of the population, including the then Federal President Heinrich Lübke. In his New Year's address for 1968, Lübke spoke of "small minorities outside the democratic parties" who had brought "uproar and terror" to the country (quoted in Frei 2008: 12). It was more than clear that he was referring to the APO and the SDS.

In many respects, the APO was no less harsh than the Springer papers. At an anti-Springer event at the Berlin Technical University on February 1, 1968, the expropriation of Springer and the occupation of the editorial offices of *BILD* and *BZ* were demanded. "The highlight was an educational film on the production of Molotov cocktails, filmed by [...] later RAF founding member Holger Meins. In the final sequence, a shot of the Springer high-rise building next to the Wall can be seen" (Kraushaar 2008: 161).

In the spring of 1968, the anti-Springer campaign died down. However, as it soon became clear, this was merely the calm before the storm. On April 11, 1968, when the mentally disturbed laborer Josef Bachmann critically wounded Rudi Dutschke, whom the political scientist Wolfgang Kraushaar rightly describes as "the figurehead of the 1968 movement" (2008: 162), with three shots, the most serious unrest in the history of the Federal Republic broke out up to that point. For the APO, the assassination attempt was the direct result of a smear campaign by the Springer press. *BILD*, along with the Berlin Senate, said members of their ranks. This was not without consequences. The night after the attack, over 2,000 APO activists attempted to storm the Springer high-rise in West Berlin. The facade was pelted with stones and burning torches, motor vehicles were set on fire, windows were broken, and the police used water cannons (Schwarz 2008: 462).

Serious riots also occurred in other German cities that night and on the following days. "Over the course of five days, more than 50,000 people took part in attempts to blockade the delivery gates of the Springer printing works in Essen, Esslingen, Frankfurt,

Hamburg and West Berlin. A total of 21,000 police officers were deployed" (Kraushaar 2008: 155). In Munich, two people were killed as a result of the attacks, and 400 people were injured nationwide. The situation was only gradually stabilized (see also the timeline of events in April 1968 in the appendix).

It is obvious that media coverage of these dramatic events played an important role in their further development. However, the role of the press in the Easter riots has so far hardly been systematically investigated. This paper focuses on the analysis of the reporting by BILD and SZ, i.e. by a newspaper that is considered hostile to the APO and one that is assumed to have reported in a friendly manner about the protesters. With the help of the category-based content analysis of the two press outlets, it will be possible to determine whether these assumptions are correct. How aggressive was BILD's reporting towards the APO in the run-up to the Easter riots? How did the tabloid report on the events that followed, in which its editorial offices were also devastated? What attitude did the SZ take towards the students? How did the Munich paper report on the riots and classify them? By answering these questions, it will be possible to compare the reporting of the two newspapers, which should help to gain more clarity about their role in the Easter Riots of 1968.

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