

From Core Business to By-product Why German Media Companies Still Invest in Journalism

Jan Hofer¹, Darian Leicher¹

¹Institute for Journalism and Public Relations, University of Applied Sciences, Gelsenkirchen, Germany

Correspondence: Jan Hofer, Institute for Journalism and Public Relations, University of Applied Sciences, Gelsenkirchen, Germany.

Received: June 25, 2024

Accepted: August 15, 2024

Online Published: August 23, 2024

doi:10.11114/smc.v12i4.7000

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v12i4.7000>

Abstract

The emergence of digital technologies over the past two decades has brought about changes that threaten the very existence of German media companies. The journalistic business model is losing sales, and the decline in print circulations is making it successively difficult to earn money with journalistic products. Therefore, German media companies have been investing in business models that have no relation to journalism to generate growth for years – with success. Considering this development, it is astonishing from a purely economic perspective that media groups, which are increasingly developing into technology companies, are still clinging to the ailing journalistic business model at all. To examine their motives to do so, this study poses the following research question: "Why do media companies still invest in journalistic products today?" To answer it, the researcher conducted interviews with high-level employees from media companies as part of a qualitative study. Analysis of the data revealed that media companies continue to invest in journalism mainly because they benefit economically from the brands their journalistic products represent. Other reasons like serving as a pillar of the democratic constitution or to help shape public discourse seem to be less important.

Keywords: journalism, journalism crisis, media management, new business, journalistic business model

1. Introduction

The latest Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute at Oxford University provides a gloomy description of the state of journalism providers: publishers are responding to rising expenditures and falling advertising revenues by cutting costs, laying off staff and downsizing or merging editorial teams (Newman et al., 2023). A trend that has been emerging for years. Although the digital business is largely expanding its reach (Schröder, 2024), it does not generate the same revenue as print advertising (Buschow & Wellbrock, 2020). News media are not the main areas of growth in online advertising today (Nelson & Miner, 2022) and the willingness to pay for journalism in Germany is rather low (Newman et al., 2023).

Many media companies are responding to this development by diversifying their portfolios while turning away from journalism. For years, publishers such as Axel Springer, Bertelsmann and Burda have been successfully investing in start-ups or buying companies that have no connection to the former core business of journalism (Priebe, 2019; Wiegand, 2021). For example, the job portal Stepstone or the real estate platform Immowelt now belong to Axel Springer, the IT service provider Arvato to Bertelsmann and the job network Xing to Burda (Priebe, 2019).

Against this backdrop, it is surprising from a purely economic perspective that Axel Springer CEO Mathias Döpfner, for example, has specifically ruled out selling his major journalistic brands BILD and WELT, even though they are battling economic ruin and show no signs of a turnaround towards more revenue growth (DPA, 2023). Bertelsmann is also far from getting rid of all Gruner + Jahr journalistic products and is continuing to focus on established flagships such as Stern. The Group is even investing a total of 80 million euros in journalistic products (Knuth, 2023). This is even though the parent company's profit for 2023 has plummeted by 47 percent and the annual forecast has been lowered (Schepe, 2023). RTL's weakening business, which now also includes the former Gruner + Jahr flagship, is to blame. Meanwhile, all other Bertelsmann divisions - the Arvato services business, the BMG music division and the education business - were able to increase their revenues and earnings (Schepe, 2023). Digital brands such as the social medium Xing, the online travel company HolidayCheck and the retail platform Cyberport generated 58% of the Burda media

company's revenues in 2022 (Hautsch, 2022). Against the background of the developments described above, the motives of decision-makers at relevant media companies for continuing to invest in journalistic products are worth determining. Why do they hold on to journalistic offerings despite incurring losses while other areas of the company are more profitable? The central concepts in the following are power and brand. It is precisely these two dimensions, in addition to profit maximization, that are focal when media managers make decisions in favor or against journalistic products (Nielsen, 2019, p. 10; Cornia et al., 2016, p. 31 f.).

Power dimension

The journalistic business model is no longer economically stable. There are currently no signs that private media companies in the German market will ever be able to compensate for advertising losses in the print sector with digital revenues (Kolo, 2019, p. 4). Even digital subscriptions, which have increased in the meantime, cannot compensate for declining print circulation in most cases (Newman et al., 2023, p. 76). It can therefore be stated that German journalism providers have not yet found a business model for commercial sales of digital formats that can keep up with previous revenues (Allern & Pollack, 2017). Cross-financing often occurs within media companies, meaning that considerable financial resources are raised from other sources to cover the costs of the journalistic areas (Nielsen, 2019). This approach can be explained by the fact that media companies apparently assume that their reporting is politically and socially significant, meaning that news media still produce most of the information about public events, helping their recipients to connect with the world and thus making news more accessible through their reach (Nielsen, 2017). Following this idea, news media are less profitable, but still powerful. This form of "power" (Nielsen, 2019) must be considered when looking for motives as to why diversified media companies still adhere to journalism today. In this context, Nielsen quotes the Israeli journalist Amir Teig in an essay, who speaks of an increasingly "influence-oriented industry" (Nielsen, 2017).

The production and distribution of journalistic offerings have rarely been permanently independent, commercially viable business areas, but have always been susceptible to potential instrumentalization (Nielsen, 2019). The term "media capture" was coined for this. In other words, the influencing of reporting by governments or other external parties (Besley & Prat, 2006). The interests of these third parties can be either purely political or interwoven between politics and commercial interests (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002). Such "hijacked" or instrumentalized media are widespread throughout the world (Djankov et al., 2003, p. 341). For example, the media conglomerates of Southern Europe and Latin America are intertwined in politics and business. Silvio Berlusconi, who once dominated Italian private television and was also party leader and prime minister, should also be mentioned in this context (Schiffrin, 2017).

In view of the current decline in advertising revenue for media companies (Newman et al., 2023) - particularly in German-speaking countries - it can be assumed that the motives of owners could also be increasingly shaped less by economic and more by political considerations (Schiffrin, 2017). Accordingly, the risk of "media capture" is increasing, because in a time of declining profitability only someone with a strong desire for political influence wants to own a media company. The motives of media owners will therefore increasingly be less economic and more political (Schiffrin, 2017). The research published in April 2023 by the weekly newspaper DIE ZEIT on the chat logs of Axel Springer CEO Mathias Döpfner is an example of what this influence can look like. These suggest that Döpfner influenced the reporting of the BILD newspaper according to his personal political interests (Gilbert & Stark, 2023). For example, six weeks before the 2021 German federal election, Döpfner wrote to the then editor-in-chief of BILD, Julian Reichelt: "Can you do more for the FDP? They should get at least 16 percent." Rarely is the power dimension of journalism revealed so directly - and even if it is an extreme case, it is still remarkable within an apparently "influence-oriented industry" (Nielsen, 2017, p. 40).

Due to the enormous structural pressure media outlets face, it is likely that the power dimension will become more prominent in the coming years. News organizations are emerging that are either bought or newly founded by self-interested actors to gain power - and not or not only to earn money (Schiffrin, 2017). The most recent example of this in German-speaking countries is the start-up "Rome Medien" founded by Julian Reichelt and the associated online platform "Nius". A strongly conservative medium is being built around the ex-BILD editor-in-chief with the help of financial backer Frank Gotthardt (Schade, 2022). Regarding the significance of the power dimension, the first research question is: To what extent do media entrepreneurs use their journalistic content to exert journalistic influence?

Brand dimension

Another argument for investing in media is their brand appeal. Media brands symbolize and convey a valid set of values and thus function as a collective representation of values (Siegert&Rademacher, 2011). The aim is to anchor certain associations and images of the company in the minds of the target group to generate traction and sell news or other products under the umbrella of the media company (Cornia et al., 2016). Accordingly, the positioning of the media brand is part of marketing and advertising measures (McDowell, 2006). Thus, companies have enduring values and

must reflect these in all their activities. They therefore remain relevant and viable, which in turn leads to customer retention and loyalty (Picard, 2006).

In a globalized, fragmented world, with new media usage and a new competitive environment, media brands are becoming increasingly important - they simplify life (Siegert et al., 2011). Against the backdrop of declining revenues from print circulation and advertising, media companies are harnessing their appeal and transferring it to new products in the form of three strategies (Tropp & Baetzgen, 2020; Cornia et al., 2016):

- Horizontal diversification: the expansion of the product range here refers to the existing offering - such as the Tagesschau, which now also addresses new target groups on TikTok and Instagram. In this context, the ZEIT products should also be mentioned, which appeal to younger target groups with the media formats ZEIT Campus and ZEIT Leo.
- Vertical diversification: Here, the product is placed upstream or downstream of existing formats in the value chain. One example is ProSiebenSat.1 Media AG, which, in addition to TV stations, also includes services for marketing, series development, production and video-on-demand and pay-TV offerings.
- Lateral diversification: The company enters completely new business areas that often have little or no connection to the Group's previous business areas. For example, the job portal Stepstone, which belongs to Axel Springer.

In all three cases, a brand's attention and credibility are transferred to other offers or business areas (Siegert&Rademacher, 2011). All strategies are based on the attraction of the respective media brand (Cornia et al., 2016): "What we offer as a company is a perspective on the world. (...) That's why we're increasingly expanding into other businesses like travel, events and financial services, where we give customers a curated view of what they should do or buy or where they should go on vacation."

Media brands, which are increasingly looking for other revenue streams to complement or even replace advertising, benefit from a leap of faith. The results of this diversification strategy have been rated as "promising", at least for the UK media market (Cornia et al., 2016, p. 31). Figures from the German media group Axel Springer, which is also increasingly decoupling itself from the traditional media business, indicate that this strategy is also being pursued in the German market. Accordingly, the core business now lies in the high-yield digital classifieds-markets such as the job portal Stepstone or the real estate company Aviv, which delivered around 74% of EBITDA earnings in 2019 (Wiegand, 2021). The same applies to the Burda Media Group: in 2017, Xing, HolidayCheck and the remaining "national digital brands" accounted for 52.5% of Group revenue (Zlatanova, 2018, p. 48). This brand dimension of media companies gives rise to the second research question: Do media companies want to use the brand image of their journalistic products for other business areas?

2. Method

To answer the previously derived research questions, expert interviews with decision-makers in German private media companies were conducted and analyzed qualitatively. The basis for the selection of interview partners is the ranking by Karle and Wiegand, which lists the 25 largest private media companies in Germany according to turnover (2021, p. 49). The benchmark for the ranking is total revenue including international business. This also includes revenue from non-media and other activities, if revenue from publishing predominates or publishing media roots are relevant to the ongoing business. This approach was used to identify particularly successful media companies. The decisive factor for this study is that the companies have journalistic products in their portfolio. In this context, a journalistic product is understood to be a regular, characteristic way in which professionally trained journalists design content deemed worthy of publication according to established structures and sourcing practices and within periodical and functional limits (Schäfer-Hock, 2018, p. 80). Corporations such as Google, Amazon and Netflix are therefore excluded from the list. A total of 19 media companies in Germany were included.

People from the group management or management board, management consultants, members of the editorial board, senior editors, employees from business development or press spokespersons were considered for the interviews. These are positions that have an insight into the strategic decisions of the company and can therefore also be described as experts with specialist knowledge (Schreiner, 2012). Written interview requests were then sent to the respective press offices, and a total of four people agreed to be interviewed, whose statements are reproduced anonymously below: A business development employee of a publishing group with over 1200 employees (interview participant 1), a head of young talent development of a media group with around 4000 employees (interview participant 2), a press officer of another media group (over 4000 employees/interview participant 3) and the head of a marketing company of a regional newspaper that has a circulation of over 120,000 (interview participant 4).

The in-depth interviews were conducted by telephone. The press spokesperson was an exception. He preferred to

answer the questions in writing. A questionnaire was designed in advance based on the two research questions. It comprises ten questions. The clusters of the same name are important for the dimensions “power” and “brand”. Within these clusters, questions were derived based on the state of research. These clusters guide the questionnaire and ensure that the interviewees gain a thematic overview of the course of the interview (Reiter, 2017). For example, the interviewees were asked to what extent media companies want to help shape or influence the public discourse with their offerings. With reference to the “brand dimension” cluster, questions were asked about the importance of journalistic products for the reputation of the respective corporate brand and the influence of by-products in the form of non-industry events such as events, award ceremonies or conferences organized in connection with the brand.

3. Results

It is clear from the data collected that journalistic products continue to play a decisive role in German-speaking media companies. This applies to both the power dimension and the brand dimension - the two central motives for investing in journalistic products. The indirect form of power held by journalistic actors is primarily distilled through the possibility of exerting journalistic influence on public discourse. Is this part of the interviewees' strategy? They all agree on this. They all shy away from the verb “to influence”, expressing that they do not intend to actively influence politics. Instead, the interviewees state that they perceive media professionals as the “fourth estate” in democracy - which needs to be strengthened. Only interviewee 2 (head of young talent development at a media group) does not completely avoid the term and explains that in the information business, one would always influence the public discourse. The background to this is that the company is a “tendency company” and therefore also transports information. Interview participant 1 emphasizes that it is the task and goal of every journalistic medium to be part of the social discourse and to set priorities that are taken up by a broad readership. However, achieving opinion diversity is important. The articles must therefore reflect all opinions. Nevertheless, as a medium, the aim is to “have an impact” on the discourse.

In principle, all interviewees attach great importance to democracy and opinion diversity. Participant 4 also says: “We are a strong voice with our media. However, it's not about us 'co-determining' a discourse, but rather taking our role as the 'fourth estate' seriously.” Independent regional and local journalism is of particularly crucial importance for democracy. There are various studies that show what happens when independent journalism no longer exists in a region. In these “news deserts”, corruption increases and civic engagement decreases. As a result, voter turnout decreases. Participant 4 came to a similar conclusion as participant 3, stating that as a media company, it is our duty to pursue the “democratic idea”. This must also be reflected in the publisher's products. He says: “Whether it's online or in our daily newspaper products - our editorial teams have a core competence here. All opinions should be heard, especially in the regional sector. There are an incredible number of exchange events with our editors. We are also the voice of the region somewhere. It's particularly important in the region - because you can or have to talk to associations and clubs here. We try to keep democracy alive and get in touch with people.”

In summary, it can be stated that all interviewees refrain from using the verb “to influence”, instead emphasizing participation or shaping discourse and strengthening journalism as the fourth estate in democracy. Only participant 2 refers to the verb, but again relativizes it in context. He says: “If you are in the information business, you always influence the public discourse. There is no other way, because we are a tendency company and therefore also transport information. We are now a relatively large journalistic brand and are always uncovering investigative, exclusive stories. Of course, that alone makes a difference in some way. But contrary to how Döpfner put it, there is no agenda. Independent, non-partisan is the credo.” The aspect of opinion diversity also plays a decisive role.

For the second question, whether media companies want to use the brand image of their journalistic products for other business areas, statements are used that deal with the importance of journalistic products for the reputation of the corporate brand and the importance of by-products in the form of non-industry events such as award ceremonies or conferences. All interviewees stated that journalistic products have an appeal that significantly influences the reputation of the media company. Accordingly, image transfer is used in two different ways for business purposes: Either, products radiate off each other, so that consumers have increased trust in an article because they know that it is distributed by a particular media company. Or companies use the brand presence to enter partnerships with other companies. Participant 2 explains that his media group tries to extend the credibility that exists in the informational area to other things as well. In other words, every entrepreneurial activity is always linked to journalism. In this way, they are trying to link other, diversified business models with the core business. He says: “We try to generate things outside the journalism business, but which are then linked to our newspapers or our media titles, so to speak. (...) For example, we bought a coach company. Or rather, it's a travel agency. They are particularly well known in the north. And we own two daily newspapers there. In this respect, we naturally try to combine the business with the daily newspapers.” Participant 4 also argues: “We have a very strong brand with our newspaper and with the local editions and we naturally use this brand strength to talk to local partners.” For example, cooperations with a job portal or with other, larger newspapers have been established. Interview participant 1 sees the advantage of brand identity more in the impact on the consumer

and speaks in this context of journalism as a “representative figurehead”. Events always take place under the umbrella of the publishing group. This in turn strengthens the brand and thus also the journalistic products.

Secondary products such as events or award ceremonies, which also contribute to the brand and benefit from it at the same time, are still weighted differently compared to the core business of journalism. In the publishing group, for example, they enjoy a high status. Participant 1 explains: “These are also relevant additional revenues that are generated. For example, the e-commerce store, where there are great gift ideas. It now generates a relevant double-digit revenue for us. Events, for example, always have an indirect impact on our brand. (...) If the brand shines, that is of course a basic prerequisite for us to be successful with our journalism.” He continues: “All activities that we organize around our core business of journalism - such as e-commerce or events - are also designed in such a way that they in turn indirectly contribute to the brand's radiance.” The businesses would “fuel” each other. Interviewee 3, on the other hand, considers the value of ancillary products to be low.

The media companies of all interviewees therefore use the brand image of their journalistic products for other business areas, i.e. the aim is to achieve synergy effects through journalism. On the one hand, this is done to enable cooperation with companies and, on the other, to convince consumers to buy other products, consume them or take part in events. A brand's attention and credibility are transferred. Brands that are increasingly looking for other sources of income thus benefit from a leap of faith. However, a distinction must be made at this point: On the one hand, there is synergy in the sense that brands reflect on each other. This is particularly the case with horizontal diversification (Cornia et al., 2016, p. 27). On the other hand, there is also a whole range of products that customers do not even associate with the publishers. This is a case of lateral diversification (Cornia et al., 2016, p. 27). These include real estate or job portals, for example. In this case, of course, the network effect is automatically lower.

4. Discussion

Publishers are increasingly becoming multidimensional media companies. This was shown in the interviews with the experts. Nevertheless, journalism continues to play an important role. The answers of the interviewees are broken down in more detail below.

It became clear in the interviews that the word “influencing” politics or society has a rather negative connotation for the interviewees and does not seem appropriate for them to assess their work. Rather, in the interviews they are looking for more appropriate self-descriptions of their own strategy, or for more suitable formulations for the verb “to influence”. For example, several interviewees preferred the term “co-design”. In addition, all experts emphasize the aim of influencing the public discourse and wanting to strengthen journalism as the “fourth estate” in democracy. However, all interviewees make it clear that they do not wish to actively influence politics - and therefore this is not part of the strategy regarding their journalistic commitments. About the ZEIT research on Mathias Döpfner or the manipulated opinion polls in the *Fellner* media on behalf of former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, however, a contradiction arises. These examples show that influence also takes place in established democracies (Gilbert & Stark, 2023; Kienzl & Matzenberger, 2021). Nielsen even defines power and influence, in disagreement with the interviewees, as one of the main arguments why media companies still cling to journalism (Nielsen, 2019). However, the declared self-image of the respondents is different - and only this self-image was surveyed in this study.

The power dimension as a decision-making factor for investments in journalistic offerings could nevertheless remain important, as barriers to market entry continue to decrease and media outlets are exposed to enormous structural pressures (Nielsen, 2017). This gives rise to news organizations that are either bought by self-interested actors or newly founded to acquire power (ibid). The greater the losses of established media companies, the more likely this scenario unfolds.

Critics claim that media such as “ZEIT”, “Spiegel” or “Süddeutsche Zeitung” propagate political ideas (Gaschke, 2023). According to them, they want to initiate and shape debates. If the media do not violate the German constitution in their statements, this must be accepted, as it is part of the democratic guidelines for opinion formation and the media also serve the public discourse by reflecting the political spectrum. However, this reflects society - the center is increasingly disappearing, while the political fringes are gaining ground. This is also an exercise of power and one of the most important motives for investing in journalistic business models. This factual development at the meta-level is therefore at odds with the perception and self-description of the interviewees. This was not confirmed in any way by the interviewees. Only participant 1 said that “as a trend company” they always influence public opinion, but do not actively control it. The study thus contradicts many other findings at this point. This may be due to the choice of company, but also to social desirability. On the other hand, it is undisputed that all media companies have a certain political attitude or basic stance. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, for example, is further to the left than the *BILD* newspaper (Maurer et al., 2024). While this does not mean that they want to manipulate the news, it certainly means that there are different perspectives on relevant topics.

While the interviewees refer to their task of distributing information in terms of potentially influencing political debates,

the perceived value of journalistic products in relation to their own brand is clear. The interviewees rate the brand significance of journalistic products for their media companies as “high”. They therefore have a significant influence on the reputation of the companies although many journalistic products do not generate earnings anymore. The value they generate is described as an image transfer that is used in two different ways: Articles either radiate off each other so that consumers know that a product is one that comes from a particular media company. Or companies use their presence to enter partnerships with other companies. This is in line with the findings of Cornia et al. (2016). For example, companies invest in new content offerings outside their main brand and even diversify their business activities into completely new areas. For example, the job portal Stepstone or the real estate platform Immowelt are now part of Axel Springer, the IT service provider Arvato is part of Bertelsmann and the job network Xing is part of Burda (Priebe, 2019). The companies are building on their existing audience and brand value. This was confirmed by participants 2, 3 and 4.

The results also show that in a globalized, fragmented world with increasingly digital media usage and a new competitive environment, media brands are becoming increasingly important. This points in the direction of Siegert and McDowell's findings (Siegert et al., 2011; McDowell, 2006). More than ever, the criteria for content selection are based on perceived knowledge of a media brand rather than availability or convenience (McDowell, 2006). A brand's attention and credibility are transferred. Thus, brands that are increasingly looking for other sources of revenue benefit from a leap of faith. In the case of media brands, the journalistic content also symbolizes the organization's internal value system and thus functions as a collective representation of the entire group (Buß, 1998). Accordingly, the positioning of the media brand is part of the marketing and advertising measures (McDowell, 2006). Media expert Borchardt explains: “Axel Springer is always measured by its journalistic products. They have partly sold off newspapers but bought them in the USA instead. They have gained international journalistic appeal in particular” (McDowell, 2006, p. 242).

Arguably, there is an interconnected effect. Either from the media company to the consumer or from the media company to the cooperation partner. The attention and credibility of a brand are transferred (Siegert, 2001). The attractiveness of journalistic products is high. An important finding, however, is that it is an indirect act of attractiveness, as only eleven percent of news consumers in Germany are prepared to pay for digital or mobile news. Accordingly, it appears to be the task of journalism and the journalistic brand to create trust among readers.

This makes it clear what impact journalistic products generate through their reach and brands and to what extent these are important for media groups. The results imply that in a broadly diversified media company, it is expected that the journalistic product does not record strong growth but that the brand “shines”, as participant 3, for example, assessed for his company. On this basis, cooperations with other companies are established, companies are bought, spin-off products are launched, and events are organized, such as cooperations with a site for job advertisements or with the help of a value-added portal that deals with commercial services. The basis is the reputation of the brand or of the journalistic product. This is also an important motive connected with decisions to invest in journalism. This effect can be so strong that management holds on to the product even though it is incurring losses in the long term (Doyle, 2013; Keller & Eggert, 2022). Accordingly, the profits of other companies are used to absorb losses in the news business (Cawley, 2019). Each management must decide independently how important radiance is in terms of profitability. What is clear, however, is that this effect cannot be ignored, and it plays an important role in the question as to why media companies still hold on to journalism.

5. Conclusion

The limitations of this study relate primarily to the very small sample. In addition, all interviewees have different perspectives on the topic. This is due to the different roles of the interviewees in their companies. Furthermore, the selected sample does not reflect a representative cross-section of the German-speaking media landscape. Nonetheless, it can be assumed that the specialized knowledge of the interviewees, which was collected with the help of a questionnaire based on the research-led assumptions of this work, makes it possible to make meaningful statements in relation to the research question. Since the experts interviewed hold management positions in media companies, it can be assumed that their knowledge is so relevant that it is suitable for qualitative content analysis. In addition, these are exclusively German, supra-regional media companies, which means that neither a national nor a regional differentiation is possible.

This should be considered in future studies on the topic. For example, employees from international companies could be surveyed and the results then compared with Germany. As an alternative to journalists or quasi-journalistic actors, media managers or investors could also be surveyed in this context, as they would be less influenced by day-to-day business and presumably have a more neutral and unbiased view of the industry. Their statements would therefore be guided less by an affection for the journalistic profession than by a cool economic view.

About research question 1: “Do media companies want to exert journalistic influence?”, it can be stated above all that the interviewees did not want to identify with the concept of influencing reporting. Instead, however, they emphasized that the willingness to help shape the discourse and to strengthen journalism as a pillar of democracy was definitely there. Depending on how the process of co-design is structured, this can come very close to the area of influence.

The results for research question 2: “Do media companies want to use the brand image of their journalistic products for other business areas?” show that media companies aim directly for a linking effect between journalism and the rest of their business. They use the appeal that their journalistic products generate. On the one hand, to enable cooperation with companies and, on the other, to convince consumers to buy other products.

Based on the interviews, it can therefore be concluded that media companies invest in journalism because they want to benefit economically from the brand radiance of their journalistic products and additionally still want to help shape the discourse. Serving as a pillar of the democratic constitution seems to be less important.

Finally, it can be said that the topic is very recent, and it will be interesting to see how German media companies will position themselves in the coming months and years, how they will restructure editorial offices and which future models they will invest in - and which motive dimension they will prioritize. Editorial offices are at a turning point, the media industry is on the move. Those responsible are balancing economic goals, journalistic obligations, political power, and the importance of their brands. One thing is clear: media managers continue to shape society with their business - and are well aware of this.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Authors contributions

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal’s policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Allern, S., & Pollack, E. (2017). Journalism as a public good: A Scandinavian perspective. *Journalism*, 20(11), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917730945>
- Besley, T., & Prat, A. (2006). Handcuffs for the Grabbing Hand? Media Capture and Government Accountability. *American Economic Review*, 96(3), 720-736. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.96.3.720>
- Buschow, C., & Wellbrock, C. M. (2020). Money for Nothing or Content for Free. *Nomos*. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748907251>
- Buß, E. (1998). Die Marke als soziales Symbol. Überlegungen zu einem neuen Markenverständnis. *Public Relations*

- Forum*, 4(2), 96-100.
- Cawley, A. (2019). Digital Transitions. The evolving corporate frameworks of legacy newspaper publishers. *Journalism Studies*, 20(7), 1028-1049. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2018.1481348>
- Cornia, A., Sehl, A., & Rasmus, K. N. (2016). *Digital News Project 2016*. University of Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Djankov, S., McLiesh, C., Nenova, T., & Shleifer, A. (2003). Who Owns the Media? *The Journal of Law & Economics*, 46(2), 341-382. <https://doi.org/10.1086/377116>
- Doyle, G. (2013). Re-invention and Survival: Newspapers in the Era of Digital Multiplatform Delivery. *Journal of Media Business Studies*, 10(4), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16522354.2013.11073569>
- DPA (2023, January 23th). *Matthias Döpfner im Interview*. <https://www.horizont.net/medien/nachrichten/mathias-doepfner-im-interview-wenn-ich-eines-nie-war-und-nie-sein-wollte-ist-es-medienmogul-205630>
- Gilbert, C., & Stark, H. (2023, April 13th). *Mathias Döpfner: „Aber das ist dennoch die einzige Chance, um den endgültigen Niedergang des Landes zu vermeiden.“* <https://www.zeit.de/2023/16/mathias-doepfner-axel-springer-interne-dokumente>
- Hallin, D. C., & Papathanassopoulos, S. (2002). Political clientelism and the media: southern Europe and Latin America in comparative perspective. *Media, Culture & Society*, 24(2), 175-195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344370202400202>
- Hautsch, G. (2022). Burda mit Bestwert. Verdi: Medienpolitik. Eine Information der Vereinten Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft.
- Karle, R., & Wiegand, M. (2021). Die 25 größten Medienunternehmen. *Kress pro*, 49-51.
- Keller, D., & Eggert, C. (2022, August 1st). Zur wirtschaftlichen Lage der deutschen Zeitungen. BDZV. <https://www.bdzv.de/alle-themen/marktdaten/zur-wirtschaftlichen-lage-der-deutschen-zeitungen-2023#:~:text=Im%20ersten%20Quartal%202023%20hatten,auf%20neun%20Millionen%20Exemplare%20ab>
- Kienzl, S., & Matzenberger, M. (2021, Oktober 7th). So änderten sich die Umfragewerte in den Fellner-Medien nach Kurz' Machtübernahme. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000130231271/so-aenderten-sich-die-umfragewerte-in-den-fellner-medien-nach>
- Knuth, H. (2023, February 9th). Altpapier. *Die Zeit*, S., 9.
- Kolo, C. (2019). Strategic challenges of newspaper publishing in an international perspective. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 40(3), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739532919862367>
- Maurer, M., Kruschinski, S., & Jost, P. (2024). Fehlt da was? Perspektivenvielfalt in den öffentlich-rechtlichen Nachrichtenformaten. https://www.polkom.ifp.uni-mainz.de/files/2024/01/pm_perspektivenvielfalt.pdf
- McDowell, W. S. (2006). Issues in marketing and branding. In A. B. Albarran, S. M. Chan-Olmsted, & M. O. Wirth (Hrsg.), *Handbook of media management and economics* (S. 229-250). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Nelson, R., & Miner, K. (2022). *Digital Transformation at The Washington Post: Innovating for the next Generation*. University of Virginia: McIntire School of Commerce. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4026900>
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Eddy, K., Robertson, C., & Nielsen, R. (2023). *Digital News Report*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. University of Oxford.
- Nielsen, R. (2017). Media capture in the digital age. In Schiffrin, A. (Hrsg.), *In the Service of Power: Media Capture and the Threat to Democracy* (S. 33-42). Washington: The Center for International Media Assistance National Endowment for Democracy.
- Nielsen, R. (2019). Economic Contexts of Journalism. In K. Wahl-Jorgensen & T. Hanitzsch (Hrsg.), *The Handbook of Journalism Studies* (2. Aufl., Kapitel 21). New York: Routledge.
- Priebe, S. (2019). *Auf zu neuen Ufern – Transformationsaktivitäten in der deutschen Medienindustrie*. Hamburg: EY-Parthenon.
- Reiter, B. (2017). Theory and methodology of exploratory social science research. *International Journal of Science & Research Methodology*, 5(4), 129-150.
- Reporters without Borders (2023). 2023 World Press Freedom Index. <https://rsf.org/en/2023-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-threatened-fake-content-industry>

- Schade, M. (2022, December 5th). *Eigene Plattform, mehr Sendungen: Was Julian Reichelt mit Rome Medien plant*. <https://medieninsider.com/eigene-plattform-mehr-sendungen-julian-reichelt-rome-medien-plane/14084/>
- Scheppe, M., & Murphy, M. (2023, June 18th). *Springer baut Flaggsschiff um – Massiver Stellenabbau droht*. <https://www.handelsblatt.com/unternehmen/it-medien/bild-springer-baut-flaggschiff-um-massiver-stellenabbau-droht/29212724.html>
- Scheppe, M. (2023, August 29th). *Bertelsmann. Gewinn bricht um 47 Prozent ein, CEO Rabe hält an Zielen fest*. <https://www.handelsblatt.com/unternehmen/it-medien/bertelsmann-gewinn-bricht-um-47-prozent-ein-ceo-rabe-haelt-an-zielen-fest/29361524.html>
- Schiffirin, A. (2017). *In the Service of Power: Media Capture and the Threat of Democracy*. Washington: The Center for International Media Assistance National Endowment for Democracy.
- Schreiner, M. (2012). *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practise*. Sage
- Schröder, J. (2024, February 8th). *BILD mit dickem IVW-Plus*. <https://www.meedia.de/analysen/bild-mit-dickem-ivw-plus-auch-weil-man-nun-die-bz-techbook-travelbook-und-andere-mitzaehlen-laesst-6e26485b320424e0404785b0d8c9f4b1>
- Siegert, G., Gerth M. A., & Rademacher, P. (2011). Brand Identity-Driven Decision Making by Journalists and Media Managers – The MBAC Model as a Theoretical Framework. *International Journal on Media Management* 13(1), 53-70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14241277.2010.545363>
- Tagesschau (2023, February 28th). *Stellenabbau bei „Bild“ und „Welt“*. <https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/unternehmen/springer-stellenabbau-bild-welt-101.html>
- Tropp, J., & Baetzgen, A. (2020). Breiter, tiefer, schräger: Diversifikation von Medienunternehmen. In: *Handbuch Medienökonomie* (S. 557-580), edited by J. Krone & T. Pellegrini. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-09560-4_28
- WDR (2023, February 7th). *Massiver Stellenabbau bei Bertelsmann-Tochter RTL*. <https://www1.wdr.de/nachrichten/westfalen-lippe/bertelsmann-rtl-gruner-jahr-stellen-100.html>
- Wiegand, M. (2021, January 12th). *Im Printgeschäft von Axel Springer drohen rote Zahlen*. <https://kress.de/mail/news/detail/beitrag/146639-exklusiv-im-printgeschaeft-von-axel-springer-drohen-rote-zahlen.html>
- Zlatanova, A. (2018). *Geschäftsmodellinnovation in der deutschen Medienwirtschaft im Kontext der Digitalisierung*. Universität Regensburg: Internet Business Cluster. <https://doi.org/10.15358/1613-0669-2018-3-44>