

German investigative journalists have founded their first network

A new network shall improve the prestige and the education of investigative journalism neglected in Germany up to now. Among the more than 35 founders were Christoph Maria Fröhder (TV-journalist), Michael Fröhlingsdorf (winner of the last Wächterpreis), Kuno Habermusch (NDR, editor-in-chief of "Panorama"), Thomas Leif (chief-reporter SWR Mainz), Hans Leyendecker (Süddeutsche Zeitung), Oliver Merz (Report Mainz, SWR), Dietmar Pieper (Der Spiegel), Bruno Schirra (Die Zeit) and Klaus Wiendl (Report München, BR). Several editors-in-chief of big daily newspapers such as Tagesspiegel, Saarbrücker Zeitung and Berliner Morgenpost, have also taken part in the foundation of the network.

Starting point was the agreed-upon analysis that the expenditure for investigation has been decreased and thus the quality of journalism has suffered.

During the foundation-meeting in Simmerath-Erkensruhr last weekend, Thomas Leif (SWR) pointed out the development of concepts for education as a fundamental goal of the network: "While in all fields from news to reporting the quality of education has risen our young colleagues are have difficulties to find teachers for research-based, investigative journalism. Michael Haller, professor for journalism at the university of Leipzig and author of several renowned teaching books, presented a concept of how the education of young journalists could be supported within the association. First of all, the exchange of experience shall lead to the formation of a pool of teachers who will pass on their knowledge. Also investigation-protocols are supposed to be published to serve as teaching-material.

The initiators of the network plan to foster the culture of investigation and research in German journalism as a whole. The network's ambition is to make educational institutions (schools of journalism, universities) as well as editorials and broadcasting stations improve the meaning of investigation within their education.

Another reason for the foundation is to secure and improve the free access to information in governmental institutions. A lot of information would be wrongly denied to journalists, such were the complaints of the network's organizers. The newly elected executive committee asked the editorial departments to pursue their legal aims by bringing model actions against the boards of administration in order to break the holding back of information. The network has planned to publish legal advice and court-judgements on their homepage.

Unanimously the participants complained about the scarce possibilities in publishing houses and broadcasting stations to be authorized and paid for investigations that would take several days or several weeks. But only in this way, a journalism that could effectively control and ensure the functioning of democracy could exist. "The problem lies within our country's mentality: Investigative journalism has no tradition here, like it does in the U.S.", Leif said. "In Germany, it is more important to write a beautiful

lead-article than to collect facts for weeks of even months." Hans Leyendecker as well lamented the scarce understanding for intensive investigation within the publishing houses and broadcasting stations. "Many editors in chief think it is already an investigation when they manage to find out a telephone number without the help of their secretary" he said.

The association should therefore also work as a lobby for critical journalism. Services for the members such as the placement of important judgements of the courts on the homepage, a black list of government offices and press offices that deliberately falsificate information or do not inform as well as a newsletter through which the members stay in contact should be part of the offer. At least once a year the members are supposed to meet for professional exchange. The self-critical evaluation of their own work should also be fundamental.

During the meeting, the participants discussed - among others the question - whether German journalists acted correctly during the investigation of Joschka Fischer's past. Kuno Habermusch (NDR) criticized that political conviction substituted investigation within this debate. Dietmar Pieper (Spiegel, Frankfurt) stated that there was "very little news and so much excitement".

The founders follow Anglo-American examples such as IRE, the association of "Investigative reporters and editors" (IRE) in the U.S. who have 4500 members and a considerable influence within U.S.-journalism. International exchange with other organizations shall therefore improve and intensify contacts between journalists of different countries.

To offer young colleagues a stimulus for investigations the association is planning to set out a high award, possibly as a fellowship. Regarding the finances, the networkers plan to address themselves to foundations of editorials but they also hope for private sponsors. The executive committee underlined that only professional journalists interested in intensive investigation could become members. Thomas Leif (SWR) was elected chairman, second chairman is Hans Leyendecker (Süddeutsche Zeitung). Other members of the executive board are Dominik Cziesche (freelancer), Inga Bruns (TV-journalist), Christoph Maria Fröhder (TV-Journalist), Simone Matthai ("Impulse"), Bruno Schirra (Die Zeit), Klaus Wiendl (BR, "Report aus München").

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FUTURE GOALS FOR THE "NETZWERK RECHERCHE"

1. The "Netzwerk Recherche" is pursuing the goal to improve investigative journalism in media-practice, to draw attention upon its significance and to support intensive investigation within journalistic education.
2. Thus "Netzwerk Recherche" is developing educational concepts for teaching of investigative journalism, providing teachers and advising educational institutions in drafting concepts and putting them into practice.
"Netzwerk Recherche" is also offering courses and seminars for investigation.
3. "Netzwerk Recherche" offers investigation mentorship for younger colleagues in order to organize an intensive process of advice and exchange during one year between experienced and less experienced colleagues
4. "Netzwerk Recherche" improves the exchange of information on the topic of investigative journalism and offers corresponding platforms to its members. In the internet newsletters support the communication among members. The exchange of information on projects, experiences of investigation but also hints about further education and extra services shall be available in the internet.
5. "Netzwerk Recherche" is taking part in an international exchange with journalistic organizations in Europe and overseas.
6. "Netzwerk Recherche" places an award once a year for extraordinary merits that highlight topics and conflicts not sufficiently perceived in public yet.
7. The members of "Netzwerk Recherche" see to that the possibilities of investigation will not be trimmed down. Regarding investigations and their regard towards the quality of journalism, "Netzwerk Recherche" goes public whenever unlawful limitations of the freedom of the press will be known of.
8. "Netzwerk Recherche" works together with other organizations of journalists and trade unions, that principally pursue similar goals and also contribute to improve the investigative aspect of journalism.
9. "Netzwerk Recherche" meets annually and discusses new tendencies within investigative journalism such as important topics of journalistic investigation and case-studies. Regional suborganizations will take care of the exchange in certain regions.
10. "Netzwerk Recherche" is politically independent and pursues goals of public benefit only. The association of journalists is trying to obtain the "public-benefit-status" in order to find sponsors and donators who will finance the work.