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Assmann, Karin

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Article

# Rise of the Zombie Papers: Infecting Germany’s Local and Regional Public Media Ecosystem

Karin Assmann

College of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Georgia, USA; [kba@uga.edu](mailto:kba@uga.edu)

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## Abstract

Germany’s public broadcasters, along with local newspapers, have consistently ranked among the top three most trusted news sources in Germany. Yet growing criticism of mandatory fees and recent revelations about public broadcasters’ misuse of funds have put into question the health of Germany’s news and information infrastructure. In fact, a perfect storm appears to be brewing: precarious working conditions, exacerbated by cutbacks in the wake of Covid-19 and the emergence of so-called zombie papers. These papers, published without a local staff, reporters, or newsrooms, threaten to complicate audiences’ perceptions of news credibility and trust. This study explores Germany’s emerging news deserts by examining the rise of zombie newspapers in two states, one in the Western and one in the Eastern part of the country. Analyses of existing literature through the lens of institutional political economy and of interviews with key informants show that Germany, despite its strong federalized system, is following in US footsteps by creating journalist-free zones. A network of hard-to-follow corporate collaborations is endangering the foundations of post-war Germany’s media system: pluralism and media diversity.

## Keywords

Germany; ghost papers; local news; news deserts; public media; zombie papers

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “News Deserts: Places and Spaces Without News” edited by Agnes Gulyas (Canterbury Christ Church University), Joy Jenkins (University of Missouri), and Annika Bergström (University of Gothenburg).

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## 1. Introduction

The invitation was brief and to the point: Join us on Tuesday, January 31, 2023, at 11:55 a.m. for a vigil to commemorate the death of the *Westfälische Rundschau* (Kah, 2023). Dressed as zombies, dozens of journalists met at what union organizers called “the 11th hour,” bearing gifts for the Funke Media Group, the publishing giant that had put many of them out of a job. These gifts included a birthday cake and the demand: “Funke, do better!” (“DJV-NRW fordert Funke,” 2023). This day also marked the 10th anniversary of Germany’s first so-called zombie paper, a paper stripped of journalists and resources but that continues to publish as if it were still alive and well. In 2013 when the newspaper was hollowed out, 120 journalists lost their jobs. This move, which brought hundreds of readers to the streets in protest (“Trauerzug für ‘Zombie-Zeitung,’” 2013), turned out to be just a prelude

to the consolidation of Funke’s media empire in the West German state of North Rhine-Westphalia. In reality, the groundwork for the creation of a patchwork of collaborations and takeovers between large and small media owners and holdings had been laid for some time. Yet while journalists were disappearing from newsrooms, in many local communities the papers continued to appear alongside competing publications, as if on autopilot. This landscape of the undead, exemplified by the much-publicized dismissal of the *Westfälische Rundschau*’s employees, has spread. What readers were seeing was a series of mergers and corporate media consolidations that presented a façade of journalistic presence that masked the creation of shadow news deserts.

This development, given Germany’s post-war media landscape that was built on the concepts of pluralism, that is, political media diversity, and federalism (Hasselbach & Porter, 2002), seemed implausible a few

decades ago. The country's newspaper and broadcast system had been deliberately rebuilt under the auspices of the Allied powers beginning in 1945. The intended creation of a strong national and regional press (Frei, 1987; Hardt, 1988; Hasselbach & Porter, 2002) included a country-wide network of public media. This network continues to exist, albeit somewhat under duress (Huber, 2022). The population's news and information diet is considered comparatively stable and citizens remain relatively well-informed, with high civic engagement and trust in the broadcast system and newspapers (Esser & Brüggemann, 2010; Statista, 2022). And yet, the past two decades have seen a shift in the local newspaper landscape that has raised alarms. While the term "news deserts" is mostly reserved for commentary about the situation in the US, research about Germany's so-called "newspaper crisis" abounds (e.g., Brinkmann, 2018; Claassen, 2010; Nohr, 2011). Spiraling advertisement revenue, shrinking subscription numbers, and austerity measures have led to conditions comparable to those plaguing the US. Yet, I argue, there are significant differences between the two media markets and their respective ideologies that account for deviations in both institutional and individual responses to life in a news desert.

This exploratory study aims to provide an overview of the current newspaper and media landscape in Germany with a focus on zombie papers in two states, North Rhine-Westphalia (Nordrhein-Westfalen) in West and Thuringia (Thüringen) in East Germany. A survey of German news coverage about the state of the newspaper industry and interviews with key informants provide a framework, setting the agenda for future research. The following sections provide reviews of relevant literature in the US and international contexts. This is followed by an explication of zombie papers and the differences between them and US ghost papers. After discussing the consequences for journalists and readers, I close with suggestions for further research.

## 2. Literature

### 2.1. *Political Economy of the Newspaper Crisis*

The crisis in journalism is neither new (Breese, 2015, p. 45) nor a contested reality (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012, p. 1376). It is rooted as much in the long tail of convergence (Edge, 2022) as it is in the dwindling trust in traditional news outlets. Yet, while these are certainly to blame, the "problem of journalism" is systemic and multi-dimensional (McChesney, 2003). One dimension is the economic reality of media production. This arguably applies to both the US and Germany where, despite the presence of a strong public broadcast system, the newspaper industry is subject to market forces. The impact of market-driven news production on news selection (McManus, 1995) and on democracy has been the focus of scholarship for decades (McChesney, 2016;

McManus, 1994). Much of the work defining the political economy of communication (e.g., Bagdikian, 2004; Hardy, 2014;) posits as a key organizing principle the idea that knowledge- and media-producing systems, in particular mass media and entertainment, are influenced by the distribution and application of wealth and power (McChesney, 2003). Commercial news media organizations are capitalist ventures (Picard, 1989, p. 14). The profit motive guides the management, organization, and institutionalization of news production. The resulting creation of media monopolies is, arguably, not in the public interest (Meier & Trappel, 1999). Researchers tracking the state of news production across the globe support the "crisis narrative" (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 162), finding consistently that journalists face increasingly precarious work conditions and declining levels of trust among news audiences in both the news media and in political institutions (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Yet a recent survey found higher levels of trust in local news media among respondents (Knight Foundation, 2023, p. 57). Mistrust in national media aligns with findings indicating a softening of audience attitudes toward public funding of news organizations (Knight Foundation, 2022, p. 41). In fact, "public service news brands still score highest for trust with national and regional/local news media close behind" (Newman et al., 2022, p. 75). Research has supported the role of public service media as a counterbalance to media concentration, in defense of healthy democracies (Cushion, 2017). Neff and Pickard (2021), at the conclusion of their study of public media in 33 countries, call for further research investigating the role of public media in both the collapse and potential rescue of local journalism (Neff & Pickard, 2021, p. 21).

### 2.2. *News Deserts*

The evolution of the US media landscape into one dominated by corporate ownership has been well-documented (Claussen, 2018; Noam, 2016; Winseck, 2008) and blamed for news desertification, especially in, but not limited to, rural areas (Abernathy, 2016). Abernathy originally defined news deserts as communities without a local newspaper. By 2018 Abernathy had expanded the definition to include "communities where residents are facing significantly diminished access to the sort of important news and information that feeds grassroots democracy," since the amount and quality of news coverage provided in communities with one paper had dramatically declined (Abernathy, 2018, p. 16). Ferrier offers a broader view of the phenomenon, calling the gaps in coverage media deserts, i.e., "geographic regions that lack access to fresh local news and information to inform and educate the public"; she adds that the term "describes not only a larger framework for content such as news, information and conversation, but the delivery of such content" as well (Ferrier, 2014, p. 1).

Despite calls for the repair of community and local journalism, Gulyás (2021) points out that research,

especially transnational research, lacks agreement about the meaning and scope of both terms: “Studies tend to focus more on societal aspects when researching local news and journalism, while arguably the spatial element is under-researched” (p. 16). Indeed, the focus has been on the creation of news deserts (e.g., Lee & Butler, 2019), on their impact on civic engagement (e.g., Hayes & Lawless, 2021), on community responses to newspaper closures (e.g., Magasic & Hess, 2021), and on the realities of living in a news desert (e.g., Mahone et al., 2019; Mathews, 2022). Studies about efforts and initiatives aiming to bring news to deserted communities (e.g., Conte, 2022; Royal & Napoli, 2022; Williams et al., 2015) are becoming more common as non-profit organizations aim to fill coverage holes (Ferrucci & Alaimo, 2020; Konieczna, 2018).

Gulyás and Baines’ (2020) survey of international research about local media and journalism includes European countries with media systems similar to Germany’s. In chapters about the French (Lardeau, 2020) and British (O’Hara, 2020) systems that are partially subsidized, for example, it becomes apparent that neither publicly funded broadcasters nor subsidized newspapers replace lost coverage. Yet, Gulyás and Baines (2020) posit:

Where commercial local media is under stress, public support is increasingly being looked to as a means to maintain the public benefit—or merit—of a diverse and pluralistic local media ecology and as a facilitator of civic and democratic engagement. (p. 14)

I argue in the following that the foundation of Germany’s post-war media landscape has in its DNA a culture committed to pluralism, that is, political and media diversity and information as a public good. It is this belief that supports the maintenance of zombie papers (Dogruel et al., 2019, p. 330), local newspapers that mimic life for the sake of preserving the façade of pluralism.

### 2.3. *The German Context*

When the Allied powers began issuing publishing licenses in 1945, paving the way for a public broadcasting system modeled after the British BBC, pluralism and federalism were baked into their visions of a free press in post-war Germany (Hasselbach & Porter, 2002). A regional network was established, with one independent broadcaster in each state and one national organization, the ARD (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland; or Working Group of Public Service Broadcasting of the Federal Republic of Germany). Representatives from various stakeholders, including political parties, unions, and churches, are meant to guarantee political independence, alongside state-specific regulatory bodies. A second, national-only public broadcaster, the ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen [Second German Television]) was established in 1963. Both public broad-

casters are financed through a mandatory monthly fee per household, currently just over €18 per month, and advertising, thereby maintaining fiscal independence (Rundfunkbeitrag, 2022). In addition, post-war Germany saw rapid growth in the number of daily newspapers and weekly magazines in the West. By the 1970s media outlets, much like in the US, became more concentrated, and, by the 1980s, commercial interests began to change the publishing and broadcast landscape (Assmann, 2022; Kleinsteuber & Thomass, 2007). The public-service broadcasting system became what is known as a dual system, in which advertising-based commercial broadcasters and publicly-funded broadcasters coexist (Donsbach & Wilke, 2014; Pürer, 2015).

The press in the German Democratic Republic, on the other hand, was, prior to reunification, mostly organized and controlled by the state. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, East Germany was poised to reignite its news and publishing industry. Yet, West German publishers had, by the time negotiations over the terms of reunification were underway in 1990, already established a distribution network and, in effect, took over publishing and news production in the East (Grimberg, 2020; Tröger, 2019; Weischenberg et al., 2012). Hence, by the early 1990s, the media system in all of Germany would be considered a democratic corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) with an expressed commitment to pluralism. Not only did the network of regional public broadcasters now cover the East, but “the big four” German news publishers flooded the market with newspapers and weeklies, imposing West German structures, norms, and practices into newsrooms in the East (Grimberg, 2020; Tröger, 2019).

Publishers’ commercial zeal only intensified in the years following their expansion into this new market (Röper, 2004), to a large extent replicating in all of Germany the development in the US. Citizens’ right to information, an agreement to guarantee basic services to allow for the free expression and formation of a plurality of opinions, are codified in Article 5 of the German constitution or Basic Law (Sachs, 2017). This explains the insistence of unions and regulators on not only maintaining a journalistic presence in all communities but encouraging multiple outlets to compete with one another. The existence of too many “one-paper-districts” across the country is considered a threat to media and opinion diversity and to deliberative democracy (Manigk, 2015; Sehl, 2013).

### 2.4. *German News Deserts*

I argue that the resulting two conceptualizations of journalism, as a civic right and public utility on the one hand, and as a commercial product on the other, shape definitions and perceptions of “news deserts.” One issue that scholars have struggled with is that of units of measurement. For decades Walter Schütz recorded newspaper statistics in Germany (e.g., Schütz, 2012) His standard

measure, the *Publizistische Einheit* (independent journalistic unit), classically defined as an entity with a core newsroom, is no longer considered an adequate unit of measurement (Dogruel et al., 2019). As in the US, German publishers consolidated and created “news desks” where stories were produced, coordinated, and distributed across regions. The idea was to reduce complexity and streamline workflows among papers with common ownership (Beiler & Gerstner, 2019); by 2018, these were well established in the German newsroom landscape. This complicated the measurement of journalistic units. With few independent institutions keeping track, scholars, long dependent on Horst Röper’s documentation of media concentration and corporatization (e.g., Röper, 1990, 2020), have turned to statistics commissioned by industry lobbyists such as the *BDZV (Bundesverband Digitalpublisher und Zeitungsverleger)*, a national association of digital and newspaper publishers (Die Zeitungen, 2022; Keller & Eggert, 2022). Revealing the gap in competitive news production would certainly not be in industry lobbyists’ interests. Yet, recent research measuring outlet diversity in Germany and Austria found that structural shifts associated with digital production and media consolidation have diluted the diversity of Germany’s post-war media landscape (Vonbun-Feldbauer et al., 2020). Just two years earlier, researchers with the European Monitoring Project found the German system to be stable; nevertheless, they cautioned that media concentration was a looming threat concerning newspapers since regulation protecting media plurality covered only broadcasters (Steindl & Hanitzsch, 2018).

Despite the economic and practical advantages that media ownership concentration and the centralization of news production around regional “news desks” bring (Hofstetter & Schönhagen, 2015), concerns around the loss of media diversity (Beck et al., 2010; Kamber & Imhof, 2011) and horizontal concentration (Meier & Trappel, 1999) grew. While the latter has occurred in both the US and Germany, a more insidious version is taking root in Germany. By the time the first news reports about zombie papers appeared in North Rhine-Westphalia 10 years ago, the two local papers had not merged, although they were owned by the same corporation. Instead, two separate papers continued to exist. But one of them had died and lived on as a zombie, mimicking competition and diversity where there was none. While industry lobbyists remained silent, unions sounded the alarm, adopting “zombie” as a trope in their campaign against corporate layoffs. Readers, they warned, would no longer know who was producing the news they were reading and whom to trust (“DJV-NRW beklagt den fortwährenden,” 2018). Herein lies an important distinction between US ghost papers and German zombie publications.

## 2.5. Ghosts and Zombies

A useful discursive device that was recently added to the concept of news deserts is the term “ghost papers,”

defined by Abernathy (2018) as newspapers that have become “shells of their former selves” (p. 24). Often, they are purchased by corporations and, with their staff and resources significantly reduced, produce less and less of their content. Such papers are often converted to advertising publications (Abernathy, 2020, p. 13). Their status, while not officially designated as “ghost papers,” becomes quite obvious to readers as the previous multi-page paper shrinks or appears only once a week. Regional and national news may still be presented, but those stories are either produced elsewhere or, if they are local stories, are written by a lone staff member.

Germany’s newspaper crisis has much in common with the crisis plaguing the US. *Nachrichtenwüsten* literally translates to news deserts and has become part of the vernacular. Yet, as argued above, with the belief that information is a public good and with media diversity as a goal anchored in Germany’s media system, ghost papers in the US mold are rare. Conversely, when the term zombie paper is used in the North American context, it refers to what Abernathy (2018) calls ghost papers. In an article published by a progressive Canadian site describing developments in the US and Canada, the author calls it “journalism of the undead” (Climenhaga, 2012). Howells (2015, p. 296), citing Climenhaga, understands this to mean that journalists have left the community.

The popular press in the US uses the term when referring to newspapers designed to spread partisan news in the weeks before an election (Folkenflik, 2022). Speakman and Funk (2021) define zombies in the news context as websites that have been bought up and repurposed, keeping the same URL and posting content ranging from pornography to insurance ads. Others simply ceased to publish news and “while not technically dead, such ‘zombie’ websites serve no practical journalistic or community-building function.” (Speakman & Funk, 2021, pp. 13–14). One could argue that the difference between zombies and ghosts is merely semantic. Yet while there is disagreement over nuances in the North American context, the German meaning of the term zombies is clear.

The first use of the term zombie in the German news context can be traced back to 2013 when unions in North Rhine-Westphalia used it to raise awareness of their campaign against austerity measures that would leave papers with empty newsrooms. Dogruel et al. (2019) describe zombie newspapers as “newspapers that are produced without any (own) editorial staff, but through copy-paste with content from other newspapers and sold under their own brand” (p. 330). That is, while US ghost papers represent hollowing out the distressed papers and thereby shrinking local coverage, publishers in Germany hold on to competing papers, turning them into zombies for the sake of demonstrating diversity. The zombie paper in a two or three-paper town is the paper that can no longer afford staff. To its readers, it is, in Climenhaga’s (2012) words, undead. While journalists continue to produce some regional news, local editions are essentially outsourced. The pages are filled with local,



even hyperlocal news, but the bylines are from their direct, local competition. Where ghosts are shadows of the past, zombies walk the earth, pretending to be alive. Brand loyalty keeps readers buying the familiar newspaper, believing they have a choice. In reality, local journalists have been laid off. In the context of the German media culture, a lack of transparency about the nature of what readers consider independent journalistic units in a competitive news media market, these differences matter. This article explores how zombie papers operate, and how key informants working for zombie papers think it affects them, journalistic content, and their readers.

### 3. Method

This study rests on interviews with six key informants who are working or have worked as journalists for local and regional newspapers in North Rhine-Westphalia and Thuringia and have experience with zombie papers. They are current or former employees of zombie papers or work for news outlets that deliver content for zombie papers. Some are union representatives involved in labor negotiations with media outlets in emerging news deserts. Some are in leadership positions. Since all requested anonymity, they are listed merely by gender and status as either current or former journalists (Table 1). One participant is currently employed by a zombie paper; two work for a newspaper that supplies content for zombie papers. They were selected following a reading of German press coverage of the newspaper crisis and of zombie papers, beginning in 2007, the year the *Münstersche Zeitung* experienced layoffs and the event laid the groundwork for what, by 2013, became known as “zombie papers” (von Garmissen, 2020). No quantitative content analysis is provided. Instead, that exploratory reading guided the key informant selection and interviews and helps inform further research. Using Dow Jones Factiva, the search term *Zombie Zeitung* (zombie newspaper) yielded 20 results from January 1, 2007–December 31, 2022. During the same timeframe, a search of the term *Zeitungssterben* (newspaper deaths) resulted in 564 articles; 402 were found relevant since the primary topic of the news story was about the local and regional news crisis. A Google News search yielded eight more articles about zombie newspapers. The six key informants were recruited using snowball sampling,

beginning with one informant who had written about the situation in their region. They provided me with further names. Other informants were identified because they had been interviewed or written about the situation. Two informants identify as women, four as men, and all requested anonymity, with the majority citing their positions within the news organization as the reason. They stated that anonymity would allow them to speak more frankly. Two informants had first-hand knowledge of the situation in North Rhine-Westphalia and nationally. Of the four informants with first-hand experience in Thuringia, one also had knowledge and experience in North Rhine-Westphalia. Interviews lasted between 34 and 51 minutes.

The semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed. The interviews began with an account of each informant’s career, their experience with the newspaper industry, and their understanding of the newspaper crisis, as well as with zombie papers. Questions then focused on their assessment of what zombie papers mean for content production, work conditions, and citizens in their regions. Key informants help gain insights and inform research about a phenomenon. They allow the researcher to “develop a definition of the dimensions involved...discover boundaries of communities...identify extremes...[and] increase knowledge of the problem” (Tremblay, 1957, p. 692) Information can be collected in a relatively short amount of time from participants with access to inside or expert knowledge in a field (Houston & Sudman, 1975; Marshall, 1996).

### 4. Findings

#### 4.1. Zombies

“It is dead but there is life in there, somehow,” is how participant NRW-1 defined zombie papers, referring in particular to the paper he once wrote for, the *Westfälische Rundschau* in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. It is the “somehow” in this statement that the following section is concerned with. Zombie papers and ghost papers are different iterations of local news products that are not what they once were. The discussions with key informants consulted for this study were grounded in the reality of their news outlets in their respective states. In the

**Table 1.** List of key informants.

Location/Expertise	Gender	Occupation
TH-1	Woman	Former journalist
TH-2	Woman	Journalist
TH-3	Man	Journalist
TH/NRW	Man	Journalist
NRW-1	Man	Journalist
NRW-2	Man	Journalist

Notes: TH = Thuringia; NRW = North Rhine-Westphalia; TH/NRW = Thuringia/North Rhine-Westphalia.

following sections, I summarize the situation in regions with zombie papers, first in North Rhine-Westphalia and then in Thuringia. This narrative is based on the coverage of the newspaper crisis and zombie papers, beginning in 2007. Interviews with participants centered around defining zombie papers, as well as the consequences for readers and their routines and practices based on their experiences.

#### 4.1.1. NRW's Zombies

Although the term zombie papers was popularized by German unions in 2013, the 2007 firing of the entire staff of the *Münstersche Zeitung*, one of two local papers in the town of Münster, had been a warning shot. Eighteen reporters and staffers in the local newsroom were replaced overnight with lower-paid reporters, employees of publisher Lensing-Wolff's subsidiary, Media Service GmbH (Freiburg, 2007b). Readers were outraged; journalists' demands to protect the paper grew loud. Newly hired reporters were met with skepticism and, in some cases, ignored and boycotted by sources (Freiburg, 2007a). Seven years later, Lensing sold the paper to Aschendorff, publisher and owner of the other paper in town, the *Westfälische Nachrichten*. What was the—de facto—end of a two-paper town, however, did not appear as such, since both papers continued to publish, with one of them, the *Münstersche Zeitung* without a newsroom. It is fed with content from a regional news desk, competing papers, and the German Press Agency, *dpa* (von Garmissen, 2020). An analysis of the content published in this patchwork arrangement revealed a confusing mix of stories with headlines, images, and quotes modified to look like distinct products. The masthead, mandated to include contact information for editors-in-charge, listed the same names for both papers, yet with different addresses and numbers. "Apparently, the same people can work in two different places at the same time" (von Garmissen, 2020). In a cynical move, publisher Aschendorff asked employees to subscribe to all company papers in order to create yet another illusion: readers ("Zeitungsmitarbeiter sollen eigene," 2015).

What began as a cruel cost-saving measure had, by the time Lensing sold the paper in 2014, created a zombie: It was a newsroom without reporters, a newspaper made to look like an independent and distinct journalistic unit, while it was, in fact, produced by reporters from another, competing paper. The 2013 shake-up at the *Westfälische Rundschau* was, by comparison, swift. Publisher Funke was poised to buy Axel Springer's regional newspapers for €920 million, of which €260 million Funke borrowed from Springer ("WAZ-Nachfolger Funke-Gruppe," 2013). At that time the two organizations had already decided to cooperate on a joint distribution network (Axel Springer, 2015), creating a structure that would allow them to hollow out local papers without erasing them. Similar content-sharing arrangements now span most of Germany.

#### 4.1.2. Thuringia

Funke Medien's entry into Thuringia's news market is part of what was arguably a hostile takeover of the former Democratic Republic's burgeoning free press, leaving virtually no East German-owned publications. Funke owns three dailies in Thuringia, the *Thüringer Allgemeine*, *Ostthüringer Zeitung*, and *Thüringische Landeszeitung*. By 2010 they began to cooperate, using not only the same regional stories from their central news desk but also copy-pasting each other's local stories. Following further cuts, Funke made an agreement with its competitor, *Freies Wort*, owned by Süddeutsche Holding. Funke papers can now use up to two full pages of local content produced by *Freies Wort*. Without their competitor's reporting, huge coverage gaps would exist. To TH-2 this is what makes them zombies: "To the outside we are the ones informing readers, we provide local news, although none of us reports from there." In the following, consequences for news content, news producers, and audiences from the perspective of key informants are discussed.

#### 4.2. Journalists

A common theme among all interviewees was that zombie papers changed their working conditions and routines. One participant explained that knowing that a colleague from a competing paper might beat them to a story kept them on their toes. On the other hand, at least at first, TH/NRW recounted, government sources would delay their press conferences and say: "Let's wait for your colleagues to arrive." By now, officials know that there is only one paper in town. Since reporters working for the zombie paper do little reporting of their own, sources are at an advantage: "We'd love to play good cop, bad cop, like we used to," TH-3 said. For TH-2, working for a zombie paper means not being able to cover right-wing demonstrations on a regular basis, thereby handing over the discourse to populists. A sense of isolation has taken hold in both zombie papers and among journalists working for the paper producing copy for their colleagues. Centralized news desks in faraway regional hubs mean a loss of autonomy and control on the local and regional levels. As TH-1 described it, "The idea is that we can focus on the local." But without a competing newsroom, there is no diversity in the way events are covered, rendering coverage bland, lacking in depth, and less impactful.

Collaborating with zombie papers has required an adjustment in work routines as well. Editors can no longer walk away after a day's work but must prepare documentation for a smooth handover as they copy and paste their stories. The additional workload is not compensated. TH-3 explained that a new, internal hierarchy has emerged. At the top are editors and journalists employed by the publisher. All those hired after 2016 are employed by a subsidiary. At the bottom are lower-paid freelancers who receive 15 cents/line

published. While those in the first two categories enjoy more stability, their pay remains the same. Freelancers, while underpaid, are at least compensated with an additional 2 cents/line published in a zombie paper.

A particularly frustrating circumstance is the lack of access to granular, local-level metrics about viewership. TH-3 said this information would be useful to gauge how the newsroom's efforts were doing in the areas that were being covered by competing journalists. TH-3, who works in a leadership position, does not know whether the data simply does not exist or whether he is not allowed to see it. He added that neither subscription numbers nor metrics were shared. This lack of transparency is a constant theme. TH-2, for example, did not know how much their "zombie paper" was paying for access to the two pages they were allowed to use. They estimated €5,000/month but were not sure. Overall, both journalists working for zombie papers and those working for papers delivering content felt at the mercy of publishers in headquarters who had no connection to their communities and whose decisions were solely profit-driven. Although some suspected their readers were unaware of the shifts in ownership, others noticed a negative impact on readers' trust in their institution.

#### 4.3. Readers

A recent survey of readers launched by Funke Medien in Thuringia was, according to TH-2, disheartening:

Readers thought there was not a single journalist left in Thuringia, that our paper is produced in a different state entirely. This sticks in their mind and they don't reach out to let us know about an event. So we don't cover it.

Local networks had moved to blogs and social media platforms. Some commented that they missed direct contact with their readers. Without a newsroom, there was no office, no secretary, and no human presence. Several participants mentioned readers sending them a note asking if they were still in the area. TH-2 said they regularly receive letters for the other newspaper with a note saying that since they were all one entity anyway, surely, they'd forward the mail. Some key informants thought only decision-makers knew that, in effect, only one paper was left in town. But others spoke about encounters with readers, irritated about the fact that they saw their favorite reporter's byline in both papers. When they found out where the reporter was employed, they said they'd rather switch to that paper, so they could "get it straight from the original."

Key informants stressed that they were no longer able to serve their readers adequately and were frustrated that budget cuts were making it increasingly difficult. As editors and reporters working for zombie papers, they were pretending to be present. The confusion their readers expressed frustrated them. Most spoke about

this in theoretical terms as well, noting the threat to democracy that this decline in media diversity brings.

#### 4.4. Content

Reporters working for the three Funke papers in Thuringia were concerned when their local newsrooms were eliminated and they moved to a regional hub. In the beginning, they tried to appear distinct by placing stories that ran on their competition's cover page on page three of their paper, hoping nobody would notice. They tried to coordinate coverage, picking up a story where the other paper had left off. When more staff was cut, they stopped customizing stories. They now have only their competitor, *Freies Wort*, to turn to for stories in locations where they used to have a newsroom. When reporters at the *Freies Wort* learned that their three competitors would use up to two full pages of their reporting, they worried: "We were afraid they'd take our best stuff, add some reporting and make us look bad," TH-3 said, adding that it turns out that they rarely use up their quota and often don't make good story choices. Participant TH-2 explained why: "*Freies Wort* stories are too long and since the deal prohibits them from making substantial edits, they have to take a pass more often than not." TH-3 noted that even regional content from their headquarters was often a mismatch: "The main part of the paper comes out of Stuttgart [200 miles away] and it makes a difference when stories are written by people with no connection to our local readers." Several key informants connected with zombie papers seemed resigned. "They just need paper with words on it to hold the ads," TH-2 remarked, noting that the advertisers were using more editorial content, albeit often more than a week old, and doing well.

Journalists in North Rhine-Westphalia have noticed similar developments. Fewer reporters are writing the stories and those they write are re-used across outlets. Many say it feels like their work is being thrown into one big pot, helping publishers mimic a competitive media environment. "Competition no longer exists among publishers," NRW-2, familiar with the national publishing scene and with conditions in NRW said: "Cooperation deals are made but there are no agreements about standards and practices." He added: "They are maintaining these Potemkin villages while pulling the rug from under us."

### 5. Conclusion

The goal here was to explore the state of two emerging German news deserts in which zombie papers were being produced and to understand this practice as it relates to the country's dual media system. Working conditions, news content, and reader trust were three themes that emerged from a reading of coverage about the newspaper crisis and from interviews with key informants. Findings contribute to the existing literature about the state of news deserts around the world (Gulyás



& Baines, 2020) by identifying the gaps and setting the agenda for future research along these themes.

While US ghost papers and German zombies share many characteristics, Germany's news culture and the belief that news and information are a public good have kept newspapers afloat, albeit as zombies. Germany is considered more traditional in its news consumption, with nearly half of the population, as sampled in a recent Reuters Digital News Report, indicating overall trust in news media (Newman et al., 2022, p. 15). Yet I argue that the practice of publishing local news in these increasingly underserved regions that are ghost-written by competitors will erode the readers' trust. According to the same report, most digital subscriptions go to national brands (Newman et al., 2022, p. 15). Local papers cannot afford to lose more paying readers. Maintaining a physical presence matters. In some ways, the act of producing journalism is performative. Seeing reporters at town hall meetings, covering events and conducting interviews, and then reading the story one saw them produce is a valuable lesson in media literacy. When local newsrooms disappear and journalists are reduced to a byline, no longer visibly at work, a community suffers (Mathews, 2022). Authenticity, honesty, and transparency are crucial aspects of this lesson. Similarly, living with competing news outlets, a public-facing exchange of viewpoints and ideas models journalistic norms and practices. Along with news audiences, journalists are affected as well. As one key informant indicated, a class system within local and regional newsrooms has emerged, with the bottom tier feeding the zombie, never compensated for the additional labor this practice creates.

The key informants interviewed for this study agree that zombie papers' pretend-presence in what are effectively one-newspaper communities does more harm than good. Resistance to layoffs and newsroom closures is mostly fueled by union leaders. Their almost playful use of the term obscures the fact that zombies are mutating. While Dogruel et al. (2019) defined them as papers produced entirely with content from other papers, the variation in Thuringia is perhaps more deceptive: it deliberately pretends to be something that it is not. Future research into audience perceptions and responses to these deceptive practices would be useful. Especially in a society that is accustomed to public media, questions about the viability of public media as a local news source should also be explored (Neff & Pickard, 2021). Additionally, systematic content analyses of news produced by allegedly competing zombie papers, as well as in-depth studies of emerging norms and practices around this emerging form of satellite journalism, are indicated.

The zombie papers dotting the German local newspaper landscape exacerbate both the slim margin of trust in the news media and precarious working conditions. By creating a convoluted maze of high-level collaborations that are difficult to track, German publishers have created dangerous conditions. They are part of a construct that obscures ownership, mimics media diver-

sity while undermining diversity, and helps build a wall behind which more layoffs and newsroom closures take place, out of sight until it is too late.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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## About the Author



**Karin Assmann** (PhD, University of Maryland) is an assistant professor of journalism at the University of Georgia’s College of Journalism and Mass Communication. Her research focuses on institutional and individual responses to change in the news industry, evolving newsroom norms and practices, as well as news and information infrastructures, in particular in rural communities in the US and Europe.