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# THE SOCIETAL RELEVANCE OF THE “RHEINISCHER MERKUR”

In April 2019, in the professional journal *Communicatio Socialis*, the communication expert Kai Hafez reflected on the reportage of the refugee crisis in Germany and urged the need for a new form of journalism, a so-called “humanitarian journalism” with “a sociopolitical attitude” (Hafez 2019, 500). He takes up here the uncertainties that have been perceptible for some time with regard to the reporting in the media in society: Where do we still find facts rather than fake news, complexity and thematic variety rather than abridgements and campaigns? And where do we get a picture of political debates in the entire breadth of their discussion? In addition to many other subsystems in society that are aware of this development and look for solutions, there is an almost cyclical demand in the Christian churches too for a new, societally relevant medium that is characterized by an outstanding journalism on the basis of the Christian faith. If one compares Hafez’ proposal of a “humanitarian journalism” with the standards of the Catholic press in the nineteenth century, one soon encounters a political newspaper that was both a pioneer for the entire press in the period of the Restoration and a symbol of the reconstruction after the Second World War: the *Rheinischer Merkur* of Joseph Görres from 1814 to 1816 and the *Rheinischer Merkur* from 1946 to 2010. Both newspapers, but especially the *Rheinischer Merkur* of the post-War years, had a sociopolitical attitude that can be a model today for the desired new form

of journalism. It is thus worth looking at the period in which the *Rheinischer Merkur* came into existence, at its task and its decline, and inquiring into the media-ethical tensions under which this weekly newspaper existed.

## 1. THE *RHEINISCHER MERKUR* – TASK AND GOAL

When the first issue of the *Rheinischer Merkur* appeared in Koblenz on March 15, 1946 under the editorship of Franz Albert Kramer, this political newspaper, which appeared twice each week (towards the end of 1946, thanks to the improvement in the paper supply, this was already increased to three times each week), distinguished itself from its competitors through several criteria. It was one of the first political newspapers to receive a newspaper license from the Allies and the French protectorate. It was customary for a press product to have several editors from various political parties, but in this unique case, there was only one editor, F.A. Kramer, who was also the license holder. He imprinted his seal on the paper in a definitive way in the first four years, and this determined its prestige until it was closed down in 2010.

Kramer, who had spent the years of the Second World War in exile in Switzerland, had good contacts to the Allies. Jean-Michael Bing, the censoring officer who was assigned to him by the military government, was a friend from Swiss days, and soon changed roles by writing under a pseudonym as a foreign correspondent for the *Rheinischer Merkur* (see Roloff 1007, 38). The name of the newspaper, the choice of printer, and the date of the first issue established the profile of the *Rheinischer Merkur* in the coming decades. It is no longer possible to reconstruct exactly whether the choice of name preceded the choice of the Görres printing house in Koblenz, or whether the discovery of this historical printing house, which had been only partly destroyed, ultimately inspired Kramer to choose the name and to continue the tradition along the lines of Joseph Görres (see Klenk 2013, 170). The *Rheinischer Merkur* appeared with an initial print of 220,000 copies, one hundred and thirty years after the last issue of Joseph Görres' *Rheinischer Merkur*. Kramer wrote in his first issue about the choice of name:

“It may indeed be audacious to take up once again now a name of that kind, in order to continue the tradition of the *Rheinischer Merkur* where it was broken off one hundred and thirty years ago; but this act of daring must find its justification in the difficulty and the fatefulness of the present time. We need today a thinking that is every bit as spacious and fearless, in order to grasp the events – at least now, at least after the sec-

ond catastrophe – in their causes and in their interconnection. And just as great a candor is required, just as certain a sense of one’s own dignity, in order to speak of these matters in public under present-day circumstances.” (Kramer 1946, 1)

This section forms the program that Kramer sketched out for the *Rheinischer Merkur*: a critical accompanying the events of the political reconstruction, and at the same time participation in the reconstruction of a critical public arena that ought to learn in freedom how to think broadly and courageously. The observation of the political events in Germany had the highest priority, as we see from the redactional division of the newspaper with its eight pages. In addition to the political emphasis, there was the section “At the silver stream: From the life of the spirit – Western review – A colorful world,” where we find in the first issue, alongside poems by Clemens Brentano and Matthias Claudius, an essay entitled “Christian humanism: Its potential in the construction of society.” The articles of association of the “Rheinischer Merkur Publisher Ltd.” envisaged a newspaper with reporting on the basis of Christian politics, a reportage that was the product of collaboration on equal terms by the two great confessions (see Roegele 1974, 72).<sup>1</sup>

“No merger between the churches, but the most trustful collaboration possible between the churches, not so much on the level of the hierarchy as on that of the laity who behave actively in the world, the politicians, the teachers, the associations and institutions [...]” (Löblich/Roegele 2004, 155)

This practical attitude to ecumenism was also demonstrated in the supra-confessional character of the newspaper. Vilma Sturm, the only woman editor among a group of men, was a single mother who was able, with Kramer’s help, to combine her work and her child. She recalls:

“We in the *Rheinischer Merkur* saw in the Christian religion the superstructure, in which we believed unquestioningly, that lay over all our thinking and action. Everything that I wrote at that time had to presuppose this superstructure, whether it was reportage about conferences

1 In his bibliography, Roegele (1994, 295–296) mentions that the material relevant to the beginnings and the first years of the *Rheinischer Merkur* has not survived.

of poets or philosophers, reflections on nature or music, on pussy willows or the casting of bells. [...] We did not only think – we also lived with the contents of the faith.” (Sturm 1987, 202–203).<sup>2</sup>

An apparently unruffled link between the Christian influence and political alertness left its mark on the first years of the weekly paper. Contrary to expectations, later developments, and to what is alleged about him today, Kramer did not intend to found a party newspaper. He aimed at “establishing the spiritual foundation and the journalistic accompaniment” (Roegele 1994, 72) of a democratic party in which Christian politicians would work together across confessional lines, in order thus to prevent a renewed extremism. Otto B. Roegele, at that time Kramer’s assistant and later his successor, summed up as follows, in a 1950 portrait of Kramer, the importance of the reporting in the *Rheinischer Merkur* for the drawing up of the Constitution:

“1948 was helpful above all for the consolidation of the editorial collaboration and the establishing of the weekly newspaper as a type. In 1948 came the ‘great hour’ for the *Rheinischer Merkur* as an organ of debate and of influence on the shaping of the Constitution. An interview with Konrad Adenauer that appeared on 21.02.1948 formed the kickoff of a campaign that accompanied with increasing vehemence the constitutional deliberations of the Presidents of the federal states, the Convention at Herrenchiemsee, and the Parliamentary Council until its final resolution on 8.05.1949.” (Roegele 1994, 74)

This retrospect by Roegele is valuable because it was not a second-hand work or the product of an analysis of the reporting in those politically decisive years: rather, it reproduces the inside perspective of what Roegele calls the editorial “campaign.” In the final vote before the adoption of the constitution, we find a pointer to the enormous influence that, in the eyes of Theodor Heuss (later Federal President), the *Rheinischer Merkur* had on the Constitution of the state. Heuss mentions three “places” that influenced from the outside the genesis of the Constitution: the Odeonstrasse in Hannover (a reference to the office of the

2 In her autobiography, Sturm gives vivid glimpses of the working conditions at the *Rheinischer Merkur* in its first years and of her work as a single mother and contributor to the newspaper. After her initial enthusiasm for the weekly newspaper and for Kramer, Sturm increasingly distanced herself from her colleagues, and was finally fired by Kramer in 1949 (see *inter alia* Sturm 1987, 193–211).

chairman of the SPD, Kurt Schumacher), the curia in Cologne (with Cardinal Joseph Frings), and the *Rheinischer Merkur* (see Roegele 1994, 74–75). Looking back, we may surely regard these initial years of the *Rheinischer Merkur*, which were likewise the initial years of the Federal Republic of Germany, as the most successful years of the weekly paper from the perspective of its founder, F.A. Kramer. His sudden death in February 1950 put an end to the decisive years of the weekly paper.

His successor, Otto B. Roegele, who was later the first professor of the science of journalism at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, was confronted with all kinds of problems that influenced the *Rheinischer Merkur* directly and indirectly. Politically speaking, the *Rheinischer Merkur* began to detach itself in the 1950s from its strong alignment with the CDU – in general, it was more of a strong alignment with the person of Konrad Adenauer, which ended abruptly when the new chancellor came to power in 1963. In 1967, in his obituary of Konrad Adenauer, the chief editor, Anton Böhm, wrote: “This newspaper had the honor of being prized in some quarters and notorious in others as the organ of Adenauer, as his ‘mouthpiece,’ his ‘favorite paper.’” (Böhm 1967, 1) This honor was not accorded to his successor, Ludwig Erhard. Apart from the political attitude of the *Rheinischer Merkur*, which increasingly developed into an opposition voice in the CDU/CSU (see Hertel 1980, 242–243), Roegele entered in the 1950s into the incipient discussion about new Catholic media formats. A flourishing spectrum of various political, academic, and aesthetic daily newspapers and periodicals, such as the *Kölnische Volkszeitung*<sup>3</sup> and *Hochland*,<sup>4</sup> had been destroyed except for a minimum by the National Socialists’ imposition of conformity. The only newspapers that had survived were those that put themselves under the protection of a bishop – this was the hour in which the diocesan newspapers were born. The overwhelming might of the NS dictatorship was simply too great, as Altmeyer (1962, 51) states: “The Catholic press was [...] brought to its knees with violence, because it was not willing to betray its own nature.” Thanks to this experience, the first steps back into an independent Catholic journalism were only hesitant, and highly varied. In addition to the foundation of the *Rheinischer Merkur*, the *Augsburger Postzeitung* was founded in 1948 by Johann Wilhelm Naumann, who had

3 The *Kölnische Volkszeitung* and the *Germania* were among the leading political Catholic daily newspapers at the beginning of the twentieth century, and were also known outside Germany (see Löffler 1924, 75–77).

4 *Hochland* saw itself as a conservative Catholic cultural periodical. The correspondence between Karl Muth, the publisher, and Friedrich Fuchs, the editor, bear witness to a vigorous debate among those responsible for the periodical about the importance to be attached to theological topics and about the attitude of the periodical in the reconciliation between Germany and France (see Rémi/Brockstieger 2014, 101–142).

consciously decided against a political daily paper in the style of the earlier “general advertisers” that tended to take a liberal position. The *Augsburger Postzeitung* soon appeared everywhere in Germany under the name *Deutsche Tagespost*; today, under the name *Die Tagespost*, it is the last surviving Catholic weekly newspaper in Germany. The Catholic publicist Emil Dovifat (1949, 94) asked in the speech he delivered at the foundation of the “Gesellschaft katholischer Publizisten” (GKP, Society of Catholic Journalists) in Bonn in 1948: “Ought our starting point to be the task we had in 1932, or do we want to take a new path?”<sup>5</sup> At this time, only the *Deutsche Tagespost* and the *Rheinischer Merkur* had made up their minds on this question, since their journalism linked onto the circumstances before 1932. However, the majority of the German journalists did not call into question the diocesan newspaper, a form born of an emergency situation as an association between the Catholic press and the episcopate; and down to the present day, this third path is the dominant form of Catholic journalism in Germany, alongside linking onto the past and breaking out into something new. The question of the legitimation of the Catholic press in a secular society, which was raised especially by the first members of the GKP and at the conferences of the “Arbeitskreis Publizistik/Presse” (AKP, working party on publicity and the press) of the “Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken” (ZdK, Central Committee of the German Catholics,<sup>6</sup> went largely unanswered.<sup>7</sup> Nor was this dilemma solved by the founding of the “Katholische Nachrichtenagentur” (KNA, Catholic News Agency) in 1952, which has continued to the present day to offer Catholic news, independently of the political orientation of a newspaper. The consciousness that Christian journalism has a place both in and for society, even outside the subsystem church, is indeed anchored once again in the journalistic milieu, but no assertive initiatives have been taken after the *Rheinischer Merkur*. This means that it occupied a special place until its end, but also that it could be perceived as being behind the times. This may also be the reason for the failure of the *Rheinischer Merkur*.

5 As far as the evidence goes, no member of the editorial staff of the *Rheinischer Merkur* is mentioned in the documents about the foundation of the GKP as one of the founding members.

6 On this, see the documentation of the Arbeitskreis Presse (1958).

7 This also becomes clear when one attempts to collate an academic bibliography: from roughly the 1960s, it is difficult to gain an overview of Germany Catholic journalism as a whole. The standard work by Scholke (1971) ends with the year 1968, since it was published in 1971. Since then, no monograph has appeared that offers a systematic presentation of the further developments and draws possible consequences.

## 2. THE *RHEINISCHER MERKUR* AND POLITICS

The first years of the *Rheinischer Merkur* were arguably also its most successful. When the Federal Republic of Germany was founded, its journalism was perceived as an important public voice, and it had not only accompanied the genesis of the Constitution, but had probably also influenced it. In the 1960s, however, the structure of society shifted, and the wish for a specifically Catholic medium took an ever clearer form in the church, at conferences of the ZdK and of the dioceses. Although the possibilities in the media were developing at high speed, those with responsibility for planning remained focused on the classic newspaper or periodical. Roegele was aware of this wish, and he hoped for financial support from the “Deutsche Bischofskonferenz” (DBK, German episcopal conference), since the circulation figures of the *Rheinischer Merkur* had begun to sink as early as the 1950s (1958: 69,400; beginning of the 1960s: 48,000–49,000) (see Pressel 1968, 25).<sup>8</sup> But his hopes were dashed when it became obvious that the DBK wanted to see a new product, and that this was already in planning. While the lawyer Hans Suttner elaborated a confidential concept for a new Catholic weekly newspaper and sent it to roughly eight hundred persons in the church and in public life (and naturally enough, given this number, it did not long remain all that confidential), the DBK commissioned a study from the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research into the positive potential and the risks entailed by the foundation of a Catholic weekly paper; this too bore the note “confidential.” The *Rheinischer Merkur* appeared, remarkably, to play no role in the drawing up of a concept for a new weekly newspaper, nor were the established professionals among Catholic journalists consulted. This was probably because of the lack of openness to new formats among the editors of Catholic church papers. For example, Ferdinand Oertel observed at the conference of the AKP in Hirschberg Castle in 1967:

“In the general discussion, however, ‘charity began at home’ for the editors. In other words, they rejected conceptual questions about the form of their own church newspapers in demarcation from the KWZ” (“Katholische Wochenzeitung,” the Catholic weekly newspaper). (Oertel 2009, 149)

But since the *Rheinischer Merkur* could not be regarded as belonging to the spectrum of “church newspapers,” its editors and its publisher were left out of the discussions, although it could have been assumed (at least in retrospect) that they possessed a greater measure of openness.

<sup>8</sup> Between 1961 and 1965, the circulation of *Die Zeit* rose from 78,000 to 210,000 copies.

Finally, in April 1968, the dummy run of the new newspaper, called *Publik*, was published for selected readers.<sup>9</sup> The reaction by the *Rheinischer Merkur* took the form of a comment on the dummy run of *Publik* that made it clear that the planning had *de facto* taken place to the exclusion of the Catholic journalistic milieu: “The bishops have taken their decision alone, with nothing less than a demonstrative refusal to draw on the expertise of the professionals.” (N.N. 1968, 32)<sup>10</sup> Three questions are put to the new Catholic weekly paper:

“1. Is it in keeping with the mind of the Council, and, in particular, is it in accordance with the German situation, when a mono-confessional paper is founded by the bishops in 1968 as the ‘leading organ’ of the German Catholics? [...] 2. In the self-understanding of today’s Catholic, absolute priority is given to the duty of mobilize all one’s forces in order that the contribution to collaboration as a citizen of the state – a collaboration that is owed to the totality of the people – is made, and that this collaboration can be integrated in the most appropriate way possible into the continuous process of the formation of opinion and of policies. Not the repulsion of enemies, not shutting ourselves into our own hermitage, but collaboration with all those of good will, and opening out onto the other groups in the plural society! [...] 3. After the experience of the debacle with Hitler and the persecution of the church by Nazism, the leaders of German Catholicism decided unanimously in favor of a bi-confessional party. [...] In such a situation, launching a mono-confessional newspaper, and even more a newspaper with the official authority of the bishops, is a relapse into the way of thinking and the praxis of the last century.” (N.N. 1968, 32)

It is clear that this comment by the *Rheinischer Merkur* criticized everything in the competitor paper that distinguished it from the *Merkur’s* own profile: the purely Catholic orientation and the risk of being stuck in the narrowness of its own milieu. Looking back, one can only describe the further history of *Publik*

9 In 2015, Florian Bock published a detailed monograph on the genesis and the failure of *Publik*, in which the *Rheinischer Merkur* is given only a marginal mention (see Bock 2015, 142–144). His monograph is the first detailed account of the events concerning the weekly newspaper *Publik*.

10 It is extremely instructive to read this comment, which gives a valuable insight into the points of criticism by the *Rheinischer Merkur*, which refer in a very objective manner to the establishing and to the profile of the new newspaper. From today’s perspective, the criticism in the comment not only pinpoints with great precision the profile and the problems of *Publik*, but also points to the fate of the *Rheinischer Merkur* itself, which was to find itself a few years later in the same financial dependence.

as tragic. Suttner died shortly after the dummy run that the *Rheinischer Merkur* criticized, so that the newspaper lost its most important provider of ideas and initiator. The first official issue of *Publik* appeared after the Katholikentag in Essen, on September 27, 1968, and it was subsequently inseparable from the situation of conflict on questions of church politics at this Katholikentag, where for the first time church-political parties became more clearly delineated as a consequence of the outcome of the second Vatican Council (see Bock 2015, esp. 303–369). After *Publik* had divided opinions in the Catholic milieu already in its first issue, it was the object of continuous debates about its content in the following years; these were not only theological and church-political in character, but also economic. *Publik* was finally closed down in November 1971. The *Rheinischer Merkur* too faced financial difficulties in the 1970s and moved gradually in this period into a total financial dependence on the DBK and on several German dioceses.<sup>11</sup>

The final great step that once again significantly changed both the content and the visual appearance of the *Rheinischer Merkur* was determined by its fusion with the Protestant newspaper *Christ und Welt* in 1980. *Publik-Forum* commented on this merger with the headline “The bastion of opinion on the Rhine,” and the secular press likewise reported it. The *FAZ* noted: “One less Christian newspaper,” and the *Kölner Stadtanzeiger* observed: “Whether this marriage will work depends on the reader.” (headlines quoted in Durth 1980, 109) It soon became clear that the *Kölner Stadtanzeiger* was right, for the number of subscribers was far fewer than expected. Too many readers had previously subscribed to both papers, and the desired number of 190,000 (130,000 reader of *Christ und Welt* plus 60,000 readers of the *Rheinischer Merkur*) was thus not reached even at the beginning. In a purely external sense, the *Rheinischer Merkur* had now achieved what it had claimed for itself since its foundation: namely, to be a bi- or supra-confessional medium. But this opinion was obviously held only by the weekly newspaper itself in the 1980s, as we see from the critical comment by the Protestant pastor K. Rüdiger Durth (1980, 110):

11 After giving a one-off grant, the archdiocese of Cologne finally took a stake of 13% in the *Rheinischer Merkur* in 1971. From 1974, the dioceses of Aachen, Essen, Freiburg, Hildesheim, Münster, and Paderborn had a stake totaling 80% in the weekly paper. In 1976, the German episcopal conference also took part in financing it through the “Medien-Dienstleistungs-Gesellschaft” (MDG, Society for media services). This last step definitively ended the redactional independence of the *Rheinischer Merkur*, because the MDG also got involved in editorial decisions (see Hertel 1980, 247–249). Hertel also gives a detailed account of the ownership structure of the publisher in the years that followed.

“The skeptical voices were in the majority even after the ‘shock of the fusion,’ quite apart from the regret that the German newspaper landscape had once again become poorer through the loss of a paper with a profile of its own. Do conservative Protestants automatically read a conservative Catholic newspaper? Certainly not.”

Only a comprehensive study of its contents and of the milieu of its readers, as well as of the church-political developments in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, would make it possible to determine when the *Rheinischer Merkur* abandoned its own claim to be supra-confessional, and became a conservative Catholic newspaper – or, indeed, if it could ever have been anything other than conservative, after the significant role it had played in the foundational period of the Federal Republic of Germany. It would, however, be unjust to the *Rheinischer Merkur* if one were to locate it from the 1980s onward in the niche of irrelevant press products. A study by Karin Böhme-Dürr and Anette Grube about science reporting in the press in 1989 presents a picture of a newspaper that is read by managers and academics.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1990s, the situation of the *Rheinischer Merkur* was undisturbed until finally, at the beginning of the new century, rumors about a new involvement by the DBK in the media once again surfaced.<sup>13</sup> There were several attempts in the following years to make the paper attractive to younger readers too, and to reduce the financial support of the dioceses, but without success. On the sixtieth birthday of the *Rheinischer Merkur*, Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel (2006) said in her *laudatio*: “For the past six decades, the *Rheinischer Merkur* has followed world events from a Christian perspective. It is one of the outstanding weekly newspapers in Germany today.” It would be interesting to know if there were still circles in the Catholic milieu at that time who attributed to the *Rheinischer Merkur* a large role in the press, or whether these were merely words of praise in the Chancellor’s premature farewell song to a sinking ship. In any case, the economic conditions were completely disproportionate, so that the DBK finally decided on a change at its autumn meeting in 2010. This initially led to false reports. The KNA reported:

12 Apart from this study, there is only one other comparative study from the 1960s that has investigated the political profile of the *Rheinischer Merkur* and of the *Zeit* (see Pressel 1968).

13 For example, the KNA wrote in April 2000 about a planned takeover by the Axel-Springer-Verlag, which however did not happen (see KNA 2000).

“Contrary to initial press statements that were open to misunderstanding, the weekly newspaper *Rheinischer Merkur* will not be sold to the *Zeit*. When asked, the Hamburg weekly paper merely confirmed a future cooperation with the Bonn paper. A spokeswoman of the Hamburg publisher stated to the KNA that the future model envisages that responsibility for the *Merkur* in terms of content and reportage remains exclusively with its editorial board and publisher.” (KNA 2010)

The DBK has kept silent until today about the precise reason for the decision to cooperate with the *Zeit*, as well as about the precise circulation and the financial circumstances of the weekly paper. In his final leader, the chief editor, Michael Rutz (2010), wrote as follows about the closing down of the *Rheinischer Merkur*:

“What was the reason for closing down the *Rheinischer Merkur*? Was it really money, at a period when church tax revenues – at more than five billion euros a year, for the Catholic church in Germany alone – have never been higher? Was it our commitment to ecumenism, which has perhaps become uncomfortable in certain parts of the official church, in view of the fact that it is particularly attractive to so many of the Catholic faithful? Was it the necessary delight in debate in a weekly newspaper, which must always be a forum of the center, and must not put itself at the service only of the margins of Catholic fundamentalism? Well, whatever the case may be, we are proud of our work.”

### 3. THE *RHEINISCHER MERKUR* AND FIELDS OF TENSION IN MEDIA ETHICS

The history of the *Rheinischer Merkur*, with its slow and yet sudden end, which has not been made public down to the present day with regard both to the financial expenditures by the DBK and by some German dioceses and to strategic decisions, is not marked only by the struggles of the editors and of the German bishops to achieve a societally relevant medium that was adequate to the post-War years. It is also marked by the autonomies of journalism, which affected the weekly paper in a very constant way that did not greatly attract public attention. The normative theory of journalism presupposes that it functions in dependence on the subsystem “politics,” and hence displays a variety of autonomies, in keeping with the specific societal system. In the case of German journalism, there are thus specific autonomies and fields of tension, which do

not only apply to journalism in general; it is above all concrete media enterprises such as the *Rheinischer Merkur* that are and were subject to them. In general, one can speak of three great fields of tension: (1) the task of informing the public and economic competition; (2) economic competition and moral standards; and (3) moral standards and ideals in the occupational profile. With regard to perspectives in media ethics, one can likewise identify three fields of tension: (1) ethics and profit; (2) ethics and quality; and (3) ethics and law (see Schicha/Brosda 2010, esp. 331–370).

In the case of the *Rheinischer Merkur*, it is not wholly easy to identify *post mortem* (so to speak) the fields of tension to which it was especially subject, since that would require an insight into the daily editorial work, which is characterized at many points by the struggle of the editors to deal with explosive topics (ethics and law), professional self-perception (ideals in the occupational profile), and the interaction between editor and reader (the task of informing the public). But precisely with regard to the last point, the task of informing the public, to which a media enterprise should always be subject, it can very reliably be affirmed, when we look at the beginnings of the *Rheinischer Merkur*, that the foundation of the weekly paper was linked to a specific claim. As my reconstruction of events in the first part shows, collaboration in the rebuilding of Germany with the aid of the press was an important concern for F.A. Kramer. At the end of his introductory article in the first issue of the *Rheinischer Merkur*, he wrote: “The task that confronts us is a construction in individual things, from the lowest level” (Kramer 1946, 1). Kramer begins here with a fundamental task of journalism, the continuous realization of the public sphere.<sup>14</sup> With this attitude, the *Rheinischer Merkur* stands in the tradition of Joseph Görres, who stated in the first edition of his *Rheinischer Merkur* in 1814:

“If a people participates in the common good; if it seeks to come to agreement about what is happening; if it makes itself worthy through deeds and sacrifices to gain a voice and influence in public affairs; it then demands such newspapers, which bring to public discussion that which is at work in all spirits and drives them; newspapers that understand how to read the heart of the nation; that fearlessly know how to defend the claims that they make; and that understand how to make clear to the crowd

14 On this point, Adorno (1972, 533) observed: “The public sphere could never – and cannot now – be regarded as something that already exists.” This is why even a society without any restrictions on communication must continuously work to ensure that the public sphere exists.

themselves what they feel darkly and unconsciously in their own selves, and to give it back to them clearly expressed.” (Görres 1814, 1)

This means that it is the politically oriented public sphere that confers its legitimation on the press by asking for an organ that bestows a perceptible voice on its own convictions. This demand helps us to understand why it was precisely in the nineteenth century that many newspapers with very differing political profiles developed. It is true that the first *Rheinischer Merkur* was prohibited by King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia already in 1816, but later press products could scarcely avoid the demand that Görres had postulated. Cooperation in the construction of the public sphere as a task of journalism, on the one hand (Görres), and striving to share in shaping the public sphere, on the other (Kramer), indicate two different expectations with regard to the press. Different answers are given to the question of how far journalism is capable not only of reflecting the discourse in society, but also of initiating societal or political processes by steering discourses. Luhmann’s theory of communication presupposes that communication partners are fundamentally able of influencing each other, while however both parties remain fundamentally autarchic (see 1984, 157). Studies in communication science indicate, however, that precisely in the relationship between journalism and the recipient, at least the recipient is subject to an interaction. For example, in her study of the processes of the radicalization of Islamists, Katharina Neumann (2019) discovered that not only the contents of propaganda, but also journalistic contents contribute to the radicalization.<sup>15</sup> A study by Sandra Lieske of the image of journalists from the perspective of the recipients also concludes that interaction between recipients and mass media is capable of lending support to the political system (see 2008, 43–44).<sup>16</sup> These two poles – the far-reaching autarchy of the communication partners (the press and the public sphere), and their reciprocal interaction with both stabilizing and altering aspects – can be seen in the role taken by the *Rheinischer Merkur* in the elaboration of the Constitution of the Federal Republic, and in the substantial

15 A seldom noted interaction is also interesting here, namely, the presentation in western media, which depict the Salafists as ready to use violence. It is this very presentation that sometimes leads to a willingness by the Salafists to use violence.

16 The author emphasizes that: “The image of journalists from the perspective of the recipient encompasses the objectively correct and false knowledge as well as ideas, attitudes, and feelings vis-à-vis journalists that are subjective, that is, marked by the personality and the experiences of the individual. This image changes over time. It can be measured with empirical methods and possesses relevance for action, since it steers the behavior of the individual in relation to journalists and to media content.” (Lieske 2008, 25)

detachment from the claim to have a share in shaping politics after Adenauer's chancellorship.

Altmeppen and Arnold (2010, 332) point out that unlike journalism, the media are subject to economic conditions: "The media business, as a unit that thinks in economic terms, is primarily oriented not to ethical values and to social responsibility in journalism, but to the maximization of profit." Although the primary interest of the shareholders of the *Rheinischer Merkur* was probably not in an increase in profit, the question of the profitability of the weekly paper nevertheless played a central role. A number of factors soon put an end to the pioneer role that the *Rheinischer Merkur* still had in 1946 as a great newspaper disseminated throughout Germany. The decision, taken although the supply of paper was in fact increasing, to shift from three issues per week to the format of the weekly newspaper made it all the more necessary for the *Rheinischer Merkur* to cultivate a profile of its own that animated the recipient to purchase a second paper (in addition to the daily newspaper). However, the circulation of the *Rheinischer Merkur* was declining already by 1950. From the perspective of a media enterprise that was active in economic terms, quite independently of the quality and the societal relevance of the contents of the *Rheinischer Merkur*,<sup>17</sup> these figures signaled the decline of a success story. If one bears in mind the economic competition of the media enterprises, one will quickly see that the journalistic freedom of an editorial board can reach its limits when the reportage no longer focuses on the creation of a public sphere. A media enterprise that would not wish to abandon the guiding principles of journalism is confronted here by incomparably greater challenges than its profit-oriented competitor. With regard to the guiding principles of the journalism that is legitimated by norms, Michael Haller (2010, 350) affirms the following points:

"Primacy of the public sphere ('creation of the public sphere') for statements that are appropriate (objectively correct) and that offer a classification; relevance of the news that is disseminated; respect for the personal rights of those affected by the reportage; consideration for the psychosocial disposition of the public (reasonableness of the way in which the contents are presented)."

17 At present, the comparative study by Pressel is the only available work that says something about the journalistic quality of the *Rheinischer Merkur*.

Respect for personal rights may indeed bear witness to a product of high journalistic quality, but in the competition with other media products, this can lead either to economic failures or to errors on the part of journalists, as the debate about the reporting of the crash of the Germanwings plane in March 2015 showed.<sup>18</sup> One can doubtless assume in principle that as a Christian newspaper, the *Rheinischer Merkur* found its orientation in the values of Christian social doctrine and social ethics. Although there are no valid statements on this point for the years up to 2000, it is certain that, while the reportage between 2000 and 2010 is not explicitly oriented to axioms of social doctrine with regard to the presentation of values, it nevertheless displays an orientation to values that (for example) behaves with extreme objectivity in dealing with the errors committed by persons (see Frey 2020).

It is impossible to identify one unambiguous criterion among the autonomies and tensions of journalism, described above, that led to the closure of the *Rheinischer Merkur*. The data with regard to the economic, redactional, and ecclesiastical decision is still too little known. In general, however, at a distance of ten years, one can now say that the successor project of the DBK, the online platform “katholisch.de,” is received, but that this homepage up to now has not succeeded in developing anything of the societally relevant power that the *Rheinischer Merkur* possessed at least at the beginning of its history. For although the number of subscribers at the end was in fact very small, it was one of the five largest German political newspapers until it closed, and the reactions of the competitors attest its high prestige. The *Spiegel* commented: “The *Merkur*, with its Rhineland-Catholic orientation, leaves a journalistic gap in the print sector.” (Wensierski 2010)<sup>19</sup>

18 The objective debate at that time was conducted primarily in the professional periodical *Communicatio Socialis*, and concerned the infringement of personal rights as well as the indignation and complaints on the part of recipients (see Eberwein 2015; Frank 2015).

19 [English translation: Brian McNeil.]

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# THE SOCIETAL RELEVANCE OF THE “RHEINISCHER MERKUR”

## SUMMARY

At present, there is no societally relevant political newspaper in Germany that is based on a Christian worldview. The *Rheinischer Merkur*, founded in 1946 shortly after the end of the Second World War and shut down by the German Bishops' Conference in 2010, was a newspaper of this kind. It went beyond the Christian milieu in the fulfilment of its mission in the public arena. The closure of the *Rheinischer Merkur* obscures even today the decisive role it played in the elaboration of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany and the substantial quality of the paper. This essay sketches the history of the *Rheinischer Merkur* and its self-understanding, as well as its decline, locating these in the context of the journalistic autonomies and media-ethical tensions to which every journalistic medium is subject.

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