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From the Field

Who Is this “We” in the Media Programs? Public Service Broadcasting in a Superdiverse Society

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Abstract: How do the German public service media respond to a society that is growing more diverse by the day? What ambivalences and affective reactions arise in connection with diversity strategies in the media, and what role could the media play in the changing social picture? The paper examines these questions regarding examples from the German public service broadcaster, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) in the context of migration.

Continuing migration has made Germany a truly “superdiverse” society according to Steven Vertovec: one third of the people in the broadcasting area of the WDR and almost half of those under the age of 18 have a “migration background” (either migrated themselves or at least one parent). This plurality is however often represented in a fragmented, sometimes belated, or even contradictory manner in the institutions, including the media. “Diversity work” in the sense of Sara Ahmed encompasses a set of measures that aim at addressing the lack of representation in the broadcasters’ workforce and content, but it is also a site where in the practice an array of ambivalences arise, especially when it comes to the concrete possibilities of institutional change. To what degree can such strategies answer the challenges of newsroom work and open spaces for multiperspectivity and alternative representations? Or is a new reflection on the speakers’ positions necessary? And, who exactly is this “we-position” in media work when “we” can no longer be defined along the lines of the nation state? The paper argues that, as spaces of representations of the social totality, the public service media, with their remit of addressing the whole society, have the possibility of redefining their role and offering articulations of belonging that correspond to the conditions of life in a society of many identities.

Keywords: migration, media diversity, diversity work, WDR, journalism, affect, public service broadcasters, superdiversity

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On May 12, 1971, Wibke Bruhns read the ZDF evening news for the first time, as the first woman in this role on German public service television (Wikipedia, n.d.). In 1990, an episode of the popular series “Lindenstraße” showed the first openly gay kiss on public service TV. In 2014, Pinar Atalay became the first descendent of Turkish migrants to host the ARD news program “Tagesthemen”.

Why these three “firsts”? At the time seen as veritable milestones of TV history, each in their own context opened the way for new faces and till then untold stories in public service media (PSM). The examples however also show just how slow the PSM have been in catching up with developments in public opinion and social make-up. Atalay’s career on news TV is a case in point: Starting over half a century after the beginning of labor migration to Germany from Turkey¹, it was accompanied by press coverage that still did not fail to describe her as being “of Turkish origins” (Brasack, 2021), as the German-born journalist reported years later.

Today, the PSM in Germany are making up for lost time, with “diversity” riding a wave of popularity: the nine broadcasters that form the Association of German Public Service Broadcasters, the ARD, cooperate within a Diversity Board on projects aiming to raise representation in their content and staff. They have named diversity as strategic goal, and have been developing strategies, publishing policy papers, organizing events around the annual German diversity Day (ARD, 2021) and installing persons in charge of what Sara Ahmed calls “doing diversity” (2012), which refers to the whole set of tools, practices and discursive strategies used in order to transform institutions. Next to the central concern with ethnic and cultural diversity in the context of migration, various dimensions have surfaced as sites of underrepresentation in the broadcasters and turned into objects of diversity strategies: LGBTQI+, disability, gender, social background, but increasingly also the often lamented lack of diversity of political opinion, underrepresentation of journalists with rural backgrounds, or, in the German context, the unbalanced West and East German representation (Borchardt et al., 2019).

On the level of policy, the broadcasters seem to have internalized the strategic importance of the topic, aware that a failure to reach higher representation in their content and workforce might mean falling short of their remit. Diversity becomes a viable management tool in the face of a looming workforce shortage and a loss of relevance among young audiences as tangible risks. Within the discursive framework of “enrichment”, migration is here seen as carrying the potential for growth or as a way of stopping the downward demographic spiral. Within this framework, elements of migrant cultures are expected to somehow bring new, interesting elements to the “host culture”.

¹ On October 30, 1961, Germany and Turkey signed a bilateral agreement bringing labor migrants to Germany. Today, around three million people of Turkish descent live in Germany (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2022).

A reduction of diversity to “‘feel good’ politics”, to “happy diversity” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 72) that “enriches” institutions, while leaving positions of “majority” and “migrants” unexamined, forms a central part of Sara Ahmed’s critique of “diversity work”. On the one hand, “diversity work” has surfaced as a feature of institutional life today (Ahmed, 2012; 2019), a set of practices with the aim to transform institutions by opening them up to those who have been underrepresented or excluded. However, a closer examination of what diversity “does” uncovers the discrepancy between declared institutional policies and the institutions’ resistance to change. Using the metaphor of a brick wall to describe the latter, Ahmed describes diversity work as “*wall work*” (2019, p. 151, emphasis in original). In a similar vein, while the strategic goal of diversity representation is gaining traction in the German public service broadcasters, “diversity work” itself continues to be characterized by ambivalences in the practical realm, often reflecting the unsettling questions concerning the changing social “norm”, or the definitions of the national and cultural identity of Germany as a country of migration.

Today, Germany is the second largest single destination for international migrants (United Nations, 2020), but the 23.8 million people with a so-called “migration background” living in the country (Statistisches Bundesamt, n.d.-a) are a more telling figure. Due to a particularity of the German statistical registration, this label is not only assigned to migrants but also to those born in migrants’ families – today this applies to around 40 percent of children (Statistisches Bundesamt, n.d.-b). In other words, even if the physical immigration were to suddenly stop, the number of people with a “migration background” in Germany would continue to grow.

To describe the political, cultural, social and demographic transformation these figures bring, Naika Foroutan uses the term “post-migrant society”, where the prefix “post” refers to the negotiations following migration: the necessary adjustments in institutions and political cultures, but also the defense mechanisms and struggles around the redistribution of resources that accompany them (2021). In a society where “unambiguous localizations are broken and discontinuities are brought into focus²”, as Yildiz (2018, p. 21) points out, this rupture “radically challenges categorical dualisms of ‘us and the others’ and instead brings into focus productive and creative cleavages, multi-native affiliations, and shifting biographies.” In other words, the social plurality opens up spaces for new knowledge production - an analytical approach that could be of great importance for the media.

However, as Terkessidis (2010; 2017) warns, the transformations of the post-migrant society – including multilingualism, transnational everyday practices, or hybridizations in popular culture - have for the most part not been accompanied by institutional reflections concerning the very concepts of diversity, difference, and citizenship. Instead of offering a vision on how the future of Germany in times of globalized movements could be actively shaped, the development in institutional

² Translations of quotes in German are all by the author.

politics has often been fragmented, belated, or even contradictory: from the fact that Germany still has no immigration law worthy of its name to the continuous contestations around questions of who really belongs to the nation and citizenship, “for whom the institutions are made and who is actually only visiting” (Terkessidis, 2010, p. 7).

So how do the media, which are defined as important societal institutions by the German Basic Law, go about this transformation? How can they become more representative of a society that is growing more diverse by the day? And what ambivalences surface within “diversity work” in the PSM? These are some of the questions that I wish to touch upon in this report from the field, referring primarily to examples from the biggest German public service broadcaster, the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR).

The WDR broadcasts from North Rhine-Westphalia, a region strongly characterized by decades of continuous immigration. With currently over 30 percent of its inhabitants with a migration biography (MKFFI NRW, 2021, p. 92), it is a crucial task of the institutions, among them the media, to face the changing social picture and respond to it adequately. The WDR reacted early to the demographics in its target broadcasting area, installing a Commissioner for Integration on its staff, introducing recruitment programs for young talent with migration biographies, collecting data on migration background of the staff, and making “intercultural skills” a compulsory module for journalistic trainees since the early 2000s.

The beginnings of this work coincide with the increased significance that institutional politics have assigned to the goal of integration. Since the 1990s, integration has been the preferred institutional response to migration, and is still generally regarded as a set of parameters necessary for ensuring the smooth functioning of the social sphere. Paradoxically, integration is invoked as a social ideal even when referring to individuals belonging to the second or third generation with a “migration background.” This in turn reveals the inherent power imbalance as well as the vagueness of the term, making it susceptible to be imbued with various meanings depending on the context.

Despite its ambiguity, integration has also been named a key task of the PSM, which are seen by the institutional politics as actors that can contribute to social cohesion. The role of media as facilitators of integration has been written into an array of media policy documents: For example, the National Action Plan on Integration (Bundesregierung, 2021, pp. 51-83)³ of the federal government includes the objective of “media integration” through reflecting the “ethnic and cultural diversity as normality in the migrant society” and the “inclusion of migrant groups into the mediated public sphere and the media system” (p. 51). The paradigm of “media integration”

³ In 2006, chancellor Angela Merkel initiated the National Integration Summit, which has since invited various migrants’ associations and institutions, among them the media, to discuss questions of integration and diversity, resulting in the development of a National Action Plan on Integration.

(Geißler & Pöttker, 2006) is also present in earlier research in this area, seeing the PSM as co-responsible for lowering prejudice and social tension, preventing segregation by reaching out to migrants, etc. The idea of integration through media goes back to the early programs the PSM offered in the languages of migrant communities. These were established in the 1960s as part of the state contracts with the countries sending labor migrants to Germany, among them Turkey, Italy and former Yugoslavia. In 1999, the WDR took the idea further when it merged its foreign-language programs with a new German-language newsroom to create a full radio program dedicated to cultural diversity in the region. Given the task of “improving integration”, as stated by the former director general of WDR, the radio was meant to offer an answer to the “profound transformation of our society and the media landscape” (WDR, 2000, p. 2).

Today, WDR COSMO continues to produce a program in German and 14 languages of migrant communities, defining its mission as delivering “the soundtrack of the 21st century” and offering the “sound of the world” (WDR, 2016). It is produced by a team of mostly multilingual, international journalists, focusing on international topics and music from urban hubs of the world. The focus of the program has however shifted away from the “multicultural”, “migration” or “integration” content of earlier years, primarily targeting migrants. Its present-day brand defines it as a “cosmopolitan”, “urban” and “international” program, catering to a diverse, politically engaged, and internationally mobile young generation – one defined by its age range or socio-economic class rather than an experience of migration. Even if this transformation can be read critically in terms of its shifts within the discourse on migration, the program is still a notable institutional attempt to articulate an alternative narrative of citizenship in Germany as a country of many identities – and the only such full program in the German PSM.

Together with a generally higher awareness of the need to adjust to demographic developments in the country, this particular program is a direct result of the paradigm of “media integration”. This also applies to a number of special-interest programs, among them for example those specifically addressing refugees, such as the multilingual digital program WDRforyou, established in 2016.

Today however, the assumption of clear-cut causes and consequences that forms the basis of that approach is not enough to do justice to the complexities of a “super-diverse” society. Steven Vertovec uses this term to describe the sociological transformation of European countries of migration, “not just in terms of bringing more ethnicities and countries of origin, but also with respect to a multiplication of significant variables that affect where, how and with whom people live” (2007, p. 7). As a result of decades of migration to Germany, the prevailing image is one of “comprehensive heterogeneity” (Fenzel, 2010, p. 85) of “ethnicity, language, religious traditions, regional and local identities, and cultural values and practices” (p. 85). Coupled with factors like social status, education levels, inter-ethnic relations and others (Vertovec, 2007), they make life in late modern European societies one of “multiple

orientations and identities with increasingly transnational dimensions” (Fenzel, 2010, p. 87).

The question that arises for the media is: Do they effectively articulate this complexity and the evolving terms of citizenship it entails? And what affective reactions arise from the media failing to address this complexity adequately? In 2019, the WDR conducted a survey to examine the media consumption patterns and expectations of young migrants residing within the WDR broadcasting area. A central and recurring finding of the survey was a generally critical perspective on what was perceived as negative bias in reports on migration, along with a desire for a more nuanced and differentiated reporting (Simon et al., 2020, p. 451). Another confirmed expectation was that this group’s media consumption habits and interests did not significantly differ from those of the same age group without a migration background.

The survey however also revealed areas of divergence between the two groups. One notable difference was the presence of transcultural practices described by the respondents in their personal lives, “among them multilingualism and consumption of media in their language of origin” (Simon et al., 2020, p. 456). These consumption practices were attributed to family traditions, emotional ties, or perceptions that topics from their country of origins were misrepresented or absent in German media. In earlier research, such findings might have been interpreted as integration deficits. Today they rather point to changing dynamics of integration. With the advancement of telecommunications and the proliferation of digital media, transnational practices tend to increase rather than diminish, allowing “migrants to maintain, as never before, extensive social, economic and political ties with places of origin or fellow members of global diasporas” (Vertovec, 2007, p. 7). Therefore, everyday transnational practices offer a more comprehensive understanding of the “complex social worlds in which migrants live” (Vertovec, 2007, p. 7), contrasting them with the clear-cut allegiances often expected by institutional politics.

Another finding from the survey was the expressed desire for role models: A total of 62 percent of the respondents stated that it was “important” or “very important” for them to see individuals “like themselves”, migrants, in prominent roles within media programs (Simon et al., 2020, p. 453). “Someone with a migration background who hosts her own TV show, that makes me really proud!” is an exemplary quote (Simon et al., 2020, p. 455), pointing to the emotional level that accompanies such moments of identification. “When people see their story and identify with it, they accept the program. For example, young people looking for the stories of their ancestors, the stories of the ‘guest workers’. That is acknowledgement, a tribute,” was a response in another audience dialogue (Krtalic & Simon, 2022, p. 34). The affective significance of seeing people “like ourselves” and their lives portrayed in the media highlighted the desire to shift the discourse on migration away from the problematizations often associated with media representations. The media pictures were instead expected to “contribute to more ‘normality’” (Simon et al., 2020, p. 455) around the topic of migration.

The study found that the potential to depict “the world of young migrants and offer identification figures” (Simon et al., 2020, p. 451) was strongest in social media and digital formats, identified as the primary platforms for media consumption of the surveyed age group. Indeed, the digital realm has opened up new spaces for journalists and stories that go beyond the mainstream, leading to significant transformations in the portrayal of migration and diversity in the media. PSM have also developed an abundance of new digital formats, with podcasts being particularly prominent. These cover a wide range of topics, from discussions about experiences of migration and racism to exploring the challenges faced by individuals growing up as children of migrants or grappling with their own cultural identity. They also include unique projects such as a “rap musical” set in a migrant neighborhood or a true-crime podcast on racist crime⁴.

While PSM are opening up to new target groups, new protagonists and stories in the digital realm, this level of representation often remains absent in their linear content. Many mainstream formats still lack diversity, with specific groups and topics being underrepresented, and certain normative pictures of society upheld. In the mainstream programs, migration is still frequently framed within a problematic context, covering issues such as illegal immigration, presumed difficulties of acculturation or reporting on crime. Overall, the media discourse oscillates between narratives of an impending “demise of the Occident” and a celebration of an “enriching” diversity. This reflects and articulates antagonisms surrounding the definitions of identity, homeland, culture and nation. These narratives, however, often reveal more about the “migration imaginary”, which “shapes understandings of national borders, culture, and identity of citizenship and our relationship to others” (Fortier, 2012, p. 32), than they do about the physical and social world in which broadcasters operate. In other words, they reflect the society as it is imagined to be rather than the society as it actually is.

For Stuart Hall, the media can participate in the construction of cultural identities, in creating a sense of belonging to a national community, and in leading to certain “preferred readings” (Hall, [1973] 2007) they can paint the picture of the cultural Other. They play a central role in creating effects of inclusion into or exclusion from the social body so in this context, as Hall argues, the most crucial contribution the PSM can make to the nation is to “educate” it in the art of ‘living with difference’ (1993, p. 35).

The question “diversity work” in media content poses is that of the “norm” and the prevailing “common sense” that the media articulate within a society. It also poses the question of how this notion can be changed. At a practical level within newsrooms, the selection of protagonists, experts and stories contributes to the portrayal

⁴ The rap musical “Hype“, the true-crime podcast “Schwarz, Rot, Blut”, the talk-podcasts “Unter Almans”, “Rice and shine” about German-Vietnamese experiences, “Heimatmysterium” about the search of young migrants for their cultural identities, or “Pottgedanken” with young people from the Ruhr area, are just a few examples of the expanding genre.

of “social normality” – a portrayal that survey respondents were keenly aware of. Experiences from everyday work in newsrooms however indicate that such initiatives often originate from “diverse journalists” themselves – from migrants, or young journalists – rather than being an industry-wide approach. This practical “grassroots diversity work” can take place and contribute to change at the individual, everyday level of newsroom work, but only an engagement in a more profound reflection on journalistic practices can make it into a tool of structural transformation. This reflection would however need to include a more profound examination of the journalistic approaches, norms and values within broadcasters.

To bring forth new perspectives, experiences, new topics, and stories that contribute to a different “common sense” in news work, it remains crucial to achieve greater representation of journalists with diverse backgrounds in the media. As figures show, the number of those journalists entering the broadcasters has increased considerably in recent years (WDR, n.d.), even if significant gaps still exist at the level of editorial positions or management roles (Boychev et al., 2020). In addition to the increasing awareness within broadcasters, targeted recruitment projects and diversity-conscious recruitment initiatives for journalistic traineeships are crucial in increasing higher representation and fostering a general understanding that diversification is a necessity and not a fringe project.

That is not to say that such projects go without their own ambivalences. “Are we that bad, that we have to ride the ‘migrant ticket’ to enter the WDR? That was a big topic in our discussions,” recounts one alumnus of the journalistic workshop “WDR grenzenlos” (WDR, 2019). The workshop for young talents with migration biographies has been one of the central tools of recruiting and training young journalists in the WDR since 2005, offering a program of training units, practical work and a mentorship to facilitate the path to the newsroom. Whereas a considerable number of alumni have launched careers as editors, journalists or hosts in the WDR, making it a successful program, the question cited above remains unanswered: Are such programs meant to offer a helping hand to disadvantaged groups, who would implicitly not manage without it? Or are they a way of winning new perspectives, otherwise missing from the newsroom? Do they delegate “diverse” perspectives to those who somehow embody diversity through their very being? How can such projects be modified to respond to the changing social dynamics, with more and more people born in migrant families in the second and third generation? And, to what degree do they convey a general commitment to structural change?

Although workforce figures can serve as indicators of success or failure in the working environment, and be used as an argument in boardroom meetings or in sensitivity workshops, they alone do not address the necessity for reflections on journalistic practices. This reflection would entail creating spaces for discussing the practice of journalism in light of emerging questions, antagonisms and identities within society. These discussions encompass a range of topics, including reporting the nationality of crime perpetrators, dealing with racist content, finding new approaches

to casting fictional programs, seeking experts outside of hegemonic positions, or grappling with continuing contestations around language. These discussions are relevant not only to those journalists explicitly dealing with diversity or migration issues but to the broader journalistic community as well.

And finally, how can “diversity” in the media content be effectively measured? How can facets of diversity be attributed to protagonists seen and heard in the programs? How can the audiences identify a character as a migrant in a media program, when their migration experience is not explicitly stated? Is it through their name, accent, physical appearance, or some other presumed “indicator”? What assumptions do media creators make when they anticipate certain interpretations? In short, how can the media strive to quantify their representation goals without resorting to stereotypes or reinforcing group identities?

All this shows that the reflection on “diversity work” in the media is an unfinished project: whereas it has increasingly centered around the questions of workforce representation and the belief that numbers will bring change in the content, a broader look at discursive mechanisms around journalism might be necessary in the long run. These concern the multiple reconstitutions of the modes of belonging that go on in media texts, as well as “a whole range of experiences, feelings, and opinions that policy frameworks simultaneously produce and occlude for those who are positioned as ‘immigrant’” (Lewis, 2005, p. 538). Why do migrant journalists often find it so hard to be taken seriously? Why are their stories often not seen as newsworthy and considered a fringe topic? Why does the “we” in the newsroom exclude certain perspectives, certain life-worlds? As Saha (2018) shows in his analysis of the “politics of production” in the media, it is these questions that concern the “structure and agency and how creative workers constitute, and are constituted by, the structures of the media, and the extent to which they conform to or can challenge standardized industrial practices that restrict their creativity” (p. 171).

What would a renegotiation of “politics of production” within broadcasters entail? Shohat and Stam (1994) use the catchy image of “artistic jujitsu” to describe the possibility of shifts in the representation practice, of media texts overturning asymmetries in representational power. For them, the media are not only a site of hegemonic images, but can also circulate alternative images, and lead further to broader alternative strategies. As Shohat and Stam point out, it is not enough to counter negative stereotyping in media texts by “positive examples”: an analysis of media discourse must instead entail both identifying power relations and structures that lead to it, and the ways in which the discourse supports the existing structures. One way of subverting these is to identify the many cultural voices involved in a media text, bringing out “the voices that remain latent or displaced” (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 214). This allows not only a “pseudo-polyphonic” discourse (such as seen in TV-commercials or certain diversity marketing campaigns, for example), but makes it

possible to hear the “multivocality” of conflicting and competing voices, “an approach that would strive to cultivate and even heighten cultural difference while abolishing socially-generated inequalities” (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 215).

Adopting this approach highlights the inherent ambivalence of “diversity work” in the media. While “diversity work” opens up the structures to new voices, the institutions tend to embrace mostly “assimilable difference” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 133). In the final consequence this can externalize difference, stopping short of a paradigm change in broadcasters as well as in other institutional settings. In short, while “diversity” can open up structures, it can also become a substitution for deeds, its usage obscuring and becoming complicit in “overing” the histories of inequalities (Ahmed, 2000, pp. 179-181).

Importantly however, Ahmed (2019, p. 153) does not call for discarding diversity work, pointing out that it is precisely due to its relative hollowness that “diversity” can also be “turned around”, filled with different meanings and, under certain conditions, indeed turn into an action-oriented tool for diversity practitioners: a “diversity jujitsu”, so to speak. With this in mind, let me go back to the audience dialogues and the wish of the young respondents in the abovementioned study on media representation in the WDR to see their life as part of “the normal picture of society” (Simon et al., 2020, p. 454). One respondent said that „the people with a migration background are Others, they are not part of the social ‘we’ in the media (Krtalic & Simon, 2022, p. 5). Another described the potential role a regional program could play, that “of creating the feeling of togetherness, of ‘we’ in a city” while adding the question: “But who is this ‘we’?” (Krtalic & Simon, 2022, p. 5).

I would argue that diversity work must begin with the question of who “we” are – when this “we” refers to “our nation”, “our citizenship” or “our social and cultural identity”. In addition to striving for increased representation in the workforce or content, diversity work should also involve a reflection on how the media operate in the processes of categorization, normalization or problematization. It is also a reflection upon what role the media play in establishing the mainstream, defining what is considered the norm, in shaping a sense of belonging or articulating the social “common sense”. Or put differently: how media attempt to fix the evolving meanings of these concepts in the discursive struggles around them.

The expectations expressed in the audience surveys cited above all point to an easy calculation for the broadcasters: if PSM fail to realistically represent a growing audience segment, they will continue to lose relevance among this part of the audience. This is however not the only reason to heed such expectations. Instead of solely catering to audience segments perceived as having specific needs, PSM could offer the space for a journalistic examination of the entirety of the post-migrant society. This approach would involve a reexamination of both the subject positions within journalism and the “politics of production” in the media. It would also embrace the understanding that the “post-migrant” does not signify the end of migration but rather

“an analytical perspective that deals with the conflicts, processes of identity building, social and political transformations” that set in when a society has recognized it has been shaped by migration (Foroutan, 2016, p. 232).

Answering the question of “Who is this ‘we’?” can lead to a deeper understanding if it is interpreted as: Who constitutes the “we” in “our” cultural identity in Germany today, and how does this evolving “we” relate to journalism? While this exploration may challenge existing certainties, it might be precisely the responsibility of PSM to create the space for negotiating the ambivalences and ambiguities that arise from living with difference, and use the stories of migration and the superdiverse society as a source of new knowledge in journalism.

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