Promoting the Interests of the Newspaper Sector - The National Association of German Newspaper Publishers

By Anja Pasquay

The Federal Republic of Germany is a nation of newspaper readers. Every day around 20 million copies come off the rotary presses. A total of 347 different daily newspapers with 1,509 local or regional editions constitute a level of diversity in the newspaper sector found in very few countries of the world. In Germany newspapers are the core element of a highly developed and diversified information culture in which the various needs, interests and opinions of the public are reflected. In contrast to France or the United States, for instance, the press landscape here is characterised by a strong local orientation. Some 95 percent of the total see themselves as local or regional newspapers. And these newspapers are read: Almost 70 percent of people over the age of 14 use them daily to obtain information and form their opinions.

As different as the various newspapers and publishing companies may be, they also have a wide range of common interests which are represented by the National Association of German Newspaper Publishers (Bundesverband Deutscher Zeitungsverleger = BDZV). The BDZV is an umbrella organisation for the German daily, Sunday, and weekly press, representing the interests of a total of 298 daily and 13 weekly newspapers. The association, which moved its offices from Bonn to Berlin on 1 August 2000, was created in 1954 in a merger of the “Gesamtverband der deutschen Zeitungsverleger” and the “Verein Deutscher Zeitungsverleger”. The latter had continued the tradition begun in 1894 with the founding of the first major newspaper publisher associations and interrupted in 1933 by the Nazi takeover and the loss of a free press. Those publishers whom the Allies licensed to publish newspapers after the Second World War were organised in the “Gesamtverband der deutschen Zeitungsverleger”.

The tasks the founders assigned to the BDZV are based on the experience, efforts, and objectives of its predecessors. The BDZV seeks to protect and promote the common ideals and economic interests of the publishing companies. Its tasks include:

- protecting and promoting the public image of newspaper publishers and representing them in dealings with government, parliament, administrative authorities, and other organisations,
- preserving a level of competition appropriate to the sector and fighting unfair advertising as well as any methods aimed at forcing competitors out of the market,
- the training of journalists and publishing company personnel,
- the conduct of negotiations in matters concerning labour law and the conclusion of collective bargaining agreements.

Preserving independence

The most important function the association has, is, and has always been, that of preserving the independence of German newspapers. As much as the danger of government repression of the press would seem to be in check in a free society, there has not been a lack of attempts to exert influence on the press and to undermine entrepreneurial and publishing freedom, particularly in the early 1950s as well as in the 1970s. Public debate in connection with a trend towards press concentration evoked proposals for legislation that, had it been passed, would have made newspapers subject to manipulation and the creation of dependencies. There were various reasons for the trend towards concentration in the newspaper sector. One key reason was an extremely strong rise in costs in the press sector, where personnel costs make up more than 50% of the total. Another reason was journalistic and advertising competition from the electronic media. The fear of losing diversity in the newspaper sector led to a discussion of questionable instruments in various media commissions as well as in federal and state parliaments. Proposals were made to limit the market share of publishing companies as well as the circulation of individual newspapers, to break up corporate groups, and even to nationalise the press.

The BDZV pointed out early on that all these proposals could be ruled out on grounds of unconstitutionality. They would have called into question the organisation of the press under private law or subjected newspapers to government control. Instead, the association opted for help towards self-help. The member publishing companies undertook a variety of initiatives of their own:

- in the editorial sector by forming newspaper rings, joint news rooms, joint correspondent offices,
- in the advertising sector by using joint price structures, advertising rings, and joint advertising sections,
- in the sales sector by cooperating in the area of distribution and delivery,
- in the technical sector by forming printing cooperatives and through joint use of computer systems.
In this way we have succeeded in keeping the level of newspaper diversity at a high level.

**Expanding the right to refuse to give evidence as a witness**

Although the Federal Republic of Germany is one of the few countries in the world where freedom and independence of the press is not only laid down in the constitution but also practised every day anew, there continue to be recurrent attempts to restrict press freedom on the part of some government leaders as well as on the part of the labour unions. By way of example, in the early summer of 1994 the SPD-led state government in Saarland expanded the right to make counterstatements very much to the disadvantage of the press, despite considerable reservations expressed by constitutional experts. State government authorities undertook an unprecedented number of actions against the press in the form of confiscations and newsroom searches conducted by public prosecutors.

The so-called "Lex Lafontaine" was repealed by a CDU-led state government in the spring of 2000. The broad scale of this aggressive strategy and intentions behind party-political planning in this direction confirmed suspicions that all the political parties were in cahoots with executive government efforts to rein in the press. Newspaper publishers will continue to put up strong resistance to any efforts of this kind. For years now the BDZV has called for an expansion of the right to refuse to give evidence as a witness regarding information journalists have obtained on the basis of their own research.

One of the fundamental tasks of the BDZV is that of safeguarding the status of newspapers as an important information medium and as the largest advertising medium. Success in the advertising business, from which newspapers need to earn about two-thirds of their income, is a precondition for the journalistic services they provide on a day-to-day basis. In view of the increasingly stiff competition being felt from other media, particularly the electronic media, the BDZV avails itself of every opportunity to document to the public the journalistic competence of newspapers and their wide-ranging potentials as an advertising medium. With this in mind it was only logical for newspapers to combine their marketing activities and to collectively and actively promote the qualities of the medium above and beyond the measures taken by individual publishers. A newspaper marketing company, ZMG (Zeitungs Marketing Gesellschaft), was created for this purpose under the roof of the BDZV on 1 July 1997. The activities of the BDZV and ZMG include joint events at the North Rhine-Westphalia Media Forum, Munich's Media Days, and "Newspaper Week" which traditionally takes place the last week of September. "Newspaper Week" constitutes a broad framework in which each newspaper publishing house can draw attention to its particular products.

**Activities for young readers**

Special attention needs to be devoted to young people. The BDZV was one of the first organisations to point out the declining interest of young people in the printed word, having done so as early as the 1970s. It called upon everyone in a position to do something about it, particularly the print media themselves, to carry out intensive and broadly based campaigns aimed at promoting the reading of newspapers. The "School Newspaper" project created by the BDZV in 1979 has proven to be a very successful way of attracting young people to newspapers as a medium. Since then further reading promotion projects have been carried out involving the connection between newspapers and schools.

The association and the newspaper publishers have recently taken a new approach in their effort to reach young people. In 1993, in light of changing communication patterns, the BDZV commissioned the Allensbach Institute for Demoscopy to carry out the first representative study on the reading expectations of the younger generation. A further focus of the study was that of determining all the activities newspaper publishers have undertaken to attract young people as readers. The aim of the study was to develop therapies that would expand the newspaper readership among young people. In a follow-up study the attitude of young people towards reading and daily newspapers was determined on the basis of in-depth psychological interviews. This gave publishers and managing editors an additional set of instruments for developing formats that will appeal to the 14-19 age group and to older readers at the same time.

**Ensuring diversity over the long term**

The BDZV is federally structured. Its members are eleven regional associations whose members are individual publishing companies. As the BDZV's statutes specifically state, the regional associations work "independently with regard to their management and the protection of their regional interests". It goes without saying that there is close cooperation between the BDZV and the regional associations. In addition to a number of special committees and working groups there are three main bodies that determine the policies of the BDZV: the Presidium, the Extended Presidium, and the Delegates' Assembly (the supreme decision-making body). The latter consists of the members of the Presidium and the delegates elected by the member publishing companies. The number of delegates depends on circulation figures as well as on the number of member publishing companies in the respective regional associations. The primary task of the Delegates' Assembly is to deal with fundamental press policy issues as well as to elect the President and four Vice Presidents. It also takes key decisions in connection with labour disputes.

Since May 2000 the BDZV has been headed by the publisher of the "Kölnerische/Bonnier Rundschau", Helmut Heinen. As BDZV President he has taken it upon himself, among other things, to ensure further improvement in the quality of editorial work and in doing so to help preserve and promote the importance of newspapers as a medium for opinion formation and democratic discourse. The Common Market and its effects on the German press in recent years have been an important area of activity for the BDZV, which has always been committed to the idea of a united Europe. Having said that, the association has always warned against the dangers to the press as a consequence of wrongly understood harmonisation efforts on the part of EU policymakers. By way of example, the EU Commission would like to see advertising greatly restricted for certain products (e.g. tobacco, sweets, and alcoholic beverages) on the single market. In numerous position statements and conversations with EU politicians the BDZV has pointed out that this kind of regimentation would violate the freedom of advertising, which constitutes part of our established freedom of the press, with all the consequences this would have for the economic base the press is founded on.

A very different issue which the association deals with actively is the responsible use of paper as a raw material for the production of newspapers. Right from the outset German newspaper publishers have made it clear that they support the environmentalist aim of promoting the economical use of production materials and want to help increase the paper recycling rate beyond the high level that has already been attained. It is the aim of the association to bring the environmentally acceptable and the economically profitable into harmony with one another. The successful work being done in this regard by the BDZV has been expressed among other things in a
"Joint Voluntary Self-Regulation Declaration" issued by the publishing companies and the paper industry and submitted to the Federal Ministry for the Environment on 12 October 1994. The paper recycling rate agreed on in the declaration (for the year 2000) was exceeded by a considerable amount that same year.

In recent years the BDZV has developed a focal interest in computer technology and its importance for the future of newspaper publishers (e.g. multimedia/electronic publishing*). At numerous publishing companies information databases and online services are already reality in addition to printed newspapers. Currently more than 230 newspaper publishers are on the Internet with their own websites. Thanks to the new technologies new business sectors are developing whose future dimensions are uncertain. What is certain is that newspaper publishing companies want to take advantage of these new media options.