

MAINSTREAM JOURNALISM: A MORALITY TALE IN FOUR ACTS

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The story of Patrik Baab is, supposedly, an open book: The experienced investigative reporter, who worked as a Northern German Broadcasting (NDR) editor for many years, and who refuses to be silenced, let alone canceled. He is taking action against the attacks and is suing the Christian Albrechts University in Kiel. After denunciatory "reporting" by one of the spokesmen in German attitude journalism (*Haltungsjournalismus*—reporting, which frames opinion from the point of view of the power elite), the university immediately revoked his teaching position. He is now taking legal action against this. In what follows, we tell the true story of a real journalist in the year 2022, in four acts: A textbook on research; the scandal of politically biased reporting at the NDR state broadcasting agency in Kiel; Mr. Baab's research trips to Russia and Ukraine; and a lawsuit against the revocation of his teaching assignment, which was filed with the Schleswig Administrative Court, shortly before Christmas.

We have received the lawsuit and other documents relating to the revocation of the teaching position at Kiel University. In addition, we rely on a statement by Mr. Baab as part of the attempted clarification of the NDR scandal, which was published a few days ago on the website of the MEP of the Pirate Party. Of course, we also looked at Mr. Baab's book, *Recherchieren* (*Research*), which is highly recommended to critical journalists as a textbook, but it can also be read as a critique of contemporary (political) journalism.

Act One: The Book

For Patrik Baab, research is the core activity of every journalist. It is the basis of criticism of prevailing opinion. Against this background, he [published his book](#) at the beginning of the year. In it, he not only writes about the tools of the trade of the investigative reporter, but also criticizes in detail the current conditions in mass media. A concise quotation will serve to clarify his position:

"In a very eloquent way, neoliberal minded journalism is becoming a silence cartel. The press apparently no longer demands anything from politics. Instead, it continually proclaims to people that they are living 'without alternative' in the best of all possible worlds. In this way, they themselves have contributed to narrowing the space for public debate to the continuation of the existing situation, with all its ills, without any alternatives. Political measures now focus only on a few system-immanent excesses; the fundamental questions are relegated to the realm of conspiracy theories."

Anyone who writes something like this should no longer be allowed to train budding journalists, as Mr. Baab did at two universities until the middle of this year. This opinion is held at least relatively blatantly by Volker Lilienthal, who holds the chair of the "Rudolf Augstein Foundation Professorship for the Practice of Quality Journalism" at the University of Hamburg. His review of Mr. Baab's book predetermined what would happen later: Mr. Baab was stripped of his lectureship. Professor Lilienthal was disturbed by Mr. Baab's politically entrenched point of view, which does not give a very good impression of the German media landscape. Mr. Lilienthal is part of a conservative media network based in Hamburg, linked via the "Netzwerk Recherche." Its task, in theory, is to promote investigative journalism, but in practice, it is a coterie.



Hotel in East Ukraine, where Mr. Baab was staying, right after a 155-mm-shell hit the parking lot; fired by a Ukrainian self-propelled gun of NATO-origin. The windows were all shattered, but no one was hurt. Photo Credit: Sergey Filbert.

Act Two: The Scandal of the Kiel State Broadcasting Center

First RBB (Berlin-Brandenburg Broadcasting), then NDR. In the fall, things did not go well for Germany's public broadcasters. While the scandal at RBB was primarily about accusations of taking advantage, the NDR got down to the nitty-gritty. Journalism itself became an issue. The editor-in-chief of the Kiel state broadcasting center, Norbert Lorentzen, the head of politics there, Julia Stein, and the director of the state broadcasting agency, Volker Thormählen, were accused of influencing research in the interests of the ruling CDU (The Christian Democratic Union of Germany), which runs the government in the federal region of Schleswig-Holstein. Initially, it was about another journalist who was allegedly obstructed in his reporting on a police scandal. But those journalists who investigated the events soon came across Patrik Baab, who had also voiced accusations against the management level of the state broadcasting house.

Mr. Baab himself said nothing more about it, after labor court proceedings; the parties concerned had agreed on that at the time. Nevertheless,

details of the accusations to light in the reports. Mr. Baab, who had co-authored several films for NDR about the still mysterious death of former Schleswig-Holstein premier [Uwe Barschel](#), sharply criticized the state broadcaster's top management. In his report for the auditing firm Deloitte, which was supposed to review the scandal, he wrote, among other things, in retrospect of the direct criticism of his research by state broadcasting agency director Thormählen:

"It was clear to me that the aim was to steer the coverage in the sense of a CDU rope team. My memo about this meeting, which later became part of the labor court dispute, was not contradicted by NDR in court."

Pirate Party member Patrick Breyer published the link to Mr. Baab's statement that was leaked and showed up on the internet. Breyer definitely saw—unlike most commentators in their articles about the Deloitte report—the appearance of political consideration of the NDR in Kiel.

Mr. Baab had also reported "interrogations" in the radio station's political editorial department:

"This seemed to me to be intended as a journalistic disciplinary tool. In my opinion, it was about forcing pre-emptive obedience by creating fear. The goal of the interrogations was to break any future resistance to political intervention in the program from the outset."

Mr. Baab refused to be broken, but agreed before the labor court not to repeat the accusations made in 2019 in an editorial conference. According to his own statement to Deloitte, the fact that he was now once again the focus of media coverage came as a surprise to him.



Interviewing a soldier in a shopping street in Donetsk, where some hours earlier 14 people, including children, were killed, when an Ukrainian 155-mm-shell hit a supermarket. Photo Credit: Sergey Filbert.

While Mr. Baab said nothing, or was not allowed to say anything because of his duty to keep confidentiality according to his working contract, NDR reported on him in its media magazine *Zapp* as a "controversial critic" of the broadcaster. By then, much more had happened than a trip to the East. Mr. Baab saw the *Zapp* report, as he wrote to Deloitte, as an "act of revenge on behalf of the executives in question, carried out by freelancers who act according to instructions and are economically dependent."

Act Three: A Trip East and the Consequences

Since the middle of this year, Patrik Baab had been in the "passive phase" of his long-term contract" at NDR, as it is called in administrative German. He is no longer working at the station, will soon retire and now has time for his own projects. One of them is a book, for which he traveled to Ukraine several times, as he says himself when asked. On the trip, he shot some films together with Russian-born video blogger Sergey Filbert. He was in eastern Ukraine during the referendums that were to decide whether Donetsk and Luhansk would join the Russian Federation. In terms of timing, the trip was not coordinated with all this; had nothing to do with it, Mr. Baab told journalist Georg Altrogge a little later. He had been preparing for the research since May, in order to report on the Russian Federation's "war of aggression on Ukraine in violation of international law," Mr. Baab said. He had also made a public appearance there, for public media. Mr. Baab was in eastern Ukraine as an election observer, some Russian media reported, and the major news portal *T-Online* picked up the thread, though having been informed that this is wrong. It all started with the report by Lars Wienand on September 26, followed a little later by Altrogge's article in *Die Welt*. A week later, *Zapp* picked up the story.



Interview with a resident whose housing block, in the suburbs of Mariupol, was completely destroyed during heavy fighting between Russian and Ukrainian military forces. Photo Credit: Sergey Filbert.

Reactions from the universities Mr. Baab works for were not long in coming. The first to take action was the Berlin University of Media, Communication and Business (HMKW). Here will just quote repeat a paragraph from our article from the end of September:

Presumably, it went as follows: The *T-Online* journalist learned of Mr. Baab's presence on site, researched his background and made a press inquiry to the Berlin University of Media, Communication and Business (HMKW). "Do you know what your lecturer is doing there? At the mock referendums? He's legitimizing them! Do you think that's good?" That's how it might have been. It doesn't matter how exactly, because according to its own statement, the university was on the phone with the delinquent, who was made one by his mere presence in the wrong place at the wrong time. And then a statement was hastily published on the homepage. The gist: We condemn and distance ourselves (HMKW, 26.9.22). Meanwhile, the article appeared on the net. Author Wienand could now add the accomplishment of his mission right away; online many things can be changed and enhanced quickly.

Kiel University followed suit a little later. On October 3, Mr. Baab was notified of the revocation of his teaching assignment on the subject of research. He was thus "canceled" for what he is supposed to teach the students. Research in the field seems undesirable, it can shake the already established opinion.

Mr. Baab's appearance as an "observer" lent "the appearance of legitimacy to Russia's occupation and annexation of Ukrainian territories in violation of international law," three professors from the Institute of Social Science at Kiel University wrote to Mr. Baab. (The letter is available to our editors.) The letter went on to say that the university, and in particular the Department of Political Science, would be threatened with an immense loss of reputation if the impression should arise that lecturers "endorse Russia's behavior, which is contrary to international law." Heavy guns were then brought out—only by revoking the teaching assignment could the reputation, order and functioning of the university be preserved. A hearing would be dispensable "due to the imminent danger, and in the public interest." Mr. Baab's lawyer reacted to the latter statement with bewilderment, and in his objection filed a few days later, he referred to the need for a procedure based on the rule of law. The objection was rejected, and Mr. Baab is now suing the university.

Before we come to this last act of the story, a short detour to *Albrecht*, the Kiel student newspaper. There, an author who had attended a seminar with Mr. Baab shortly before took up the topic and let Mr. Baab speak at length. This article had no clear slant, even though it became clear that the author opposed "well-known narratives" of the Russian side and accused Mr. Baab of being too close to those who represent precisely these narratives. Nonetheless, a little of the principles of journalism that Mr. Baab may have taught in the seminar stuck with the author. He asked Mr. Baab, i.e. "the other side," and let him have his say, but could also have asked the university why it refers to the reports of "Russian state media," according to which Mr. Baab was an election observer. Normally, after all, this media is accused of propaganda. *Hintergrund* recently asked the university a question along these lines, but the university did not provide any information, citing the ongoing legal proceedings.

Act Four: The Lament

And so we arrive at the fourth act of the story. Mr. Baab is suing Kiel University with the aim of having the revocation of his teaching contract rescinded. This should not have been revoked. The plaintiff is a committed journalist and was neither an election observer nor could he be perceived as such, writes Mr. Baab's lawyer in the grounds for the lawsuit, which is available to our editors.

"The plaintiff, as a journalist committed to reporting on location—and not from afar like other media observers—undertook highly risky research on location in order to actually perceive and report on the situation on location with his journalistic experience."

This statement says it all. It contains—in addition to the concise justification of why an experienced journalist should not be thrown out just like that—a clear assessment of most of today's reporters: They observe from a distance. One could add to the lawyer's words in spirit that they do not allow their preconceived image in the sense of the prevailing opinion to be destroyed by on-the-spot checks.



An Azov Battalion tank destroyed in the Azov steel mill. Notice the "Wolfsangel" (a Nazi emblem) on the side of the tank. Photo Credit: Sergey Filbert.

The fact that mainstream journalism has largely gone to the dogs is due precisely to this attitude—the attitude toward war and the attitude toward the profession. Because journalists have to observe on location, they have to go everywhere. And they must be allowed to do so.

Because it is precisely about denying a journalist this basis for work and this right, that we will continue to keep an eye on the Patrik Baab case. In its many facets, it represents a moral portrait that shows us the reality of today's mainstream journalism in one example, in one person. It shows how journalism could and should be—and how it is instead.

By focusing on Patrik Baab, we have brought into focus the great decline of western journalism—the double standards, attitude journalism, the partisan stance when it comes to the war in Ukraine and issues relating to the Corona Virus. We have looked at mainstream denunciationism, the fake news stories that the leading media disseminate and admit, if at all, only coyly. And Mr. Baab's story is about Cancel Culture, as well as the close connection between politics and public broadcasting.

This article appears through the kind courtesy of [Hintergrund](#).

