



Journalist Fellowship Paper

News from a different league: the rise of the digital party press in Austria

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Introduction

Amid all the debate in journalistic circles about impartiality, audience trust, attention share, paywalls and other revenue opportunities, you may have missed an important alarm bell sounding from Vienna in 2021.

Austrians awoke to a political earthquake on the morning of October 6, 2021, when investigators raided the offices of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, his Finance Ministry, the headquarters of his conservative party ÖVP (the Austrian People's Party) and several of his top aides' homes and offices.¹

The reason for the early-morning intrusion? Kurz and co. are being investigated on suspicion of paying an Austrian newspaper to publish faked popularity polls from 2016 onwards.

Back then, Kurz was just Foreign Minister, but the Prosecutors' Office for Economic Affairs and Corruption claim that daily metro newspaper *OE24* was paid by the Ministry of Finance to run skewed polls in order to influence public opinion for Kurz.

“I am convinced that these accusations [...] will prove to be false,” the 35-year-old Chancellor said that day. Three days later he announced he would “step aside to prevent chaos”, resigning as Chancellor but remaining head of the ÖVP.

That did not last long: By December 2, 2021, Kurz said he was leaving politics to spend more time with his newborn son. One of his dearest political friends, former Interior Minister Karl Nehammer, became Chancellor and party leader.

All of this has sparked a vigorous discussion in Austrian media circles about impartiality, ethics and the corruption of the free press in Austria. The popular sentiment is that this scandal illustrates that mainstream media has become too cosy with the establishment.

As Austria Press Agency's chief editor Johannes Bruckenberger told me in the interview for this paper: the scandal demonstrates “that the virtues of journalism —

¹ I should say from the outset that I know Kurz and his inner circle well: I wrote a best-selling book about them and their methods in 2020 (Knittelfelder, K., 2020. *Inside Türkis*. 1st ed. edition a.)

for example, keeping a safe distance from power — seem to have gotten confused in some places, even in quality media”.

The public seem to share that sentiment: according to a Gallup poll conducted in the weeks following the scandal, the majority do not expect the media to report in a neutral way. Just 3% thought that private media in Austria was not corruptible.²

What this case also illustrates is how important the media was considered to the rise and success of Sebastian Kurz. He won two major elections in 2017 and 2019, and was polling strongly elsewhere: to allegedly go to such lengths to control polls and their coverage – which would have in all likelihood been favourable without interference – shows just how important controlling the message and the media was to Team Kurz.

“Message control hasn’t been a big thing in Austria, but in the last couple of years it has rapidly grown,” Brucknerberger told me. “And Sebastian Kurz was the one who did it in the most professional and intense way.”

What does message control mean? Brucknerberger says it is “that kind of scripted propaganda work that offers extremely professional delivered information that already seems fit to print or send — including a plan for its dissemination: who in the party or government will be saying what at which time, all centralized and controlled by the head of the party”. That is quite an accurate description of the communication plan visited on Austria’s media landscape after Kurz became prime minister in 2017.

But, in 2021, message control is far less reliant on cajoling or controlling the free press. With new technology, political parties have become successful publishers themselves, and can bypass traditional media for near-total message control. And they are doing a remarkable job of it.

Sebastian Kurz, for example, has 940,000 followers on Facebook, 486,000 on Twitter, 370,000 on Instagram and more than 100,000 newsletter subscribers in a country

² DER STANDARD. 2021. *Nach der Inseratenaffäre: Mehrheit hält private Medien für käuflich*. [online]

Available at:

<<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000130902627/folgen-der-inseratenaffaere-mehrheit-haelt-private-medien-fuer-kaeufllich>> [Accessed 15 December 2021].

with a population of 8.9 million.³ By comparison, *Die Presse*, a traditional broadsheet paper, sells 67,000 copies a day.⁴

And it is not just Kurz and the ÖVP who have found ways to circumvent the traditional media. The far right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) runs one of the most successful YouTube channels in Austria, and the social democrats (SPÖ) have created their own digital outlet that, according to FanPage Karma data, was the second most-shared Austrian news platform on Facebook in October 2021. The Green Party has announced plans to launch their own news platform, too.⁵ And the liberal Neos party began advertising a vacancy for an editor-in-chief in January 2022.⁶ At this rate, every party in Austria's parliament will probably run a news platform by the end of this year.

To the casual reader, these sites look like traditional media outlets; there is no overt labelling to show they are party-sponsored.

It leaves me with a question, and it is at heart the alarm bell I hope to sound in this paper: how much simpler would the Kurz scandal (as described by Austrian prosecutors) be to execute and conceal if *OE24*'s alleged complicity did not need to be bought? With the emergence of multiple party-sponsored platforms and party-aligned platforms, the next time a politician plots to deceive the public they may not require any amplification from the traditional press to ensure they reach millions.

As politicians rely less and less on traditional media, they have already begun to “bypass” the difficult questions and fact-checking associated with the old guard. As Matthias Schrom, the chief editor of Austrian national public service broadcaster ORF, told me: “It has never been so difficult to bring politicians to interview formats. And this applies to every political party.” They prefer producing a Facebook video to answering questions live on TV, he said. “And if there is news [contained in

³ Figures captured in November 2021.

⁴ 2021. H1 2021 Report. [online] Available at:

<https://www.oeak.at/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Auflagenliste_H1_2021.pdf> [Accessed 15 December 2021].

⁵ <https://www.horizont.at>. 2021. Politik & Medien: Freda: Grüne Partei baut neues Parteimedium. [online] Available at:

<<https://www.horizont.at/medien/news/politik--medien-freda-gruene-partei-baut-neues-partemedium-85715>> [Accessed 15 December 2021].

⁶ <https://www.neos.eu/mitmachen/jobs/chefredaktion-und-chef-in-vom-dienst-teilzeit>

those Facebook videos], we can't ignore [them] later on. The difference is that we are not able to ask questions, so that leads to the elimination of questions so to speak.”

And now they have reached the next level of message control: the digital return of party press.

In this paper, I've attempted to catalogue the trend by speaking to those who run these new partisan platforms about their aims. I've also interviewed the chief editors of Austria's three most important traditional news gatekeepers (ORF, Krone and APA), and consulted with experts on political communication and trust in media. Finally, I took a look at their data using Google Analytics data supplied by the platforms themselves, and data gathered from social media monitoring tool, Fanpage Karma.

What I found was a phenomenon that demands our attention, further investigation, and ongoing monitoring. Austria has been a blueprint for Europe in the past, and may prove to be so again in this case.

The platforms

This paper profiles three outright party-owned platforms: Kontrast.at (run by SPÖ), FPÖ TV (run by FPÖ), and Zur Sache (run by ÖVP). I have also included two partisan sites, eXXpress (labelled as ÖVP-leaning) and Zack Zack (labelled as anti-ÖVP, left-leaning).

Kontrast.at

It takes a click and a lot of scrolling to find out who owns Kontrast.at, but there it is at the end of the About page: SPÖ Parliament Club. This is part of Austria's Social Democratic Party. The website has existed since 2016 and was started by Patricia Huber when she was a staff member of the parliamentary group. She is now chief editor at Kontrast.at.

The biggest motivation to start the platform, she told me, was “a preponderance of conservative, ÖVP-friendly views in Austria's media landscape”. “So it was our goal to put in another perspective, let's call it social democratic or progressive.”

In the early days, they aimed only to serve party officials, she said. But then the platform grew rapidly and they found they could “manage to reach people outside our bubble as well”.

The goal of Kontrast.at today, according to Huber, is the promotion of social democratic ideas like the four-day-week, or “other progressive issues”.

“We have extremely strong convictions about what is politically important to discuss. And we do that in a very consistent way,” she said.

The site is currently 100% financed by funding from SPÖ's parliamentary group (in other words, tax money). Currently, there are only five people working in Kontrast.at's newsroom, which is physically based at the SPÖ's parliamentary group office.

They are not allowed to sell adverts, which means their newsroom cannot grow at the moment, something which bothers Huber. “We'd like to try to grow,” she said, but that would mean growing out of the parliamentary group.

Huber doesn't call herself a journalist. She prefers to refer to her work as "political activity with publicistic tools". Unlike other parties, she said, their platform is not so focused on making the SPÖ appear in a good light and she says the newsroom can act "freely". She adds: "Of course we know who publishes our work. We know what we can do... and what we can't do."



Left: SPÖ's news platform *kontrast.at* writes that Sebastian Kurz "destroys the pillars of democracy and pretends to be a victim". Right: An article about the former chancellor's PR budget

To the casual reader, *Kontrast.at* looks like a journalistic platform; there is no SPÖ branding anywhere, unless you take the time to navigate through the About section and look at its address.

This is intentional, Huber said: "I have seen that in Bernie Sanders' campaign: He ran a page called *Democracy now* for sharing articles that support his campaign. An amazingly good idea, because many people just don't want to share party content. Even for me it is embarrassing to share party content, although everybody knows that I work for SPÖ. Meanwhile many people think politically and want to share progressive things without a party label. We wanted to lower the barrier for those people."

FPÖ TV & Co.

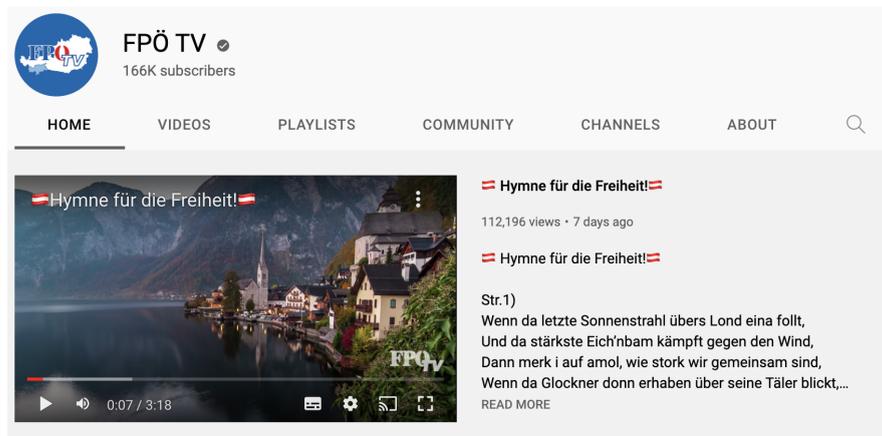
The earliest adopters of politically owned digital media are the far-right FPÖ. Several years ago, in an interview for my Masters thesis, current party leader Herbert

Kickl called the “elimination” of traditional media as gatekeepers for political communication a “reformation”.⁷

YouTube channels like FPÖ TV and associated Österreich zuerst (Austria First) are not their only media tool: they can also rely on digital outlets [Unzensuriert](#) (not officially run by the party, but with strong personnel and content-related connections) and FPÖ-leaning [Wochenblick.at](#) for content sympathetic to their causes.

The party and its politicians also benefit from enormous followings on social media, and FPÖ-TV is one of the most successful YouTube channels in Austria, with 160,000 subscribers and videos that have amassed over 104 million views.

ORF2’s parliamentary proceedings might attract 300,000 viewers on a good day, according to publicly available figures. A clip of FPÖ MP Michael Schnedlitz pouring Coca Cola onto a COVID test for a positive result – taken from ORF and posted on FPÖ TV – has had 1.17 million views.



Screenshot of FPÖ TV's YouTube page

Or consider a clip taken from ORF’s Sunday TV debate, *Im Zentrum*, which usually attracts 500,000 viewers on TV. Edited to show only FPÖ politician Marlene Svazek explaining why she sees “no use” in a COVID vaccination, without rebuttal, it has been viewed 150,000 times since it was uploaded in September.

Their content is well produced, and financed by the parliamentary group of the far-right party. Former public TV star Marie Christine Giuliani works for them as a

⁷ Klaus Knittelfelder (2016).. Wahlkampf 2.0: eine Analyse des Bundespräsidentenwahlkampfes 2016 im Social Web, pp 164.

presenter, for example, and their live-streamed FPÖ press conferences reach hundreds of thousands.

During the pandemic, the YouTube channel has become a magnet for those who are anti-vaccine and virus-related restrictions. Some content containing blatant misinformation about the pandemic has been deleted by YouTube.⁸

It is common to see criticism of traditional media and journalists on their platform, and on FPÖ-leaning outlets. Unzensuriert, for example, accused public service TV of telling lies about far right protests against covid policy.⁹

Zur Sache

In the spring 2021, Kurz's ÖVP decided to launch their own news portal called Zur Sache, and bump up their already huge official social media and newsletter activities. "We knew that there had to be a response to platforms like Kontrast.at," ÖVP's head of digital, Kristina Rausch told me. "Otherwise we would have a competitive disadvantage."



Left: Zur Sache coverage of ongoing disputes in the social democratic party. Right: Zur Sache concludes that new evidence in the poll scandal actually exonerates Sebastian Kurz.

⁸ Österreich Politik - Nachrichten. 2021. Social Media - Rede von Kickl im Nationalrat von Youtube gelöscht. [online] Available at: <<https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/oesterreich/2088568-Rede-von-Kickl-im-Nationalrat-von-Youtube-geloescht.html>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

⁹ Unzensuriert. 2021. Bericht über Corona-Demo: ORF hörte „antisemitische Kommentare“. [online] Available at: <<https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/125236-bericht-ueber-corona-demo-orf-hoerte-antisemitische-kommentare/>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

According to Rausch, who played a central role in Zur Sache's launch, they were also motivated by traditional media quoting partisan media sites like Kontrast.at and ZackZack in their coverage, even though "there haven't been any facts that would have justified that".

"That was the moment we decided to venture into that kind of media market too," she said. The first step in Zur Sache's strategy was targeting party members with talking points for political debate that were "prepared in a way they enjoy consuming it". "Because media consumption is changing heavily," she said. "A conventional party paper is too slow and too expensive. And although experts always called social media the big thing, it doesn't answer all the questions."

Because there is no ÖVP label on it, Rausch believes people who would not normally share ÖVP content will interact with it.

In the role of chief editor they hired former *Tiroler Tageszeitung* journalist Claus Reitan. They are not dependent on turning a profit, because the site is an official product of the party's parliamentary group.

Zur Sache's newsroom produces its articles in consultation with the communications arm of the party. Rausch, who was responsible for managing the many powerful social media accounts of ÖVP politicians such as former party leader Sebastian Kurz and is now responsible for the new prime minister's "strategic communication", extends the reach of Zur Sache by sharing their articles on those accounts.

With or without Kurz, Zur Sache will continue to play an increasingly important role in ÖVP's strategy. Kurz right-hand man, Gerald Fleischmann (once dubbed "Mr. Message Control" and a pioneer in this field), moved to ÖVP's parliamentary group after the scandal. There, he is "mainly working for Zur Sache," according to group leader August Wöginger.¹⁰

The site attempts to appear neutral by producing so-called "fact checks" on other parties or established media reporting. One such fact check, which dealt with the

¹⁰ nachrichten.at. 2021. "Wir machen das nicht aus Jux und Tollerei". [online] Available at: <<https://www.nachrichten.at/politik/innenpolitik/wir-machen-das-nicht-aus-jux-und-tollerei;art385,3517665>> [Accessed 22 December 2021].

severe accusations against party leader Kurz, was headlined: “Is Austrian media reporting balanced?” (Their unsurprising conclusion: no.)

Can ÖVP’s policy also be criticized on the platform? “No, I can exclude that in the current situation,” Rausch said. But, to her, this is still “some kind of journalism”, “in terms of processing information and opinion”.

Of course, Rausch explained, Zur Sache’s articles are “not neutral” as they are motivated by ideological views, “but they work with real sources”.

The “Alpine Breitbarts”: eXXpress and Zack Zack

There is one other facet of new political media worth profiling here: the emergence of highly provocative, donor-funded platforms that are not officially “owned” by particular parties, but publish highly partisan content – often far more aggressively than the digital party papers themselves.

I will profile just two of them here: left-wing-platform Zack Zack and eXXpress, which is described by commentators as “ÖVP-aligned”.¹¹ Both are often compared to Steve Bannons’s famous news platform, which is why APA’s Brucknerberger calls them “Alpine Breitbarts”.

So who operates these outlets, and to what end? The attention-grabbing project eXXpress may not be structurally connected to the conservative party, but its majority shareholder (50.7%) is Eva Hieblinger-Schütz. She is former vice-head of cabinet in the ÖVP-led Ministry of Finance and office manager for Kurz intimate Thomas Schmid, who is accused of being a key player in several scandals including the latest. Her husband is a billionaire who donated €100,000 to the ÖVP party.¹²

A review of eXXpress’s daily output reveals — to put it mildly — a very favourable outlook on ÖVP activities. Negative stories about the ÖVP are downplayed. Take their reporting of an opinion poll prepared by researcher Peter Hajek in the autumn

¹¹ Die Presse. 2021. Staatsanwälte und Presseclub kritisieren ÖVP-nahen.... [online] Available at: <<https://www.diepresse.com/6055092/staatsanwalte-und-presseclub-kritisieren-ovp-nahen-express>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

¹² Graber, R., Marchart, J. and Widmann, A., 2021. Wer steht hinter dem Medium "Exxpress", das gegen Staatsanwälte und Journalisten ausreitet?. [online] DER STANDARD. Available at: <<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000130948973/wer-steht-hinter-dem-medium-express-das-gegen-staatsanwaelte-und>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

of 2021.¹³ According to this poll, 65% of Austrians were against a return to office for Chancellor Kurz. That was the headline for APA, ATV and other media outlets writing about the results.¹⁴

eXXpress also quoted the poll, but excluded information that the majority surveyed were opposed to a Kurz comeback, focusing instead on poor ratings for social democratic leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner.¹⁵ Not a single word on Kurz's unpopularity, which was the major issue for other media.

Like many other conservative politicians, Kurz has visited eXXpress's TV studio several times, and promoted the interviews on his social media accounts afterwards.

eXXpress has also campaigned against the judiciary and the Minister of Justice over their handling of the Kurz scandal.



Left: eXXpress published that a prosecutor in the poll scandal lives near the chief editor of a left-leaning weekly – and the platform sees the possibility of a plot against Sebastian Kurz. Right: eXXpress reports – like Zur Sache – that prosecutors misinterpreted evidence against Kurz

They have attacked journalist Florian Klenk in articles, with unsubstantiated claims that he received secret information about the Kurz case from prosecutors.¹⁶ They

¹³ Österreich-Trend: Mehrheit der Österreicher wünscht sich Kurz-Rückzug. APA, 25 October 2021.

¹⁴ news.ORF.at. 2021. Hajek-Umfrage: Mehrheit wünscht sich Rückzug von Kurz. [online] Available at: <<https://orf.at/stories/3234040/>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

¹⁵ Exxpress. 2021. Political quake: Kickl overtakes Rendi-Wagner on the chancellor question. [online] Available at: <<https://exxpress.at/polit-beben-kickl-ueberholt-rendi-wagner-in-der-kanzlerfrage/>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

¹⁶ Schmitt, R., 2021. Justice affair: "At 3:24 p.m. a call from Klenk, at 4:26 p.m. the criminal investigation department came". [online] Exxpress. Available at:

revealed that one of the prosecutors and Klenk live in the same village as “proof” they were sharing secret information. The Association of Austrian Public Prosecutors complained that eXXpress had “crossed a red line” with its personal campaigns against prosecutors, including the article hinting at details of a prosecutor’s personal life.¹⁷

All in all, eXXpress takes a far more aggressive stance than ÖVP’s official news platform Zur Sache. ORF’s chief editor Schrom (who calls eXXpress the “ORF-hate-platform”), is not surprised by that: “I think a platform like eXXpress can do things a party could never do. For example, if something is just a rumour or even false, there are far more possibilities for reporting it under the guise of tabloid journalism than there are officially for a party. And, in the end, the party can always say that they did not have anything to do with it.”

eXXpress’s chief editor Richard Schmitt defines their position differently: According to him, the platform “acts independently from political parties”. From his perspective, official party media isn’t successful anyway. Not compared to his success, certainly: in only a few months after launch in March 2021, eXXpress reached approximately 2 million unique monthly clients by December 2021.¹⁸

On the other side of the political spectrum is Zack Zack, which began as an official party media in 2019. It was initially funded by former political party Jetzt, led by left-wing politician Peter Pilz who held a seat for them in parliament for two years. So it was built with taxpayer funds, but continued on when the party lost its seats in parliament. Unlike Jetzt, the platform is thriving and reaches big audience numbers with its articles, including a series of attacks on the ÖVP and Sebastian Kurz.

“We started as classical party media but then the party passed away,” chief editor Thomas Walach told me. The party funding lasted for the first year, which is why Walach refers to it as “start-up financing”. Currently, the platform is mainly financed by donations, he said. He will not divulge where the donations come from, but Walach said most of them do not give large sums. A former section of Jetzt is still

<<https://exxpress.at/justiz-affaere-um-15-24-uhr-ein-anruf-von-klenk-um-16-26-uhr-kam-die-kripo> /> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

¹⁷ Kurier.at. 2021. ÖVP-Ermittlungen: Staatsanwälte- und Presseclub-Kritik an "exxpress". [online] Available at:

<<https://kurier.at/politik/inland/oevp-ermittlungen-staatsanwaelte-und-presseclub-kritik-an-exxpress/401791544>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

¹⁸ A unique client is the Austrian measure of unique devices accessing content.

listed as Zack Zack's majority shareholder. Left-wing politician Pilz, who recently published a book titled *Sebastian Kurz – A Regime*, owns 26%.



KARIKATUREN

by Othmar Wicke



KARIKATUREN

by Othmar Wicke



Left: A cartoon on Zack Zack lampoons ÖVP politicians' behaviour in parliament. Right: How Zack Zack sees the work of Austria's dailies (baby birds being fed by Sebastian Kurz)

Zack Zack's reporting does not go ignored: Kurz himself called a very unusual press meeting in February 2021, inviting senior editors of all major media outlets to his office to tell them that about what *Kleine Zeitung* described as “allegations by Zack Zack” about a holiday trip to the home of an entrepreneur years ago. Kurz called the allegations false and “dirty campaigning”.¹⁹ (The holiday issue died down after one day of attention in the mainstream media.)

Editor's note: a previous version of this paper said Kurz called a press conference over a “report by Zack Zack”. We have amended the copy to clarify that Kurz was responding to unpublished allegations. We also amended the final sentence of this paragraph, which read: “the story disappeared”. We have amended this sentence to clarify that reporting of the story in the mainstream media died down.

Zack Zack's intentions seem to be quite clear. Walach himself once tweeted: “If Shorty is ever caught, I would like to do something else professionally. Maybe [make] honey. Or [write] books. Or both.”

¹⁹ www.kleinezeitung.at. 2021. Urlaub auf Mallorca: Kurz beklagt "Dirty Campaigning" von Pilz-Medium "Zack Zack". [online] Available at: <https://www.kleinezeitung.at/politik/innenpolitik/5945120/Urlaub-auf-Mallorca_Kurz-beklagt-Dirty-Campaigning-von-PilzMedium> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

“Shorty” is one of the former Chancellor Kurz’s nicknames.

In the autumn of 2021, Walach tweeted that Kurz had “ordered 100,000 corona deaths”, because Kurz warned at the beginning of the pandemic that 100,000 may die in Austria if action wasn’t taken.



Zack Zack editor Thomas Walach on Twitter, contemplating life if Kurz were to leave office.

Speaking to Walach in person, his mission sounds less aggressive: “We are left-wing and government critics,” he said, adding that his aim is also to “fascinate” supporters of FPÖ with politically left ideas: “The bulk of the media landscape is too friendly. So we overcompensate that with unfriendliness.”

Party press: what's in the data?

The key concept for me is this: what Zack Zack and others do can no longer be considered niche. On social media – where 48% of Austrians say they get news according to the *Digital News Report 2021* – these platforms frequently outperform traditional news outlets, according to data from social media monitoring tool Fanpage Karma.

In a sample captured in October 2021, showing the top ten Austrian news outlets on Facebook ranked by highest number of reactions (likes, shares, comments), three of the outlets in the previous chapter appear.

	Fans	Engagement	Post-Interaktion	Gesamtanzahl Reaktionen, Kommentare, Shares	Anzahl Posts	Anzahl Kommentare (total)
 Zeit im Bild @zeitimbild	828k	4,8%	0,41%	1.1M	327	254k
 Kronen Zeitung @krone.at	363k	3,6%	0,096%	370k	1.1k	98k
 oe24.at @oe24.at	312k	3,9%	0,083%	340k	1.3k	112k
 DER STANDARD (AT) @derstandardat	316k	2,7%	0,024%	235k	3.1k	58k
 kontrast.at @kontrast.at	168k	4,3%	1,5%	204k	80	17k
 Kleine Zeitung @kleinezeitung	210k	3,3%	0,10%	196k	894	49k
 KURIER @kurier	116k	5,8%	0,077%	187k	2.1k	55k
 exxpress.at @exxpress.at	9.8k	52%	0,88%	138k	1.7k	27k
 Zack Zack @zackzack.at	29k	15%	1,3%	123k	314	19k
 OÖNachrichten @nachrichten.at	111k	3,6%	0,093%	112k	1.1k	31k

The blue column shows Austria's top ten news outlets on Facebook, as ranked by the highest number of total reactions, comments or shares. Source: fanpagekarma.com

Ranked by “Shares” only, Kontrast.at comes second only to public service TV’s account in the first two weeks of October 2021. And the seven most-shared news

links on Facebook in October 2021 were mainly produced by Kontrast.at, Zack Zack or eXXpress.²⁰

The situation on Twitter is not really different: in a ranking of 16 major news platforms, including the accounts of all wide-reaching dailies and weeklies, eXXpress, Zack Zack, Kontrast.at, Unzensuriert and Zur Sache are among the ten platforms with the highest reaction numbers (meaning retweets, likes and comments in this case). Their links have also been among those with the highest numbers of engagement.

	Fans	Engagement	Post-Interaktion	Gesamtanzahl Reaktionen, Kommentare, Shares	Anzahl Posts	Anzahl Kommentare (total)	Page Performance Index	Follower Wachstum wöchentlich (in %)	Anzahl Likes
 ZackZack.at @redaktionzack	29k	5,5%	0,45%	46k	378		100%	3,3%	39k
 eXXpress @expressat	3.7k	11%	0,25%	12k	1.3k		100%	1,3%	8.6k
 profil online @profilonline	174k	0,21%	0,018%	11k	355		25%	0,23%	9.0k
 Kronen Zeitung @krone_at	68k	0,49%	0,013%	10k	1.2k		56%	0,50%	8.1k
 @falter_at @falter_at	91k	0,33%	0,030%	9.3k	347		60%	0,84%	8.1k
 Kontrast.at @kontrast_at	20k	1,2%	0,61%	7.6k	64		100%	0,68%	5.8k
 Kleine Zeitung @kleinezeitung	58k	0,21%	0,0035%	3.7k	1.8k		32%	0,38%	2.9k
 KURIER @kurierat	127k	0,065%	0,0044%	2.6k	465		15%	0,26%	2.1k
 unz @unzensuriert	6.1k	1,1%	0,23%	2.1k	150		70%	0,34%	1.2k
 zur-Sache.at @zursache_at	1.3k	4,5%	2,4%	1.7k	58		100%	1,7%	1.3k

The blue column shows Austria's top ten news outlets on Twitter, as ranked by the highest number of total reactions, comments or retweets. Source: fanpagekarma.com

²⁰ As an aside: when you include the personal accounts of politicians in the mix, Sebastian Kurz has more followers than any of the news outlets, and FPÖ's leader Herbert Kickl had the second highest engagement number in October 2021 on a list of all major news outlets and political accounts.

In a similar report prepared about YouTube, FPÖ TV is listed as the second-biggest news channel in Austria, both when ranked by number of subscribers and engagement.

	Fans	Engagement	Post-Interaktion	Gesamtanzahl Reaktionen, Kommentare, Shares	Anzahl Posts	Anzahl Kommentare (total)
 OE24.TV @UCyQpfuhftLvrnjxgEzVH78Q	199k		0,30%	599k	1.0k	141k
 FPÖ TV @UCRdEdkAlZetdf74bYaBRv3g	129k		2,9%	297k	80	34k
 krone.at @UC4qhj5cnX0MkbwXQ5vll1NQ	53k		0,41%	27k	126	5.1k
 derStandard.at @UCgau4awdKG2ni2Ib4jvUqFA	39k		0,83%	21k	67	0
 ZackZack @UCv48GGI4JF3F37Ym5zIcbw	4.9k		11%	4.8k	10	536
 KURIERat @UCNmFEQ_4AhYknXVmk4Fk5IA KURIERat	0		0%	3.2k	34	359
 VOLAT - Meine Startseite (Vorarlberg Online) @UCJ1NGNij5b_x789i0LyFr2g	65k		0,015%	2.7k	283	340
 eXpressTV @UC1y1GtNgGIAUBfQz87Ijag	946		0,21%	143	80	143
 Kontrast AT @UCs0fQy5jeWGLTeTLpZ1CtSw	2.8k		1,3%	75	2	2
 Tageszeitung Heute @UCek0LnBX0FUJlrprvYUHuig	9.8k		0,34%	33	1	5

The blue column shows Austria's top ten news outlets on YouTube, as ranked by the highest number of total reactions, comments or retweets. Source: fanpagekarma.com

It is worth noting here that, in contrast to other social media networks, public service TV, ORF, is not allowed to run a YouTube channel because of legal restrictions on where they may publish publicly funded content, chief editor Schrom told me. "I would love to have one, but we aren't allowed to."

This formidable success on social media can be logically associated with good click rates, but none of this success is widely discussed in Austrian media circles: the official source for most is Austrian Web Analysis (ÖWA), and they do not include the alternative media platforms profiled in this paper in their published rankings.²¹

²¹ <https://oewa.at/>

According to eXXpress chief editor Richard Schmitt, their site reaches a million unique monthly users. In October, according to Google Analytics, they reached 868,000. The number of users they are reaching after only a few months in operation is impressive compared to established brands.

Die Presse, for example, reached 1.8 million users in October 2021. *Kleine Zeitung*, the second biggest daily with a newsroom of more than 100 journalists for both print and online, reached 3.4 million unique users in October 2021. Media market leader *Krone* reached 6.6 million users online.

The platforms of famous weeklies like Profil.at or News.at were read by less than half a million people in October 2021. That's pretty much comparable to the numbers Kontrast.at is reporting: the website of the social democrats reached 300,000 unique users on average in 2021, and had half a million page views. In addition, they reached a million people per month via Facebook, 700,000 via Instagram, 34,000 via Telegram and newsletters and had 500,000 impressions via Twitter, YouTube and TikTok.

The much more provocative left-wingers at Zack Zack were even more successful: From the middle of September until the middle of October, 559,000 unique users came to their website, with the platform recording a total of 1.5 million visits and 8.85 million page views, according to Walach.

A good time for biased news

This revolution in political discourse is taking place in the midst of a severe decades-long economic crisis for traditional media. As APA's Bruckenberger puts it: "PR departments for government ministries and political parties are growing while newsrooms are downsizing."

Unlike most traditional media outlets, biased and party media does not typically rely on audience revenues. "There will never be a paywall at Zur Sache," ÖVP's digital communications manager Kristina Rausch explained, "because we don't want to make money." We are competing for attention with outlets who are not facing the same economic pressure to make paywalls work.

And that freedom may translate to an even bigger competitive advantage in the next few years, because Austrians say they don't want to pay for online news, according to the Reuters Digital News Report. Just 12% paid for digital news in 2021, and 85% said they do not foresee paying for online news in the near future. Just 3% said it is "very likely" that they will pay for online news in the next 12 months.²²

Nevertheless, the majority of traditional Austrian media outlets have either already put up a paywall or are in the process of implementing one.

When it comes to content distribution via social media – a more popular news source in 2021 than the whole print sector, according to the Digital News Report – politicians and partisan media are already equal competitors for attention.²³

On YouTube, for example, 28% said they pay "the most attention" to either politicians, political activists or new alternative media when it comes to news. Just 24% pay the most attention to mainstream media or journalists. The situation on Facebook is similar. This is an issue of growing importance as 21% of Austrians surveyed for the Digital News Report said they use YouTube as a source of news, 31% use Facebook.

²² Newman, N., 2021. Digital News Report 2021. [online] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

²³ Newman, N., 2021. Digital News Report 2021. [online] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

And it's unlikely that they can tell the difference between traditional media and partisan outlets, according to Benjamin Toff who researches trust in media at the Reuters Institute. "Certainly some people know. But in our qualitative interviews many people had a hard enough time differentiating between any of the news outlets they encountered on platforms, much less which of them were partisan. Many assumed that most if not all news sources had partisan agendas."

There is little data about this, but an anecdote from Kontrast.at's chief editor confirms Toff's findings: "When I do workshops I even meet SPÖ staff who do not know that Kontrast.at belongs to our party," Huber told me.

And even if people do recognise the difference, are they that concerned about sourcing their news from outlets that uphold impartiality? One out of three – especially younger people – prefer news "from their point of view", according to the Digital News Report.²⁴

Toff's research found that people are "more trusting of news on social media if they also prefer news that shares their point of view".

In the end, the consumption of alternative media might also lead to a growing mistrust in mainstream media.²⁵ Unless there is a "growing awareness" and labelling of partisan media outlets, Toff advises that they should be "seen as real competitors". His reasoning is simple: "From an audience perspective they are just seen as different providers of news and information."

²⁴ Newman, N., 2021. Digital News Report 2021. [online] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

²⁵ Fletcher, Richard and Park, Sora (2017). The Impact of Trust in the News Media Online on News consumption and Participation, Digital Journalism, pp. 1295 .

What the heads of Austria's biggest news outlets think about partisan outlets

Despite dire warnings from media researchers, the old guard don't see much of a threat. Klaus Herrmann, chief editor of Austria's biggest daily, *Krone*, told me: "They are no competitors. They do something different; we play in a different league."

What about Brucknerberger, head of APA? Does he think of partisan media as competitors? "No, not really," he told me. "I wish them a long life, which always depends on their financiers."

ORF's chief editor Schrom said he hoped they would not be real competitors "when it comes to trust", but added: "I think that there is a certain percentage of people who prefer to just confirm their prejudices, which has never been easier to do than it is nowadays. These platforms definitely fulfill this function. I do not think that this is a good development, it certainly has an impact. Without alternative media, Donald Trump maybe would never have been president."

Brucknerberger also describes Zack Zack and eXXpress as "platforms with an agenda", and not as media in the traditional sense.

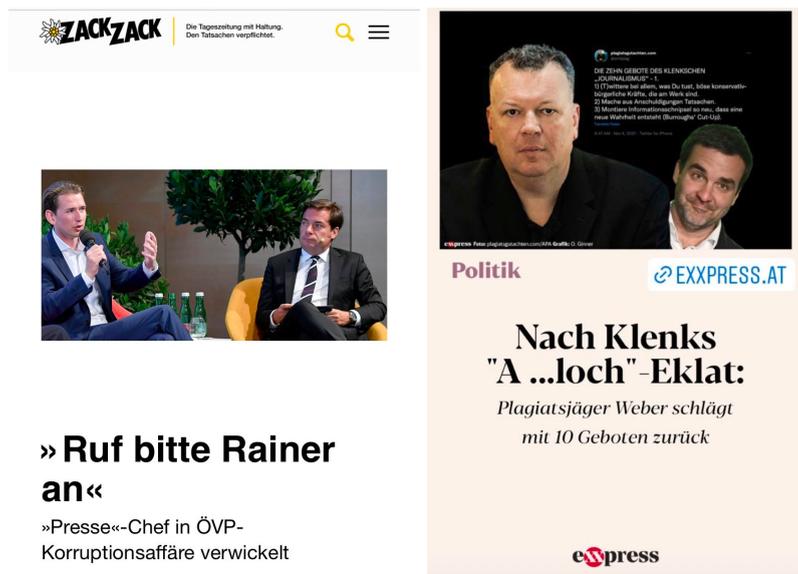
Nevertheless, these outlets are not completely ignored by the traditional press – certainly not when it comes to quoting exclusive lines from them. APA monitors Zack Zack, for example, "but more to see what they are doing than to quote them," Brucknerberger said. "Although we do not mind the source if any content is exclusive."

But things are different when they do cite these platforms – all three traditional editors agreed: sources must be doubly checked because, as Brucknerberger put it, "there is no principle of trust for these platforms."

Editor's note: A previous version of this paper included a quote from Schrom about his experience working with Zack Zack. The author regrets not giving Zack Zack the right of reply before publication, and has removed the anecdote.

Unzensuriert, for example, labelled ORF the “Lügenpresse” – a term that was used in the 1930s to label established media outlets liars.²⁶

I myself have been “honoured” with attention from partisan press: back in 2018, Unzenurteilt wrote a very critical piece about me as a reaction to an article about current FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl, which they obviously did not like.²⁷



» **Ruf bitte Rainer an** «

»Presse«-Chef in ÖVP-Korruptionsaffäre verwickelt

Left: Zack Zack criticising Presse’s “involved” chief editor.
Right: a piece about eXXpress’s fight with Falter’s chief editor

Zack Zack wrote a series of articles about what they called the “too-close relationship” of Presse’s chief editor and the ÖVP, even going so far as to claim he was “involved in ÖVP’s corruption affair”.²⁸ (There is currently no evidence to support his claim.) Soon afterwards Zack Zack accused the APA of spreading “fake

²⁶ Unzensuriert. 2021. Bericht über Corona-Demo: ORF hörte „antisemitische Kommentare“. [online] Available at:

<<https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/125236-bericht-ueber-corona-demo-orf-hoerte-antisemitische-kommentare/>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

²⁷ Unzensuriert. 2021. Tageszeitung “Kurier” regt sich über die gute Laune von Innenminister Herbert Kickl auf. [online] Available at:

<<https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/0027705-kurier-regt-sich-ueber-die-gute-laune-von-innenminister-herbert-kickl-auf/>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

²⁸ zackzack.at. 2021. »Ruf bitte Rainer an« - »Presse«-Chef taucht in ÖVP-Korruptionsaffäre auf - zackzack.at. [online] Available at:

<<https://zackzack.at/2021/10/09/ruf-bitte-rainer-an-presse-chef-taucht-in-ovp-korruptionsaffare-auf/>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

news” because they interviewed a person from the judiciary who defended Kurz – all above board, by the way.²⁹

I could continue with a long list of instances of baseless attacks by partisan outlets on the traditional media. The irony is that these stories are uniformly presented by both sides as proof that the traditional media is biased, and that they are the only real independent news source. “Those who are not independent boasting about being independent – it causes remarkable vertigo,” Schrom said.

Hermann added, of this sort of polarisation: “It has become harder to serve everybody.” His advice for responding to these attacks was to do so “as passively as possible”. “They are just looking for attention,” he said.

²⁹ Walach, T., 2021. Fake News auf allen Kanälen - Kommentar - zackzack.at. [online] zackzack.at. Available at: <<https://zackzack.at/2021/11/01/fake-news-auf-allen-kanaelen-kommentar/>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

Conclusion

In the end, neither message control nor social media success is unique to Austrian politicians. Canadian author Alex Marland described the steps for political message control in a western-liberal country back in 2016, including centralised and totally disciplined communication, with a warning that this would result in problems for parliamentary democracy.³⁰

Some of the steps described by Marland are fascinatingly similar to what played out in Austria after Kurz came to power in 2017. The circumventing of traditional media by “permanently campaigning” politicians on social media is widely described by political communication researchers, too.³¹

Because of political message control, “journalism has really become more difficult”. So said ORF’s chief editor Schrom. And not just in Austria. In other countries – he gave the example of Italy – “it is even more extreme: journalists can only directly address the prime minister around twice a year. The rest of the time there are just statements.”

But when it comes to party-owned and extremely partisan media, German campaigner and lecturer Martin Fuchs thinks Austria has gone further than most. “I think Austria might be some kind of blueprint in terms of [party] owned media,” he told me. “Austria is much further along.” According to Fuchs, German far-right AfD “wants to build up its communication exactly like their role model, FPÖ.”

Fuchs sees similar “tendencies” in Germany of politicians looking to bypass traditional media, but digital party press is not a very big thing in Germany yet. One reason is that there are more media outlets for politicians to choose to place their messaging in than there are in Austria’s highly concentrated media market.

Additionally, there seems to be a bigger opposition to politicians mixing up PR and journalism, Fuchs says. “But I think that German politicians are having a look at the situation in Austria.”

³⁰ Marland, Alex (2016). *Brand Communications. Canadian Democracy and Politics in the Age of Message Control*. UBC Press

³¹ Metz, M., Kruikemeier, S. and Lecheler, S., 2019. *Personalization of politics on Facebook: examining the content and effects of professional, emotional and private self-personalization*. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(10), pp.1481-1498.

Precisely now – at a time of anti-vaxxers attacking established media, demonstrating in front of their newsrooms, accusing them of telling lies about COVID-19 – the success of provocative alternative media may lead to even more political polarisation of the public agenda.³²

So what can be done, considering all the material I’ve presented here for evidence-based pessimism?

A clarification around the rules for ORF’s social media content could help balance the books, for example, by providing YouTube users with more quality Austrian video options to choose from. In fact, every traditional news outlet should rethink their social media strategy and assign resources to meet the challenge of remaining relevant and visible off-network.

In the absence of a legislative intervention or public funding initiatives – and given how unlikely either is to transpire – it may be left to traditional media outlets to demonstrate the difference between journalism and activism.

Playing eXXpress and their ilk at their own rhetoric game would be counterproductive, but we can be very clear with our audiences about who they are when we quote from these platforms.

Brucknerberger’s outlook may be idealistic, but it is within our control: he advocates focusing on the quality of our own journalism as the way to keep and grow trust. “Just do what our recipe for success has always been: factual and unbiased news.”

After all, a clear majority of people still want their news to reflect a range of different views and leave it to them to decide.³³ This is our competitive advantage.

³² Brickner, I., 2021. Corona-Leugner planen Demos vor (fast) allen Redaktionen. [online] DER STANDARD. Available at: <<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000131773843/coronaleugner-planen-demos-vor-fast-allen-redaktionen>> [Accessed 17 December 2021].

³³

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/impartiality-unpacked-study-four-countries>