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Dealing with the Extreme Right

Christoph Andersson

Reporting on right-wing extremists and parties is risky; journalists are often harassed and threatened. It is imperative, however, to continuously report on the extreme right – and how it tries to gain political power. The question is how journalists should conduct themselves when entering an extreme environment.

Gelsenkirchen, in western Germany, Saturday, 27 March 2010. A crew from the television company ZDF suddenly came under attack during an anti-Islam meeting arranged by the regional right-wing party PRO NRW, that is, Pro Nordrhein-Westphalia.

The crowd was screaming ‘Nazis raus, Nazis out’ and ‘go and pee on yourselves, fascist horde’ to the crew.

Around 250 people were participating in the meeting, held inside a fifteenth-century castle, Schloss Horst. Highly ranked politicians from all parts of Europe were present, some representing the Belgian Vlaams Belang, and some the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs or Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). One person was there for the very first time, Kent Ekeröth from the Swedish Democrats, a party that emerged from the Swedish Nazi movement (Jansson & Schmid 2004).

He, however, was acting differently from all the other representatives, he stood and tried to calm the crowd down. Among the crowd was another Swede, millionaire and businessman Patrik Brinkmann. He was very red in the face from screaming: ‘Nazis raus, Nazis raus!’

Brinkmann had recently promised to support the PRO NRW’s election campaign with five million euros. The party would be running for the State parliamentary elections in May 2010.

The ZDF team was present to report on how PRO NRW representatives were connected to the far-right-wing party NPD, The National Democrats. Beside Brinkman, who made a fortune from buying and selling on the stock market, at least two other participants who had former close connections with the NPD were present.

In August 2008, Brinkman arranged a conference with the NPD, trying to get nationalistic hardliners to change their anti-Jewish view to a more anti-Islamic one (Andersson, Swedish radio 2010c). In interviews and speeches Brinkmann claimed that

a nationalistic party criticizing Islam ('a religion that treats women like shit') would be accepted more easily by the German public than a party still stigmatizing the Jews, 63 years after the fall of the Third Reich (Andersson, Swedish radio 2010b).

When the NPD refused to shift its focus onto Islam, Brinkmann found a new ally – the PRO NRW – which readily opened its doors to former NPD members and others struggling to 'create a right-wing party, without anti-Semitism'. To become accepted by the German public, the PRO party needed to redefine the word 'Nazi'. This four-letter word is currently used by the PRO as a derogatory term for all those considered political opponents, be they scholars or representatives from other parties, regardless of whether they are from the Left or Right, or journalists. The aim is to give an impression that the FPÖ, Vlaams Belang, PRO NRW and the Swedish Democrats do not have any extreme right-wing views. Contrary to that notion, they pose as good democrats, representing society's mainstream, while it is their opponents who are the extremists. The ZDF is included in the extreme category.

The incident finally ended with that the reporter and his crew, as well as a professor accompanying the team as an expert on right-wing extremism, being violently forced to leave the premises. One of the politicians from PRO NRW, Manfred Rouhs, a former NPD member, tried to stab his finger into the face of a reporter and was screaming straight into his ear: 'Nazis raus, Nazis get out.'

Usually, German police are present when the extreme right holds its meetings. The police are very well aware that reporters and camera crews frequently come under attack. But this time neither the state police, nor the German 'feds', die Bundespolizei, were present. From a police perspective, highly ranked politicians – MPs from Flanders and Austria – and a Swedish millionaire, Brinkmann, all dressed in fine expensive suits, would not be expected to become aggressive. This, however, is exactly what happened.

Why do some journalists come under attack and not others?

I was watching, and recording the incident on audio tape, and was just a few metres away from the incident. My brief was to collect material for a Swedish radio documentary on how the various extreme right-wing parties were cooperating across borders. As a matter of fact, nationalism was becoming more and more internationalized, which the Gelsenkirchen meeting clearly demonstrated. One of the walls was covered with a huge poster showing the FPÖ, Vlaams Belang and PRO NRW logos. The message was 'Stop Islam'. An illustration showed a Muslim woman in a niqab, and behind her were black minarets, drawn like missiles, ready for launch.

The anger, stated on the poster and voiced at the meeting, was also focused on the ZDF crew. The question is why this was not focused on me as a radio reporter. Actually, the ZDF crew and I were partly covering the same issues. So why was the television team thrown out when I and other reporters, working on our own, were not? I recall a personal experience similar to the one my German colleagues were having that day, but in Sweden in August 2005, just outside the city of Nyköping, 100 km south of Stockholm. At a Swedish-German gathering a young neo-Nazi threatened to kill me, there and then, on the spot, in front of all his Nazi friends – as well as in front of the Swedish police (Andersson 2010a: 108–13). But none of the hardliners laid a

hand on me. The attack was only verbal. On the day described above, however, ZDF crew members in Gelsenkirchen did not experience any death threats; nevertheless, people from the PRO NRW did use physical force on them. Another difference is that the police were present in Nyköping, even though Swedish law enforcement did not react or do anything. The only conclusion to be drawn from the two incidents is that reporters need to be very well prepared to deal with such situations on their own. They cannot really depend on help from the police, whether present or not.

One option would be for the media companies to hire their own security guards. On the one hand it might create a feeling of being protected, on the other it does not really avoid being thrown out. Worse is if the use of private security guards gives the impression that the journalists are afraid, that they are 'cowards' and dare not meet 'nationalists' on their own. Furthermore, bringing in additional people can lead to reduced journalistic success. Who would like to be interviewed by a journalist accompanied by a group of hired bodyguards? What affect would a number of people surrounding a journalist have on interviews?

Good journalism is generally the result of a meeting between two persons, an honestly interested reporter asking questions and an interviewee willing to answer, in a climate of at least some mutual respect. Anyone else introduced to this situation might disturb the quality of the interview. Of particular importance is that an interview can only take place if journalists are on the premises. Otherwise they will have to rely on secondary sources, such as what parties themselves make public on the Net, or what others are publishing.

One might argue that undercover journalism, using hidden cameras and microphones, is an option. I reject this, apart from exceptional situations, when all open methods have been tried but absolutely nothing else works, and the subject is of great public interest. Otherwise, such methods are unjustifiable. It is important to be aware that undercover methods might not only be illegal or unethical, they also open up strong criticism of journalists, who might be viewed as trying to provoke situations that would otherwise not take place. It is, besides, very dangerous. The journalist using such methods may later be looked upon as a traitor, which might lead to the very people who once considered him or her to be a sincere political friend taking their revenge. Therefore, the bottom line must always be to use overt rather than covert methods and not get thrown out of meetings.

Moreover, a consequence of being thrown out will be that the public are deprived of important information on extreme right-wing parties or activists, who have ambitions to run for local, regional or national governments, and finally rule the country. Questions, therefore, need to be asked and observations made on how democratic these parties really are – and if they do in fact have a hidden racist agenda. The issue is therefore: are there any journalistic strategies for achieving this goal?

Ways to act in an extreme environment

Let us go back to that Saturday in Gelsenkirchen, in March 2010, and analyse what caused the expulsion of the ZDF crew – and if something could have been done to avoid it. Before the main meeting started, a press conference was held in Schloss Horst.

We were probably around 30 journalists, including cameramen, sound engineers and photographers.

What usually happens when established political parties are invited to conferences such as this is that reporters shake hands with participating politicians, or at least the press officer running the meeting. But this did not happen in this case. I hardly saw anyone shaking hands with any of the right-wing representatives present. I nevertheless took the initiative to greet Mr Brinkmann, on whom I had recently made a radio documentary, broadcast just a week before, on 'Sveriges Radio' station P1, 'Patriot i frack, Patriot in tuxedo' (Andersson 2010d). The programme narrated the story of how, during a two-year period from 2008 to 2010, he had tried to influence the German extreme right towards becoming more anti-Islamic. I also greeted the press officer, general secretary Markus Wiener of PRO NRW, and the party's chairman, the lawyer Markus Beisicht. I even greeted a former party-leader candidate of the NPD. He is one of Brinkmann's best friends and had switched from the NPD to the PRO. His name is Andreas Molau. I interviewed him in 2008 for the Brinkmann documentary.

Some German colleagues found my behaviour strange. One expressed himself very clearly, 'We do not greet Nazis'. I see this very differently; nothing in the Swedish or German press code states that people with extreme views should not be greeted, or should be treated in a hostile manner. People have a right to be treated respectfully, regardless of their political or religious beliefs – even if the reporter is opposed to those beliefs. Interviewing people is moreover built on obtaining their cooperation.

A very good example of this is the work of the reporter Gitta Sereny. After the war she interviewed highly ranked former Nazis, people responsible for the Holocaust and war crimes. Among them was Fritz Stangl, former Commander of the Treblinka death camp from 1942 to 1943. Her contribution to our understanding of the mechanisms leading to a society as extreme as that of Nazi Germany cannot be underestimated. But she could achieve such great reporting only after getting Stangl to cooperate, by convincing him of her genuine journalistic interest (Sereny 2000: 110–58). For her, growing up under Nazi suppression, this was surely an extremely difficult task. Still, Gitta Sereny managed to keep her integrity by acting as a journalist, and by not taking on the role of prosecutor. Gitta Sereny taught us a great deal about what kind of attitude should be adopted when dealing with extreme right-wing individuals.

Reacting to them with hate or disregard would not only be to play their game, inadvertently placing them in the victim's position, it would even make interviews impossible.

Journalism is about asking questions and getting answers to those questions; it is not about starting unnecessary arguments. It is certainly not about getting into a debate with extremists, and trying to win it. That will usually lead to confrontation, with very negative results for reporting.

All these factors were in play at the press conference in Schloss Horst: As soon the conference opened for questions the ZDF reporter took the initiative. He read out long quotes from a report presented by the Verfassungsschutz, the secret police of Westphalia. I recorded it all on tape. Finally he stated:

'The PRO party is described as racist, hostile to immigrants, and right wing in the extreme.'

The PRO leader, Beisicht, responded 'most willingly', but since he was not asked any real questions he made a statement himself:

'It's like story time, with the Minister of the Interior telling fairy tales,' he claimed, and used the opportunity to deny and reject all forms of racism. The turn went back to the ZDF reporter. He now drew a conclusion, based on a report by the secret state police, that the PRO party says one thing in public but actually has a completely different agenda.

'You are very welcome to use this hour to tell fairy tales,' Beisicht responded, and returned to his message: 'Racism once led Germany to a catastrophe so that cannot be the answer. We reject all kinds of racism!' The ZDF reporter and Beisicht interrupted one another several times. It caused tension, which became heightened as the conference proceeded.

The escalation process

Beisicht wanted to make sure that every reporter understood that the PRO party did not want to proscribe Islam. He claimed that freedom of religion was not at stake, it was only the construction of new mosques, with '*prozige*, boastful minarets', which should be banned. The statement provoked a female colleague of the ZDF reporter. She is a TV reporter of Turkish descent.

'I am anxious to hear how you would define the word boastful?' she asked.

The PRO press officer, Markus Wiener, replied:

'For decades we have not had any huge or boastful Mosques or minarets.'

He was interrupted by the female reporter, now making a statement herself. In contrast to the ZDF reporter, she became very personal; she told how her Turkish father, now 65 years old, once came to Germany as one of many guest workers. At that time, he and the other Turkish migrants did not have any appropriate mosques to pray in. She claimed that religion in those days had to be practised in the most primitive circumstances, in cold chilly buildings. She said that she was very happy that her parents now had the opportunity to go and pray in real decent mosques:

'That will certainly not threaten your Western European culture!' she said.

'Thanks for bringing that up', Wiener responded, 'we do not have anything against modernizing mosques, with the very best kind of heating and sanitation, but we are definitely against minarets, fifty-five metres tall'. 'You know the expression, "The minarets are our bayonets and the believers are our soldiers", the architecture is used to demonstrate Islamic dominance, that's why we are against it.'

Now the female reporter became angry:

'I don't think you have any idea of what Islam is and how diverse and how colourful the religion actually is! Open your eyes and try to see the German kind of Islam, it's practised by many young, well-educated and dedicated Turks and Arabs!'

On the one hand, her reaction was understandable, being of Turkish descent and feeling targeted herself. On the other hand, debating in this forum would later contribute to getting her ZDF colleague into trouble. She finally stated that the PRO Party was 'stigmatizing Muslims'. Beisicht countered that he himself had been 'stigmatized' and

needed to live under police protection. He asked the reporter when a Christian church was last built in Turkey. The reporter countered by screaming that 'This discussion is about Germany!'

Until this point, the right-wing politicians from other countries had not said a word, but a FPÖ representative became extremely provoked by the female reporter, even though she was dressed in modern fashion and was not covering her hair. He confronted her with: 'You are a disgrace to your profession, your task is to ask questions and not to act as if you are in a courtroom!'

The two German reporters took up a lot of the conference time, arguing and making statements. It was only at the very end of the conference that I saw an opportunity to ask my questions. I was very interested in what the whole Gelsenkirchen gathering was actually about. According to the invitation it was to stop the building of mosques, by arguing that a law be proposed at European Union (EU) level.

To be able to do so the present parties must use the Lisbon Treaty, forcing the European Commission to draft a legal proposal for a new EU directive. This could only be done if they got enough signatures from EU citizens in favour of such a directive. If they managed to do that, the matter could later be brought before the European Parliament. I was most interested in following up this process and reporting it in my radio documentary. Therefore, I needed all the politicians on the podium to answer my question about how many signatures they would be able to get in each country.

'Finally we get a real question', one said, relieved.

Everyone on the podium claimed that they would get extremely high numbers, as they saw themselves as representing the mainstream, the majority in each country. My plan was, later, to compare the figures mentioned with the actual numbers of signatures.

What the politicians could not see was their propaganda-like answers from a long-term perspective. These would help me to measure how strong they actually were politically, in comparison to what they claimed to be. In other words, the question was a bit trickier than it first appeared. Still, it did not cause any tension or aggressive behaviour, towards me or Swedish radio.

What I did not know at this time was that the whole idea of getting signatures would, politically, be more or less dead within about 16 months. This was because one of the strongest supporters of the parties present was a young Norwegian named Anders Behring Breivik. On 22 July 2011 he would blow up government buildings in central Oslo and massacre many young people on Utøya Island. The number of deaths that day was over 70 men and women. Breivik's actions resulted in a decline in public support for right-wing populist parties, at least temporarily.

The final throwing-out process

After the press conference the meeting commenced in the main hall of the castle. Markus Beisicht began his welcome speech by greeting participants. From the back I observed something very strange, a new participant arrived and checked in at the conference reception desk. It was a young man wearing a jacket with the letters LONSDALE. The brand is often used by NPD followers. The name LONSDALE includes the letters

NSDA, only a P is required to create the abbreviation NSDAP, short for Adolf Hitler's Nazi party, *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (Andersson 2010a: 74).

I could also see that the man had an SS motto tattooed on his body. The remarkable thing was that, in spite of his obvious and visual political leanings, the PRO people let him join the meeting – even though the message presented at the press conference was quite the opposite, that they did not want to have anything to do with racists or Nazis.

Simultaneously, the ZDF crew and I moved forward to document this man, who was about to enter the meeting. This was immediately noticed by Markus Beisicht. He interrupted his speech, saying that the ZDF team was disturbing the proceedings. Meanwhile some PRO politicians decided to stop the man entering the hall in his Lonsdale outfit. In a friendly and non-hostile way, the man was asked to leave, in front of the running ZDF camera. He accepted and went away calmly.

Now Beisicht, highly irritated, saw a chance finally to get rid of the entire ZDF crew, including the professor, brought in as an expert on the extreme right. He blamed the ZDF reporter for trying to question why the man was allowed to join the meeting – and how this complied with all the previous statements made at the press conference. I in fact asked the very same type of question, but only the ZDF reporter and his crew were urged to 'Sit down – or leave!' (Kolenvideo 2010). Within a few seconds PRO politicians and activists were trying to push the ZDF crew out of the hall while the crowd screamed 'Nazis raus, Nazis raus'.

Naturally, the ZDF team recorded the violence it was subjected to and broadcasted the scene later, on 1 April (Frank ZDF 2010). The question now is whether this scene could make up for everything the crew missed by getting thrown out of the meeting. The issue is what impact did that crew, comprising four people, huge cameras and broadcast equipment, have on the confrontation that was building from the very beginning of the press conference.

To Beisicht it was all a demonstration of media power, to which he needed to respond. It was imperative that he show all those present, politicians, participants and journalists, that he was strong enough to meet the challenge of a huge and important media company like ZDF.

Maybe all this might have been avoided if the ZDF reporter had adopted a different strategy. He should not have started by making statements and bringing a big crew to the press conference. It would, perhaps, have been enough for ZDF to be represented by just one reporter and a lightly equipped cameraman.

Regarding what happened in Nyköping in August 2005, as mentioned earlier, I also demonstrated far too much power by using a microphone with a huge windshield and headphones that were far too large. I was one of three radio reporters on the spot. We were all from public Swedish radio, backing one another up and each with a car at our disposal – two with the symbols SR, Swedish Radio.

One of the SR vehicles was built for live broadcasting, with antennas on its roof. Together, we signalled considerable media power, such that the right-wingers probably felt provoked (Andersson 2006, Swedish Radio). I remember getting into an argument with the right-wingers, not about any security police report, but whether the car park we were on was a public one or not. The argument caused the situation to escalate further, resulting in death threats.

There are no general guidelines

Still, there are never solid working guidelines. Sometimes a demonstration of media power will actually prevent reporters being attacked. I experienced this on the very same day that the Nyköping incident took place. One of my two colleagues and I were stopped at a roadblock, about 60 kilometres south of the city. Heavies from the extreme right were actually blocking a public road. The reason was that the road lay next to a nearby country house, in which hundreds of right-wingers from all over Northern Europe and the United States of America were preparing for a rally. I and my radio colleague were completely outnumbered. Neither the police nor any other colleagues were present. Fortunately our two cars, especially the one with the huge antennas, helped to create some kind of status.

Another important factor was that I, some weeks before, had arranged to hold an interview with a German NPD politician representing the party in the State Parliament of Saxony. He was one of the main speakers at the rally. As we were not let in, he came out and gave an interview just beyond the roadblock. I treated him no differently from any other politician. We shook hands, made small talk and did not argue or debate, which might have made him either defensive or aggressive. By treating him respectfully, and getting the same respect back, the situation never escalated. Still, it was a failure, as neither I nor my fellow reporter was able to attend or monitor the rally itself.

This is similar to the situation in which the ZDF crew found itself in Gelsenkirchen. Actually, the really interesting speeches and statements were yet to come – in the absence of the ZDF. These began with a speech by the scholar Alfred Merchtesheimer, once active in the German peace movement during the 1980s and a former member of the Green faction in the Bundestag.

In his speech, Merchtesheimer urged ‘that the participants not only should hold protest meetings outside mosques, but also outside Christian churches’. This was recorded on my tape. He considered Catholic and Protestant clergy leaders to be far too tolerant of Islam. During his speech, church bells suddenly started ringing outside, which is customary in Germany on Saturday afternoons. ‘What is this? Some sort of attack (on us)!?’ Merchtesheimer said.

The next speaker was the leader of Vlaams Belang, Filip Dewinter. He described Islam as a ‘wild beast’, ready to attack its ‘weakest victim’. He even went as far as comparing the spreading of Islam with the spreading of AIDS. His final conclusion was that it was everyone’s duty to be ‘Islamophobic’, in the struggle to defend Western values. Dewinter was followed by the Swedish Democrat Kent Ekeröth, running for a seat in the Swedish Parliament in the autumn elections. Ekeröth told everyone about his home country and the city of Malmö:

‘The Islamization of Sweden has led, as it always does, to violence and unrest,’ he said. He continued with: ‘The Jewish population of Malmö is fleeing due to anti-Semitic attacks from the Muslim population.’

He was indeed right in that there had been attacks on Jews in Malmö, but his statement that all Muslims in Malmö were attacking all Jews, making them leave town, was incorrect. Finally, Ekeröth urged all Muslims to leave Sweden and 'go home'.

What was actually said at the conference itself was far more radical than what was said earlier, during the press conference. Being present to record events was therefore most important in order to get a true picture of what the parties present actually represented. The recordings open up many questions that may be put, not only to present politicians but to the Muslim Community, the Church and established political parties.

Conclusion: Do not get into the position of being thrown out

It is very important that journalistic methods should never be questioned; the recordings were made overtly, and with the consent of the PRO party and others. Quite different from Swedish radio, ZDF, in November 2011, still suffers from what happened that day. On various sites on the internet, accusations are made that the incident with the Lonsdale man was staged by the ZDF, although I personally have seen no evidence to support that statement (PRO NRW 2010: anonymous video). The ZDF reporter (Frank, Udo) also strongly rejects those accusations. The incident, however, is used for an ongoing never-ending defamation of the ZDF, as well as an ongoing campaign in which the PRO party portrays itself as the victim, that it is haunted by the media in general and ZDF in particular. Even if untrue it probably causes a lot of damage for further ZDF reporting on the far right and its aims. Sometimes there is no way to avoid situations such as this, though sometimes there is, simply by being aware of how to act as a reporter in a hostile environment. This will impact on how we journalists are treated, and positively affect our ability to provide adequate and important information about what is going on within the right-wing movements and parties, all over Europe.

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