

Germany: Response to satirical children's video exposes self-censorship of the media

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The week before Christmas, German broadcaster WDR posted an online video of a children's choir singing an updated version of a satirical song "Meine Oma fährt im Hühnerstall Motorrad" ("My grandmother rides a motorcycle in the chicken coop"), which was then made the subject of a hysterical media storm.

In earlier versions, the grandma possesses many strange and wonderful things, such as "a radio in her hollow tooth", "glasses with curtains", "a cane with a taillight" or has "a revolver in her garter". The chorus runs, "My grandma is a very smart woman" ("meine Oma ist ne ganz patente Frau"). The song and an English translation of the lyrics can be found [here](#).

In the on-demand video WDR put online, the broadcaster's Dortmund children's choir sings a new version of the satirical song, which ends in the chorus "Meine Oma ist 'ne alte Umweltsau" ("My grandma is an old environmental sow").

It is a harmless satire, which, according to its authors, "is intended to use exaggeration and humour to target the conflict between the generations". The children sing about the discount meat-eating, SUV-driving and cruise ship travelling grandma. At the end of the video, a girl quotes Greta Thunberg saying, "We will not let you get away with this".

The way the West German Broadcasting Corporation (WDR) then dealt with the so-called "Umweltsau" video is a prime example of how the media censors itself under the slightest pressure from the right and spreads the ideology of the far-right.

Spiegel Online, based on a Twitter survey by social media analyst Luca Hammer, has shown how right-wing trolls unleashed a tirade against the video.

"His evaluation shows that the first accounts tweeted against the video on December 27," the article says. "However, the first tweets about it hardly get any attention. But then the spark jumps over accounts that are too wide-reaching to be assigned to the right-wing spectrum. Many tweets complain about an 'instrumentalisation of children'

or speak derogatorily of 'state broadcasters'. Starting from here, the outrage spreads quickly—until it finally reaches right-wing conservative multipliers and the first media reports appear."

"'Granny Gate' is a typical example of right-wing outrage and mobilisation—both in terms of structure and in terms of issues and arguments," Patrick Stegemann, author of a book on "Right-wing mobilisation", told *Spiegel Online*. "Environmental issues have become insanely popular in right-wing mobilization lately, Greta [Thunberg] is the enemy personified of the right."

The "Umweltsau" song, according to Stegemann, is not an isolated case. Right-wing influencers and groups have tried again and again to provoke outrage. "A lot of bait is thrown out—and as soon as something catches, the machine really goes off, then it goes around."

The right wing did not stop at this Twitter tirade. On December 28, about one hundred right-wingers demonstrated in front of the broadcaster's building in Cologne. Further demonstrations followed, which had been called by those around such neo-Nazi outfits as the "Brotherhood of Germany", the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the extreme nationalist Identitarian Movement.

Choirmaster Zeljo Davutovic was accused of "instrumentalising" the singing children, AfD associations called him a "child molester" and tweeted his telephone number. The right-wing blogger Jürgen Fritz published the names and photos of members of the production team on his Facebook page. Some WDR employees received death threats, which should be taken seriously in view of the extreme right-wing murders of recent years—from the neo-Nazi National Socialist Underground (NSU) to the murder of leading Christian Democrat Walter Lübcke, to the attack on the synagogue in Halle.

But instead of standing up and protecting the WDR journalists and defending the freedom of press, opinion and satire, the broadcaster's management, the state government and other media outlets stabbed them in the back.

WDR quickly removed the video from all its internet platforms. WDR director-general Tom Buhrow, who has also been chairman of the ARD, a joint organisation of Germany's regional public service broadcasters, since the beginning of the year, apologized explicitly. On the evening of 28 December, WDR broadcast a special radio program in which Buhrow himself apologized "without ifs and buts" for the video.

North Rhine-Westphalia's state premier Armin Laschet (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) personally joined in, tweeting that "the debate on the best forms of climate protection" was being "escalated" by WDR into a generational conflict. Never should "children be instrumentalized by adults for their own purposes". With the song, WDR had "crossed the boundaries of style and respect for older people". In a guest article for the weekly newspaper *Zeit*, Laschet wrote, "In these times, we urgently need a strong public broadcasting service that serves social cohesion, corresponding to its mission statement".

Deputy state premier Joachim Stamp (Free Democratic Party, FDP) also condemned the video, "Perhaps we should make a joint effort for the new decade not to describe people in general as 'sows', 'pigs' etc."

In the tabloid *Bild*, the editor-in-chief personally spoke out against the video, its makers and WDR. The paper quoted Bundestag (federal parliament) Vice President Wolfgang Kubicki (FDP) saying, "The fact that a children's choir is being abused to denounce and re-educate speaks against the TV makers and is a fatal reminder of the failed former East Germany".

In an open letter to Buhrow, more than 40 TV authors have expressed their solidarity with the makers of the video, demanded it be immediately reposted and accused the WDR director of falling into the trap set by right-wing trolls and abandoning his staff. Among the signatories of the solidarity declaration are authors of programmes such as "Neo Magazin Royale", "Dark" and the "heute Show".

"The dispute over the song lacks any rational basis," the letter says. "Even the word 'satirical freedom' seems inappropriate when the threshold of indignation is so low that it is ruptured by every other pop song. A (!) fictional grandmother discriminates against an entire generation just as little as the alcoholic father from 'Papa Was a Rollin' Stone' does not mean all men are unfit for marriage."

Writing about Tom Buhrow, the letter goes on to say, "A media manager whose handling of modern, right-wing propaganda shows so much naivete and awkwardness and who is not able to defend his staff on the simplest questions of freedom of the press and freedom of opinion, endangers precisely these freedoms. He should draw the consequences."

In a statement, the WDR editor's office also supported the producers of the video and sharply criticized Buhrow. "We are stunned," it says, "that the program director of WDR 2 has a video with a satirical children's song deleted, and above all about the fact that director Tom Buhrow gives in so easily to a shitstorm apparently orchestrated by right-wing extremists, hastily distances himself editorially and not only apologizes in person, but also publicly (and repeatedly) in the process, (live on WDR 2, among others), instead of backing them up in the face of staged outrage against WDR and the other public broadcasters." According to the editors' representatives, the internal freedom of broadcasting had thus been violated.

On Tuesday, a private meeting of editors took place at WDR, where Buhrow faced the criticism of about 700 employees. About 30 speakers made emotional contributions, one participant told the news magazine *Der Spiegel*. For some, the question arose as to whether it would be possible to employ satire at all in the future. Although Buhrow had stressed that everyone should continue as before, he had also said in principle that he would do the same again.

The WDR's self-censorship in the case of the "Umweltsau" video is symptomatic of the ruling elite's shift to the right. In the face of growing social tensions, they are arming themselves both internally and externally and are no longer prepared to tolerate criticism and dissenting opinions—even if only in the form of satire.

Those who do not adhere to self-restraint and censorship are to be intimidated and attacked. The persecution of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, who are in prison for having exposed war crimes, sets an international precedent for this development. It is not the perpetrators of crimes and grievances who are being prosecuted, but those who expose and criticise them.



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