



Reports

Sina Hartert

Reporting on Persecution of Christians

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



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for Religious Freedom

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Abstract

This study examines how the topic of the persecution of Christians in the 21st century is dealt with in print and online newsrooms in Germany. It also identifies the reasons for this approach. To this end, seven guided interviews were conducted in June 2023 with print and online editors of *Die Zeit*, *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*, *Welt* and *Die Tagespost*. As there has been no academic research on this topic to date, a quantitative media analysis of the four newspapers mentioned was carried out in advance. The aim was to examine the amount of reporting on the persecution of Christians in the period from January 1, 2018 to January 1, 2023 in comparison to the reporting of the *Catholic News Agency (KNA)*. In addition, a guided interview with an expert on religious freedom and the persecution of Christians was conducted to further deepen the topic.

Almost two-thirds of the world's population live in countries where religious freedom is severely violated. With at least 360 million people affected worldwide, Christians are the largest group – which is why there is currently talk of the greatest persecution of Christians of all time. Time and again, voices are raised criticizing the fact that this socially important issue does not receive enough public attention in the West.

The quantitative media analysis shows that the catholic *Die Tageszeitung* even reported more than the *KNA* during the same period. In contrast, the coverage of the other three newspapers is significantly lower. The results of the guided interviews show that the quantitative and qualitative reporting on the persecution of Christians is considered unsatisfactory. The following reasons for these deficits emerged: Even if the relevance of the topic itself is rated as high, this does not apply to the journalistic relevance, which is geared towards the interest of – increasingly secular – readers. Particularly among online readers, who are on average ten years younger, interest in religious topics is negligible. News factors such as proximity and thematization play a role, as do specific challenges such as the instrumentalization of the topic by right-wing populist movements and the difficulty of obtaining reliable information. The skills required to be able to write (qualitatively) about the topic include a certain level of *religious literacy* and *religious freedom literacy*, which, according to the interviewees, many journalists seem to have only to a limited extent. The journalist's biography and worldview can be important personal influencing factors. In addition, spontaneous, often unconscious associations with the topic of Christian persecution play a role. As part of foreign reporting – which meets with less reader interest than domestic reporting – the quantity and quality of the topic of persecution of Christians also suffers from the decline in budgets and the number of correspondents.

The results of this project are not representative due to the qualitative approach. Nevertheless, they can provide valuable insights into the editorial approach to the persecution of Christians and serve as a basis for further research.

1. Introduction

“We are currently witnessing the greatest persecution of Christians of all time”, says the international Christian aid organization *Open Doors* on its website (OD 2023c). According to *Open Doors* (2023b), Christians “are by far the largest group persecuted for their faith in absolute terms. World-wide, more than 360 million Christians are subject to intense persecution and discrimination because of their faith.” This corresponds to 13.8 percent of the global Christian population of 2.6 billion Christians (cf. Center for the Study of Global Christianity 2022).

There seems to be no improvement in sight. In the current year, three reports on the global situation of oppressed Christians have been published in Germany that give cause for concern: *The World Persecution Index* by *Open Doors* (see 2023a), *Religious Freedom Worldwide* by *Aid to the Church in Need* (see ACN 2023b), and the *3rd Ecumenical Report on Religious Freedom Worldwide* by the German Bishops’ Conference and the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (see 2023).

Although the persecution of Christians has become a global phenomenon – as a report on the subject commissioned by the British Foreign Office also states (cf. Mounstephen 2019, p. 6) – and has assumed genocidal proportions in certain regions of the world (cf. *ibid.*, p. 16 f.), it is repeatedly criticized that this issue does not receive enough public attention in the West. In an editorial entitled *Spectators at the carnage*, *The Times* (cf. 2014) criticizes the fact that the West is hardly standing up for the Christians under threat. There are also repeated voices criticizing the fact that the topic is underexposed in media coverage (cf. Mounstephen 2019, p. 17; cf. *The Washington Times* 2017). Archbishop Casmoussa from Mosul explains: “You would think that nothing escapes the media’s attention. But rarely do we learn about a very serious matter: the hardship that people suffer because of their religious beliefs. [...] The persecution of Christians in our time has developed into a real catastrophe. The media have so far largely ignored this catastrophe, almost as if a news blackout had been imposed” (Pelster 2008, p. 3).

However, topics that are less present in the media coverage hardly enter the public consciousness, all the more so as the public discourse space is increasingly influenced and controlled by the media (cf. Czerwick 1990, p. 181). However, anchoring the phenomenon of the persecution of Christians in the public consciousness would be important for various reasons. Some of them are illustrated in the report by the British Foreign Office (cf. Mounstephen 2019, p. 6): For example, the persecution of Christians violates one of the universal human rights – freedom of religion. In addition, the issue mainly affects the poorer world population, as Christianity is predominantly a phenomenon of the southern hemisphere. “Despite the impression those in the West might sometimes have to the contrary, the Christian faith is not primarily an expression of white Western privilege. [...] Western voices that are quick to speak up for the world’s poor cannot afford to be blind to this issue” (*ibid.*). If a minority is affected to such a significant extent by religiously motivated discrimination, it is not fair that

it receives so little public attention. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that ignoring the persecution of Christians also means neglecting the persecution of other minorities: “Because the Christian faith is perhaps the one truly global faith it has become a bellwether for repression more generally. If Christians are being discriminated against in one context or another you can be confident other minorities are too” (ibid., p. 7).

For these reasons, this study aims to examine the reporting on the socially important topic of the persecution of Christians in the 21st century. It is guided by the following two research questions:

1. “How do print and online editorial offices in Germany deal with the issue of Christian persecution?”

2. “What are the reasons for this contact?”

To answer these research questions, a total of seven guided interviews were conducted with print and online editors of the weekly newspapers *Die Zeit* and *Die Tagespost* and the daily newspapers *Die Welt* and *Kölner Stadtanzeiger* in June 2023.

Intensive research into the state of research on the topic of reporting on the persecution of Christians led to the conclusion that there do not appear to be any research projects on this topic in German-, English-, French- or Italian-speaking countries. This underlines the relevance of the present work, as it breaks new academic ground and can contribute to closing a research gap. Due to the lack of research – for obvious reasons, a separate chapter on this topic is not included – a preparatory quantitative media analysis and an interview with an international expert in the field of religious freedom and the study of Christian persecution, Christof Sauer (see FTH 2017), were conducted to explore the topic and create a guideline.

For the theory and methodology chapters, specialist literature from the fields of communication and political science as well as sociology was consulted. In addition, articles by experts in the field of religious freedom and publications by various governmental and non-governmental organizations, such as the United Nations, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees and the Christian aid organizations *Aid to the Church in Need* and *Open Doors* were consulted. In addition, the most important results of several studies on foreign reporting and the relationship between journalists and religion were summarized.

The study is divided into the following chapters: Theory, Method, Evaluation and Conclusion.

In the theory section, the most important aspects of reporting and the phenomenon of the persecution of Christians will be laid out. Therefore, the most important tasks of journalism and the necessity of news selection are addressed first. The news value theory, which explains the criteria for the selection of news by journalists, is also examined (cf. Schulz 2011, p. 92). As the current persecution of Christians is generally taking place outside Germany (cf. 2.5.3), structural features and challenges of foreign reporting in general are then considered.

The relationship of journalists to religion and religious topics is discussed below, as it “can hardly be denied that personal predispositions can be reflected in media reporting. Interests in topics often lead to increased thematization, disinterest to non-thematization” (Hafez 2002, p. 73).

This is followed by an in-depth discussion of the human right to religious freedom, as the issue of the persecution of Christians must be seen in the context of the violation of religious freedom. Finally, the current persecution of Christians will be presented. Due to its central importance for this work, most of the space will be devoted to it. This enables a more precise description of the phenomenon, emphasizes the importance of reporting on it and makes it easier to classify the statements from the interviews with the expert and the editors.

The methods section describes the preparatory quantitative media analysis as well as the selection of interview partners and the conduct of the guideline interviews. The presentation and justification of the guideline categories is moved to the printed appendix.

Following the evaluation of the quantitative media analysis, a category-based analysis of the guideline interviews will play an important role before the thesis concludes with a conclusion and outlook.

2. Theory

2.1 Journalism: tasks and decision-making processes

2.1.1 Social responsibility

Journalism has a responsibility to society (see Meier 2018, p. 250) and is a constitutive element of democracy (see *ibid.*, p. 16). One of its core tasks is to inform the public as comprehensively and objectively as possible: it should “draw attention to key issues and events so that joint discussions about social problems can be held. At the same time, it should offer the widest possible range of topics and opinions” (*ibid.*). Furthermore, it fulfils a critical and control function: “Abuses, wrong decisions, corruption or bureaucratic arbitrariness should be uncovered” (*ibid.*).

In this context, the media can exert significant influence on political decision-makers by creating publicity so that they react to grievances. The dynamic between the media and the political sphere, as described by Hafez (cf. 2002, p. 132), is also becoming increasingly important in the context of foreign reporting. “Today’s timely reporting on humanitarian crises, which is updated every minute, can put politicians [...] under pressure to act” (Heimprecht 2017, p. 3).

2.1.2 Topic selection

Every day, journalists are confronted with a flood of information, which makes it necessary to select and prioritize essential content (cf. Hooffacker and Meier 2017, p. 5). Many socially relevant topics are therefore underexposed in the media. This is also pointed out by the *News Enlightenment Initiative*, which annually draws attention to important topics “that are neglected by the German mass media” (Die Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung e. V.).

The novelty of an event, the factuality and the relevance are of decisive importance for the selection of topics (cf. Meier 2018, p. 14). The latter refers to the importance of the topics for the respective target group, possibly for society as a whole, and thus “to the (presumed) current interests of the audience” (ibid.).

If journalism were to proceed arbitrarily, it could not “fulfil its social orientation service” (ibid., p. 15). The so-called news factors serve as selection criteria: According to news value theory, an event has certain characteristics – the news factors – that define its news value. “The more pronounced a news factor is and the more of the factors apply to an event, the greater its chance of being considered news” (Schulz 2011, p. 92). Schulz (cf., p. 91) has defined six dimensions of news factors: status, valence, relevance, identification, consonance and dynamics. He assigned news factors to each of these dimensions.

In the following, only the most important factors will be mentioned, which often play a role in reporting on the persecution of Christians:

If the event takes place in a powerful and important country (news factor: elite nation), if it is mentioned publicly by a prominent person (elite person), if it involves a high level of open violence (aggression), if it is far-reaching (scope), if the event takes place geographically, politically or culturally close to Germany (proximity) and if Germans are affected (ethnocentrism), the probability that the event will find its way into the media is quite high. The fewer of these factors play a role, the less likely it is that an event will be classified as newsworthy by the editors. As the persecution of Christians is always a violation of religious freedom and therefore a threat to a human right enshrined in international law, the news factor of values also plays a role here. In Christian media such as *Die Tagespost*, the dimension of identification seems to be of great importance, as it can be assumed that readers feel connected to the fate of their fellow believers.

Kepplinger (1998, p. 19) points out that journalistic selection cannot be explained solely by news factors, i.e. characteristics of reality. It is also necessary to consider “the journalists’ perceptions of their newsworthiness”. He also emphasizes that although news factors are “a *conditio sine qua non* for positive selection decisions”, they do not explain why other topics with the same characteristics were not selected (cf. ibid., p. 22). According to Kepplinger (ibid., p. 26), the topics have a major influence “on the news value of the news factors.”

Key events do not normally modify the selection criteria (cf. ibid., p. 30). Although interest and therefore coverage increase in the short term, both then fall back to their previous level – with certain exceptions: Some key events initiate “topic-specific changes in the selection criteria” (ibid.). For example, the reactor accident at Chernobyl, after which environmental reporting was no longer the same as before (cf. ibid.).

2.2 Foreign reporting

“Reports on foreign countries are generally seen as part of current affairs reporting” (Herzog 2006, p. 37). Despite the important role of providing recipients with insights into global events and developments, however, the public’s interest is

“more focused on local and domestic news” (ibid.). Already at the end of the 1990s, a decline in foreign reporting was noted at the *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, which explained this with a change in demand (cf. Wilke 1998, p. 48).

2.2.1 News factors of proximity and elite nation

Some news factors play a special role in foreign reporting. Above all, the characteristics of countries must be taken into account. Since these are “(for the time being) basic entities of global society – in geographical, political, cultural and economic terms – countries characterize foreign news as settings and actors and distinguish them from domestic news. Therefore, characteristics of countries are the specific selection determinants of foreign news coverage” (Hagen et al. 1998, p. 59). Looking at Schulz’s list of news factors from 2011, proximity and elite nation are characteristics of countries, and thus two factors that are particularly important in foreign reporting. The latter can also be described as the “power status of a country” (ibid., p. 78). This refers to the ability of a country to “influence any other country” (ibid.).

The foreign news coverage of 38 countries – including Germany (cf. Wilke 1998, p. 39) – was examined in the broad international comparative *foreign news study* initiated by UNESCO in 1995 (cf. Hagen et al. 1998, pp. 60–61; Heimprecht 2017, p. 5). This study, as well as its predecessor from 1979, shows “that not every country receives the same attention [...]. While the USA receives worldwide media attention, some countries almost never appear in the news [...].” (Heimprecht 2017, p. 5). Sreberny (1985, p. 52) speaks of “areas of invisibility” and Herzog (2006, p. 39) of “‘white spots’ on the world map of reporting”. Due to the importance of news factors, it can be assumed that this is due, among other things, to the news factors of proximity and elite nation.

2.2.2 Structural features of foreign reporting

In addition, six structural characteristics of foreign news reporting should be mentioned here, which Hafez (cf. 2002, pp. 58–67) summarizes as results of the *Foreign News Study* of 1995: Regionalism played a role in almost all countries, meaning that most foreign news originated from regions in which the reporting country was located. Conflict perspectives and a focus on politics were also very pronounced. The elite focus in foreign reporting means a concentration on official elites or counter-elites (such as rebels) and marginalizes social groups, movements and the population (cf. ibid., p. 64). The structural feature of “decontextualization, i.e. the neglect of political, economic, social and cultural cause-effect relationships [...] is to be found on various levels: It is the result of space, time and relevance specifications of the media organizations as well as the process of information procurement and the journalist’s varying degrees of contextual competence. It is also the result of the consumer’s generally low level of contextual knowledge about foreign contexts, so that it can be assumed that there is a far greater need for contextual information in foreign reporting than in domestic reporting” (ibid., p. 65). A final point is the non-representation of struc-

tural problems of international relations, which according to Hafez (ibid., p.67) is a sub-aspect of decontextualization, as well as the “fact that media reporting is often event-oriented and less process-oriented.”

2.2.3 Challenges

Herzog (cf. 2006, p. 39) notes that the unbalanced reporting results from the limited resources of the editorial offices in the area of foreign reporting. According to Hafez (cf. 2002, p. 96), due to the lack of resources and the informational framework conditions, the editorial offices have to rely heavily on agency reports. According to him, these represent at least 50 percent of the sources of foreign reporting. In an article by Deutschlandfunk, Michael Thumann (see Schäfers 2018), foreign affairs correspondent for *Die Zeit*, expresses the view that the lack of reporting from many parts of the world is not only linked to a lack of resources in the editorial offices, but also to the educational backgrounds, language skills and cultural affinities of the editors. The editorial argument that readers are less interested in foreign news is not convincing, as media should provide “comprehensive and balanced information” (ibid.) so that users can open themselves up to new topics. Editors need courage to overcome resistance from colleagues (cf. ibid.).

The study *Das Verblässen der Welt* by the Otto Brenner Foundation from 2022 confirms the results of the *Foreign News study* and illustrates its topicality. The journalist and long-time foreign correspondent Marc Engelhardt (2022, pp. 1–2) examined “the foreign reporting of 23 regional and national German newspapers over a period of ten years” for the study and conducted interviews with correspondents (cf. ibid., p. 2) and found that foreign reporting is in a crisis that has resulted in “an increasingly distorted and fading picture of the world” (ibid., p. 5). In view of the results of the study, the frequently expressed assertion that “half of the world does not take place in foreign reporting” seems almost an understatement (ibid., p. 15). Engelhardt (cf. ibid., p. 28) outlines five decisive factors which, in his opinion, are responsible for the crisis in foreign reporting: The decrease in correspondents, the thinning out of foreign pages, the downsizing of budgets and editorial offices, the increase in barriers and – linked to this – that of propaganda. Barriers refers to efforts by “authorities in many capitals of the world” (ibid., p. 36) to make the work of correspondents more difficult or to prevent it, as they are aware of the importance of critical and high-quality foreign reporting for their reputation. Due to the increase in propaganda, “correspondents [...] in some countries are working against an information machine” (ibid., p. 41), which is intended to influence the foreign public.

Jürgen Stryjak notes in an interview with Engelhardt as part of the same study that the strong interest of editors in crises and wars would have the disadvantage of “tunnel vision” (ibid., p. 34). As a result, there is no longer any room for everyday topics and stories that are important for understanding countries and societies. This is problematic because “a large part of reality is lost if you only really look when things are going wrong” (ibid.).

In a commentary, Arne Perras (2017) of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* expresses concern about the lack of interest in the fate of people in disadvantaged countries in the western world: “Those who have the task of reporting from distant worlds sometimes have irritating experiences. When you work in poor countries, you see many things that cry out to heaven. But does anyone at home, in distant Europe, want to read, hear or see this? [...] If media attention is also an indicator of a society’s values, Europe has a few things to worry about. [...] Certainly, it will never be possible to attract attention to all the victims in the world. But a little more balance would do us good. It would be a sign that the rich world of the West considers human dignity to be universal and indivisible.”

Overall, it can therefore be said that many regions of the world are not included in reporting due to a lack of resources and growing obstacles. This and a pronounced conflict perspective lead to a narrow view of the world. More balanced foreign reporting would be desirable, also so that violations of human dignity receive more attention and readers can open up to new topics.

2.3 Journalists and religion

As already mentioned, journalists’ personal interests also influence whether or not they take up a topic (cf. Hafez 2002, p. 73). Editors-in-chief, department heads or (department) colleagues can also influence the selection (cf. Czerwick 1990, p. 183). For example, the editor-in-chief of a free newspaper explained in a guided interview as part of the Swiss research project *Role of the mass media in the clash of cultures* “that the topic of religion is ‘not treated with the necessary intensity’ in his newspaper because he himself is ‘not a religious person’” (Dahinden and Wyss 2009, p. 132).

Even when journalists strive for balance and impartiality, the way they report a story, including its religious aspects, can also be influenced by their life history and worldview (cf. van Ginneken 1998, p. 66; Mitchell and Afshari 2021, p. 24).

As the topic of Christian persecution is socially relevant and is often closely interwoven with the politics of a country (see 2.5.3), it is obvious that it is mainly political editors who report on the topic, who are not usually specialized in religious issues. However, they are inevitably confronted with religion – especially Christianity – when it comes to this particular topic. Given the possible impact of journalists’ personal attitudes and professional expertise on their reporting, this subchapter aims to compile findings and studies on the relationship between journalists and religion.

2.3.1 Value of the topic of religion

The results of the 2012 research project *Religion among opinion makers – The significance of religious orientations among opinion-forming elites in Germany* show that the “significance of religion for their own lifestyle varies among the elite journalists surveyed, with the majority tending towards the pole of irrelevance” (Gärtner et al. 2012, p. 261). With regard to the role of religion in report-

ing, these journalists unanimously emphasize that religion does not occupy a special position and is subject to the same criteria as other topics (cf. *ibid.*, p. 259).

In the aforementioned Swiss research project, the journalists surveyed attributed a high level of social relevance to the topic of religion, but nevertheless stated that it had “little news value” (Dahinden and Wyss 2009, p. 132). It gains journalistic relevance when it can be “coupled with conflicting political or economic perspectives” (*ibid.*, p. 134).

Interesting results are also provided by a study commissioned by the *Faith and Media Initiative*: “The [...] Global Faith and Media Study reveals a worldwide deficit in the coverage, treatment and quality of understanding faith and religion in modern society” (Faith and Media Initiative 2022, p. 23). The study surveyed 9,000 people from all over the world and conducted 30 in-depth interviews with media representatives from 18 countries who report on the world’s most important religions (cf. *ibid.*, p. 2).

The results show that 82 % of the 9,000 respondents consider themselves to be religious, devout or spiritual. 53 % of them are of the opinion that reporting actively ignores religion as an aspect of today’s society and culture (cf. *ibid.*, p. 5).

The journalists surveyed are also of the opinion that the topic of faith is becoming less important in reporting: “Journalists feel that coverage of faith and religion is poor, inconsistent, and becoming more marginalized” (*ibid.*). One reason cited is tight budgets, which lead to a lack of specialist journalists in newsrooms. On the other hand, there is a certain fear in editorial offices of reporting something wrong about religion. The often very rapid reporting implies the tacit acceptance that the time and resources available make a differentiated and sensitive treatment of the topic impossible. In addition, editorial teams rarely represent the diversity of religious views in society. Journalists with a strong religious background felt that they would be judged negatively if they reported on topics related to their faith, fearing that this could raise questions about their impartiality and damage their reputation. There was also a consensus that faith and religion – except in the case of controversies and scandals – are not seen as a driving force for reader engagement (cf. *ibid.*, p. 7).

2.3.2 Religious literacy

The US scientist Rubin (2009, S. 47) writes in his article *Three decades of misreporting Iran and Iraq*: “Particularly in the Middle East, war, politics, and religion can be so intertwined as to be inseparable. In any story the devil is often in the details, and as journalists rush to produce seven-hundred-word copy, they can seldom address theology in detail, but failure to understand the nuances of religion can lead to misanalysis and an artificial emphasis on political and diplomatic motivations.” He notes that many American and European journalists are predominantly secular. “Reporters may have grown up in a society separating religion from politics, and journalists may separate religion from their daily life” (*ibid.*, p. 64). However, in order to convey conflicts accurately, Western cor-

respondents should immerse themselves deeply in religious debates in order to understand the background to the events they want to describe (cf. *ibid.*). The American religion journalist Green-Ahmanson (cf. 2009, pp. 165–166) also emphasizes that for many journalists religion – in contrast to money, sex, ambition and power – is not a credible explanation for human behaviour.

In 2021, the British *All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religion in the Media* published the final report of its study *Learning To Listen – Inquiry into Religious Literacy in Print and Broadcast Media*. The starting point is the researchers' finding that many Britons share the view that an incorrect presentation of religious content in the media is widespread (see APPG 2021, p. 4). In the study, *religious literacy* is defined as a broad knowledge of world religions, including their history, beliefs and interaction with society, as well as respect for religion and belief as a valid source of guidance and knowledge for the majority of the world's population (cf. *ibid.*, p. 17). Thus, *religious literacy* is essential for understanding our societies (cf. *ibid.*, p. 4). The study proposes integrating the teaching of *religious literacy* as standard in the ethics modules of journalism training and establishing it as a fixed component of continuing professional development (cf. *ibid.*, p. 10).

Academic researchers Mitchell and Afshari (2021, p. 23) point out the difficulties in developing better *religious literacy*, which often lie in a lack of time and resources, as well as in “audience expectations, complex networks, pressurized environments, communicative contexts and journalists existing worldviews.”

2.4 Religious freedom

The most important aspects of the human right to religious freedom, which are also helpful for understanding and classifying the phenomenon of the persecution of Christians, are outlined below.

2.4.1 Human rights and religious freedom

Human rights are rights to which people are entitled not on the basis of achievements, positions or memberships, but solely on the basis of their humanity (cf. Bielefeldt and Wiener 2020, p. 27). These include freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance” (UN General Assembly 1948). However, the UDHR is not binding under international law. The situation is different with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of 1966, which also guarantees freedom of religion under Article 18 (see UNHCR 2018, p. 7).

Human rights are based on “the three principles of inalienability, universality and indivisibility” (Voges 2022). This means that they cannot be revoked, that they apply to all people and that human rights are mutually complementary (cf. *ibid.*).

Religious freedom is always closely linked to the comprehensive protection of human rights: Where it is respected, other freedoms such as freedom of expression and information as well as freedom of assembly and association are also guaranteed. Where religious freedom is violated, other freedoms are often violated as well (cf. Pöttering 2017, p. 12). Religious freedom is therefore “an essential part and prerequisite of a democratic civil society” (DBK & EKD 2023, p. 58).

Even if freedom of religion is sometimes regarded as antiquated in “religion-distanced circles” (DBK 05.07.2023, p. 2), Heiner Bielefeldt, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, emphasizes: “Just as freedom of religion must always be seen in the overall context of human rights, human rights can only develop their full human potential in the context of religious freedom [...] It expresses the fact that people are beings who can be determined by fundamental convictions and can orient their lives accordingly. Without recognizing this central dimension of being human, human rights could ultimately not do justice to human beings; they would cease to be ‘human’ in the comprehensive sense” (ibid.).

2.4.2 Essential aspects of religious freedom

Contrary to a common misunderstanding, religious freedom does not defend religious communities, institutions, practices or a prescribed morality. The subject of religious freedom is solely the individual, whose dignity is protected (cf. Bielefeldt 2014, pp. 121–122). Freedom of religion thus also includes “the right to challenge the religious self-understandings of other people and groups, to ask critical questions, to formulate non-violent provocations and to engage in missionary activity” (ibid., pp. 128–129). These aspects, but also the possibility of conversion, are the “test question” (ibid., p. 131) as to whether religious freedom actually prevails in a state.

The scope of freedom of religion must be broad: “Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms ‘belief’ and ‘religion’ are to be broadly construed” (UNHRC 1993, para. 2). Thus, positive and negative religious freedom are inextricably linked. The latter protects an individual from being “coerced into a religious or philosophical belief or practice against his or her will” (Bielefeldt 2014, pp. 132–133).

The state is the formal guarantor of human rights: it has “obligations to respect, protect and guarantee” (ibid., p. 124) and thus the duty not only to respect religious freedom in its own actions, but also to defend it against attacks emanating from others. State restrictions on religious freedom, on the other hand, are subject to strict criteria (cf. ibid., p. 123).

2.4.3 Violations of religious freedom: phenomena and actors

Violations of religious freedom can be seen as a four-stage process, ranging from intolerance, discrimination and persecution to genocide. Intolerance is difficult to measure, “as it is often understood as a ‘perceived climate’”. Discrimination occurs when laws or regulations do not apply to everyone, but only to a specific group (see ACN 2021c). These two forms of violation of religious free-

dom occur in all areas of life: “in courtrooms and prisons, in state authorities, in hospitals and psychiatric institutions, at work and at school [...], on the streetcar and sometimes even in the circle of one’s own family. They manifest themselves in [...] stigmatizing media reports, social prejudice, acts of vandalism and other forms” (Bielefeldt and Wiener 2020, p. 152). As many incidents are difficult to research and classify, publicly reported human rights violations are probably “only the tip of an ‘iceberg’” (ibid.).

The term persecution is also difficult to define. “There is no universally accepted definition of ‘persecution’, and various attempts to formulate such a definition have met with little success. From Article 33 of the 1951 Convention, it may be inferred that a threat to life or freedom on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group is always persecution. Other serious violations of human rights – for the same reasons – would also constitute persecution” (UNHCR 1992, paragraph 51). According to *Aid to the Church in Need*, acts of persecution can be cumulative, they “do not have to be ‘systematic’ or follow a specific strategy” (ACN 2023a). In order to be considered religious persecution, religion must be the main motive for the persecution – even if other motives are often involved and overlap (cf. Tieszen 2011, p. 41).

The final stage in the violation of religious freedom is genocide – the ultimate form of persecution with the intention “to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such” (United Nations 1948).

The actors responsible for violations of religious freedom can be the state, local non-state actors and multinational criminal or terrorist organizations (see ACN 2021c). Among the many causes of violations of religious freedom, three main motives can be identified. “(1) the enforcement of religious truth or purity claims; (2) the maintenance of a national identity defined by a religious-cultural heritage; and (3) the control obsessions of authoritarian governments” (Bielefeldt and Wiener 2020, p. 158). There are of course overlaps between these motives, and other factors are often also involved (cf. ibid.).

2.4.4 Actual developments

Most states have acceded to the ICCPR – “even states from which one would not necessarily expect this” (Oehring 2017, p. 15) such as North Korea, Eritrea and China. However, this does not necessarily guarantee that the state in question will comply with the ICCPR requirements, as terms such as freedom of religion are interpreted differently in the constitutions of many states (cf. ibid., pp. 15–16). The current report *Religious Freedom Worldwide* by *Aid to the Church in Need* (cf. ACN 2023b, p. 4) speaks of 61 countries with a total of 4.9 billion people in which religious freedom is seriously violated. Although “more massive and targeted persecution than in the past” (ibid.) took place during the reporting period, “the international community is reacting with increasing restraint to acts of violence by ‘strategically important’ autocratic regimes (such as in China and India)” (ibid.). This points to the development of a “culture of impunity” (ibid.).

According to Willy Fautré (see 2023), Director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, the recently appointed EU Special Representative for Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union, Frans van Daele, stated in June 2023 that the defense and promotion of religious freedom in Europe faces some major obstacles: Indifference and ignorance. Fautré criticizes the fact that religious freedom in Europe is generally treated as a weaker link in the family of human rights, although its protagonists consider it the mother of all other freedoms.

On the one hand, according to the *3rd Ecumenical Report on Religious Freedom Worldwide* (cf. DBK & EKD 2023, p. 121), progressive secularization seems to be contributing to the fact that there is also less understanding among decision-makers. On the other hand, “it can be observed that right-wing populist and extremist forces in Germany, Europe and worldwide are increasingly trying to appropriate the concept of religious freedom and the commitment to persecuted Christians for themselves” (ibid., p. 71–72). This has the potential to increase reservations about religious freedom in secular, liberal and left-wing circles. As a result, religious freedom threatens to develop into a “toxic issue” (ibid., p. 78). As a result, more and more actors are withdrawing from their commitment to religious freedom for fear of being associated with right-wing populist and extremist forces (cf. ibid.). A retreat would nevertheless mean giving such forces even more space. The report argues that all parts of society should actively combat right-wing extremist appropriation and visibly stand up for freedom of religion and ideology (cf. ibid., p. 79).

Obstacles to public awareness of violations of religious freedom therefore include ignorance, indifference, lack of understanding, reservations and fear of possible appropriation.

2.5 Persecution of Christians

One aspect of the broad topic of violations of religious freedom is the worldwide persecution of Christians in the 21st century. Of all the different faiths that suffer persecution, Christians, as the largest religious community worldwide, are the most affected (see German Bundestag, p. 3).

2.5.1 Definition

First of all, a distinction can be made between specific, exclusive persecution of Christians and their involvement in broader religious persecution phenomena. When looking at the countries in which Christians are affected by religious persecution today, it becomes clear that they are currently never the only persecuted religious group (cf. Klingberg 2019, p. 245). However, as this study focuses on Christians, the term persecution of Christians is used, knowing full well that it is not exclusive to Christians, but that they are always affected by persecution alongside other religious groups.

A precise definition of Christian persecution is similarly challenging as the definition of persecution (see 2.4.3). Here too, there is no uniform definition. Depending on the interests at stake, a broad or narrow definition is used: “Sociologically and theologically, people are interested in the existential significance of perse-

cution in its entirety” (Sauer 2020, p. 55), while legal approaches in international criminal and refugee law lead to a narrow use of the concept of persecution in order to reduce the responsibility of third countries to the minimum of the most serious cases (cf. *ibid.*).

Narrow definitions limit the term to “systematic, state or official or intensive persecution of Christians” (*ibid.*, p. 54). An example of a broad definition is that of the Christian aid organization *Open Doors* (2022a, p. 7): “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.”

According to the aid organization (cf. *ibid.*), the idea that persecution must necessarily be violent underestimates the subtle power of culture, which over time can lead to Christians being gradually pushed out of social life. For this reason, the phenomena mentioned in the *Open Doors* definition should be considered fundamental to the concept of persecution of Christians in this work. Since journalism primarily perceives “salient events” (Meier 2018, p. 183), especially if they correspond to the news factor aggression (cf. 2.1.2), these various phenomena should be divided into bloodless and bloody ones. This is similar to the categorization of *Open Doors* (2023a, p. 362) into the two main forms of persecution, which can be described as “‘squeeze’ ([...] constant pressure on Christians in all areas of life) and ‘smash’ (violent attacks)”. This distinction is important with regard to the guided interviews in order to be able to discuss the different journalistic treatment of the two types of persecution with the expert and the editors.

2.5.2 Complexity of the phenomenon

Max Klingberg (2019, p. 245), a former employee of the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR), emphasizes that the persecution of Christians is complex and does not follow a “simple black and white pattern globally”. In the following, the most important aspects of this complexity will be briefly addressed.

Christians are not the only ones who are persecuted in the respective countries. In addition, often not all Christians within a country are affected: Different Christian denominations are “often treated completely differently” (*ibid.*, p. 246). Christian communities that do not have a long-standing tradition in a country often face significantly greater challenges compared to the established churches that have been rooted there for centuries. This often results from the missionary work of the former (cf. *ibid.*, p. 269). Furthermore, foreign Western Christians are generally treated more favorably than local Christians as long as they do not engage in missionary work (cf. *ibid.*, p. 267 f.). The situation for Christians within a country can also vary greatly depending on the region, which is partly due to different ethnic constellations and provincial governments (cf. *ibid.*, p. 266 f.).

Another factor that contributes to the complexity is the fact that the persecution of Christians is often not only based on religious grounds, even if these are often central. Economic interests, ethnic identity and similar aspects also play a role (cf. *ibid.*, p. 272, p. 278).

2.5.3 *Situation of persecuted Christians: facts and figures*

Aid to the Church in Need (ACN 2021a, p. 1) stated in 2021 that the persecution of Christians “has increased dramatically and reached a level rarely seen before. In the current global situation, an easing is hardly to be expected for the time being”. In mid-2023, the *International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance*, to which 37 countries belong, published a declaration in which it stated, among other things, that reports of intolerance and harassment against Christians are increasing around the world (cf. Marshall 2023).

With regard to information on the number of persecuted Christians worldwide, Sauer (cf. 2019b, p. 142) warns that due to the complex nature of the topic, this must be done with the utmost care. Attempts to quantify persecution could ultimately only be approximations of the actual reality (cf. Sauer 2021, p. 230); approximations that, however, served as “alarm bells” (Sauer 2019a). Estimates of the Christians affected depended on the one hand on the definition of Christian persecution used and on the other hand on estimates of the number of Christians in populous countries (cf. Sauer 2019b, p. 142). However, the latter are very problematic, as there are no precise figures in countries such as China. Max Klingberg (2019, p. 254) emphasizes the same problem: “Various governmental and non-governmental figures and ‘estimates’ on the number of Christians in China vary from around 19 million to over 120 million people! This fluctuation alone far exceeds the number of all Christians in North Africa, the Middle East and the Middle East combined.”

Aid organizations such as *Open Doors*, which publish figures on persecuted Christians, therefore only ever give a minimum number (cf. Sauer 2021, p. 229). According to the most recent publication of the *World Persecution Index*, this figure is 360 million (cf. OD 2023a, p. 8).

Although hate crimes against Christians also take place in Europe – for the year 2021, the *Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians* (see 2022) documented over 500 anti-Christian hate crimes in 19 European countries, including 14 physical attacks and 4 murders, although it is assumed that the number of unreported cases is higher – most incidents occur outside European borders: Asian countries such as North Korea, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, China, Iraq and Qatar are among the 50 most affected countries according to the *World Persecution Index* published in 2023. In Africa, countries such as Somalia, Eritrea, Libya, Nigeria, Sudan, Egypt, Mali and Burkina Faso are affected, and in Latin America, Colombia, Cuba and Nicaragua, among others (see Open Doors 2023a, p. 7).

In the following sections, the most important actors in the persecution of Christians will be named; on this occasion, a brief look will also be taken at some selected countries.

“Various forms of Islam [...], whether as a state religion or as an Islamist movement”, are primarily responsible for the persecution of Christians in most of the countries concerned (Sauer 2019b, p. 140–141; cf. Klingberg 2019, p. 273). In Nigeria alone, where *Boko Haram* is very active, around 5,000 Christians were murdered for their faith within one year – more than in any other country in the world in the same period (cf. OD 2023a, p. 8). In Iraq, the genocide perpetrated by the Islamic State in the Nineveh Plains caused the Christian population to decline by almost 90 percent within a generation (cf. Mounstephen 2019, p. 17; cf. ACN 2023c, p. 54).

Other actors in the persecution of Christians are extremist followers of Hinduism and Buddhism, whose actions are based on religiously motivated nationalism (see OD 2023a, p. 385). In the years around 2008, Sauer wrote in 2019, “around 50,000 Christians were driven from their homes in the Indian state of Odisha, and around 500 died as a result of the violence. To this day, the survivors live as refugees in their own country, mostly in tent cities” (Sauer 2019b, p. 140–141). Violent attacks on Christians and church institutions continue in India (see ACN 2021a, p. 5). In Buddhist Myanmar, there have been repeated attacks by the military on civilians in recent years, especially on Christian villages and churches; Christian helpers and pastors have been killed (cf. OD 2022b).

Open Doors also mentions communist oppression as an important driving force behind the persecution of Christians. At this point, it should be noted that totalitarian government systems “suppress any group that could endanger the state’s monopoly on power” (ACN 2021a, p. 2). For example, the Chinese Communist Party strives to sinicize religions and demands their adaptation to party ideology – under strict state control through state-of-the-art technologies (cf. ACN 2023b, p. 21). However, *Open Doors* (cf. 2023 a, p. 387) also reports on targeted violence against Christians, for example in North Korea’s prison camps.

2.5.4 Two groups particularly affected: Converts and women

Two groups that are particularly hard hit by the persecution are Muslims who convert to Christianity and Christian women and girls.

Klingberg (2019, p. 271) emphasizes: “In the vast majority of Islamic states, [the freedom to adopt a different faith] is not even rudimentary. The hypocrisy with which representatives of these states [...] speak of religious freedom is sheer cynicism to the victims’ ears.” Converts usually hide their new faith from their own families (cf. *ibid.*, p. 270). In Iran, for example, they can expect to be expelled from the family and/or denounced to the security forces by family members, and thus lose their job or be imprisoned. Death sentences are not excluded (see BAMF 2019, p. 9–11).

In many countries, Christian women suffer from a double marginalization due to their gender and their religion (see Mounstephen 2019, p. 20). According to a study by *Aid to the Church in Need* on abductions, forced conversions and sexual exploitation of Christian women and girls, 95% of those held captive by Islamist extremists are Christian women. Overall, the data situation is poor, as the

women often remain silent out of fear. Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence to prove the alarming severity of this gender-specific persecution of Christians and to point to a human rights catastrophe (see ACN 2021b, p. 2).

2.5.5 Commitment towards persecuted Christians

The *International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance* emphasizes: “Many in the world, including in the media, still suppose that Christianity is White and Western, even though three-quarters of active Christians live outside the West. We need to be continually reminded of the persecution of Christians.” (Marshall 2023) Bishop Scheuer of Linz complains that so-called political correctness shows little interest in the current persecution of Christians. Thus, the topic “meets with an almost uncanny disregard” (*Die Tagespost* 2018). Open Doors (2023d) notes: “When it comes to religious freedom for Christians, this is largely ignored by Western governments and media. If a holy book is burned in a Western country – which is reprehensible – there are media earthquakes and an emergency meeting of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. In contrast, thousands of Christians murdered by Islamists often don’t even seem to be worth a marginal note.” Islam scholar Breuer (2015, p. 145) also confirms this observation and states: “Especially in the liberal or even religion-critical milieu, one sometimes gets the impression that it is downright embarrassing to stand up for Christians and show solidarity with them.” And the Islamic scholar Steinbach (2008) emphasizes that many Christians in the Middle East feel “left alone”.

One reason for this could be that “accusations of persecution of Christians in the Middle East [...] are countered with references to Islamophobic tendencies in Europe” (Bielefeldt and Wiener 2020, p. 28). In any case, it is clear that the same trend of low public attention can be observed in the area of the persecution of Christians as with the topic of religious freedom in general (cf. 2.4.4). According to Volker Kauder (cf. 2020, p. 136), public awareness would be important in order to signal to the victims that their suffering is not being ignored. States that oppressed Christian minorities thus received the clear message that they were being critically observed: The concern of being exposed internationally as human rights violators could provide an incentive for improvement. And finally, “public awareness is a prerequisite for political and civil society commitment to religious freedom” (ibid.).

3. Method

The central method of this work consists of guidelines for print and online editors of four selected newspapers. The editor interviews were preceded by an explorative quantitative media analysis and an expert interview.

3.1 Preparatory quantitative media analysis

The aim of the quantitative media analysis was to determine the extent to which the newspapers *Die Zeit*, *ksta*, *Die Welt* and *Die Tagespost* report on the persecution of Christians, measured against the extent of reporting by the *Catholic News Agency (KNA)*. The latter was chosen as a point of reference because

the four newspapers claim to have subscribed to the *KNA reports* and the *KNA* regularly reports on the persecution of Christians. However, it should not be forgotten that the *KNA* also selects news and therefore does not report on all events, and that it is not the only source of these newspapers on the subject of the persecution of Christians. It is therefore not a perfect basis for comparison – its reporting can only serve as a point of reference.

Once the newspapers and editors for this study had been determined, the start of the study period was set for 01.01.2018, as *Die Tagespost* has only had a daily online presence since the end of 2017. It therefore made sense to set the end of the study period to 01.01.2023 so that the period is exactly five years.

Quantitative research “makes quantifying statements about as many cases as possible for a limited number of characteristics” (Methodenportal KU 2023c). In this case, only one characteristic was examined: the number of articles on the persecution of Christians in the respective newspaper in the specified period.

An initial pre-test revealed that the word persecution of Christians rarely appeared in the texts. For example, the journalists spoke of attacks or massacres; they therefore named the relevant events without placing them in the context of the persecution of Christians. The search terms were therefore adapted to several phenomena of persecution of Christians (see 2.5.1). Further pretests showed that many search results were irrelevant if the word stem *Christians** was too far away from the other terms. Therefore, the distance operator “w/5” was introduced, which ensures that *Christen** is not more than five words away from the other terms. In addition, certain terms that could mislead the search were filtered out using the operator *and not*. The following search term combination was therefore used on the *Nexis Uni* research platform to find articles on the persecution of Christians from *KNA*, *Zeit*, *Welt* and *ksta*:

Christians w/5 and persecuted* or discrim* or attent* or oppress* or hate or attack* or attacked or abducted* or killed or die* or died or oppress* or died and not letter to the editor and not euthanasia and not punishment.*

As *Nexis Uni* does not list *Die Tagespost* as a source, the website www.die-tag-espost.de was only searched for the term Christian persecution. Although this does not allow full comparability with the other search results, the problem of the first pre-test hardly seemed to exist with *Die Tagespost* and the search term “Christenverfolgung” (persecution of Christians) seemed sufficient, since as a Catholic newspaper it generally identified and named events in connection with the persecution of Christians as such.

3.2 Qualitative method – guided interview

In order to answer the research questions, a qualitative and thus inductive method was chosen. In the inductive approach, “conclusions are drawn from the particular to the general” (Methodenportal KU 2023c), which is particularly helpful when the research project breaks new empirical ground, as is the case with this work: “The inductive approach makes sense when an area of reality has been little researched [...]: We then first observe the relevant subject area with the ‘principle of openness’ [...], systematize individual cases and try to form

lawful connections from them” (Meier 2018, p. 41). In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research does not aim to make universally valid statements, “but rather to look at a small number of actors with their different subjective perspectives” (Methodenportal KU 2023c). In this study, seven journalists convey their perspective on the topic of Christian persecution and provide an insight into their editorial approach to it. Based on these individual cases, it is possible to generalize “cautiously” (Meier 2018, p. 47).

The aim of the research is to gain a better insight into the complexity of reporting on the persecution of Christians. To this end, the qualitative interview is used as a research method, as it helps to capture deeper contexts. The semi-structured interview was chosen in order to give the interviewees space for their views and still maintain structure. Here, a guideline serves as orientation for the interviewer, whereby questions and sequence can be flexibly adapted if necessary (cf. Methodenportal KU 2023b). In the interviews with the editors, this ensured that the most important topics were asked of all of them, which was important for the comparability of the interviews (cf. Methodenportal KU 2023a). Due to the flexibility, it was possible to respond to the statements of the interviewees and ask follow-up questions. As the expert and the editors were familiar with interview situations and detailed answers were expected, planned main or contingency questions were deliberately omitted if they seemed superfluous due to the explanations of the interviewees or other circumstances (cf. Mikos and Wegener 2017, p. 308; cf. Scholl 2018, p. 71).

3.3 Presentation of the expert guideline

The thematic blocks of the expert interviews serve to approach and classify the topic of reporting on the persecution of Christians. In addition, a scientific perspective, which is not guided by everyday practical questions like a journalistic one, was expected to provide both a bird’s eye view and a deeper insight, which may prove fruitful for the evaluation of the research project.

The following topics were addressed in the expert interview: Relevance of the topic, problem of audience habituation and saturation, various aspects of reporting (quantity, quality, development, forms of presentation, length), reasons for the relatively low level of reporting – identified in the quantitative media analysis – and ideas for improvement, comparison with other countries, occasions for reporting on Christian persecution and the definition of Christian persecution.

As some of the questions served more to explore the field than to directly answer the research questions, the corresponding answers are only included in the analysis to the extent that they can be assigned to the categories developed later (see pp. 48–51).

3.4 Presentation of the guidelines for editors (print and online)

Once the terrain had taken shape through the expert interview, three sub-questions were formulated to concretize the research questions mentioned at the beginning:

- 1. what can be said about the quantity and type (quality and forms of presentation) of reporting on the persecution of Christians?**
- 2. could the following aspects be possible reasons for the amount and type of reporting on Christian persecution? Definition of Christian persecution, sources on Christian persecution, assessment of the relevance of the topic, occasions for reporting, selection criteria, specific challenges with this topic, competence in matters of religion and religious freedom, personal influencing factors of the journalist, goal(s) of reporting, target group, general development of foreign reporting?**
- 3. to what extent do print and online reporting on the persecution of Christians differ?**

The aspects of the first two sub-questions were included in the guidelines for print editors, while those of the third sub-question were included in the guidelines for online editors. However, the latter was also included in the guide for print editors, as the availability of online editors was uncertain at the time. A total of 21 categories were derived from both guidelines, which are listed and explained in the printed appendix (see pp. 48–51).

In view of the lack of research literature, the assumptions of the sub-questions are based on self-reflection, literature, media analysis and expert interviews. The similarity of the sub-questions, the questions in the guidelines for print and online editors and the derived categories makes a separate explanation of the sub-questions superfluous, which is why this is dispensed with.

The guided interviews aim to ask the editors about their practice, experiences, opinions and interpretations in relation to reporting on the persecution of Christians, without focusing on their own publications on this topic.

3.5 A selection and presentation of newspapers and interview partners

The expert interviewed was Christof Sauer, who held the professorship for religious freedom and the study of the persecution of Christians at the Freie Theologische Hochschule in Gießen from 2017 to 2022 (cf. IIRF-D 2023) and whose specific knowledge is therefore important for this study (cf. Gläser and Laudel 2012, p. 43). Through the conversation with him, “background and contextual knowledge” (cf. Methodenportal KU 2023b) could be acquired, on the basis of which the guideline interviews with the editors could be prepared in a more targeted and competent manner and their answers could be better classified.

The selection of journalists was based on the selection of newspapers. The aim was to include a broad spectrum of newspapers with different political orientations in order to gain insights into their different approaches to the topic of the persecution of Christians. Print journalists were then identified who had already reported on the topic of Christian persecution or who could be considered due to their area of responsibility. However, contacting them proved to be difficult, as several, including journalists from the *Tageszeitung (taz)*, the *Süd-*

deutsche Zeitung and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, did not respond to the requests. As a result, the range of different orientations is somewhat smaller than originally planned. Nevertheless, it was possible to recruit editors from *Die Zeit*, *ksta*, *Welt* and *Die Tagespost* for this study.

Guided interviews were conducted with one print editor and one online editor from each of these four newspapers, with the exception of *Die Welt*: Here, the print editor was of the opinion that he could also answer questions about the digital offering, so that a separate interview with an online editor from *Die Welt* did not appear necessary.

The newspapers and interviewees are briefly introduced below: With 610,983 copies sold (cf. IVW 2023c), the national weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* has the highest circulation compared to the other three newspapers. Its orientation is considered liberal (cf. Deutschland-Portal 2012). One of the print editors of *Die Zeit* who reports most on the persecution of Christians is Ulrich Ladurner, editor of the Politics section. He was a war correspondent for over 20 years and has reported from Kosovo, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq, among other places (cf. Zeit Online 2015). Since 2016, he has been reporting from Brussels as a European correspondent (see Zeit Reisen 2020). Hannes Leitlein, who studied theology and was deputy editor-in-chief at *Zeit Christ & Welt* before moving to the *ZEITmagazin Online – Sinn* department, was interviewed as online editor (see Zeit Online 2014).

The *ksta* is the largest regional daily newspaper in the greater Cologne area (cf. Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger 2020). Together with the *Kölnische Rundschau*, it has a paid circulation of 176,958 copies (cf. IVW 2023d). Its basic stance is liberal (see Frank, p. 13). Joachim Frank, chief correspondent and member of the editorial board, is an expert on church issues, among other things. He has also been chairman of the Catholic journalists' association *Gesellschaft Katholischer Publizisten* for eight years (cf. Joachim Frank 2023). The interviewee for the digital offering was Kendra Stenzel, head of the news team (see *ksta* 2023).

The paid circulation of the national daily newspaper *Die Welt*, which is considered conservative (cf. Deutschland-Portal 2012), is 85,863 copies (cf. IVW 2023b). Matthias Kamann has been political editor of *Die Welt* for 24 years (cf. *Die Welt* 2023) and has repeatedly reported on the persecution of Christians in this context. According to Kamann (p. 4), the print edition of *Die Welt* is “the follow-up product to the digital edition”, which is why he and all his colleagues initially write for the online platform.

The national weekly newspaper *Die Tagespost* is tailored to a specific – Catholic – audience with a rather small paid circulation of 10,829 copies (see IVW 2023a). According to the print editor interviewed (p. 11), the newspaper's orientation is “value-conservative”. Maximilian Lutz (see *Die Tagespost* 2023a) was interviewed as head of the online service.

3.6 Conducting the interviews

The one-hour expert interview was held via Zoom on 10.05.2023. The interviews with the editors were also conducted via Zoom; only the interview with Joachim Frank took place in person. The decision between Zoom and face-to-face interviews had no methodological relevance, but was due to the geographical distance between the interviewees.

The seven interviews with editors took place from June 1 to June 20, 2023 with an average duration of around 75 minutes for the print editors and around 30 minutes for the online editors. During short preliminary telephone conversations or exchanges via email, the topic and aim of the study were explained to the interviewees and their consent to the recording of the conversations was obtained. Both were discussed again before the interviews began. Following the interviews, they were transcribed using the online tool *Trint*. As the narrative style and language were not important for this study, non-verbal and paraverbal communication was generally not documented (see Scholl 2018, p. 71). Exceptions were non-serious statements that were accompanied by laughter on the part of the interviewee; in these cases, the laughter was noted in order to record the irony in writing.

4. Evaluation

4.1 Preparatory quantitative media analysis

The results of the media analysis are briefly presented below. The figures listed refer to the articles that were classified as relevant for this study following a manual review. The manual sorting was carried out on the basis of personal judgment and therefore involves a certain degree of interpretation. For this rea-



Figure 1: Reporting on persecution of Christians 01.01.2018–01.01.2023.

son, the figures given do not claim to be exhaustive, but merely serve as a point of reference for assessing the quantity of reporting on the persecution of Christians.

It is noticeable that, despite less extensive search operators (cf. 3.1), *Die Tagespost* recorded more results than the *CBA*, which was chosen as the benchmark. This can certainly be explained on the one hand by the self-commitment of *Die Tagespost* and its goal of raising awareness (cf. RDT, p. 3, p. 7) and on the other hand by the fact that the *KNA* is not the main source of *Die Tagespost* with regard to the topic of Christian persecution (cf. RDT, p. 1; cf. Lutz, p. 1). As almost all articles in the print edition also appear on the website with a time delay, this explains why so many articles on the topic were found, even though persecution of Christians is not clicked on as much in *Die Tagespost's* online presence (cf. 4.2.8).

It is also noticeable that *Zeit*, *ksta* and *Welt* did not include most of the *KNA* articles on this topic and their coverage is relatively low compared to the *KNA*, at 1 to 9 percent. However, it is astonishing that the liberal *Zeit* seems to report more on the persecution of Christians than the conservative *Welt*. However, this may also be due to the imprecision of the media analysis, which results from the difficulty described above in finding the relevant articles with the correct search terms (see 3.1). Nevertheless, it can be stated that the difference between the search results of the two newspapers is not particularly great. The low result of the *ksta* is not surprising in view of its regional focus, as it focuses more on the greater Cologne area and less on other countries.

4.2 Category-based evaluation of the interviews

The results of the guided interviews are presented and interpreted below. The transcribed interviews were analyzed by category in order to answer the sub-questions of this study and thus the two research questions. Some statements can be assigned to several categories¹ at the same time. They are therefore generally only quoted in connection with the respective category to which they are most directly related. Occasionally, however, repetitions are unavoidable or even desirable in order to expand on certain aspects in another category. In the presentation, the categories that are closely linked in terms of content are presented together. However, this makes it difficult to organize them according to content or logical blocks, which is why the order of presentation is alphabetical according to the first category presented in a sub-chapter. One exception is the Ideas category, which is presented after the other categories, as it does not directly serve to answer the research questions, but provides possible suggestions that could be of interest for the conclusion.

¹ The description and justification of the individual categories can be found in the printed appendix from p. 48.

4.2.6 Events – Sources

All of the print editors surveyed agree that internationally recognized terrorist attacks are the main reason for reporting on the persecution of Christians. This can be explained by the event fixation of information journalism (cf. Meier 2018, p. 183) and the news factor of aggression (cf. 2.1.2). Two editors (cf. RDT, p. 4; cf. Kamann, p. 6) cited the publication of reports by Christian aid organizations or the two major churches as a reason.

Occasionally, political statements (cf. RDT, p. 4) or statements by the Pope or representatives of the Curia (cf. Frank, p. 4) can also serve as an occasion for reporting, which is presumably due to the news factor elite person (cf. 2.1.2). Not surprisingly for a Catholic newspaper, certain jours fixes such as December 26 – St. Stephen’s Day, which is celebrated by the Catholic Church as a day of prayer for persecuted Christians (cf. RDT, p. 4) – are mentioned as recurring events.

Sauer (cf., p. 4) also mentions the comprehensive annual report of the US Department of State (cf. USDOS 2023) and that of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (cf. USCIRF) as well as the semi-annual thematic reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (cf. OHCHR) as further potential reporting occasions.

As far as the sources of the print and online editors on the persecution of Christians are concerned, according to the editors, the newspapers are not systematically informed about the topic – with the exception of *Die Tagespost*, which obtains its information directly via newsletters from Christian aid organizations or via local religious communities (cf. RDT, p. 1, cf. Lutz, p. 1). Essentially, however, three main sources can be identified: News agencies, news from church aid organizations and our own correspondents.

It is noticeable that the weighting of these sources by the editors varies. While agency reports² are of great importance for the two daily newspapers *Die Welt* and *ksta* and – not least because of the “agency privilege” (Frank, p. 1) and the resulting credibility – are generally adopted on a one-to-one basis (cf. *ibid.*, p. 2; cf. Kamann, p. 2), they are of secondary importance for the two weekly newspapers. The difference is striking in the case of *Die Tagespost* (cf. RDT, p. 1): As the news agencies, in contrast to the Christian aid organizations and some religious communities³, are generally not present on the ground in the areas where persecution of Christians is taking place, they are only attributed a low relevance.

Frank (p. 12) also emphasizes the credibility of the aid organizations,⁴ with which he has maintained long-standing contacts: “The employees know what is going on.” Nevertheless, it is true for church organizations “that they are ‘lobbies’ in a

2 According to Kamann (see p. 1), these are the *Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa)* and *Agence France-Presse (AFP)* in isolated cases. However, it is mainly the *Protestant Press Service (epd)* and – probably even more so – the *KNA that provide information on the topic of the persecution of Christians.*

3 Both are therefore considered primary sources for *Die Tagespost* (cf. RDT, p. 1; cf. Lutz, p. 2).

4 In terms of aid organizations, he refers to *Misereor*, *Adveniat* and *Missio*. Especially in connection with the persecution of Christians, *Aid to the Church in Need* is highlighted as the most important aid organization (cf. Frank, p. 1).

certain sense, i.e. they represent certain (own) interests” (ibid., p. 1). This view is also shared by the online editor of *Die Zeit* (cf. Leitlein, p. 2). Kamann (cf., p. 2) notes that he takes a close look at the methodology of their reports. Frank (cf., p. 2) emphasizes a “greater journalistic distance” towards evangelical providers, as the question of credibility is increasingly raised here. Due to the difficulty of verifying information from areas in which Christians are persecuted, he therefore accepts less information from such sources (cf. ibid.).

With regard to correspondents, all four newspapers state that they only have a few in areas where Christians are persecuted; in addition, “the threshold for reporting on the persecution of Christians is very high” (Frank, p. 2). However, *Die Zeit*, which according to Ladurner (cf., p. 3) is in a good financial position, relies less on a large number of correspondents – it regularly sends its editors on research trips in order to be able to report first-hand.

4.2.7 Forms of presentation – print/online

According to most editors, short (agency) reports or longer reports are written on the subject of the persecution of Christians. This is followed by commentary. Reports are used if they can be researched on location (cf. Frank, p. 11; cf. Ladurner, p. 12). Occasionally, interviews also take place (cf. RDT, p. 5; cf. Kamann, p. 12 f.).

With regard to the differences between the print and online versions of,⁵ Lutz (p. 8) explains that the “threshold of relevance” for *Die Tagespost*’s online presence is lower than in the print edition, where some articles have to be omitted due to limited space. Depending on the time of the event and the desired depth of coverage, *Die Tagespost* articles are published either digitally or weekly in print; its online articles tend to be short and news-oriented, while print articles provide more in-depth background (cf. ibid., p. 3). According to Stenzel (p. 4), the digital offering of the *ksta* also offers a wider variety of topics and space for “offbeat topics” due to the greater space capacity compared to the printed newspaper. At the *ksta*, background articles tend to appear in the print edition, while current events tend to appear digitally (cf. ibid.).

4.2.8 Influencing factors – objectives

In the interviews, the editors expressed various personal associations or experiences in connection with the topic of the persecution of Christians, which (can) influence them – often unconsciously – in whether and how they report on it. On the one hand, it was pointed out that the term persecution of Christians is spontaneously associated more with the persecutions of the first centuries (cf. Frank, p. 5; cf. Ladurner, p. 1) than with current events. On the other hand, it was noted that the church is quickly associated with the apparatus of power and that Christians are therefore not understood as victims, even if “intellectually or at the level of consciousness it is already clear” (Frank, p. 6) that this is “non-

5 The analysis of the relevance category deals with the different importance of the topic of persecution of Christians for the print edition and online presence. At this point, the focus should be on when a topic is generally more suitable for one or the other distribution channel.

sense, because persecution is persecution” (ibid., p. 6 f). These reservations should therefore be “reflected upon again and again” (ibid., p. 9). Ladurner (p. 10) addresses the same aspects and notes that as an editor you feel: “You are writing against a spectre, and the spectre is: ‘Christians are [...] perpetrators’⁶”. This narrative is very powerful, and since the editorial office is a reflection of society, it is also present there and people think: “Christians are white and powerful” (ibid., p. 4). It is therefore not always easy to get the topic accepted in the editorial department (cf. ibid.).

In addition, Ladurner (p. 8) suggests that many journalists are in some way materialists: they “believe that things are explained by material conflicts, but not by ideational ones. [...] We don’t understand that people are motivated by something they believe. It can be religion, it can be something else. We think that’s irrational.” This confirms the assertion in theory chapter 2.3.2, according to which religion is not a credible explanation for human behavior for many journalists.

Finally, Ladurner cites personal experiences that have brought him closer to Christianity and the topic of Christian persecution: Even though he did not come from a particularly religious home, he nevertheless grew up Catholic in South Tyrol. “If you grow up like that – at least that’s my opinion – then you feel certain things differently” (ibid., p. 9). The fact that he writes relatively much about the topic of Christian persecution is mainly due to the fact that he was a war correspondent for many years and experienced Christianity in countries where it is a threatened minority (cf. ibid., p. 4, p. 9). As already stated in chapter 2.3.2, biography and worldview certainly play a role in reporting on religion-related topics according to these statements.

With regard to the aims of the editors in reporting on the persecution of Christians, Ladurner (cf., p. 4) denies an educational purpose, but admits that it is important to him that readers understand that Christians in these regions are not in the majority as they are in Europe and that they need help. He has often found that the topic is not properly understood (cf. ibid., p. 9). Closing this gap in reporting is one of his goals. The topic must be made better known and discussed more widely. A Middle East without Christians would be shocking: “We have no sympathy for this cultural root in the Middle East being cut off” (ibid., p. 4). It is also important for RDT (p. 6) to raise awareness and “make people realize that this is not a trivial matter.” The media have a special responsibility in this regard due to Germany’s recent history. “This part, that Christians were also persecuted in the Third Reich, is almost completely ignored here today – and that this also creates an obligation” (ibid., p. 8). She also wants her reporting to give comfort to the persecuted Christians themselves: “It’s such a basso continuo that you hear, especially in the Middle East: ‘The West has forgotten us’” (ibid., p. 7). “Not to leave the suffering alone” (Kamann, p. 9), to give them “basic responsibility or basic empathy [...] the] pretext in reporting” (Frank, p. 8), that is also what the other editors are concerned with. In addition, they attach importance to “clearly documenting human rights violations” (Kamann, p. 9),

6 In the expert interview, Sauer (see p. 6) also refers to the fact that Christians today are quickly associated with perpetrators.

and would like to try to contribute to improvement (cf. 2.1.1) by creating publicity: “The abuses that take place in secret are always very much in danger of continuing [...] and publicity is actually our only instrument, the only effective lever” (Frank, p. 8). In this way, a certain political influence is also sought, as, for example, the approval of funds can be dependent on reporting (cf. *ibid.*).

4.2.9 Challenges – naming the religion of the perpetrator (group)

The various challenges faced by the editors in relation to the topic of Christian persecution present a wide range. One outstanding difficulty that all of the editors surveyed struggle with is the dilemma explained in the relevance category (see 4.2.8). It is important to find a balance between the social importance of the topic and the interests of the readership and economic aspects. Lutz (p. 7) puts it in a nutshell: “You can’t write completely past the readers and subscribers, neither in print nor online. But allowing the topics to be absolutely dictated to you and only offering what they want is not the right solution either [...], but [you] have to continue to focus on the topics that are important to you as a newspaper, despite the click figures and subscriber numbers you have in mind.” However, there are limits to this freedom due to economic constraints. The online editor of *ksta* (Stenzel, p. 5) explains: “The luxury [...] of saying: ‘We’ll tell you this anyway, even if you don’t read it’, we can only really afford that for a small amount of content and say: ‘This is important, regardless of whether you think so or not’. It’s a much more economic approach – in the entire industry, I think – than it used to be.”

Obtaining reliable information is another hurdle when it comes to the persecution of Christians. The reasons for this are, on the one hand, the “own distance to the events [...]: That all information comes second-hand” (Frank, p. 9), the reduction of foreign correspondents in editorial offices (cf. RDT, p. 4; cf. 2.2.3) and that “persecution of Christians takes place predominantly in countries that are not accessible to us in terms of language on an ad hoc basis” (RDT, p. 5). Another reason is that those affected “do not describe the situation in the most drastic terms for fear of causing harm” (*ibid.*).

The competence⁷ is also mentioned as a challenge, a certain “‘know-how gap’: Do I really know enough about it to be able to write about it in a serious way?” (Frank, p. 9). This also includes classifying and analyzing the situation (cf. Kamann, p. 9) as well as a fine differentiation. Ladurner (p. 9) explains: “You have to realize that there are many facets to the persecution of Christians. You can’t lump everything together. Although you can say: ‘Worldwide, Christians are the most persecuted minority’, it is different in every country and there are nuances, colorations. And it is important for me to admit this, to present it, and it is not always easy. There is not *just the* persecution of Christians – there is *the* assassination and *the* massacre and *the* discrimination. Presenting this, this whole differentiated portrayal, that is the biggest challenge.” Another problem could be a certain uncertainty as to whether one phenomenon or another – such as

⁷ In addition to the competence category, this aspect is linked to the quality category.

the persecution of people who campaign against human trafficking or drug trafficking because of their Christian faith – should be classified as persecution of Christians or not (cf. Kamann, p. 8).

Making readers in Germany understand the importance of religion for many people worldwide is another difficulty: “So much firmness of principle and also faith that a Christian allows himself to be persecuted for his religion and does not decide pragmatically according to the motto: ‘What is more useful to me at this moment? ... I believe this is a basic attitude and it is very difficult to convey in our society today. Regardless of how you feel about Christianity’” (RDT, p. 6).

One point that also comes up again and again is the fact that has already been addressed in chapter 2.4.4: the appropriation of the topic by right-wing populist and extremist forces. Sauer (p. 6) states: “Those who then want to report on the topic out of objective interest and with neutral distance and competence must fight tooth and nail to avoid being pigeonholed [and] labeled ‘Islamophobic.’” Ladurner (p. 2) also explains that a “fine line must be drawn” so that the term “persecution of Christians” cannot be misinterpreted. Non-religious journalists, in particular, would probably be reluctant to use the term because of the political “minefield” (ibid., p. 6) and because they do not want to be identified with the struggle of right-wing extremists, “keep their hands off it” (ibid., p. 2). However, it is important not to leave the topic to the right-wing extremists, who “virtually monopolize it and use it as a fighting term” (ibid., p. 1).

However, the fact that the topic is often misused for anti-Muslim discourse does not mean that the editors shy away from clearly naming those responsible for incidents of persecution of Christians. This is shown by the statements in the category that deals with the naming of the religious affiliation of the perpetrator (group): Frank (p. 11), for example, explains: “Since this is directly part of understanding or classifying the crime, I don’t see any problem there at all. On the contrary: to leave it out would be to omit important information for understanding the whole thing. So let’s take an attack on a synagogue: it always depends: [...] How is this – suspected – anti-Semitism motivated? Are the perpetrators right-wing extremists? Do they stem from Islamist-motivated anti-Semitism?” However, the majority of editors also stated that they would pay particular attention to the wording when naming the perpetrators in order to avoid incriminating the entire religion or using stereotypes.

4.2.10 Competence – Quality – Framing

All editors initially believe that no specific skills are required to write articles on the subject of the persecution of Christians, apart from those that a journalist needs for his work anyway. As Frank (p. 7) puts it, most of them emphasize the importance of familiarity with the “political, societal and social conditions of the reporting area”. Kamann (cf., p. 8) points out that statistical knowledge is needed in order to be able to correctly evaluate studies on religious freedom and the persecution of Christians.

When asked, however, the editors confirmed the need for basic knowledge in the area of religious freedom. Frank (p. 7) doubts that journalists have in-depth knowledge on this point: “Since most of them have a university degree, often in the field of political science or social sciences, I would say that there is a basic familiarity with fundamental rights. But whether everyone could now define what positive and negative religious freedom is; that there is ‘freedom from’ and ‘freedom to’, I would no longer put my hand in the fire for that. And that would of course be important in such a case.” RDT (cf., p. 4) expresses the view that there has been an overall decline in competence and interest in reporting on religious topics and religions in general. This corresponds with the observations of Sauer (cf., p. 5), who points to deficits in the area of *religious literacy* and *religious freedom literacy*⁸ among journalists.

It can be assumed that there is a connection between the quality of reporting in these areas and, among other things, the competence of the journalists. For example, Sauer (cf., p. 14 f.) points out the importance of differentiated reporting on the persecution of Christians, which he often lacks on this topic. In addition, he feels there is a lack of background articles, analyses and longitudinal and cross-sectional reports⁹ (cf. *ibid.*, p. 13), which would make the topic more attractive to readers (cf. *ibid.*, p. 2 f.). Accuracy and impartiality are also important for articles on the *World Persecution Index* by *Open Doors*, which he has not always been able to ascertain (cf. *ibid.*, p. 7 f.). In addition, a certain linguistic policy can sometimes be found in Germany in a weakened form, as is regularly used by the *BBC*, where attacks by Muslim Fulani on Christians in Nigeria are usually referred to as *Christian-Muslim clashes* without clearly naming the perpetrators and victims (cf. *ibid.*, p. 8).

RDT (cf., p. 9) and Kamann (cf., p. 12) emphasize that they are unable to judge the quality of the reporting as they are not familiar with the reality on the ground. However, the majority of editors are of the opinion that the quality is unsatisfactory. Frank (p. 10) summarizes it as follows: “Since the occasions for broader media attention often arise ‘only’ from spectacular acts of violence, the reporting – given the severity of the problem and the burden of those affected – cannot be of adequate quality.” RDT (p. 4) points out that the reduction in foreign correspondents in many major newspapers means that they “basically have to copy from elsewhere when it comes to the persecution of Christians”. According to Ladurner (p. 6), there is hardly any “really calm, sensible reporting” on the subject.

With regard to the category of framing (cf., p. 49), Sauer (cf., p. 8) makes it clear that in some articles on the persecution of Christians in Nigeria, the religious motive is obscured by placing other motives, particularly economic and political

8 This means understanding the most important aspects of the human right to religious freedom and its significance for society (see Sauer, p. 5).

9 There is certainly a connection here to the structural characteristics of foreign reporting, in particular the decontextualization and the non-representation of structural problems (cf. 2.2.2).

ones, in the foreground.¹⁰ This is also confirmed by Ladurner (p. 8): “I think from our point of view it is very difficult to understand that religion can be a driving motive to kill someone. Religion as a motive for murder is explained away and then it’s simply conflicts over distribution or then it’s simply a fanatization process.” In Europe, for example, it is “difficult to describe a religious conflict as a religious conflict” (ibid.). Sauer and Ladurner’s observations correspond with those in chapter 2.3.2.

Kamann (p. 7) emphasizes that when reporting on the persecution of Christians, one must also be careful not to slip into polarizing arguments: “I have the impression that, despite all the justification for criticism of dictatorial Islam, political Islam, Islamic fundamentalism, there is a danger of falling into a framing of this topic: ‘Authoritarian Islam’ ... you have to be careful. You can’t rule it out, because it’s a fact that most Christians in Islamic countries are oppressed, often quite cruelly. But you have to be careful with this topic that you don’t end up in a culture clash.”

4.2.11 Quantity – development – abroad

Sauer and all editors agree: the quantity of reporting on the persecution of Christians is insufficient. The results of the media analysis (cf. 4.1) confirm their observation. Sauer (p. 4 f.) specifies: “Measured by the prevalence of this phenomenon worldwide [...] measured by how many countries this occurs in [...], and measured by the number of those affected, it is not reported on to an appropriate extent. And you never hear about many of the countries where it occurs.”

Some of the factors that can lead to an underexposure of Christian persecution in reporting become clear in connection with other categories. They are not listed separately here.

An important factor mentioned by the editors is the secularization of society: Kamann (p. 6) notes that religion reporting has generally declined, which certainly has to do with the “general loss of relevance of religiosity in public life”. In his opinion, reporting on the persecution of Christians could be more extensive. On the other hand, the secular character of society should also be respected (cf. ibid., p. 11). RDT (p. 8) points out that in today’s world, religion is seen by many as a “sideshow”, which means that “there is no money to be made from persecuted Christians”. She is of the opinion that journalists would be more interested in the topic if it were associated with prestige or money (cf. ibid.).

Thus, reporting on the persecution of Christians – except in the case of blatant events that cannot be ignored – often seems to depend on the personal interest (cf. Leitlein, p. 3) and “commitment of the individual editor” (Ladurner, p. 5).

Sauer (p. 5) corresponds with Ladurner’s observations (cf., p. 7 f.) by citing the biography and worldview of journalists as a further potential aspect: “If studies and voices I have heard are right, namely that journalists are more areligious

¹⁰ In this context, Sauer (p. 8) refers to the article *Persecution eclipse* by a Nigerian researcher who wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons and who points out that persecution in Nigeria is often made almost invisible (cf. Anonymous 2013, p. 1).

than the rest of the population [...], then that means: they have no biographical experience of their own and also little interest in religion. [...] They have little understanding and expertise for religious phenomena: They do not understand why the lives of most people in the world are very strongly influenced by religion, why it is important in their everyday lives and not something that can simply be left in the drawer when it becomes unpleasant. And why a lot of political and social action is also fundamentally determined by religious motives.” Their lack of *religious literacy* leads to insufficient *religious freedom literacy*. As a result – as Kamann also points out (cf., p. 10) – the importance of religious freedom in the context of human rights is sometimes neglected (cf. Sauer, p. 5). Fautré (cf. 2.4.4) has also drawn attention to the latter.

Ladurner (p. 2) mentions the foreignness of non-European Christianity as another factor that could contribute to the fact that relatively little is reported about the persecution of Christians: “They are Christians, but they are culturally different. Some of them have a different history. That is something distant for us.”

He also expresses the opinion that reporting on this topic follows a right-left pattern: newspapers further to the right would emphasize it more, while newspapers further to the left would focus on it less (cf. *ibid.*, p. 6).

Nevertheless, to move on to the category of development, according to Sauer (cf., p. 11), the topic of the persecution of Christians has come more into focus since the first debate in the Bundestag around 1999, but especially since the serious terrorist attack on Christians in Alexandria on January 1, 2011. He describes this event as a “media breakthrough” (*ibid.*), as the persecution of Christians was now also perceived by the leading media and no longer just by “religious formats within Christianity” (*ibid.*, p. 12). Frank (cf., p. 10) explains that due to the conflicts in the Middle East and Africa caused by IS terror and Boko Haram, the persecution of Christians as a humanitarian problem has come to the fore. He notes that, after some fluctuations, reporting has returned to its previous level (cf. 2.1.2) or has risen slightly; the latter is due to a somewhat different basic approach to the topic (cf. Frank, p. 10).

The foreign reporting category will only be briefly discussed insofar as it could also provide an explanation as to why the persecution of Christians finds comparatively little space in reporting. Frank (cf. *ibid.*) points out that there is empirical evidence that the attention and interest of readers for domestic topics is significantly higher – which confirms the statement in chapter 2.2. Several editors note that countries such as the USA or France – elite countries (see 2.1.2) – are given a particularly large amount of space in reporting. The small number of foreign correspondents available to newspapers can be a further hurdle for the topic of Christian persecution (cf., Frank, p. 4).

4.2.12 Selection criteria in general and in relation to persecution of Christians – Bloodless events – Definition of persecution of Christians

Relevance,¹¹ i.e. the connection to the readers' world and the resulting reader interest (see 2.1.2), is named by all editors as the most important selection criterion. As not all relevant topics can be included in reporting, it is necessary to “fight for your topic” (Ladurner, p. 4). In this context, the majority of department heads and the editor-in-chief exerted influence on the selection of topics by ultimately deciding which of the proposed topics would actually be included. However, Kamann points out that the online presence is strongly “sales-driven and clicks-driven” (Kamann, p. 3), which creates an “economic momentum of its own” (ibid., p. 4). As a result, editors-in-chief are increasingly “de-legitimized” [and the editors'] “scope for decision-making is restricted” (ibid.). In the digital sphere, click rates, dwell time, user behavior and subscriptions indicate relevance and are decisive for the selection of topics (cf. Leitlein, p. 4).

The diversity of topics (cf. Frank, p. 4) as well as aspects that can be described with the news factors scope and ethnocentrism (cf. Lutz, p. 4), thematization and proximity (cf. 2.1.2) are also used as criteria: “The further away, the more special a topic, the higher the hurdle for it to find its way into the paper” (Frank, p. 3).

This raises the question of the selection criteria with regard to the specific topic of the persecution of Christians. According to Frank (ibid.), the selection of the topic follows the “quite normal traditional criteria.” However, apart from the “specific interest of the editor in charge” (ibid.), the importance that an editorial team attaches to “the area of religion in society” also plays a role (ibid., p. 6; cf. 2.3).

With regard to the aforementioned competition of topics, the topic of Christian persecution can have a particularly difficult time: “It’s a competition: Is the attack on the churches in Sri Lanka important? Yes, it is relevant. But in the same week the German government falls and in the same week the dam in Ukraine is blown up. Then the persecution of Christians takes a back seat. [...]” (Ladurner, p. 5). This is slightly different for *Die Tagespost* – at least in the printed edition: “Of course, as a Catholic newspaper, we have a kind of self-commitment that we pay particular attention to the issue of persecuted Christians” (RDT, p. 3). In this respect, there is also a certain reporting tradition there (cf., p. 50). In this context, Frank (p. 2) speaks of an “inclination towards certain topics”, which, for example, at the *Frankfurter Rundschau*¹² is focused on topics such as human rights violations.

Bloodless phenomena of persecution of Christians – with the exception of the print edition of *Die Tagespost* (cf. RDT, p. 5 f.) – find it particularly difficult to find their way into the reporting. Sauer states (p. 12): “[The public] is not interested when the phenomenon manifests itself mainly in pressure and in legislation that

¹¹ See also 4.2.8.

¹² Joachim Frank was editor-in-chief of the *Frankfurter Rundschau* from 2009 to 2011.

restricts the living space of Christians.”¹³ Kamann (p. 12) refers to the increase in crisis reporting, which leads to “others who do not have an acute crisis not getting a single text for years.”

However, Kamann (cf., p. 6) and Ladurner (p. 7) note that there is an exception to the non-observance of bloodless phenomena of Christian persecution if these phenomena explain something: “If you were to talk about China, for example: [...] Then the character [...] of this dictatorship is also shown in the fact that it suppresses the practice of a Christian religion or other religions. This makes it clear: ‘These are not such nice people who are in power.’” At the same time, however, Ladurner (p. 11) – like Sauer (cf., p. 4) – points out the prerequisite for this to happen: “If we only ever report on massacres, then we talk about the massacre. But if we were to report on an ongoing basis, then the various shades could be better represented.”

Even if bloodless events in connection with the persecution of Christians are therefore rarely reported, all editors agree that a definition of the persecution of Christians should include them.¹⁴ For example, Ladurner (p. 1) states: “Persecution sounds very dramatic. We immediately imagine the lions in the Colosseum devouring the Christians. But persecution of Christians is upstream, so it starts with discrimination.” The definitions put forward by the editors are very similar in terms of content and can be summarized as follows: “All restrictions on the fundamental right to religious freedom to which people are subjected because of their Christian faith. This does not have to be violent” (Frank, p. 1).

4.2.13 Target group – relevance

According to estimates by the editors surveyed, the age of the print readership of the four newspapers is around “50 plus”; the online readership is on average 10 years younger. The readers of *Die Zeit* mostly have an academic background and belong to the upper middle class (cf. Ladurner, p. 11). The readers of *Die Welt* are “liberal-conservative [with] mostly Christian backgrounds” (Kamann, p. 5). *Die Tagespost* is aimed at an “educated middle-class audience” (RDT, p. 10), a large proportion of whom are Christians (cf. *ibid.*). The readership of the *ksta* is a relatively broad – also Christian – audience with “a sensitivity for human rights [and a] social conscience” (Frank, p. 12). Nevertheless, according to Stenzel (p. 2) of the *ksta*, the topic of Christian persecution is “very far away from the readers.” Frank (p. 5) speaks of a “marginal topic”, which, as he admits, is probably “not appropriate” for the topic itself.

Sauer also reminds us of this difference as to whether something is relevant from the point of view of the issue or for the readers and thus for the reporting (cf., p. 1). The other editors also emphasize with regard to relevance that the persecution of Christians is an important topic in itself, but that it often plays a

¹³ As a counterpart to major attacks as an occasion for reporting (cf. 4.2.1), this is certainly also related to the news factor of aggression and the event-centered nature of journalism.

¹⁴ The inclusion of bloodless phenomena in the definition also corresponds to that of *Open Doors* (cf. 2.5.1).

subordinate role in reporting, especially in online reporting¹⁵. The online editor of the Catholic daily newspaper *Die Tagespost*, Lutz, says (p. 9): “In general, I think it’s a very, very important topic. [...] But it doesn’t necessarily have the potential to cause a stir and it often just slips down the agenda a bit.” He emphasizes that this is a shame for a Catholic newspaper. “But unfortunately, in practice it is still the case that there are one or two topics that are more attractive on a daily basis, where you know it will appeal to more readers” (ibid.). This confirms the definition of journalistic relevance (see 2.1.2), according to which the topics must be important for the target group of the respective medium. According to online editor Leitlein (p. 4), the topic of persecution of Christians has hardly any relevance for *Die Zeit*’s unchurched online target group – it is “close to zero”. He even goes so far as to say: “God is dead on the internet” (ibid.). Because: “If we write ‘God’ in the line, nobody actually clicks on it” (ibid.). Thus, the topic of Christian persecution, if it is addressed at all, tends to be discussed in the overall context of persecution, asylum and flight (cf. ibid., p. 3). This is different in the print edition of *Die Zeit*, as the readers there are “significantly older [and] more church-bound” (ibid., p. 5). A correlation is therefore established between the age of the target group and their relationship to religious topics.

The print editor of *Die Zeit*, Ladurner (cf., p. 4), expresses the view that the persecution of Christians is definitely an issue. He cites the high number of persecuted Christians, the fact that everyone is entitled to practise their religion freely (cf. ibid., p. 5) and that it is a problem that the cultural roots in some countries are “simply wiped out by force” (ibid., p. 2). However, he also emphasizes that it is difficult to reach people with this topic, as Christianity is increasingly “perceived as something foreign” (ibid., p. 10): “I think that the progressive secularization of our European society makes us mute and deaf to Christian persecution: ‘These are not our people’, something like that” (ibid.).

Kamann (p. 5) sees a certain relevance in the topic, as it reveals “much about the human rights situation and thus also about the political system in the individual states”. Furthermore, the persecution of Christians is the most pronounced persecution of religious groups and plays a “blatant role” in some countries (ibid., p. 7). However, he argues that the issue of the persecution of Christians should always be seen in the context of “human rights violations in connection with religion” (ibid.).

Sauer (cf., p. 1 f.) emphasizes that reporting on the persecution of Christians is important for various reasons. On the one hand, this reality should be recognized due to its frequency and prevalence, not least in order to promote measures against it, such as sanctions by governments and transnational actors against countries that persecute Christians. Pressure on politicians is usually only successful through media coverage. This confirms Frank’s statement (cf., p. 8) and that of the theoretical chapter 2.1.1. Secondly, according to the expert, the per-

¹⁵ This “dilemma”, that some socially relevant topics are underexposed in reporting, has already been pointed out in chapter 2.1.2.

secution of Christians has a signal effect: where Christians are restricted and persecuted, the religious freedom of non-Christians is also restricted. Another reason he cites is the solidarity that Christians in this country should have with persecuted Christians (see Sauer, p. 1). He also points out that, on average, “at least half of the audience of secular media describe themselves as Christians” (ibid., p. 2) and that there should therefore actually be an interest on the part of the public.

If we look at the statements made by the editors in the interviews, it becomes clear that this interest mainly exists in *Die Tagespost*. This is also reflected in the feedback from readers: “Many readers are then very concerned and react with promises of prayer” (RDT, p. 10). Ladurner (p. 10) from *Die Zeit* notes that many readers are happy that he is taking a stand: “I get letters [...] from people who say: ‘At last someone is writing about this;’ who have the feeling that the topic is otherwise not given the attention it deserves.” However, his impression is that only a minority really understand him (cf. I. ibid.).

4.2.14 Ideas

The following section presents spontaneous ideas and suggestions from the interviewees that could help the topic of Christian persecution gain more media coverage. According to Kamann (p. 10), it would “make sense if the topic were to be brought out of its confessional confinement [...] if those who have very little to do with these confessional interests were to take on this topic as such.” He therefore welcomes the existence of a Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion and Belief. “However, he is a bit quiet. He should be a bit more forceful and take a look at the various issues. And then that should be addressed. You could [...] – so that it is balanced – look at the oppression of Christians in Islamic countries today and the oppression of Buddhists in India tomorrow and the oppression of Muslims in [...] Eastern Europe the day after tomorrow” (ibid., p. 11). RDT (cf., p. 9) and Sauer (cf., p. 7), who point out the reciprocal interaction between the media and politics, also point in this direction, stating that reporting also depends on the extent to which politics takes up the topic.

If you want to help the persecuted, Leitlein notes (p. 5), it is not expedient to focus exclusively on the persecution of Christians, as the term “persecution of Christians” is now “compromised”¹⁶.

Sauer (cf., p. 7) – like the *Learning To Listen* study (cf. 2.3.2) – starts with the training and further education of journalists on the topic of religious freedom, so that they are sensitized to the topic and their knowledge can be deepened. It can be hoped that, as Sauer (cf., p. 13) suggests, the topic of Christian persecution will be presented in a more interesting and in-depth way in reporting, for example through a temporal or geographical cross-section, a differentiation according to different groups affected or through thematic focuses.

¹⁶ Cf. 4.2.4.

5. Conclusions

The two research questions “How do print and online editorial offices in Germany deal with the topic of Christian persecution?” and “What are the reasons for this approach?” were answered exploratively through theoretical reflections and seven guided interviews with print and online editors of four selected German newspapers.

One difficulty was the lack of research literature on reporting on the persecution of Christians, which made the exploration of the topic complex and required a quantitative media analysis and an expert interview in advance. Another challenge was the interdependence of the various categories, which often made it difficult to draw clear boundaries in the presentation of the analysis.

In the following, the research questions are first summarized, then suggestions are presented as to how the topic of Christian persecution could be given more media presence, and finally the limitations and contribution of this study as well as further research possibilities are shown.

With regard to the extent of reporting on the persecution of Christians, the media analysis shows a predominantly very low level of 1 to 9 percent for most newspapers compared to the *KNA*. One exception is the Catholic daily newspaper *Die Tagespost*, which reported on the topic even more frequently than the *KNA* over the five-year period analyzed. The expert, Christof Sauer, and the editors also speak of an overall inadequate amount of reporting compared to the high number of Christians affected and the global dimension of the phenomenon.

With regard to the quality of reporting on the topic, it proves difficult to establish a benchmark. The answers given by the editors in the guided interviews can only be understood as an approximation of this complex aspect. The expert misses a broad and in-depth presentation of the current persecution of Christians. Even though two editors emphasized that they could not judge the quality of reporting due to a lack of personal experience on the ground, the prevailing opinion among the editors is that the topic could be treated in a more differentiated and multifaceted way if there was continuous reporting instead of focusing predominantly on major attacks, as has been the case to date.

In the print version and online presence, the topics – and therefore also the topic of Christian persecution – are presented differently in some newspapers. At *ksta* and *Die Tagespost*, background articles tend to be published in the printed newspaper, while current short reports are published online. In general, the online platform allows a wider range of topics due to the absence of space restrictions, which represents an opportunity for the topic of persecution of Christians, but which – as has been shown – is hardly used accordingly.

The results of the guided interviews show: The reasons for the inadequate media treatment of the topic essentially arise from a complex web of professional selection criteria and journalistic constraints, supplemented by individual influences in the journalists’ lives. Consequently, many aspects of the theoretical framework of this work are confirmed by the answers of the editors.

These show that the underexposure of the persecution of Christians, as with many other topics, is initially related to the necessary selection of topics in journalism and the associated selection criteria in the form of news factors. Relevance – the orientation towards reader interest – also plays a major role. This is not considered to be very high for the topic of persecution of Christians due to increasing secularization and the generally lower level of attention paid to foreign topics. This is particularly evident in the digital sector, which is particularly dependent on click figures and subscriptions: online readers are on average ten years younger than print readers and show significantly less or no interest in religious topics. It is interesting to note that even in the Catholic daily newspaper *Die Tagespost*, the topic of Christian persecution is much less present online than in the print edition¹⁷.

The low level of reporting on the persecution of Christians is also linked to the development of foreign reporting in general, its increasingly scarce resources and growing obstacles, especially in totalitarian states. The decreasing number of foreign correspondents also makes it increasingly difficult for journalists in Germany to obtain serious information about foreign countries.

The interviews with the expert and the editors have shown that a certain degree of *religious literacy* and *religious freedom literacy* is necessary in order to be able to write (qualitatively) about the topic, but according to the interviewees, many journalists only seem to have this to a limited extent. Sauer points to biographical and ideological reasons among the journalists, and the print editor of *Die Zeit* also goes in this direction. There are parallels here with a study that points to limited *religious literacy* among British journalists. Another study, the *Global Faith and Media Study*, which was also presented in the theory section, shows, among other things, that there is a certain fear in editorial offices of reporting something wrong about religion. If this also applies to German editorial offices, this could be one of the reasons why topics related to religion are covered less frequently. However, this would have to be examined in a separate study for German editorial offices.

According to the editors interviewed, one reason for journalists' reticence when it comes to topics such as religious freedom and the persecution of Christians could also be the fear of being associated with right-wing populist or even right-wing extremist movements that use these topics as fighting words. This confirms the observations already made in the context of the theoretical considerations on religious freedom.

Furthermore, mental associations with Christianity can lead to journalists not perceiving or taking seriously the reality of the worldwide persecution of Christians. This important aspect became clear from the guided interviews alone.

17 As the majority of *Die Tagespost's* online readers are also Christians, this does not appear to be due to a lack of interest in religious topics. The different presentation of the topic in the print edition and online presence could possibly be a reason, but this would need to be investigated in a further study.

The following approaches, which were put forward as ideas by the discussion partners, can help to raise awareness of the issue of Christian persecution and give it more space in reporting:

Placing the persecution of Christians in the context of religious freedom and human rights can focus more strongly on the situation of those affected. This can reduce the distraction caused by mental associations with Christianity.

However, it also makes sense to report specifically on the plight of Christians as the world's largest persecuted religious group and to express a certain solidarity with them on the part of a still Christian West. Here, one editor pointed out that it could be helpful overall to encourage more secular engagement when dealing with issues such as the persecution of Christians in order to minimize possible denominational interests. However, it must be noted that this is not within the power of the media; however, they would have the opportunity to address the importance of secular engagement on the humanitarian issue of Christian persecution.

Another important approach could be the training and further education of journalists in the area of *religious literacy* and *religious freedom literacy*. The dilemma of low reader interest in foreign news and topics with a Christian connection can certainly not be solved completely. However, if journalists demonstrate the importance of the topic and present it in an appealing and informative way, it is more likely that readers will develop more interest and become more sensitive to the topic over time.

The results of this research project are not representative due to the qualitative approach and the associated small number of interviews. Nevertheless, they can provide a valuable exemplary insight into the editorial approach to the topic of Christian persecution and serve as a basis for further research. For example, this work could be followed up by projects that examine the *religious literacy* of journalists in Germany or explore the nature of reporting on the persecution of Christians in a broader framework that includes more media sources, interviewees and political orientations.

Both the present study and further research projects can contribute to closing the research gap on the topic of reporting on Christian persecution, raising awareness of the socially important issue of Christian persecution and promoting a constructive dialog on universal religious freedom.

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Appendix

Presentation and justification of the categories

The questions of both guides were translated into 21 categories. These categories cover different aspects of reporting on Christian persecution and allow for a comprehensive picture of editors' motivations, decision-making processes and challenges. The categories are also intended to help structure the editors' answers and gain key insights for the present work.

The categories are listed below (in alphabetical order), explained if necessary and individually justified.

Events: This category describes which occasions there are for reporting on the topic of Christian persecution. It is interesting to examine whether a newspaper also considers other occasions, such as statements by politicians or the publication of reports by various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the churches or the federal government on the topic of the persecution of Christians, to be significant in addition to the major attacks, which are almost always the reason for reporting, and thus forms the basis for reporting. This is because it can be assumed that the fewer events are perceived by the editors as an occasion, the less the topic of persecution of Christians will be included in the reporting.

Foreign reporting: This category describes the development of foreign reporting (in general and at your own newspaper), possible reasons for this, as well as the relevance of foreign reporting for your own readers. According to the Otto Brenner Foundation's study on foreign reporting, newspapers are reducing the number of foreign correspondents, which is leading to a decline in foreign reporting: "The declining number of reporters is accompanied by a dwindling view of the world from Germany [...]" (Engelhardt 2022, p. 4). If this trend is confirmed by the editors, this could indicate a connection with the underexposed reporting on the persecution of Christians, as this primarily takes place abroad.

Forms of presentation: This category describes the most frequently used forms of presentation in reporting on the persecution of Christians. It thus contributes to a more comprehensive picture of reporting on the topic.

Definition of persecution of Christians: In the theory chapter on Christian persecution (cf. 2.5.1), it was explained that there are different definitions of the phenomenon and that, depending on the definition, certain phenomena (such as discrimination) are not considered to be Christian persecution. It is important for the interviews to know which definition the respective editor uses. Overall, the breadth or narrowness of the definition could be related to a broader or narrower coverage of the topic.

Influencing factors: In the expert interview, Christof Sauer (cf., p. 6) mentions that Christians in the West are perceived as perpetrators and not as victims, which has an impact on reporting. Thus, there are some factors (such as personal associations with Christianity or a biographical proximity to the topic) that are not part of the professional journalistic selection criteria and influence journalists in whether and how they report on the topic of Christian persecution.

Development: This category describes the extent to which reporting on the persecution of Christians has developed and any reasons for this.

Framing: This category describes which framing¹⁸ can characterize the reporting on the topic of Christian persecution.

Challenges: This category describes the challenges editors face when writing about Christian persecution. Among other things, these could provide an explanation for the journalistic approach to the topic.

Ideas: This category describes the ideas put forward by the interviewees on how the topic of the persecution of Christians could gain more media attention. This could provide valuable impetus, which could be particularly important for the outlook at the end of the study.

Competence: In the expert interview, Sauer (cf., p. 5) points out what he sees as a lack of competence among journalists in the area of *religious literacy* and *religious freedom literacy*. This category is therefore about what specialist knowledge, skills and background information a journalist needs in order to be able to report appropriately on the complex and sensitive topic of the persecution of Christians. By identifying these skills, possible knowledge gaps or uncertainties that could limit reporting can be uncovered.

Mention of the religion of the perpetrator (group): Investigating whether and how the religious affiliation of those responsible is mentioned by editors in incidents of persecution of Christians may indicate possible reticence in reporting on religiously motivated violence. Sauer (cf., p. 6) mentions in the interview that those who report on the persecution of Christians in Islamic countries are quickly labeled as Islamophobic. This could, for example, lead to a certain fear among journalists of naming the religion of the perpetrators if they belong to Islam.

Print/Online: This category describes the criteria for whether an article is published only in the print edition, only in the digital offering or in both. General information on this could indicate whether one of the two platforms is possibly preferred for the topic of Christian persecution and to what extent this affects the type of reporting if Christian persecution is reported differently on these platforms.

Quality: Since Sauer (see p. 13) rated the overall quality of reporting on the persecution of Christians as unsatisfactory in the expert interview – too little background, analysis, longitudinal and cross-sections – it seems interesting to find out the editors' views on this aspect.

Quantity: The preparatory quantitative media analysis (cf. 4.1) and the expert interview (cf. Sauer, p. 4 f). point to inadequate reporting on the persecution of Christians in relation to the events. It therefore seemed sensible to approach the editors about this aspect and ask them about the reasons why they thought this might be the case.

¹⁸ Frames are patterns of interpretation “which are used to make sense of and evaluate different topics” (Dahinden 2018, p. 14). They are, so to speak, “our perspective on complex topics” (cf. Meier 2018, p. 209).

Sources: This category describes the sources through which the editors are most frequently informed about the topic of Christian persecution, how the editors evaluate these sources and how they deal with them. This can have a potential impact on reporting.

Relevance: On the question of relevance, editors can share their individual assessments and evaluations regarding the importance and urgency of reporting on Christian persecution. If they consider the topic to be less relevant, this could be a reason why it is reported on less frequently or in less detail.

Selection criteria in general: This category describes the professional selection criteria that generally guide editors in their choice of topics and what else (apart from personal factors, which are discussed under the category of influencing factors) influences them in their choice of topics.

In addition to the news factors (see 2.1.2), these can be “editorial decision-making programs” (Hafez 2002, p. 101), the influence of the editor-in-chief (see Czerwick 1990, p. 183), knowledge of the specific interests of the target group (see Hooffacker and Meier 2017, p. 113) or the fact “whether or not there is a ‘tradition’ within the respective editorial office to address human rights issues [...]” (Hafez 2002, p. 103). In the digital sphere, for example, direct feedback from the audience is also of great importance (cf. Mitchell and Afshari 2021, p. 26), as are the algorithms of news tickers.

Selection criteria for the persecution of Christians: This category focuses on the specific criteria and considerations that play a role in reporting on the topic of Christian persecution. It is of interest whether there are differences to the general selection criteria and whether the topic of persecution of Christians is therefore treated differently.

Bloodless events: This category describes the extent to which bloodless phenomena (cf. 2.5.1) of persecution of Christians occur in reporting. Sauer (2019b, p. 138) notes in an article: “The public is particularly interested in the persecution of Christians when lethal violence is involved”. This is certainly related to the news factor of aggression. Nevertheless, the opinion of the editors should be sought. It might also be surprising to see under what circumstances bloodless events are nevertheless reported.

Objectives: Wilke (cf. 1998, p. 44) writes that the intentions of journalists have an impact on reporting, and in particular on foreign reporting. It therefore seems important to find out from the individual editors what goals they pursue in reporting on the persecution of Christians.

Target group and feedback: Since both knowledge of the target group and their feedback influence reporting, as already mentioned under the category “journalistic selection criteria in general”, the nature and age structure of the target group is one of the factors that explains the quantity of reporting on the persecution of Christians.

Guideline – Expert

1. A quote from a journalism textbook says: “The topics that journalism takes up have three characteristics that together characterize the concept of topicality: [...] [Among them] relevance: The topics are important for the target group of the respective medium, sometimes for society as a whole. This means that they relate to the (presumed) current interests of the audience. Relevance thus determines the social and audience relevance of journalism” (Meier 2018, p. 14).

In this respect, it is understandable that the media report little about the persecution of Christians in other countries, or mostly on other continents. In your opinion, is it nevertheless important that they regularly report on this in Germany? (Please give several reasons.)

2. Observation/informal survey of my circle: Even some practicing Christians read few articles about the persecution of Christians. The headline is already the news. The circumstances vary slightly compared to other incidents, but ultimately “it’s always the same”. For many, it is therefore enough to read the “kitchen call” (e.g.: “5 nuns killed in Nigeria”), but not the rest of the article. Do you have any ideas on how journalism could counteract this?
3. In your opinion, is there adequate *quantitative* reporting on the topic?

If no:

- a. What do you think are the reasons why so little is reported about it?
- b. What would have to happen for the media to report more on this? / How can more media attention be generated?

4. In your opinion, is the *quality of* reporting on the topic appropriate?

If no:

- a. What are the lacunae in the reporting?
- b. What would more competent reporting look like?
- c. Have you observed a certain language policy in various leading media?

If so, could you give a few examples (of different media)?

- d. Have you observed different “frames” in the reporting on this topic?

If so, could you give a few examples (of different media)?

5. Have you observed reporting in other countries? Is the topic dealt with differently there?
6. According to your observations, how has reporting on the persecution of Christians developed in Germany in recent decades?

7. In the Mission 2019 yearbook, you write (Sauer 2019b, p. 138): *“The public is primarily interested in the persecution of Christians when lethal violence is involved.”* In the article “Alarm bells against discrimination” (Sauer 2019a), however, it says: *“Fortunately, the leading media have also been reporting repeatedly on the persecution of people because of their religion for some years now. This no longer only happens on particularly ‘media-worthy’ occasions.”* The two statements seem to contradict each other, especially as both articles were published in the same year. Could you briefly elaborate on this?
8. In your opinion, what are the reasons for reporting on the persecution of Christians?
9. Have you made any observations about the way the various articles on the persecution of Christians are presented? Which do you think is the most common?
10. Have you made any observations about the length of the various articles on Christian persecution?
11. The relevant literature – especially from you – shows that there are narrow definitions of Christian persecution that only define the worst cases of Christian persecution as such (torture, imprisonment, injuries, killing), and there are other definitions that also include harassment and discrimination (loss of employment, poorer education for children, etc. because one is a Christian).
 - a. According to your observations, what type of definition is most often adopted by journalists?
 - b. And what definition would you find appropriate for media coverage?
12. Is there anything else you would like to mention in relation to our topic?

Guidelines – Print editors

In the print editors’ guide, the questions were weighted (see Mikos and Wegener 2017, p. 318) by highlighting the main questions in bold and also listing some detailed questions that were of less importance at the end of the interview and could be omitted if time was short. The last main question, which gives the interviewee the opportunity to address aspects of the topic that have not yet been discussed but seem relevant to them, is intended to “reduce the risk [...] of not giving enough space to the interviewee’s relevance system” (cf. Mikos and Wegener 2017, p. 310). In addition, the study can only gain in quality by broadening the horizon.

1. What do you mean by persecution of Christians?
2. Are you regularly informed about the issue of persecution of Christians? If so, by whom?
- 3.

- a. What is the difference between a message from an agency and a “PR message”?
 - b. Do you often take over articles from agencies/PR reports on the persecution of Christians without (major) changes?
4. Are there guidelines from the editors? An editorial line on the subject of religion/religious freedom/Christianity/persecution of Christians? (e.g. on language policy?)
 - a. Is there a “reporting tradition” on the topic of the persecution of Christians in your editorial office?
 - b. What are your decision-making criteria when selecting topics/news in general?
 - c. Do you generally decide on your own, or is there a joint discussion in the editorial team about whether to report on this or that topic? If the latter applies, what are these topics?
 - d. To what extent do the publisher and/or editor-in-chief have an influence on the selection of topics?
5. To what extent do you see the persecution of Christians as a relevant topic for reporting?
 - a. Do you have the feeling that topics about the Christian faith and/or the persecution of Christians are deliberately avoided among journalists?
6. What events draw your attention to the issue of the persecution of Christians?
7. What criteria play a role for you in deciding whether to report on the topic of Christian persecution?
 - a. There are various definitions of persecution of Christians. A somewhat broader definition (as it will apply in this paper) also includes discrimination and intolerance.
Do such “bloodless” topics sometimes make it into the news?
 - i. your newspaper? Why?
 - ii. In other print media?
8. Are you aware of a certain framing when you write about this topic? If so, which one?
 - a. In your opinion, what influences whether and how you report on the topic?
In your opinion, what skills does a journalist need to report on the persecution of Christians?
 - b. How competent do you feel on religious issues and how do you assess the competence of (newspaper) journalists in general? (“Religious literacy”)
 - c. How competent do you feel on issues of religious freedom and how do you assess this competence of (newspaper) journalists in general? (“Religious freedom literacy”)
 - d. If you are prepared to answer this question: Would you describe yourself as a (Christian) believer?
 - e. What are the challenges of writing about the persecution of Christians?

9. What goal is important to you when reporting on the persecution of Christians?
10. In your opinion, is there adequate quantitative reporting on the topic?
 - a. From you/your newspaper?
 - b. From other print media?
 - c. If not, what could be the cause?
 - d. Do you have any ideas on how the topic of the persecution of Christians could gain more media attention?
11. In your observation, has there been a decrease or rather an increase in foreign reporting in general in recent years? (Roughly)
 - a. At your newspaper?
 - b. Generally in the print media?
Have you observed a development in the quantity of reporting on the topic of persecution of Christians? (Increase/decrease?)
 - c. At your newspaper?
 - d. Generally in the print media?
 - e. If so, how do you explain this?
12. In your opinion, is there generally adequate quality reporting on the topic?
 - a. If not, what could be the cause?
 - b. Do you have enough time for your own research?
 - c. Which form of presentation do you and other newspapers use most often for the topic of Christian persecution?
 - d. If an attack on Christians has been carried out by extremists of another religion, how do you deal with the naming of the perpetrator & his religious affiliation?
(Are there certain fears?)
13. What are the criteria for whether something appears in print or digitally? (Or both?)
14. Is persecution of Christians reported differently in print and online?
 - a. If yes:
 - i. What are the differences?
 - ii. Why is reporting different?
15. What audience do you write for when you report on the persecution of Christians? (Has your newspaper carried out any research on the target audience for this topic?)
 - a. Difference print/online?
 - b. What feedback do you get from your readers on the subject of the persecution of Christians?
16. Is there anything else you would like to mention in relation to our topic?
If there is enough time:
17. General information
 - a. How would you describe the political stance of your newspaper?
 - b. Would you consider yourself more of a specialist journalist or an all-round journalist?
 - c. Does the day and/or time when the agency or PR message reaches you play a role?

Guidelines – Online editors

1. Could you briefly describe your position/tasks?
2. Are you regularly informed about the issue of persecution of Christians? If so, by whom?
3. What are the criteria for whether an article appears in print or digitally? (Or both?)
4. Is persecution of Christians reported differently in print and online? If so, what are the differences?
5. Which target group are you addressing with your online presence? Difference: print/online?
6. Are there any reactions from readers on the subject of Christian persecution?
7. To what extent does the audience actively influence which topics are reported on by providing feedback on various topics etc.? Through feedback?
8. What relevance does foreign reporting have for readers? (click figures, etc.)
9. What relevance do topics relating to Christianity, and in particular the persecution of Christians, have?
10. There is no “space problem” online as there is in print. What impact does this have on the selection of topics? (Number; selection of topics?)
11. Do you have a news ticker that automatically sends some news items to your website? How are the algorithms set up? (In other words, what kind of topics does it bring to the website?)
12. Is there anything else you would like to mention in relation to our topic?

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