

Martina Thiele

»... and always just think of the reader«?

Journalism Research, visibility and language

The problem

In his day, Focus Chief Editor Helmut Markwort demanded not only »facts, facts, facts,« but also a focus on the »readers.«^[1] That was in the 1990s. Today, in 2020, there is disagreement about whether *Journalism Research*, an »academic journal under the principle of independent publishing,« should, indeed must, use gender-sensitive formulations – whether we three male and two female publishers should in future encourage authors to write in a gender-sensitive way. So far, the style sheet has kept quiet on this. Other aspects, such as the form of citation and the length and form of potential papers, are prescribed, but there is no mention of gender-sensitive, non-discriminatory language.

Gender-sensitive language

What does it mean? Simply that we ask that »women« and »men« »and others« are made visible in the text (and try to stick to this ourselves!). This is done by naming both the »male« and »female« grammatical form, such as using an intermediate »I,« an underscore, a gender asterisk... We want to allow the greatest possible freedom in the choice of form, knowing that the intermediate »I« and naming both the »male« and »female« grammatical form can be read as heteronormative while the gender asterisk, for example, allows greater openness and diversity, as does the form »Journalistinnen*,« which has a different meaning than »Journalist*innen.« Some people might be unaware of the differences. Is it a question of age? Of gender? Of wanting to know? Or perhaps a fundamental aversion to this »gender nonsense?«

1 In German, the plural form »Leser« is identical to the singular form »Leser,« whose grammatical gender is masculine: »der Leser.« Thus, female readers are not explicitly addressed. Correctly, Markwort should have demanded, in addition to »Fakten, Fakten, Fakten,« that both female and male readers are always considered.

Freedom or compulsion

We publishers would accept many different versions, but we expect gender-sensitive formulations to be used. Exclusive use of the male form, indicating the generic masculine or that women are meant implicitly, is not enough. And it would be new for *Journalism Research* in 2020!

But is it OK for us to do this? Can we tell »our« authors how to write? Is it not compulsion? And could these specifications prevent wordsmiths and linguistic royalty from publishing their work with us?

My view: 1. Yes, we publishers can inform the authors in the style sheet and especially in direct discussions that implicit inclusion is not enough. That is our right and our duty. Equally, authors then have the right not to publish their work in *Journalism Research*. 2. We should not only think of the wordsmiths, who might look for other publication options due to our specifications, but also of those authors that we have perhaps not looked at in the past and who might be bothered if these minimum standards of democratic language use do not apply in *Journalism Research*. 3. The question arises of why this topic – gender-sensitive language and its compulsory use – in particular triggers fundamental discussions on freedom of expression, artistic freedom, comprehensibility, inclusion, and exclusion, but the functions and effects of language are barely addressed. Does it reflect power structures; can it change them or create awareness? Who decides what is »good« journalism and what is appropriate or comprehensible language?

In my opinion, resistance to inclusive language indicates resistance to the fact that diversity in society is reality. Incredibly, it is often those who deal a lot with language professionally and who see themselves as creative minds who are not creative when it comes to linguistic expression, the search for alternatives, and the further development of language.

What triggered the debate

The composition of the publisher team has changed, putting this topic – language and inclusion – on the agenda. The specific trigger was a paper submitted to *Journalism Research*, in which the author spoke exclusively in the masculine form of the journalists, the reader, the followers, the opponents etc. »there,« in a country in the southern hemisphere. Although in many societies around the world men do hold the important positions, make the decisions, and set the rules, there are still »more people,« »further people involved,« not only those affected, but also active actors. Do they not have a voice, not even the right to be heard? Should those who write about others not at least try to ensure their visibility?

Processes of self-understanding

But before inclusive writing can be considered, it is down to us, as those who publish a journal, to decide – on the authors, their topics, their language, their perspectives. It is not only about gender-sensitive language, but also about depicting diversity and complexity in general, with the aim of breaking through the limitations of our perception. This can succeed if we offer a range of authors a forum, accept different experiences, and enable various views on journalism and journalism studies.

Following weeks of arguments and an entrenchment of the various fronts, a solution was suggested: We should make our debate public. But does going public help, if we cannot even agree in our small group? Would it not make more sense to clarify the issue ourselves first, and then to vote on a passage stating that »we expect our authors to use non-discriminatory formulations and ensure the visibility of diversity?«

We had almost got that far, and a majority had even been found for including the sentence in the information for authors. But it was then that the discussion really heated up, ending with this proposal: publishing position papers. They at least give an insight into a debate whose timing, extent, duration, and indeed intensity, have amazed me. I had assumed that the most non-discriminatory language possible was already a matter of course in academia, and thus also in *Journalism Research*. After all, the arguments are well-known and countless studies in linguistics, cognition psychology, sociology, and communication studies have shown that it does make a difference whether I speak of readers as »Leser« or »Leserinnen und Leser.« Practical guides and websites also provide plenty of useful information about how to write both inclusively and comprehensibly.^[2] The fact that, despite this, there is repeated, and indeed increasing, public discussion about »gendering,« the word »compulsion« is used, and tolerance of ignorance is demanded, is symptomatic of the general unease at things that are perceived as »new,« »complicated,« or apparently »incomprehensible,« and rules that are considered »ideological« and as going too far. Examining this unease in more detail and asking who is stoking it, who feels it, and why, appears to me more useful than spending weeks arguing over whether to add a point about gender-sensitive formulations to the style sheet. Yet this argument also brings clarity – I am in favor of the information for authors including the sentence: We expect gender-sensitive, non-discriminatory language.

Translation: Sophie Costella

2 Examples are collected by the website www.genderleicht.de/gendergerecht-schreiben-in-sieben-schritten/, a project by the Journalistinnenbund [Association of Female Journalists]. Further tips on formulations come, e.g., from the »Neue deutsche Medienmacher*innen« [new German female media creators], an initiative for diversity in the media: <https://glossar.neuemedienmacher.de/> or <https://geschicktgendern.de/>