



**Citation by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
for the “New York Times” at the Marion Dönhoff Prize  
award ceremony  
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I would like to tell you, our guests from New York, a story that wasn't published in your paper. It is the story of the demise of a civilisation, and it was experienced by an eight-year-old boy.

This boy woke up one morning to find the place of worship over which his father presided lying in ruins. A mob had broken in during the night and destroyed the entire interior and all the sacred objects. Only by a stroke of luck had the fire not reached the family's apartment on the second floor. When the eight-year-old looked out the window on the morning after the attack, women and men from the congregation were already clearing away the traces of the night and carrying the destroyed benches and tables outside. Again, a loud mob had gathered in the street. They swore and spat at the people cleaning up. The boy saw two police officers standing nearby, watching what was happening with interest, but not lifting a finger.

Suddenly the boy caught sight of a familiar face, that of the milkman, who was making his way impassively through the crowd, past the gate and up the stairs to the family's apartment, where he left the milk, as he did every morning, turned around and disappeared into the crowd again, showing just as little emotion as when he arrived.

What was the boy supposed to make of all this? Was it a nightmare in the midst of normality? After all, normality did continue, just as the milkman came back the following day and the day after that. The boy hadn't heard much about the growing attacks in the previous years. His day-to-day life took place behind the walls of the temple, in a protected environment frequented by scholars, theologians and philosophers – what one might describe today as an “intellectual echo chamber”.

Eight-year-old Walter Jacob didn't know what was happening around him. Fortunately, his parents knew better – they were readers of the "New York Times"! On the morning of 10 November 1938, they knew that what had happened was not a one-off occurrence. Since the Nazis had come to power, the "New York Times" reported on boycotts, harassment and violence against German Jews. And they continued to report, even though Joseph Goebbels had repeatedly threatened to expel its "libellous foreign journalists", as he noted in his diary. And now, in the 10 November issue, Walter's parents read about the looting of Jewish shops on Leipziger Strasse and Friedrichstrasse in Berlin. Then, on 12 November, the "New York Times" called the "Nazi day of terror" a "threat to all civilisation".

No – normality would not return. And the Jacobs sensed that, after all the "New York Times" reporting. The Rabbi and his family decided to leave their home – the beautiful Synagogue of Augsburg, which I had the privilege of visiting just a few months ago, on the occasion of its 100th anniversary. At the end of 1938, the Jacobs travelled to their relatives in London. On New Year's Day in 1940, they finally reached New York City, along with 17 other Jews from Augsburg. In New York –so Walter Jacob told me and smiled- his parents had no difficulties adjusting to their new home. After all, they had studied the local newspaper for years!

Walter Jacob is now 87 years old. He lives in Pittsburgh, where he is the Rabbi at the Rodef Shalom congregation. He writes books, as his father did in Augsburg, and still, every day, he reads the "New York Times"!

And – you might not believe it: He came with me today, to his wife's hometown, to Hamburg, and he is right among us: Dear Walter Jacob – what a joy that you are here with us!

Today we are paying tribute to an 'Authority of Enlightenment' – the "Gray Lady", the "New York Times". We are paying tribute to a beacon of reason in an age of rampant unreason. We are paying tribute to a flagship of freedom of the press in an age in which Deniz Yücel and hundreds of journalists are in prison in Turkey, in which independent newspapers are branded as foreign agents in Russia, and in which – even in Western democracies – the value and purpose of the free press are being called into question – and be this simply in the form of a casual early-morning tweet.

I would like to thank Matthias Naß and the jury for the invitation, which I accepted gladly and with deep conviction.

The story of us Germans and the "New York Times" is long and complex. And when it comes to long and complex stories, who can beat the "New York Times", whose weekend edition is often over 100 pages long? This amazes even the journalists from "DIE ZEIT" who are

here with us today. And, dear colleagues from "DIE ZEIT": At the "New York Times", they don't do that once a week – they do that every day...

This long story dates back to one Bertha Levy from Landau, who emigrated to America during the turmoil of the German revolution of 1848, and, in Nashville, Tennessee, met a man called Julius Ochs from Fürth. So, there we had two Bavarians in the deep South – and now, much later, this prize in Hamburg! The couple's son, Adolph Ochs, when he was barely out of his teens, first whipped the "Chattanooga Times" into shape and then bought the struggling "New York Times" in 1896 with a loan of 75,000 dollars, competing against the larger, aggressive and sensationalist 'yellow press'. He had a different, almost foolhardy vision: "All the News That's Fit to Print".

In other words, he wanted a facts-based, comprehensive and sophisticated newspaper to beat the yellow press? To even reach a global audience? 'How naïve!', 'How unrealistic!', some said. But – young Adolph Ochs succeeded! And the "New York Times" continues to succeed to this day, including under you, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr., now the fourth generation since your great-grandfather at the helm of the paper.

The "New York Times" has become a global authority. However, for us in Germany, it also remains a window into a country, the United States, that will always be diverse, vibrant and contradictory – at any rate a far more complex place than how it is glorified by some and condemned by others, here in Germany. The "New York Times" embodies both the complexity of the United States and its struggle with this complexity.

This paper has won many prizes. But when today, one Dönhoff Prize from Germany is added to 122 Pulitzer Prizes, then it is important to me to speak about the woman behind the prize. Marion Gräfin Dönhoff was a committed transatlanticist. She never avoided the political differences with the big brother in the West, but as someone who was born in 1909, she knew this much: we Germans owe the United States. She understood that the United States is important for us Germans – important not merely geostrategically, but important in building our democracy. Anyone in Germany who now says, with a certain cultural snobbishness: 'let's break with the United States – everything over there is headed in the wrong direction and our common ground is long gone' – to every such person I say: Just take one glance at the "New York Times"! This paper has long set, and continues to set the standards of a free press of the very highest quality. And in these difficult times, we need quality journalism more than ever!

Arthur Sulzberger, Dean Baquet,

After talking about Walter Jacob, I would now like to tell you about another German reader of the "New York Times", admittedly a fictitious one, but no less loyal for that. In Uwe Johnson's "Anniversaries", Gesine Cresspahl reads the paper from front to back every day. If I open the novel at the part set exactly half a century ago, on 3 December 1967, it contains nothing but snippets from the "New York Times" – "the consciousness of the day" – ranging from the weather forecast to the obituaries. As for so many readers before and after her, the "New York Times" is, for Gesine, the "world's diary".

Mr Sulzberger, in case you ever wondered what your newspaper would look like if it were made of flesh and blood, Uwe Johnson provides a very imaginative description. Gesine thinks of the "New York Times" as an "aunt from a good family". I quote: "the clothes dark and elegant, the hair still piled high, a harsh voice, smiles only in the corners of her eyes. (...) Auntie smokes (cigarillos), she is not above hard liquor. (...) The old lovers come to remember, the younger generation to be instructed. (...) She keeps abreast of the times. (...) She is up-to-date." Mr Baquet, I would dearly love to know if this description reflects how you and your team see yourselves today!

Ever since the "Times" has existed, people have suspected that the "Gray Lady" is too close to the ruling elite. Like all independent media, it is the critical voice. But yet, it exists within the fabric of democracy – not against it. And so the term "East Coast establishment" has become a battle cry of those who despise democracy. And –not just since the last presidential election campaign– the "New York Times" is in particular denounced as part of this establishment, including by those self-appointed anti-establishment warriors who themselves come from well-heeled East Coast families.

I am confident that high-quality media can withstand this kind of criticism. In fact, they must do so! Even the "Gray Lady", even an 'Authority of Enlightenment', is not infallible. After all, what is "Enlightenment"? It is searching, making mistakes and correcting them. That goes for the "New York Times" – and for the United States as a whole. The authority of the free press is always borrowed. It is borrowed from the authority of the emancipated reader. The "New York Times" has always had to deal with these readers' critical questions.

In the turmoil of the Second World War, did it emphasize and highlight enough the horrifying truths of the Holocaust, which gradually came to light and which still represent a painful, challenging chapter also in the paper's history?

And then, especially in the decades of the burgeoning civil rights movement, did its staff reflect the diversity of US society?

Later again, at the time of the Iraq War, did it check sources on alleged weapons of mass destruction thoroughly enough?

More recently, did it have a sufficient understanding of the explosive mixture of resentment, alienation and rage in rural America that led to the outcome of the 2016 presidential election?

And finally – and not quite as seriously, did it always conduct sufficient due diligence in its choice of photos of, let's say, Germany's head of state?

The "New York Times" has never dodged such questions. On the contrary, it constantly learns and corrects. These lessons include its clear, institutional separation between reporting and commentary, more resources for investigative research, higher standards for checking sources, greater transparency in the newsroom, and strict rules for the use of social media. And, as you, Mr Baquet, have repeatedly underlined, "We reporters need to get out of our New York bubble!"

Reporters are not robots – and nor should they ever become robots! That is the very reason why taking a critical look at oneself – at one's own attitudes, preferences and prejudices – is just as important for the work of a journalist as looking critically outside oneself, at the topic of one's reporting. I have great respect for the "New York Times" for this critical look inside – especially now when we in Germany are also having some critical debates in and about the media, be it on reporting during the refugee crisis or the right way to respond when populist parties break taboos.

I think the self-criticism regularly demanded of politicians can also be expected of journalists. Of course, in this complex world, we need to trust the authority of the media. But I am convinced that self-criticism does not undermine this authority – on the contrary, it's the basis for trust in the media.

"All the News That's Fit to Print". This motto of the "New York Times" reflects an impressive, extremely self-confident and eternally valid ethos of journalism. But it also reflects all the major and unsolved questions regarding the future of journalism. These days, we could add a question mark to each word:

"All?" Which medium can still claim to cover all the news in today's world?

"The news?" What is news and what is fake news? And whom do we trust to distinguish?

"Fit?" Who decides what is fit for the public sphere? Certainly not only newspapers – but also trolls, bots and tweeting presidents, to name just a few.

Well, and "to print?" When I recently asked a group of school pupils when they had last read a printed paper, they looked at me in sheer amazement – 'printed papers'?

In all of these important questions, in all the upheaval of our time – the spread of digital technology, the watershed of the last presidential election and the cacophony of the post-factual world – the "New York Times" has remembered something: It has remembered – and it has refocused on the fundamental virtues of its craft.

How to react to unreason? With reason and absolute objectivity.

How to react to constant commotion and hysteria? With the solid and thorough craft of reporting.

How to react to growing polarisation and partisanship? By putting itself in the other's shoes; by taking arguments and counter-arguments seriously.

How to react to lies? By pointing out the facts.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is between hysteria and shrugging where the heart of journalism lies: its heart is enlightenment! That's what the job is all about – to inform! And, I believe, that is, and will remain, a noble task.

Washington correspondent Maggie Haberman recently said with wonderful clarity: "Some people would like us to be the opposition party. But that's just not our job!"

Good journalists are authority figures in a democracy – but they are not the better politicians. Perhaps the "New York Times" is a step ahead of some German journalists, who prefer to morally educate the public, particularly these days. The "New York Times" reacted to populism not by inflating its sense of purpose, but by restricting it: to the noble task of enlightenment, of information.

And that brings me back to the start of my speech, to the milkman in Augsburg.

This character from Walter Jacob's childhood made me think. Who might he have been, this German man who delivered milk to the rabbi's doorstep the morning after what later became known as "Reichspogromnacht"? What might he have been thinking? Was he courageous – or was he a tacit supporter? Was he simply doing his job? Or was his unwavering path through the crowd perhaps in fact a silent act of solidarity?

We can only speculate about who this milkman was and what motivated him. However, I am pretty certain of one thing: He was in the dark. He saw what was happening around him with his own eyes, but was he able to know how the Nazi regime had systematically orchestrated the pogrom all across the country? The answer is "no"

because, by that time, the free German press had long since died. It had been smothered by Goebbels' propaganda ministry and its daily orders and bans. If the milkman read the local "Augsburger National-Zeitung" on 11 November, two days after the pogrom, he would have read the following: "The police have established that all evidence points to Jewish elements having started this fire themselves."

Ladies and gentlemen, it is not merely good fortune to be informed freely and independently – it is absolutely essential for democracy. Democracy does not survive without it. And so: to inform is a journalist's proud mission. But more than that: to be informed is a civic right – and I also believe: a civic duty. Being a democrat and staying uninformed does not go together. No president, no milkman, no voter can afford that. And for that reason, we cannot afford to cede even the slightest ground when the freedom of the press is infringed. If this freedom falls, all freedom falls!

The Jacobs were informed. Gesine Cresspahl was informed. Millions of readers of the "New York Times" are informed. And 500,000 new subscribers since the last US election are also informed.

My dear "New York Times", please continue to bring us "All the News That's Fit to Print" so we can be informed!

Congratulations, Gray Lady. Or as Uwe Johnson would have said: Congratulations, Auntie Times!