



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at an event held in Berlin on 1 July 2019 to celebrate
70 years of the German Press Agency dpa**

Thank you very much for inviting me here today. Before I launch into my panegyric for a great institution, as behoves a speaker on such an occasion, allow me first to take a different tack. Heribert Prantl once said that a career in journalism required a certain degree of vanity. It was, he claimed, a trade for extroverts, rather like acting.

That may be true, and yet it is only part of the truth. Because journalism also has a side totally lacking in vanity. Not only where it can shine with polished phrases in refined articles is journalism especially good. Though dpa can do that too: I have enjoyed reading and have learnt from many a terrific piece by dpa correspondents. Agency journalism, however, is especially good where the writer is overshadowed by the text, sometimes even disappearing altogether behind the text. A news editor does not have a "Me, Inc." mindset and it is even harder to imagine a news agency populated by lots of individuals with well-developed egos. Such creatures obviously exist, not only in politics. Regrettably, we have recently seen that journalistic narcissism can also lead down the wrong track – often, indeed, even being rewarded for the results.

A news agency does not itself make news, at least not in its own cause.

That goes for dpa, too. We have already heard about one exception, the first dpa report, released via telex on the morning of 1 September 1949. I would like to repeat just one sentence from it:

"The new agency's guiding principles will be to propagate objective news reporting and remain independent of any government, party-political or commercial interest groups."

Objectivity and independence – that sounds familiar, though it was written in a very different time.

On that day, 1 September 1949, ten years after the outbreak of the Second World War and four years after its end, it was clear – perhaps not to everyone who read that report, but certainly to the majority – that there was, absolutely, a link between the piles of debris strewn around and the establishment of an independent German news agency.

That one was, as it were, the result of the other. The country's material destruction had been preceded by its moral devastation, and the great liberal German press, once so admired, lay beneath the ruins.

Its independence had already been lost in 1933; its Jewish, Social Democratic and liberal publishers and great writers had been driven into exile, or murdered. Without them, the Vossische Zeitung, the Frankfurter Zeitung or the Berliner Tageblatt could not be revived. Their loss was complete and irreplaceable.

Germany's news agency in the Weimar Republic, by contrast, the Wolffsche Telegraphenbüro, had never been free of state influence, and in 1934 it was swallowed up by the Hugenberg-Konzern, which merged it with its Telegraphen-Union to form the Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro – a propaganda tool.

So, after the Second World War, the only Germans to know a free press were those who had been reading newspapers prior to 1933. There had never been a German news agency completely free of state influence.

At the time of its launch, then, the Deutsche Presse-Agentur was unprecedented in the history of Germany.

The establishment of the Deutsche Presse-Agentur marked a break with the past and a radical new beginning. The pledge to try from then on to ensure objective and independent transmission of news and thus to contribute to objective and independent reporting is, like freedom of the press itself, one of the founding pledges of the Federal Republic of Germany.

And now I come to the praise for which you have all waited so patiently for so long. If we try today, seventy years after the entry into force of the Basic Law and the creation of dpa, to identify the reasons why we managed to take a democratic course – despite the abysses of dictatorship – then the Deutsche Presse-Agentur is certainly one part of the answer. It has contributed to the success of this democracy. And for that, it deserves gratitude, including the gratitude of the Federal President.

Information and communication are no longer merely "elements of modern life and social structures", as the publication marking dpa's 25th anniversary put it. Nowadays, rather, they are the driving force for an information society which is more than ever dependent on the

unhindered flow of news. Unhindered, obviously, by censorship or state regulation – but unhindered, too, by deliberate manipulation.

For a long time, news agencies were the only institutions to guarantee and safeguard this free flow of news. All news had to be fact-checked before a report was published. Certainly we worked, slept – and governed – better when the news profession was one that worked that way, when we were dealing first and foremost with things that were actually happening, and not just with things that were felt to be happening. By the way, minute-by-minute tweets have not improved the quality of politics. I for one would be happy if in future customs duties were not increased via Twitter and if wars were not unleashed via Twitter.

But we cannot turn back the clock: we cannot stop such trends. I have no intention of pointing out what digitisation means for news agencies like dpa or for the working conditions of editors. You know all that better than I do. Journalism is undergoing mind-boggling changes which challenge us, and sometimes overwhelm us. Everything that happens, or is claimed to have happened, frequently reaches us readers, listeners and viewers out of the blue. It moves us, excites us, disturbs us or scares us; above all, though, it overwhelms us. Anyone who really wanted to access the whole range of real and alleged news available via countless channels, platforms and digital networks, and anyone who wanted to go further and check whether it is a trustworthy source and a truthful account, would have to admit defeat.

The never-ending stream of scraps of information is news confetti with which no individual can any longer cope. But before algorithms not only decide the selection of news items available to us but also analyse and process them for us, I would like to say this: for the moment, the broom is still in the sorcerer's hands. Even if we cannot halt these developments, we can still influence them.

The Deutsche Presse-Agentur is the best proof of this. Because it is influencing our communication by doggedly doing precisely what it has been doing for 70 years: supplying reliable, trustworthy news. Reliable, trustworthy news is the prerequisite for every debate in parliament, and for every article written. Facts are facts, if they are reported by dpa. And if, on occasion, it should happen that they are not, a correction is issued immediately. This trust you enjoy, ladies and gentlemen, is the fruit of your labour.

What has changed is the environment. The news business has become even more hectic. Notwithstanding all the possibilities, advantages and opportunities it brings, digitisation is also challenging agency journalism as a business model. And we have not managed to find an appropriate response to the question of how to adequately reward quality and experience, diligence and high standards, when the

digital bargain bin with all its cheap offers is just a mouseclick away. We will have to keep on looking for an answer to this question.

Because democracy needs journalism. Not just any old journalism, and not a type of journalism that invents or manipulates stories, but one that does its research, checks its facts and analyses information before publication. Constantly bombarded by news and fake news, democracy is more than ever dependent on reliable sources like dpa, on a differentiated take on news. For this, democracy needs journalists, including experienced agency journalists and correspondents; it needs editors, for online and print versions. Democracy needs foreign correspondents and reporters who give their readers, listeners and viewers a picture of the real world.

It may be that democracy also needs influencers. And indeed they have long been part of the new public. I suspect that what they do is simply the same as what used to be called a commentary or an opinion piece. Anyone who listens to an opinion delivered in no uncertain terms should be aware of one eternal truth: in the world of commentary, climate change can be stopped immediately, a crisis can be ended at the touch of a button, and peace restored in an instant. Not in the real world, unfortunately. Because to find a solution in politics you need not only the political will, but also time. Reason knows no instrument but argument. And often enough it has to fight interests unconcerned with being reasonable.

In truth, the demands made of serious journalism are no less than before: a journalist who wants to be convincing must first be well-informed. He must compare what he has himself seen and heard with his experience, write it up truthfully, pass it on and thus enable the readers, listeners or viewers to build up their own picture. Because ideally, anyone making a judgement – and readers want to – should be in a position to understand.

Opinion-forming is the precursor to the building of political will.

Democracy and the media need each other. Together they can only function, however, if they maintain a professional distance from each other. Reporting and politics must ever remain separate spheres, with different rules. Journalists should not want to be politicians, and vice versa. Only then can journalism safeguard its independence, and democracy profit from a critical public.

Journalists and politicians – both are needed. And so I find it shocking that both are increasingly the target of attack: physical violence, attempted murder or indeed murder – the fate recently of the regional politician of Walter Lübcke – these are all attacks on our political culture, on our trust in peace in our country, and on democracy.

The Lübcke case will reveal whether our country and its institutions have learnt anything from the NSU murders. What has come to light so far suggests that the perpetrator had accomplices and supporters, that he had planned the act, procured weapons, and carried it out with a great degree of professionalism. There are many indications that we are dealing here with a new dimension of right-wing terrorism which we must combat with the utmost resolve using the full range of instruments available to the state.

From the members of the Genç family killed or injured in the Solingen arson attack, to Marwa el-Sherbini, a pregnant woman murdered exactly ten years ago in a courtroom in Dresden, to the victims of the NSU serial murders – almost 200 people have fallen victim to right-wing extremist violence since 1990. Furthermore, anti-Semitic attacks are on the rise.

Democracy needs to set sharply-defined boundaries vis-à-vis those who bring violence into the political discourse. It needs security agencies that can uncover and neutralise links and networks, and above all it needs people who stand up for democracy. Because only if we act together can we preserve democracy. We need democratic policymaking, just as we need critical journalism and its responsible, well-informed and critical readers. We need readers who ask questions and who want to learn something before they click on “like” or share a link, readers who use the internet and the digital media for civilised exchange and debate, and not as a platform to propagate humiliation and hatred.

And so my request to the dpa shareholders is this: do not allow yourselves to be conquered by digitisation; rather, conquer the digital world! Remember the promise made in that sentence 70 years ago: objectivity and independence. That noble aim is not outdated. On the contrary, it is more necessary than ever in this environment of constant excitation. I believe it is possible to have a digital world that is sensible, mature and democratic. And whoever wants to live in this modern world needs good, intelligent journalism, and has to be ready to pay for it.

I would like to advise you to invest in a journalism that informs and educates. Retain the dpa’s resources, especially its human resources. For that is the only way to pass experience on from one generation to another. And I am not merely referring to passing on experience from the older generation to the younger. In this age of digital revolution, experience needs to be shared in the opposite direction, too. I am well aware that this costs money, but it will be money well spent.

It seems to me that ultimately the whole point of a celebration like this one today is to take a look back, to see what was good, but also to look to the future, to open up new avenues. Anyone who is

committed to democracy in our country will also want to preserve the Deutsche Presse-Agentur, and anyone who invests in order to maintain all that has been achieved for the future is acting in the service of both democracy and independent journalism.