

**Review of Jörg Becker's Book "Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. Demoskopie zwischen NS-Ideologie und Konservatismus" (Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. Pollster between Nazi-Ideology and Conservatism). Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2013. ISBN 978-3-506-77614-3. 379 pages.**

Christian Fuchs

*\*University of Westminster, UK;  
christian.fuchs@uti.at, [www.fuchs.uti.at](http://www.fuchs.uti.at)*

**Abstract:** This paper reviews Jörg Becker's book "Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. Demoskopie zwischen NS-Ideologie und Konservatismus" (Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. Pollster between Nazi-Ideology and Conservatism). It presents some of the basic content, gives an overview of the book's resonance in German media and contextualizes it in the structure of German Media and Communication Studies.

**Keywords:** Media/Communication/Cultural Studies, Jörg Becker, Elisabeth-Noelle Neumann

## Myths

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1916-2010) is mainly known for having founded the German polling firm Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach (internationally also known as the Allensbach Institute), as a pioneer of survey research and author of works on the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1993). After her death in 2010, the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* that Noelle-Neumann co-founded and co-edited commemorated her as "one of the outstanding personalities of the past century" (Petersen, Worcester, Donsbach, Neijens and Traugott 2010, 151), "an icon for German women" and a "contributing and ethical colleague, always ready to share her knowledge, her findings and most of all her wisdom" (Worcester 2010, 153). On the occasion of Noelle-Neumann's 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, Jack M. McLeod (2002) praised her "important direct and indirect contributions to public opinion theory and research" and that she strongly advanced "closer connections today than ever before between academic scholarship and applied research" (McLeod 2002, 90). Hans Mathias Kepplinger, one of Noelle-Neumann's students and her former assistant who became a professor at the University of Mainz's Department of Communication (Institut für Publizistik) one year before Noelle's retirement<sup>1</sup>, wrote that she created "one of the few social theories from Germany that have gained international importance after the war" (Kepplinger 2010, 587).

So the story of Noelle-Neumann seems for many to be one of feminism, management, ethics and outstanding contributions to survey research and Media and Communication Studies. Jörg Becker's new book has set out to illuminate a blindspot of this story. Although to a small degree discussed within Media and Communication Studies (e.g. Simpson 1996), the relationship of Noelle-Neumann to the ideology of National Socialism had thus far not been systematically studied in detail. Becker's work "Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. Demoskopie zwischen NS-Ideologie und Konservatismus" (published in German) has undertaken this long-missing task. The book is a detailed, systematic, rigorous and convincing study that compares Noelle-Neumann's autobiographical claims to archive data. Jörg Becker is a leading German critical communication scholar who has reminded us in his works of the political

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ifp.uni-mainz.de/99.php> (accessed on July 6, 2013).

nature of communication in capitalist societies. He promised his friends Dallas Smythe, Herbert Schiller and George Gerbner to write this book (p. 8).

It is alarming that in more than 67 years since the end of the Nazi regime no representative of Media and Communication Studies has “considered it necessary to systematically deal with Noelle-Neumann’s works published during the NS-time” (p. 8)<sup>2</sup>. This circumstance is telling of the character and conservatism of Media and Communication Studies in the German-speaking world. Manfred Knoche, just like Jörg Becker one of the pioneers of Critical Media and Communication Studies in the German-speaking world, studied journalism and communication studies under the guidance of Noelle-Neumann at the University of Mainz in the late 1960s. In an analysis of the development of the University of Mainz’s Department of Communication (Institut für Publizistik), he writes that Noelle-Neumann used a “selective mixture of various content analyses from Mainz and Allensbach-surveys” for the “belittlement or justification or even apologetics of press concentration” and a “‘general abolition’ for local monopolies” (Knoche 2005, 101). Knoche argues that Critical Communication Studies in Germany was explicitly struggling against Noelle-Neumann’s perspective that advanced positivism, science as ideology and an apology of the monopoly structure of capitalist media (Knoche 2005, 103f). Knoche was involved in struggles against Noelle-Neumann’s form of research and teaching in Mainz that culminated in the students’ occupation of the Department of Communication. The students’ critique focused especially on the “weaknesses of the practiced empiricism, especially also the entanglement of science, conservative politics and private economic interests under the guise of positivist value-neutrality as well as on the neglect of or repression against critical approaches that were oriented on society in research and teaching” (Knoche 2005, 104). Jörg Becker’s study adds a very important anti-fascist element to the critique of Noelle-Neumann and conservative German communication research.

### The Book’s Analysis

Becker’s book consists of 18 chapters focusing on her early academic years (chapters 1, 2), her work during National Socialism (3, 4), the first years after 1945 (5, 6), the formation of the Allensbach Institute (7), Noelle’s husband Erich Peter Neumann (8), Ernst Jünger and the right-wing publication “Die Wildente” (The Wild Duck) (9), denazification certificates (10), US secret services (11), the relationship of the Allensbach Institute to German governments (12), fascism and opinion research (13), the Allensbach research’s methodological problems (14), the spiral of silence (15), esotericism (16), anti-Semitism (17), and the New Right movement (18).

Becker argues that it is likely that Noelle-Neumann’s meeting with Hitler in June 1937 was not spontaneous, but organized by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Nationalsozialistischer Studentinnen (Association of National Socialist Women Students) and critically analyzes her own view of Hitler (pp. 14-17). His analysis concludes that Noelle as exchange student in the United States in 1937/1938 propagated Nazi-ideology (pp. 17-28). In November 1937, Noelle published an article in the *Columbian Missouri*, in which she spoke of large influence of Jews in the German culture, economy, medical system, judicial system, press, theatre and government that according to her views threatened the German culture and nature (pp. 22f). Noelle wrote: “Finally, National-Socialism is the reaction to the loss of national pride, to complete helplessness of a disarmed Germany amidst feverishly rearming nations, to the disappearance of national self-preservation, to the rapidly decreasing birth rate, to overruling of the cultural and economical life through extending influence of Jews, caused by the fact that in Germany after the war about 70-90 per cent of the key positions in medicine, law, the press, the theatre and a large part of government positions were in the hand of the Jews, although they constituted only one per cent of the population. This situation endangered German cultural life and national unity. [...] National-Socialism is opposed to the mixture of races because it sees herein a danger to the maintenance of national character, since history

<sup>2</sup> I have translated direct quotes from German to English.

shows sufficient examples that the downfall of great nations has set in with the mixing of races" (Noelle 1937, cited by Becker in German on pp. 22f and in English on pp. 266f, footnote 44).

Becker argues that Noelle in her text adapted many claims of the Nazis as statements of fact and thereby agreed to these assertions: "For her there were in fact 'races' and a 'Jewish question' [...] In this respect she identified with the anti-Semitism that was prevalent back then" (p. 23). The author documents that Noelle was subject to a hearing in the US House of Representatives in September 1938, in which it was argued that she had compiled an address list for the distribution of Nazi propaganda (p. 26).

Chapter 2 analyzes Noelle-Neumann's dissertation "Meinungs- und Massenforschung in den U.S.A. Rundfragen über Politik und Presse" (Opinion and Mass Research in the USA. Polls on Politics and the Press). Noelle argued in it that public opinion in Germany was like a "national body" (Volkskörper) that "receives its orders from the brain that when executed guarantee cooperation of body and limbs that can create time-transcending political and cultural values" (p. 30). Becker concludes that Noelle's dissertation "is clearly anti-democratic, feels committed to an organic-holistic worldview typical for the 1920s and 1930s" (p. 33). In line with the Zeitgeist, the dissertation according to Becker would also be anti-Semitic, describing Jews as engaging in "anti-German agitation" and as "fever curve" (p. 33). The author says that Noelle would also have added the term "Jew" in parenthesis whenever mentioning Walter Lippmann in her dissertation.

Chapter 3 presents a highly original analysis of the 25 articles that Noelle-Neumann published in the years 1940-1942 in the weekly *Das Reich* (*The Reich*). He argues that Noelle-Neumann overall in these articles "obviously sympathizes with National Socialist topics, persons, arguments, traditions and opinions" (p. 58). Noelle-Neumann wrote e.g. in the articles published in *Das Reich* that the US engages in anti-German propaganda by making concentration camps "a bloodthirstily exploited topic" (p. 65), that "Jews write in the newspapers, own them, have almost monopolized the advertisements" (p. 66), or that "without the leadership of the word of the elite opinion a new public opinion cannot assert itself" (p. 66).

Becker argues that after 1945 Noelle-Neumann created a theatre company in Tübingen that worked with former Nazis, that Noelle's husband Erich Peter Neumann, who was a member of the Nazi party, wrote for example in *Das Reich* that one can observe "the abhorrent variety of all types of Jews from the East" in the Warsaw Ghetto and that they constituted "an assembly of the asocial" (p. 138). He also analyzes how the Allensbach Institute became influential in the German public and obtained constant orders from German governments and says that the Institute in three studies in the late 1940s showed sympathies with the survey result that the German "population was tired of the denazification processes or with the assumption that order ruled in the Third Reich" (pp. 171f). He also documents that the US State Department shared the opinion that Noelle-Neumann's articles in the years 1939-1945 spread "the most crude Nazi venom" (pp. 175, 177) and that studies of the Allensbach Institute were "blind on the right eye" (p. 216). Noelle-Neumann's concept of the spiral of silence is for Becker "deeply embedded into a pre-democratic reference system of the leader and the led" (p. 224) and based on social Darwinism (p. 227). He also argues that she was member of three Nazi-student organizations (Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund, Arbeitsgemeinschaft Nationalsozialistischer Studentinnen, Nationalsozialistische Studentenkamphilfe des Nationalsozialistischen Deutschen Studentenbundes) (p. 154ff), that her thinking was shaped by esotericism and occultism (chapter 16), that the Allensbach's Institute repeatedly found anti-Semitism in Germany to be a minimal or almost negligent problem, whereas other studies reported that it was a huge phenomenon, which resulted in methodological criticisms (chapter 17) and that the *Handbuch deutscher Rechtsextremismus* (*Handbook of German Right-Wing Extremism*) documented relations of Noelle-Neumann to the far-right scene (chapter 18).

In chapter 11, the author argues that the USA saw opinion research as powerful political means and was therefore sceptical of Noelle-Neumann's Allensbach Institute, whereas she several times tried to directly offer her expertise to the US. In her autobiography she describes one of these meetings in Nauheim and that she felt like in an interrogation. Becker

documents the background and that the person she met there was opinion researcher and US intelligence agent Frederick Williams, who saw Noelle-Neumann as a very suspicious person and did not trust her. The US conducted several analyses of her role in Nazi Germany that were documented. One report argued that her articles in *Das Reich* had dangerous propagandist effects on the German public and that it was intolerable for democratic press politics in Germany to allow her to engage in journalistic activities (pp. 169f). Another report wrote that the US should not support the work of Noelle-Neumann's institute because of methodological concerns (p. 170). Yet another report written by Kurt Glaser (p. 171) concluded according to Becker that "Noelle-Neumann continued after 1945 to be close to National Socialism and that her methods of empirical social research did not adhere to standards of scientific rigour" (p. 172). A fourth report argued that Noelle-Neumann's articles in the years 1939-1945 were "crude Nazi venom" and that in "conversation, Noelle disclaimed any change in views as late as 1947" (p. 177). A fifth report that Becker documents raised fundamental methodological doubts about Noelle-Neumann's 1949 study of Germans' opinions about the Third Reich (pp. 179f). Becker also shows that there were people in the USA who supported Noelle-Neumann and argued that her institute should be supported by the US. Becker argues that anti-communism was the background of these considerations and that Frank Gardiner Wisner, who worked for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the CIA, played a key role (pp. 181-186). Many questions about his relationship to Noelle-Neumann would remain until today.

Becker shows the translation of a denazification certificate from 1950 that says Noelle-Neumann is "unbelastet" (guiltless) as well as a certificate from 1949 that says she is "Mitläufer", Begünstigter der Verordnungen 133 und 165" (Fellow-runner, beneficiary of the decrees 133 and 165) (pp. 159f). Becker cites Robert Wolfe, a former archivist of the US National Archives specialized on German war documents, who in an interview with Becker argued: "Noelle's translation of her French Zone denazification document was on the face of it a deliberate and flagrant falsification! [...] Noelle-Neumann translated into English her French Zone verdict of Sympathisant, not as Mitläufer, but as 'Unbelastet', bowdlerizing the British Zone German language terminology 'Entlastet' to further soften it thus dropping her category of 'fellow traveller' to exonerated!" (p. 294, footnote 294; German translation on pp. 61f). Becker in some passages in the book directly says that he too thinks the translation is fabricated (e.g. on pp. 162, 178, 252, 260, 263, back cover). Becker trusted the judgement of a leading expert on German war documents. He also writes that another document shows that Noelle-Neumann was an "NS-beneficiary" (p. 161). The document says that she was "Mitläufer-Begünstigte der Verordnung 165" (Fellow-runner-beneficiary of decree 165). This decree ruled that no expiation measures should be taken against those who were considered to be Mitläufer (fellow-runners) according to a decree from March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1947 that was passed in the Federal land Baden, where Noelle-Neumann lived and that was part of the French occupation zone. The 1947 decree defined Mitläufer (fellow-runner) as those who were not more than nominally involved in National Socialism or who supported the Nazi's violent regime only marginally, especially members of the NSDAP or one of its organizations who paid membership fees or attended obligatory events and membership applicants (article 7)

In respect to the claims that the denazification documents were fabricated and that Noelle-Neumann was a NS-beneficiary, Noelle-Neumann's great nephew and adoptive son Ralph Erich Schmidt sought injunction against Jörg Becker and the book's publisher (Ferdinand Schöningh publishing). A judicial settlement was reached, in which the author and the publisher agree to omit these claims in future editions of the book<sup>3</sup>.

Although Jörg Becker made a factual mistake in writing that the document published on page 158 shows that Noelle-Neumann was a NS-beneficiary and a second one by stating that the translated document on page 160 was fabricated and although he could have simply cited the opinion of experts without writing that he shares them, what remains is that he con-

<sup>3</sup> Pressemitteilung zum Verfahren Schmidt vs. Schöningh Verlag und Jörg Becker bezüglich der Publikation "Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann – Demoskopie zwischen NS-Ideologie und Konservatismus",

[http://www.schoeningh.de/pressemitteilungen.html?tx\\_mbooks\[page\]=1&cHash=e0aaef5e5de871bc6a5dac7e1a019ec8](http://www.schoeningh.de/pressemitteilungen.html?tx_mbooks[page]=1&cHash=e0aaef5e5de871bc6a5dac7e1a019ec8)

ducted the first systematic analysis of Noelle-Neumann's dissertation and her articles published during the period of Nazi Germany and that he traced connections and lines that persisted after 1945. The results of the study are shocking and provide detailed insights into Noelle-Neumann's worldview. The overall message of the book is that Noelle-Neumann has "based on old insider relations from the Nazi time made her career in post-war Germany" (p. 8), that "the pre-democratic relationship between the nation body and national leader outlined in her dissertation has carried itself over to her 1980 theory of the spiral of silence" (p. 8) and that she "has not expressed a single word of regret about her activity during the Nazi time and has not a single time said in Germany that she is sorry for her manifold and repeated misanthropic sentences" (p. 261).

### The Book's Resonance in German Media

Becker's book has found large resonance in the German feuilleton. *Der Spiegel* says that the findings are "impressive" and that now "there can be no doubts about the brown worldview of the young Noelle-Neumann" (Bohr 2013). *Falter* stresses that "the biography is based on a study of sources that thus far nobody had conducted in such elaborateness" (Gepp 2013). Dieter Prokop (2013), professor emeritus of media sociology at the Goethe University Frankfurt am Main, argues that the book is "excellent investigative journalism" (57) and "analytical criticism" (59) that shows that "the old Nazi-networks persisted after 1945 in the Federal Republic" (58). He says that one wants to read the whole book at once because "one cannot believe what happened in these Nazi networks" (58). "The critical social researcher Jörg Becker was compelled to search in the remotest archives by the desire to expose those fatal constellations in society that circumvented democratic opinion research. He did it in the interest of enlightenment" (59). *Hintergrund* stresses the book's "meticulous inquiry work" that constitutes a "milestone" for preventing the romanticization of Noelle-Neumann and reveals her "obviously sugarcoated autobiography" (Schiffer 2013). *Junge Welt* said the biography "paints the picture of a German career" (Köhler 2013), shows how Noelle-Neumann contributed to "opinion research as tool of domination" and that she "learned the method of the mass survey with Goebbels' help" (Rügemer 2013). *Die Zeit* published an article by Becker (2013) about Noelle-Neumann.

The conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) wrote that Becker is judging from the standpoint of the "secure federal German democracy", does not see that "other survival needs dominate in dictatorships" and that "Noelle's NS-word was never her NS-deed" (Wolffsohn 2013). One wonders in this respect why the author, Michael Wolffsohn, dualistically separates thought and behaviour in the realm of journalism. A journalist's word reaches out to a lot of people. Making words public is not just thought, but an important action in itself. Journalism under National Socialism had a propaganda function and Noelle-Neumann wrote, as Jörg Becker shows, for a weekly that reached up to 1.4 million readers and that contained editorials by NS propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. The *Neue Rheinische Zeitung Online* said that Becker's book is "more than worth reading", that it is "a meticulous study of the activities of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and her husband Erich Peter Neumann in the Nazi period" and that Wolffsohn's review in the FAZ "tries to make Noelle-Neumann and her thinking look harmless" because he has an "aversion to everything supposedly left-wing" (Hecht-Galinski 2013).

*Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) wrote that the book is "full of reputation-damaging interpretations" (Güntner 2013). The conservative Springer-newspaper *Die Welt* argued that the book is "seriously flawed" and stressed that "it is no secret that she wrote as a young journalism scholar for the weekly 'Das Reich', the showpiece magazine of propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels". This expression hides that the content of what Noelle-Neumann actually wrote in *Das Reich* was until the publication of Becker's book hardly known. It is Jörg Becker's merit that he has based on meticulous archive work systematically analyzed the worldviews of Noelle-Neumann's articles, dissertation and later works and has contextualized the results in German politics and society.



The ad writer and consultant Frank Stauss (2013) argued in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “Who is really still interested, except those who have always preferred to fight the battles of the past instead of standing up when one could still have some effect?”. Noelle-Neumann would have been one of the first women “who managed to found in male-dominated post-war Germany a leading institute, to expand it and to lead it to the top. She was among the first female senior executives of her time and was indisputably a pioneer of market research in Germany” (Stauss 2013). It seems that Stauss thinks that success in management justifies whatever one did in the past.

Becker stresses that he wrote this book at a time when the freedom of age allowed him to no longer worry about career disadvantages resulting from critical publications (p. 259) and that he did not find the time and rest for writing this book during his academic career (p. 8). Commenting on the fact that Becker did not write this book earlier, Stauss notes: “May one be silent for almost half a century despite better knowledge? May one for fear of reprisals even ignore good friends’ requests for support? One can assume that no great harm would have occurred to a university scholar of the 70s and 80s in the Federal Republic if he had critically dealt with an opinion researcher. Nevertheless, Jörg Becker ignored his American colleagues Dallas Walker Smythe, Herbert Irving Schiller and George Gerbner’s advice to engage more closely with Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann beyond the death of all of them”.

Stauss completely misperceives the reality critical social scientists and communication scholar have faced in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s and later. Some examples: Horst Holzer (1935-2000), like Jörg Becker a German Critical Political Economist of Media and Communication, was one of the most prominent victims of the German *Berufsverbote* (occupational bans) for members of the DKP (German Communist Party). A university committee appointed him to the Chair in Communication and Aesthetics at the University of Bremen in 1971, but the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany)-dominated Senate of Bremen denied him the position because of his DKP membership. He was subsequently denied appointment at the University of Oldenburg in 1972, at the Pädagogische Hochschule Berlin in 1973, the University of Marburg in 1973, and faced a denial of tenure and suspension at the University of Munich in 1974 (see Bönkost 2011; Scheu 2010, chapter 6.1). Manfred Knoche was involved in organizing leaflets, discussions, protests, articles, counter-lectures and occupations in Mainz that were directed against Noelle-Neumann (Scheu 2010, 200). According to Knoche, the consequence of his political positioning was that he was fired from the position of assistant at Noelle-Neumann’s department in 1970 (Scheu 2010, 200f). In an interview Knoche said that after the department occupation, he was dismissed without notice and Noelle-Neumann refused to further supervise his dissertation, which according to Knoche was the reason why he moved to and continued his studies in Berlin<sup>4</sup>. Facing the conservative climate in German universities, he had to leave the country and from 1983-1994 was professor of media and communication studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Belgium, after which he became professor of media economics at the University of Salzburg in Austria (1994-2009). Hanno Hardt argues that German Media and Communication Studies’ engagement with National Socialism was highly problematic: When former SA (Sturmabteilung) member Franz Ronneberger became honorary member of the German Communication Association DGPK (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft), Hardt protested by cancelling his membership (Scheu 2010, 264). He furthermore considered German Media and Communication Studies not only blind on the right eye, but also as provincial and neglecting Critical Theory, which is the reason why he was not interested in working as professor in Germany and made a career in the United States (ibid.). Christopher Simpson published a critical journal article about Noelle-Neumann in 1996 (Simpson 1996). *Der Spiegel* wrote an article in 1997, in which it argued that a German student who held a scholarship from an association of friends and supporters of the University of Mainz’s Department of Communication (Institut für Publizistik) sent a letter and a response to Simpson written by Hans Mathias Kepplinger that argued against Simpson’s analysis to

<sup>4</sup> Video excerpt shown as part of Manfred Knoche’s valedictory lecture. University of Salzburg, Austria. November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009. <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/2632949> (accessed on July 6th, 2013). 34:28-34:53.



