Seminar Paper

Lived Experiences: Trust or Mistrust? Mainstream Media in times of Covid-19

M2: Qualitative Methoden der Empirischen Sozialforschung

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most European countries partly shut-down the economy and implement nationwide lockdowns. Austria was enforcing lockdowns in spring, autumn 2020 and at the beginning of 2021. The government and most of Mainstream-Media (MSM) portrayed the lockdown as the only alternative to get the Covid-19 pandemic under control, hence save lives and prevent the collapse of the national healthcare system (APA, 2020; Streihammer, 2020).

The lockdown required most individuals to stop meeting other people outside of their household and comply with preventive measures such as wearing face-masks on public transportation or keeping a certain distance from other people (Sozialministerium, 2020). In general, people followed the required preventive measures without much hesitation. However, many Corona-Protests occurred in European cities, with thousands of people protesting the government's decisions, demanding the end of the "*Corona dictatorship*" or calling the MSM "*Fake-News*" (krone, 2020; OTS, 2020; ZDF, 2020). The term 'Mainstream-Media' (MSM) will be defined as the traditional forms of media such as traditional newspapers (e.g., Kronen Zeitung, Der Standard), television (e.g., ORF) and radio (e.g., OE3), which influences a large number of people. Additionally, the MSM is likely to represent widely accepted beliefs and opinions.

According to a survey of the Austrian Gallup-Institute, an increasing part of Austrians judge media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic as increasingly negative (Die Presse, 2021). Between March 2020 and February 2021, the government's Covid-19 measures' approval ratings fell from 88 to 43 per cent. Furthermore, an increasing minority of 26 per-cent of Austrians agree that the MSM would contribute to a further escalation of the crisis and spread panic. The head of the Gallup-Institute, Andrea Fronaschütz, *comments that it "seems like the established media (MSM) are perceived as a part of the political system, whereas this parallelism strengthens feelings of insurrection against the governments and causes mistrust against media"* (quote translated from German and slightly adopted) (Die Presse, 2021). The 2019 long-term study on media confidence from the Johannes Gutenberg University demonstrated a polarisation of individuals of either trust or mistrusting the MSM (Uni-Mainz, 2020). Furthermore, a pre-print study demonstrated that during spring 2020, the German TV-programs *ARD Extra* and *ZDF Spezial* predominantly applied a narrative and rhetoric of Covid-19 as an inevitable human crisis without discussing proper solution approaches (Gräf & Hennig, 2020, pp. 16–17).

Therefore, this small-scale abductive research study aims to examine which (if any) *lived experiences* and events caused individuals to mistrust the MSM in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the limited number of interviewees, research findings do not apply to the general public. The study aims to produce indicatory research, which could help subsequent research projects in the field of *lived experiences* and the MSM in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. Questions of trust or mistrusting media outlets are essential for governments, as Zhao et al., 2020 has demonstrated in recent research. Study results showed that compliance with preventive behaviours (to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic) is divided along media bias lines (Zhao et al., 2020). In other words, compliance with Covid-19 preventive measures is highly dependent on which media outlets individuals trust. Lastly, Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020, p. 378) indicate that 'trust' in news and media is one of the strongest determinants of actively using news and media.

Consequently, exploring why individuals tend to (further) mistrust the MSM in times of the Covid-19 pandemic shall contribute to the fundamental knowledge of how media outlets can ensure their readers' high trust and how to avoid polarisation of trust.

In order to explore individuals lived experiences in times of the Covid-19 pandemic, the paper is raising the research question of:

> Which *lived experiences* may have caused or intensified mistrust to the mainstream media (MSM) in times of the Covid-19 Pandemic in individuals living in Vienna and its suburban area.

The research question will be answered as follows. First, the introduction provided a very brief literature review on existing research and guided to unresearched fields of exploring individuals' lived experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. Second, the theoretical framework will further expand on the literature exploring *lived experiences* by Max van Manen (2016). Third, aspects of research ethics will be examined, which have been crucial as the study includes two in-depth interviews and interviewees have been encouraged to discuss intimate details about their life. Fourth, the research design elaborates the format in which interviews took place and discusses van Manen's analysis techniques. The fifth section will present the findings of van Manen's (2016) method of analysing participants *lived experiences*. Finally, the paper will summarise and discuss its findings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lived experiences involve an immediate pre-reflective conscious moment in our life: a defining moment that is there-for-me without having a reflexive awareness of it. *Lived experiences* gain hermeneutic significance by reflectively thinking of the moment. In daily life, we give meaning to a lived experience's phenomena through conscious meditation, conversations with others, daydreams or other inspirations (van Manen, 2016, pp. 35–37).

To give an example, van Manen suggests imagining yourself participating in a panel discussion. The moment when you are saying something, and all eyes are on you; these eyes are robbing the "*taken-for-granted relation to my voice and my body*" (2016, pp. 35–36). These eyes are forcing you to be aware of the experience of talking while you are experiencing this moment. This moment is often resulting in awkwardness and shyness. However, quickly after you are getting involved in a debate and 'forget' about others' presence, you will become involved again *immediately* and *naturally* in the discussion. After the debate, you will be able to reflect on it to fully understand what the debate was about (van Manen, 2016, p. 36).

Studying *lived experiences* is about understanding individuals' unique and personal characteristics and how their experiences are shaped by subjective factors of identity (race, gender, political interests, sexuality, etc.) that determine their daily life. *Lived experiences* (phenomena) investigate how humans experience the world, therefore how individuals experience the information flow in media outlets and which factors cause or intensify mistrust to the MSM (Adams & van Manen, 2008, pp. 616–617). Adams and van Manen are arguing that any human experience is the "*main epistemological basis for qualitative research studies*", and the concept of "*lived experiences possesses special methodological significance for phenomenology*" (2008, p. 616). Studying *lived experiences* of individuals focuses on experiencing an immediate moment in life, as one experiences it pre-reflectively and not as one conceptualises, categorises or reflects on it (van Manen, 2016, p. 9). Phenomenological researchers are interested in asking, "*What is this or that kind of experience like?*", therefore, they aim to explore and explain a phenomenon as it presents itself to a participants' conscious mind (van Manen, 2016, p. 9).

Consequently, the study of *lived experiences* focuses on everyday life events and participants self-awareness and how humans react and respond to those experiences (Boylorn, 2008, pp. 489–490). Drawing from the example above, studying *lived experiences* includes the following three steps. First, life's history must be understood. Second, the personal experience of the interviewee in time of the Covid-19 pandemic will be reconstructed. Third, the participant's reflection to give meaning to the experienced situations will be explored. Boylorn distinguishes between 'life story' (concentrates on ordinary occurrences such as language, rituals or routines) and 'privileging experiences' (the way of knowing and interpreting the world) (2008, p. 490). Furthermore, studying individuals' *lived experiences* allow a researcher to learn more about society and how experiences are communicated among each other (Boylorn, 2008, p. 489).

ETHICAL ASPECTS

The research comprises interviews, which included sensitive and personal information of participants (e.g., earlier life experiences, political attitudes, reflections of individual behaviour etc.). Therefore, I went through the ethical code of conduct from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to avoid formulating unethical (follow-up) questions and/or interview techniques during the interviews (TCPS, 2018). Additionally, the following points were clarified before the interview.

First, interviewees were informed about essential points and the aim of the study. This helped me and the interviewees to form a rough picture of what the questions will be about. Second, it was explained how data of interviews (transcript) would be analysed and handled by me. Furthermore, the interviewees have been encouraged to ask questions regarding the procession of data and how the researcher (me) will guarantee anonymity. It was offered to contact me in case of any follow-up question and to inform them about the study results.

I asked questions specifically to assess participants understanding of the research and the processing of collected data. Additionally, participants have verbally confirmed their consent to the interview and the transcription of the audio material.

Data, which included personal information, which may reveal participants' identity, were pseudonymised during the transcription process. That means that age, name, and personal preferences (for example, political parties) were slightly modified.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This phenomenological research project carried out two in-depth interviews with several open-end questions. As mentioned earlier, the first set of questions focused on the interviewee's personal history and characteristics. The second list of questions aimed at whether any of the interviewee's personal experiences (while engaging with the MSM) leads to a change in media consumption. Lastly, questions were asked to reflect upon the personal experiences with the MSM, and if participants have learned something new, they are eager to share. (Literature which inspired the construction of the interview guide are - among others; Bevan (2014) and Lauterbach (2018, p. 2884)).

The participants were recruited through my close friend circle, with implications to the study's ethical aspects (discussed in the next chapter). During the interview, the focus was not involving any personal discussions and/or exchange of opinions between the researcher and the participants.

The study participants were asked if they have a general mistrust towards 'Mainstream-Media'. This question served as a 'filter' as the word 'Mainstream-Media' is loaded with meanings. By initially focusing on individuals who are already mistrusting MSM, I expected fruitful discussions about exploring one's *trust/mistrust* towards MSM. However, the 'filter question' also limited the scope of eligible interviewees, affecting the study's outcome.

The first interview was coded and verified with the interviewee in a follow-up call before the second interview was conducted. Therefore, the second participants' interview questionnaire was slightly adopted as it turned out that some questions produced competitive data material.

The recorded audio files were transcribed with a speech to text programs (Dragon NaturallySpeaking) and MAXQDA 2020. Subsequently, the transcripts were re-read several times to explore how: "lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality) and lived human relation (relationality or communality)" emerged in the participant's discussion of their shared experiences (van Manen, 2016, p. 101). For each of van Manen's four lifeworld existentials, the transcripts have been read through individually. Therefore, each transcript was read through more than four times. Following this step, interview segments have been marked, and an *incident-to-incident* open coding process was performed using MAXQDA 2020 (cf. Charmaz (2006, pp. 42–71)). After this step, the

initially open coded data was revisited to explore and develop ideas and categories, leading to a construction of new abstract concepts of putting a relationship between *lived experiences* and *trust/mistrust* of the MSM.

Additionally, following the emergence of abstract concepts relating *lived experience* and *trust/mistrust*, the focus laid on interpreting the investigated relations. Lastly, memos have been used to sort out and categorise personal thoughts. The next chapter will present the analysed results of which *lived experiences* may have caused or intensified mistrust to the mainstream media (MSM) in times of the Covid-19 Pandemic of the interviewed individuals.

RESULTS

The following chapter discusses the findings of the analysed *lived experiences* within the transcripts. For interviewees' anonymity, Interview Person I will subsequently be named 'Max' and Interview Person II, 'Stefan'. The chapter will be divided into four subsections according to van Manen's lifeworld existentials; lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality) and lived human relation (relationality or communality). It shall be noted that the interviews were held in German, and the following transcript segments are translated. The original full interviews are presented in the appendix.

Lived space (spatiality)

The first phase of operationalising van Manen's (2016, p. 102) lifeworld existentials is about the "*felt space*". To better imagine and understand *lived space*, one should think of space outside of its physical terminology of physical proximity and location. *Lived space* not just considers the place where we can feel at home and comfortably, but also the emotional state of comfort. Therefore, emotional distance to others and/or the invasion of personal boundaries shall be investigated.

Throughout the interview, the code of "feeling discomfort" accompanied by feelings of *repressions*, *manipulation*, *indoctrination*, *humiliation*, *feeling powerless* or *haunted* were named in combination with direct implications of reading MSM and being exposed to preventive measures declared by the state.

Max expressed thoughts of pessimism about how easy the MSM can manipulate and indoctrinate most of the population (Max, Pos. 180).

> "*Well, pessimistic simply because […], I see how easy it is to control most of the population, yes really, to indoctrinate, and to conditioning, and to guide [them] in the direction of how you want, actually*" (Max, Pos. 180).

Stefan agreed with my paraphrased definition that regularly reading MSM can influence your common attitude towards life; "*you find a common basis [with others], a common basis towards life, which you absorb from the media*". (Interviewer, Interview with Stefan, Pos. 72-73). In other words, MSM can contribute and influence your feelings of personal *lived space (*negative and positively). If, however, reading particular MSM articles trigger feelings of the *lived space* being invaded or are in danger due to manipulating *MSM*, Stefan is deciding to elude reading MSM.

> "*I cancelled my subscription of Kurier exactly one year ago. That was my last subscription. (…) Yes, and the second thing was when exactly a year ago it started with the Corona reports, this constant negative sensationalism, and even more cases and this and that. No matter where. (…) But I just couldn't forgive my favourite media*" (Stefan, Pos. 49).

> "*It is human greed, the willingness to even read through something like that, yes. (…) This is manipulation, and I try to avoid it*" (Stefan, Pos. 127).

Lived body (corporeality)

Van Manen describes *lived body* as the "*fact that we are always bodily on the world*" (2016, pp. 103–104). Van Manen further quotes that "*under the critical gaze, the body may turn awkward, the motions appear clumsy (…)*", which undermines the importance of understanding the connection of the physical and the inner-mental and spiritual body altogether. The category *lived body* is not just analysing the transcripts regarding discussions of interviewees physical body, but also in connection to their inner selves. Max and Stefan regularly noted an inner feeling of '*restlessness*' due to the Covid-19 coverage of the MSM.

The MSM are regularly portraying Covid-19 positive tested as "*infected and sick people (…), which is simply false*" (Max, Pos. 68, 152). (The term 'infected' is generally associated with something that can cause diseases; ergo, the term is negatively afflicted.) The personally felt discrepancy of *truth* between 'infected' and 'just positively tested' individuals lead to a feeling of being "*manipulated"* and *"indoctrinated*" (Max, Pos. 170, 176, 180, 184). The feelings of being *manipulated* or *indoctrinated* are resulting because Max compares MSM's content regularly with ones of the so-called alternative Media (pos. 160). (Alternative media are all media sources outside of the mainstream, often independent, dissident, small, radical, etc.)

According to Stefan, the MSM portrayed the Covid-19 pandemic as a situation without an alternative to escape (Stefan, Pos. 51). The lack of solutions presented by the MSM to overcome the pandemic resulted in mixed feelings of "*deepest loneliness, anger, rage and sadness divided by depression*" (Stefan, Pos. 57). Such feelings emerged because the MSM are entirely and transparently manipulating the public without considering any critique of the "*Corona Mainstream*" (Stefan, Pos. 59).

> "*Yes, because [it is] completely transparent for me. [The] synchronisation of the media, and manipulation of press conferences, which are then reproduced, and [without] zero critical questions of the Corona Mainstream*" (Stefan, Pos. 59).

Lived Time (temporality)

Lived time is subjective time, hence the opposite of what we read of the clock (van Manen, 2016, p. 104). *Lived time* shall be understood as a question of what formed us in the past as memories and which expectations we have for ourselves in future. Most regularly, codes appeared related to certain '*discomforts about the future*' and consequently the '*need to change something about it*'.

Max is reading (alternative) media almost daily to inform himself about worldwide political events (Max, Pos. 18, 93-99). Furthermore, Max worries about the consequences of 'the intensifying repressions of individuals disclosing lies of the MSM' (Max, Pos. 184). He notes that not enough of today's society realises what harm the MSM may cause to them and worries of ending living in a dictatorship (Max, Pos. 184).

> "*(…) the extreme repression [against individuals who are disclosing lies of the MSM] is growing, (…) and I also have a bit of a fear that it is simply happening too slowly [that today's society realises such repression of individuals] and that at some point it will be too late, and yes, then we will be in a dictatorship, or I don't know, in a not so beautiful vision of the future*" (Max, Pos. 184).

Stefan worked together with journalists and politicians for several years, which is why he does not trust them anymore (Stefan, Pos. 121). During a train journey to Vienna, Stefan had a terrible eye-opening experience. He was watching others who voluntarily collected the gratis newspapers of 'Heute' and 'Österreich' and were reading about "*Murder, manslaughter, just negative information*" (Stefan, Pos. 127). Experiences as such changed his perception of the MSM, as Stefan nowadays perceives reading MSM as a "*waste of time*" (Stefan, Pos. 82-83). This is particularly interesting, as "*the gift of time*" is one of Stefan's most valuable resources (Stefan, Pos. 81). Lastly, Stefan notes that he is

even a bit ashamed of having worked for the MSM industry for many decades but now looking for alternatives solutions to do something else – more positively (Stefan, Pos. 129).

> *"After 35 years of working for this juggernaut, I'm a little embarrassed, but I'm trying to do something positive, going a different way (…)"* (Stefan, Pos. 129).

Lived other (relationality)

Lived other is defined as "*the interpersonal space that we share with*" others (van Manen, 2016, p. 104). It is the lived relation of belonging to specific communities and the urge of finding a sense of purpose in life. In the interview transcripts, codes of '*missing out on solidarity'* and indicators of '*social isolation'* emerged frequently. This was accompanied by the *urge of exchanging and sharing information* among one's friend groups.

The Covid-19 preventive measures are burdening for Max as he is not allowed to go to the gym and meet friends regularly (Max, Pos. 24). Max noted to feel a bit pessimistic as he believes to be *"one of maybe five-per-cent or ten-per-cent who can recognise"* manipulations of the MSM (Max, Pos. 178). Furthermore, Max loves to share and exchange researched information with friends and would love to see himself as a whistleblower (Max, Pos. 54, 109-114).

> *"I would like to see myself as a whistleblower/entertainer, (…) so that I can somehow build up my knowledge, do my training so that I can do this work in the future, make myself independent in the field (…), [and] educate people or help them in certain ways, like in areas I am knowledgeable of"* (Max, Pos. 54).

Stefan is noticing an increased loss of solidarity and difficulty socialising with work colleagues (Stefan, Pos. 19). He mentions that:

> "*It is important, and as long as it is possible, to tell and point out to my colleagues, please, stay intelligent, what is this whole thing [certain Covid-19 measures] for, that doesn't make any sense (…)"* (Stefan, Pos. 29).

Additionally, Stefan decided to refuse to read articles of the MSM more and more, pointing out having dedicated friend-circles that he trusts and regularly exchanges and shares information (Stefan, Pos. 75).

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

This paper aims to discover which *lived experiences* may have caused or intensified mistrust to the mainstream media (MSM) in times of the Covid-19 Pandemic in individuals. Research in the field of trust and mistrust concerning the coverage of the pandemic in the MSM demonstrated an increasing picture of polarisation among its readers (Die Presse, 2021; Uni-Mainz, 2020). Implications of *not trusting* certain media outlets can have far-reaching effects on governments' compliance efforts to enforce preventive Covid-19 measures (Zhao et al., 2020). Van Manen's (2016) method of defining and analysing *lived experiences* was applied throughout the research process. It helped to construct the interview guidance and a structure on how to analyse the interview data. Subsequently, two in-depth interviews were recorded and coded based on van Manen's (2016, pp. 101-106) four lifeworld existentials (*lived space, lived body, lived time, lived other)*. The analysed four lifeworld existentials may be summarised as follows but shall be examined with caution as data saturation was not reached.

Both interviewees reported feelings of *intrusion* and *discomfort*-into their (personal) *lived space*. It is suggested that reading particular MSM articles triggered participants feelings of being *helpless ('Ohnmächtig')* due to the *exposed manipulation* of the MSM in portraying the Covid-19 pandemic as a situation without alternatives to get along with. In other words, the MSM portrayed the pandemic as a crisis without *appropriate* solutions to cope with (preventive measures of the government were

rejected and described as *useless*). The *exposure of manipulation* was not happening from one to another day, but more slowly and steadily. The argument is that the MSM contributed to negative feelings of *helplessness* and/or sentiments of *manipulation.* These feelings triggered the *discomfort* of one's state of comfort and led to solid rejections of MSM outlets.

The distinction lines between the four lifeworld existentials are not always clear. This is apparent when looking closer at interpretations of the existential *lived body*. Feelings of one's *intrusion* and *discomfort*-into their personal *lived space* can be widened to an inner feeling of '*restlessness'*. Both participants mentioned (indirectly) that alternative media sources validated their belief in *propagandistic* and *manipulative* MSM outlets. The perceived discrepancy of presented *truths* between the MSM and certain alternative media sources triggered feelings of "*deepest loneliness, anger, rage and sadness*" and of becoming *manipulated* and *indoctrinated* (Stefan, Pos. 59).

The existential of *lived time* was experienced as *discomfort about the future* with the subsequent urge to *change something* about that situation. As mentioned earlier, mistrust towards the MSM was a slow and steady process, based on extensive previous experience reading and engaging with articles of the MSM. Accusations and/or the feelings of *manipulation* runs like a golden thread through exploring reasonings for mistrust towards the MSM. The interviewees noted being worried about the future, as one was concerned with '*ending up in a dictatorship'* and '*wasting time by reading MSM articles'*. Taken together, indicators presented above suggest that feelings of *increased manipulation* leading to an aversion for the MSM. The interviewees choose not to believe the information presented in the MSM as the information is in stark contrast with their own beliefs of a positive future.

Lastly, both interviewees noted a strong passion for sharing *what they believe is right,* accompanied by missing out on social contacts and solidarity within their social environments. Van Manen (2016, p. 104) points out the importance of belonging to communities and finding a sense of purpose in one's life when describing the lifeworld existential of *lived other*. Evidence of 'finding a sense of purpose' can be found in one's visions of becoming a "*whistleblower/entertainer (…) [and] educate people or help them in certain ways like in areas I am knowledgeable of"* (Max, Pos. 54).

The research findings (*lived experiences*) can conclude that discrepancy of presented information in the MSM and alternative media triggered various negative emotions and feelings of *becoming manipulated*. The sentiment *of becoming manipulated* by the MSM generated feelings of *discomfort* in one's state of comfort. Since information printed in the MSM was perceived as *strongly biased* without highlighting *appropriate alternatives* to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic, it was chosen to reject trusting MSM more and more. However, alternative information about '*the truth'* was exchanged regularly and intensively discussed with friends and dedicated friend-circles.

This study's findings underline the importance of expanding researching *lived experiences* of individuals in *trust/mistrusting* the MSM. The findings suggest the MSM's importance to allow and encourage journalists to discuss and represent a broad spectrum of opinions. The more it is perceived that specific spectra of opinions are *not wanted or unwelcomed in mainstream discussions*, the more likely it will become that its supporters will turn one's back to the MSM and find themselves in sources of so-called alternative media. This hypothesis, however, shall be a question of another research study.

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