

Short Summary

Scheinbar transparent III (Apparently transparent III).

Eine Analyse der Inserate der Bundesregierung in Österreichs Tageszeitungen im Jahr 2021

(An analysis of the federal government's advertisements in Austria's daily newspapers in 2021).

A Study by Medienhaus Wien

In 2021, the Austrian federal government spent €28.18 million on so-called "media cooperations" with Austria's daily newspapers. Slightly less was spent on these advertisements and other information formats in print and the online editions than in the previous year. However, the highest quarterly bookings since records began in the transparency database in 2012 were recorded by the Federal Chancellery (BKA) from January to March 2021: with 8.9 million euros in particular for pandemic information and the Corona vaccination campaign. A good half of this went to Austria's daily newspaper publishers.

The highest advertising revenues from the BKA and ministries in 2021 were achieved by the *Kronen Zeitung* (7.11 million euros), followed by *Österreich/oe24* (4.74 million euros) and *Heute* (4.67 million euros). In an overall view, these three tabloids thus had a share of 59 % of all government spending on paid advertisements in print and online editions of daily newspapers. 23 % were distributed among the seven federal state newspapers (*Vorarlberger Nachrichten*, *Neue Vorarlberger Tageszeitung*, *Tiroler Tageszeitung*, *Salzburger Nachrichten*, *OÖ Nachrichten*, *Kleine Zeitung*, *Oberösterreichisches Volksblatt*), 11 % among the two national quality newspapers (*Der Standard*, *Die Presse*) and 7 % among the midmarket paper (*Kurier*).

In terms of business models, free newspapers were able to increase slightly in 2021 and recorded one third of all advertising revenues.

In a comparison of the advertising bookings for the printed editions with their readership figures according to Media Analysis, an average readership contact cost 4.12 euros. In order to reach readers of *Österreich/oe24*, the government spent more than twice as much, namely 8.30 euros. The least was spent per capita at *OÖ Nachrichten* (2.37 euros) and *Der Standard* (2.20 euros). The very uneven distribution of funds means that newspaper readers in the eastern region are reached significantly more often by government information than those in the west and south of Austria.

At the beginning of 2021, in response to earlier studies by Medienhaus Wien and after a parliamentary question, the Federal Chancellery cursorily described a "formula" for the allocation of government advertisements, according to which print circulation figures are given the same weight as readership figures when booking advertisements. A mathematical reconstruction of this formula shows: Such a formula leads to a promotion of free newspapers and their distribution model, and it disadvantages bought newspapers with their targeted reaching of subscribers and paying readers.

In most ministries, however, this formula was ignored in 2021 when booking advertisements. In the Federal Chancellery and the Ministry of Finance, however, the formula was a point of reference, as the spending pattern shows. The BKA, however, still spent significantly more

than the calculated guideline values of such a formula on free newspapers, especially on *Österreich/oe24*. In the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence, this media group was the most booked and the three tabloids in the country received a total of up to 90% of the advertising budget.

The advertising strategy in the ministries led by the Greens was different, especially in the Ministry of Climate and Environment, which has a budget of 1.45 million euros in 2021, which is slightly higher than in 2020: there, advertising was spread across all media categories, i.e. broadcasting, print, as well as all publication frequencies and online. Newspaper publishers were only integrated proportionally into campaigns with about one third, much less than in the ÖVP-led ministries.

For the first time in 2021, the federal government's bookings in the social media sector, i.e. for Facebook, Google, YouTube and other international platforms, exceeded the million euro mark with 1.16 million euros.

In the first quarter of 2022, some of these trends have solidified with lower budget use. The print share of the booking mix is declining. In some ministries, whose department heads withdrew from politics, advertising expenditure was drastically cut back. The traditionally particularly information-friendly Ministry of Finance, itself at the centre of prosecutorial investigations and internal audits on its ad spending, has zeroed it out under new leadership in the first quarter of 2022.

A coordinated strategy for the allocation of advertisements or, more generally, for the provision of paid information to citizens in the mass media is just as unrecognisable in 2021 (and in the first quarter of 2022) as in previous years. Rather, the data analysis of the federal government's advertising expenditure reinforces the impression of a cacophony of communication according to arbitrary personal and party-political feelings.

The advertising policy intervenes in the newspaper market, for example through targeted promotion of free papers, above all the media group *Österreich/oe24*, with simultaneous budgetary devaluation of the business models of subscription and sales newspapers. The digitisation of print media tends to be hindered by the advertising policy because the (low) expenditure for online bookings is rather simplistically linear-proportional to print bookings, without taking into account actual usage figures in the World Wide Web. The government's strategic handling of the powerful social media platforms also remains unclear. In comparison to the other advertising market developments, Google et al. continued to have a low budget in 2021 - but more was spent on Facebook than on large national online portals such as *derstandard.at* or *kurier.at*.

Without the presentation of qualitative and quantitative communication reports, it remains unclear with which content-related goals ministries in the respective campaigns and with which media-political and market-regulatory intentions the federal government as a whole carries out its so-called "media cooperations". The registration in the "media transparency database" of the regulatory authority RTR also continues to only feign transparency. It must be plausibly assumed that in 2021 not only the officially reported 225 million euros, but more than 300 million euros were spent by the public sector on media cooperations.

The federal government's announcement of a comprehensive reform of the media funding and advertising system and the transparency database has not yet had any consequences.

The EU Commission's "Rule of Law Report" described as a threat to Austria's media pluralism and political system the fact that there were "no rules ensuring a fair distribution of state advertising contracts among the media" (European Commission 2020) and formulated major "concerns about possible political influence" in view of the non-transparent allocation of advertisements.

This concern is still justified, as our current analyses show.