



# The VAP – An organization of and for foreign correspondents in Germany



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## ABSTRACT

Foreign correspondents have been a much treated subject in media and communication science, however, thus far the focus has been on the individual, on the micro-level. This study looks at the meso-level of an organization which up to now has received little attention – the Foreign Correspondents' Association in Germany (Verein der ausländischen Presse in Deutschland, VAP). Based on assumptions of organization theory and a guided group discussion the study explores the functioning and structures of the VAP in a historical and current perspective. Empirical evidence is based on two evaluations of the register of members (2003/04 and 2011/12) as well as on a log of the VAP activities of the years 2001, 2002, 2003, 2011 and 2012.

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## 1. Introduction

“Since the beginning of history there are people who report from foreign countries. There are three groups of them: diplomats, journalists and spies. It has not always been easy to tell them apart” (Cullen, 1996, p. 4<sup>1</sup>). This article will focus on the alliance of journalists reporting from Germany. Since 1906 they have had their own organization to represent their interests and concerns, the “Verein der Ausländischen Presse in Deutschland e.V.” (VAP, the Foreign Correspondents' Association in Germany, registered association). In order to evaluate the micro-level, the individual experiences and the work of foreign correspondents, it is essential to know about the structures they are integrated in – as it is the meso-level and the organizations' directives that guide the individual's actions. Organizational restraints and possibilities influence and structure the foreign correspondent's leeway.

The objective of the article is to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: How did and does the organization “VAP” work and why is this association so unique in the world of foreign correspondents' clubs (meso-level)?

RQ 2: How important is the VAP to correspondents of foreign media in Germany?

RQ 3: What are the advantages of membership (micro-meso-link)?

In order to answer these research questions, four VAP members as well as the office manager were interviewed and a comparative analysis of the membership rosters was conducted, apart from a thorough literature review. Additionally, the events offered by the VAP were evaluated according to five thematic sections.

In the introductory part of this article, I will provide a first background of the VAP. Theoretical considerations on organizations and voluntary associations are made in Section 2, followed by a historical outline (Section 3) that illustrates how the organization changed according to varying circumstances. The research design is explained in Section 4. Section 5 deals with the recent structure and functioning of the VAP. Section 6 compares the VAP to other foreign correspondents associations in the world. Section 7 creates a link between meso and micro-level in order to bridge between the organization level and the individual level. Thereafter, I will present material, methods, and results of the evaluation of the membership roster before dealing with future challenges and ending with a conclusion and outlook.

The VAP has existed for more than 100 years – though during this time there were several interruptions (see Section 3). The association has about 400 members. The exact total at any moment is difficult to ascertain due to the constant flux of those joining and those leaving the association. 350 of the members live in Berlin,

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30 live in Bonn/Cologne/Düsseldorf, 20 live in Frankfurt (mainly economy coverage), and the rest lives in other places in Germany, mainly the freelancers.<sup>2</sup> The VAP meetings and press conferences are exclusively for foreign correspondents, no journalists who work primarily for the German media are allowed to attend. This is the first research project in which the VAP is itself the object of research. There have been previous studies designed to solve a specific problem by using information gleaned through member questionnaires, as well as studies to examine only American or other nationality foreign correspondents<sup>3</sup>. Often times, researchers in this field “focus their analyses of foreign news on coverage in major established news outlets” (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004, p. 301) and not on professional associations of foreign correspondents. This research gap stresses the relevance of the study at hand. The next part describes the state of research and identifies specific results of the former studies.

### 1.1. State of research: VAP studies

In the following studies, the VAP’s membership list has been used as a trigger for sample building. Communicator research was the primary interest; the structural and organizational aspects of the VAP were not investigated.

Wittmann (1982) examined “Third World Correspondents” who were listed as VAP members in respect to the UNESCO debate about the New World Information Order. The social demographics reveal that in February 1981, 46 of the 315 journalists of the Bonn VAP worked for “Third World media”. Wittmann’s (1982, p. 313) poll contained 31 correspondents, of which only two were female. The average age was 44.8 years; every correspondent had an academic background and belonged to the upper classes of their country. Their good command of foreign languages was striking. Before becoming a correspondent in Germany the journalists had been working in their profession, some even already as foreign correspondents in another country. Most of them did not report solely about Germany but had to cover various other European countries. In contrast to Wittmann, Kluge (1981) excluded “Third World Correspondents” and described the sociodemography of the remaining correspondents as well as their topics of coverage. He also asked the correspondents about advantages and disadvantages compared to their German colleagues (Kluge, 1981, p. 79). 23 percent said “We have advantages”, 36 percent said there was no difference, and 40 percent said, “We are disadvantaged”.<sup>4</sup>

Sange (1989) examined the characteristics of Japanese correspondents in Germany. He interviewed ten correspondents and detected a great homogeneity with regard to their personal background<sup>5</sup>: All of them were married, in their forties and had graduated from university. One third of them had studied German. Most of them had non-Japanese employees in their office who knew how to do journalistic work. The correspondents mostly worked for the same medium for more than ten years (Sange, 1989). They obtained their information primarily via TV, personal

<sup>2</sup> In 2004, there were still more correspondents working in the Bonn/Cologne/Düsseldorf area (60) and less in Berlin (300). There was an outpost office in Bonn/Cologne which no longer exists because there are not enough correspondents. They died, moved to Berlin or realigned for other professions. Also the number of members in Frankfurt is decreasing. In consequence, the VAP does not hold events there anymore.

<sup>3</sup> Hess’ survey, for example, comprised “404 foreign correspondents whose work regularly appeared in the United States” (Hess, 1996, p. xiv). One of his results was that most U.S. American foreign correspondents had a high education (Hess, 1996, p. 12). The high education was also identified in Carroggio and Njoroge’s (2004) study: 91 percent of the Vatican correspondents owned a university degree.

<sup>4</sup> One percent of the responses could not be related to the categories.

<sup>5</sup> All these characteristics also apply to the Japanese correspondent interviewed in a more recent study by Rothenberger (2009).

contacts and observances, news from wire services, newspapers, radio and press conferences. Two correspondents indicated that they also used books and archives for their work.

Rothenberger (2009) described the historical evolution of the VAP, but without properly putting it in organizational theory perspective. In addition, she conducted a poll of VAP members and also interviewed correspondents working for media from Japan, the U.S., Egypt, Italy, Poland, Colombia and South Africa (Rothenberger, 2009, p. 61). She depicted the “average VAP correspondent’s” demography, the daily working routines and the image of Germany that the correspondents had. I will refer to the results of this study in the “micro-level” section (starting with Section 7) of this article.

This short presentation shows that VAP-related studies, apart from Rothenberger (2009), were only interested in the members, not in the organization as such. Therefore, the importance of the VAP will now be highlighted using organization theory.

## 2. Theoretical background: organization theory

Regarding the three societal levels, the VAP, as a professional organization, is located on the meso-level. Therefore, organization theory lends itself to investigating the structures of the VAP. Rosengren regards organizations as “a social structure defined in terms of the relations between a number of more or less interrelated positions, the individual incumbents of which have to play social roles more or less distinctly defined by the position in question.” (Rosengren, 2000, p. 105) The organization’s members joined the organization in order to pursue a common goal – in our case to facilitate the foreign correspondents’ work and life. They also have some sort of overlapping identity. Generally speaking, organizations are “a special type of group” (p. 105) that (a) show a certain (hierarchical) structure of communication, (b) have a goal that is often explained in the founding charter, and (c) apply standardized procedures for recruitment and exclusion of its members as well as for its decision-making processes (Rosengren, 2000). The organization often links different social units. In this particular case, foreign correspondents from all over the world are linked to the German political system.

The meso-level is a rather disregarded level in the study of foreign correspondence. Most times, the correspondents on the micro-level take center stage. Sometimes, the macro-level is considered too, but the linking meso-level plays an important role, also in foreign correspondence. Besides, it is assumed “that systems are only observable via organizations and institutions (associations, businesses, markets, parties, etc.), in which the systems’ functions are constituted as external constraints for the recursive processes of communication and cooperation that proceed within them.” (Küppers & Krohn, 1992, p. 175) Of course, the VAP is integrated into the systems’ macro-level, but also is a constituent thereof. “All organizations exist within a general environment of social institutions, political networks, economic markets, legal precedents and regulations, technological knowledge and techniques, physical resources and constraints, and cultural assumptions, norms and history” (Luhman & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 61). Apart from external relations, an organization like the VAP cannot move without its members who interact and communicate within the organization’s (structural and normative) realm and beyond (Ortmann, Sydow, & Türk, 2000, pp. 15–17).

Organization theory is coined by manifold approaches, rooted in systems or action theory, in cultural, economic, cognitive, structural and other perspectives (for an overview see: Kieser, 2001b; Ortmann et al., 2000). For our purposes, it is essential to take a closer look at the specific German organization type “Verein” (voluntary association). As the “e.V.” (eingetragener Verein, registered

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