VOICES

VOICES FROM THE PERIPHERY: (DE-)CONSTRUCTING AND CONTESTING PUBLIC NARRATIVES ABOUT POST-INDUSTRIAL MARGINALIZATION

The VOICES project (2024 – 2027) is a DFG/AHRC funded research project that aims to examine the role of the media as key agents in the public construction of post-industrial marginalisation, and to explore the modes of subjectification of residents of post-industrial communities against these dominant mass-mediated narratives in a cross-national comparison. At the centre of the project are six post-industrial cities, each of which has experienced the rise and fall of industrial work: Redcar, Rotherham and Middlesbrough in the North of England, and Weißwasser, Lauchhammer and Eisenhüttenstadt in East Germany.

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RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of the VOICES project is to (re)conceptualise 'media marginalisation' through the lens of post-industrialisation. Conducted in six post-industrial cities, the project explores regions that have undergone profound economic and social transformation following the decline of their industrial base. These places remain shaped by ongoing structural change and continue to face significant challenges. At the heart of our research are the lived experiences of local residents who have witnessed these transitions. We seek to foreground their perspectives, particularly in light of dominant media narratives that often frame these areas as 'left behind'. By documenting not only stories of loss and disruption, but also those of adaptation, resistance and resilience, the project sheds light on how individuals and communities respond to changing economic realities. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of media marginalisation and the representational dynamics of post-industrial life.

PROJECT STRUCTURE & METHODOLOGY

Using a systematic research design informed by critical discourse theory and inequality research, the project aims to contrast an elite-centred with a grassroots perspective on the marginalisation of post-industrial milieus:

Work Package Media

Work Package Identity

Work Package Dissemination

Following a cross-national comparative approach, the project is divided into two thematic work packages (WPs): media and identity. WP1 investigates media regulation, journalistic and social media production, journalists' backgrounds, and media representation from a "top-down" perspective. WP2 addresses identity-related research from a "bottom-up" perspective. In this WP, storytelling is at the heart. Media use/reception is collaboratively explored by both WPs.

THE CASE STUDY CITIES

Redcar – 36,000 inhabitants, former steel harbour, high density of welfare recipients.

Middlesbrough – 140,000 inhabitants, formerly known for steel industry and shipbuilding, highest poverty rate in the UK.

Rotherham – 265,000 inhabitans, multi-ethnic city in South Yorkshire, once dependent on the steel and coal industries.

Eisenhüttenstadt – 25,000 inhabitants, archetypal socialist planned town, built in the 1950s in the 'middle of nowhere' to house workers from the nearby steelworks (shrunk from 16,000 to 2,500 jobs after 1990)

Lauchhammer – 14,000 inhabitants, a traditional mining area that is confronted with the decision to close all coal mines in the entire Lusatian mining region
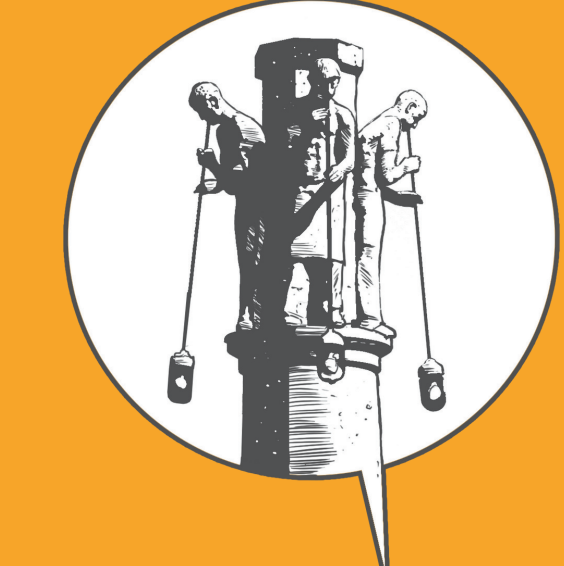
Weißwasser – 20,000 inhabitants, rural region on the border with Poland, historically known for its glass industry

INSIGHTS FROM THE STORY-TELLING CAFÉS

State of research: 20+ storytelling cafés (Rotherham, Lauchhammer, Eisenhüttenstadt) with a total of around 130 participants
Key themes: pride, identity, community, nostalgia for the past.
Marginalisation: systemic and relational marginalisation, lifeworld manifestations of exclusion, erosion of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital, developed sense of heteronomy.
Subjectification: distinction from dominant mass media narratives, accompanied by a perceived need to justify and legitimise one's life course.

> "What I really miss is the sense of human solidarity—the way people supported each other. You just don't see that anymore."
>
> **Former geologist for open-cast lignite mining, born 1957, Lauchhammer**

> "All I remember is the smell of metal. It was in our clothes and in our skins. You walked in and smelled it and you knew you were at home. You knew you were with brothers."
>
> **Former steelworker, born 1945, Rotherham**

FURTHER READING

- **Fiedler, A.** (2023). Where the sun rises in the East: (post-)communist remembrance in Germany's right-wing counter-public sphere. *Javnost – The Public, 30*(4), 586–602. doi:10.1080/13183222.2023.2222489
- **Glück, A.** (2021). Kalter Krieg oder innere Einheit? Der Wandel des Mediendiskurses über Ostdeutschland durch ostdeutsche Journalist*innen in Die Zeit. In N.S. Borchers, S. Güney, U. Krüger, & K. Schamberger (Eds), *Transformation der Medien – Medien der Transformation* (pp. 77–100). Westend. doi:10.53291/AAMU5370
- Lemke, G., & **Räder, A.** (Eds.) (2024). *Sorbische Filmlandschaften. Serbske filmowe krajiny.* Bertz + Fischer.
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- **Lilleker, D. G.,** & Liefbroer, M. (2018). Searching for something to believe in: voter uncertainty in a post-truth environment. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics, 14*(3), 351–366. doi:10.1386/macp.14.3.351_1
- **Morrison, J.** (2022). *The left behind: reimagining Britain's socially excluded.* Pluto Press.

Find out more about the VOICES project