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Fictionalizing the COVID-19 Pandemic “Instantly”

A Case Study of the German Comedy Drama Drinnen — Im Internet sind alle gleich

Abstract

Based on interviews with production members and trade magazine articles, the paper discusses how the German comedy drama *Drinnen — Im Internet sind alle gleich* (2020) dealt with COVID-19 in its production. The series — whose title translates to “Inside — On the Internet All Are Equal” — is obviously about the pandemic: it tells the story of Charlotte, who is planning to quit her job and leave her marriage when she suddenly has to self-isolate and communicate with others only online. Not only Charlotte’s fictional life but also the show’s real-life production was very much affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. All crew members worked from home, due to Germany’s contact restrictions in early 2020. For a fictional production, *Drinnen* was developed and shot in an extremely fast way — even more so when one considers its public-service context, usually accompanied by complicated bureaucratic structures. The speed and flexibility of the project-based making of *Drinnen* points to wider changes within its broadcaster, the public-service ZDF — Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (Second German Television), as well as in German drama production in general. Already before the emergence of COVID-19, attempts had been made to produce serial fiction more quickly, flexibly, and cheaply; under the pandemic, these approaches intensified. While *Drinnen* is often regarded as an innovative role model in this context, such “instant” drama productions also require critical examination. For the practitioners involved in producing *Drinnen*, the race to quickly fictionalize the COVID-19 pandemic meant immense pressure.

Keywords

German television, television drama, COVID-19 pandemic, media industry studies, project network

Introduction

In Germany, as in many other countries, fiction series are usually developed and produced in project networks. Writers, directors, and providers of artistic and technical media services (e.g., studio technology) as well as representatives from the broadcaster or platform and production companies (all of which have lately multiplied and diversified through increased digitalization and transnationalization)¹⁾ usually come together on only a temporary, project-defined basis.²⁾ Alongside the current project, practices and relationships from previous collaborations play an important role — particularly for freelance creatives, who usually pursue “portfolio careers.”³⁾ They depend on successful projects in order to obtain new contracts. For many participants of project networks, the temporary nature of the work can be quite precarious.⁴⁾ This insecurity was even more pronounced in 2020, when an additional instability factor arose: the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic interrupted the “precarious cycle”⁵⁾ described by Willemien Sanders and Anna Zoellner: “production companies generally depend on several projects being in production simultaneously to fund ongoing costs and the development of future projects”. COVID-19 complicated, and even killed off project networks in Germany’s TV fiction industry and almost came to be an “additional actor” alongside the different trades and organizations in the project-based collaborations.

However, the virus and its linked restrictions didn’t only cause delays and cancellations: it, in fact, became the genesis of some shows in and beyond Germany.⁶⁾ One such example is *Drinnen — Im Internet sind alle gleich* (2020), with which the public broadcaster ZDF — Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (Second German Television) and the two responsible production companies reacted to the pandemic, through both the show’s production modes and its content. The comedy drama, whose title can be translated to “Inside — On the Internet All Are Equal,” personalized the COVID-19 pandemic through the protagonist, Charlotte. This woman in her mid-thirties is planning to quit both her job and her marriage when she suddenly has to self-isolate and communicate with others only online. Not only Charlotte’s fictional life but also the real-life production process were very much affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. All crew members worked from home, due to Germany’s contact restrictions in early 2020. This article discusses in greater detail how *Drin-*

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- 1) See, e.g., Lothar Mikos, “TV Drama Series Production in Germany and the Digital Television Landscape,” in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, eds. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (London: Routledge, 2021), 177–190.
 - 2) Arnold Windeler and Jörg Sydow, “Project Networks and Changing Industry Practices Collaborative Content Production in the German Television Industry,” *Organization Studies* 22, no. 6 (2001).
 - 3) Angela McRobbie, “From Holloway to Hollywood: Happiness at Work in the New Cultural Economy?,” in *Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life*, ed. Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 2006), 111.
 - 4) E.g. Rosalind Gill, “‘Life Is a Pitch’: Managing the Self in New Media Work,” in *Managing Media Work*, ed. Mark Deuze (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011).
 - 5) Willemien Sanders and Anna Zoellner, “‘We’re in This Together’ — but Not in the Same Way: Institutional Responses to the COVID-19 Production Stop in the British and Dutch Film and Television Industries,” in *Documentary in the Age of COVID*, eds. Dafydd Sills-Jones and Pietari Kääpä (Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, New York, and Wien: Peter Lang, 2023), 202.
 - 6) See Gabriele Dietze, “Quarantäne Als Therapie: Corona-Miniserien,” in *Das Virus im Netz medialer Diskurse*, eds. Angela Krewani and Peter Zimmermann (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2022).

nen dealt with the pandemic in its production process. I argue that *Drinnen*, as a very specific production made within a crisis situation for both society at large and the TV and film industry specifically, points to broader changes in TV fiction production in Germany, which were advanced through the COVID-19 pandemic.

This article is based mainly on two interviews with “exclusive informants”⁷⁾ — two ZDF commissioning editors responsible for *Drinnen*. I also use some textual analysis of the show, to interpret the interviewee’s statements, and refer to articles on *DWDL.de*, a crucial online trade magazine for the German television industry. Beyond articles on *Drinnen*, fifty search results on *DWDL.de* for “Corona” (the common, informal term for the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in German) were screened and categorized. Because trade magazines mostly serve marketing and managerial purposes, they publish only official “trade stories”;⁸⁾ nevertheless, these sources can provide certain information on a basic mood, important topics, and discourses within their target industry.

My analysis of the trade articles and interviews focused primarily on two closely related models: the *project network*, already outlined above, and the *screen idea work group*. Ian Macdonald defines the latter as “flexibly constructed work group organized around the development and production of a screen idea.”⁹⁾ The parallels to the project network are quite obvious. However, the screen idea work group is more about individuals and creativity than the project network, which is more interested in institutions, and considers the writing and production of films or television drama to begin with individuals and their screen ideas.¹⁰⁾

In *Drinnen*, the screen idea work group and the project network came together in a very limited time frame to portray and fictionalize the COVID-19 pandemic “instantly.” Before describing the content and aesthetic linked to this almost “real-time” approach and the show’s production process, including the formation of its screen idea work group and project network, this article first provides a brief overview of Germany’s TV industry under the COVID-19 pandemic. How did the pandemic affect the local industry, and how was it negotiated?

Germany’s TV industry in the time of COVID-19

The analysis of *DWDL.de* articles (most from the pandemic’s first year, 2020) shows that the industry discourse on the impacts of COVID-19 focused particularly on economic challenges — much more so than on other issues such as ideological controversies (e.g.,

7) Hanne Bruun, “The Qualitative Interview in Media Production Studies,” in *Advancing Media Production Research: Shifting Sites, Methods, and Politics*, ed. Chris Paterson et al. (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 139.

8) John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 37.

9) Ian Macdonald, “‘...So It’s Not Surprising I’m Neurotic’: The Screenwriter and the Screen Idea Work Group,” *Journal of Screenwriting* 1, no. 1 (2010), 47.

10) See Eva Novrup Redvall, *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark: From the Kingdom to the Killing* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 29.

COVID-19 deniers, anti-vaxxers), which partly arose within the industry when several prominent actors criticized Germany’s contact regulations as being excessive in controversial, supposedly satirical, video statements.¹¹⁾ Even discussion on the increased television and streaming use under the pandemic, due to more people being at home, was not as visible as economic questions on *DWDL.de*. In a statement on *DWDL.de*, Oliver Castendyk by Allianz Deutscher Produzenten — Film & Fernsehen (Alliance of German Producers — Film & TV; short name: Produzentenallianz) divided COVID-19’s economic impact on the television industry into two main categories: first, the costs of COVID-related shooting cancellations and postponements; secondly, the more difficult production conditions, longer production times and thus increased production costs due to the strict pandemic regulations.¹²⁾

Such economic challenges, negotiated by both practitioners and trade journalists, are closely linked to the flexible organization of work in project networks. Especially in TV fiction, which has less consistent and shorter commissions than non-fiction shows accompanied by high expenditures, many production companies can hardly create a reserve fund as they proceed from one project to the next, as producers highlighted on *DWDL.de*.¹³⁾

For freelancers, the situation is very similar. However, some trades were affected more or differently than others by the restrictions under the pandemic. For example whereas actors — a particularly visible and prominent trade — often claimed on *DWDL.de* and in other media to have lost all their work,¹⁴⁾ writers pointed out how they were used to working at home and individually.¹⁵⁾ Still, neither group’s future income was necessarily guaranteed during the beginning of the pandemic, as several projects faced insecure futures.

Referring to the insecure economic landscape, the producer Hana Geißendörfer, of Geißendörfer Film- und Fernsehproduktion (a production company particularly well known for the long-running weekly soap *Lindenstraße* [1985–2020, ARD/WDR], that was canceled in 2020), also discussed a psychological burden in February–March 2021, a time when most shops and other public places were still closed and contact regulations affected multiple work sectors.

11) Thomas Lückerrath, “#allesdichtmachen: 53 Schauspieler*innen outen sich als Populisten: Zynische Aktion sorgt für Empörung,” *DWDL.de*, April 24, 2021, accessed September 13, 2022, https://www.dwld.de/meinungen/82473/allesdichtmachen_53_schauspielerinnen_outen_sich_als_populisten/.

12) Timo Niemeier, “Viele Produzenten sehen ihre Existenz durch Corona bedroht: Herbstumfrage der Produzentenallianz,” *DWDL.de*, December 18, 2020, accessed September 13, 2022, https://www.dwld.de/nachrichten/80801/viele_produzenten_sehen_ihre_existenz_durch_corona_bedroht/.

13) Timo Niemeier, “Produzenten zwischen Solidarität und staatlichen Hilfen: Corona ist für viele existenzbedrohend,” *DWDL.de*, April 2, 2020, accessed September 13, 2022, https://www.dwld.de/magazin/77008/produzenten_zwischen_solidaritaet_und_staatlichen_hilfen/page_1.html. See also Sanders and Zoellner, “We’re in This Together’ — but Not in the Same Way.”

14) Jan Freitag, “Corona trifft Schauspiel: ‘Wir sind halt nicht systemrelevant’: Schauspielerinnen und Schauspieler in der Krise,” *DWDL.de*, March 30, 2020, accessed September 13, 2022, https://www.dwld.de/magazin/76973/corona_trifft_schauspiel_wir_sind_halt_nicht_systemrelevant/.

15) Senta Krasser, “Preisgekrönt und auftragslos? Kreative in der Corona-Krise: Start einer dreiteiligen Reihe,” *DWDL.de*, April 6, 2020, accessed September 13, 2022, https://www.dwld.de/magazin/77118/preisgekraent_und_auftragslos_kreative_in_der_coronakrise/.

In 2020 and 2021, the TV industry in Germany also had to move to solo work from home and strictly digital interaction in many contexts. In the negotiation of such work, TV professionals cited on *DWDL.de* touched on the topic of the project network, arguing that the practicability and intensity of such digital cooperation differs according to each individual project and its production areas (e.g., daily soap, high-end miniseries, TV film). Correspondingly, in a qualitative survey among producers in April 2020, Joachim Kosack, managing director of the UFA Group, claimed that UFA — one of the biggest production companies in Germany and part of the Bertelsmann conglomerate — decided how to deal with the pandemic and the linked contact regulations on a project-by-project basis.¹⁶⁾ Opinions on the increased work from home, including exchange through videoconferencing, differed: some practitioners regarded such a digital work as quite constructive, after brief struggles at the beginning,¹⁷⁾ whereas others criticized a detrimental effect on creative exchange.¹⁸⁾

The assessment of the economic situation was also ambivalent. Besides the pitfalls resulting from the nature of project-based work, some practitioners also pointed out on *DWDL.de* that the television industry in Germany was, compared to other countries, secure in this crisis situation, thanks to state funding for film and media (which increasingly supports TV and streaming drama), pandemic-specific government aid measures, such as the short-term working benefit (*Kurzarbeitergeld*) for companies and their employees, and the steady stream of revenue received by strong public broadcasters. Again and again, the practitioners' negotiations focused on to what extent public broadcasters and other commissioners, including transnational streaming services, could cover the financial losses and additional costs incurred by the production companies under the pandemic.¹⁹⁾ The strong protection of producers in Germany as compared to in other countries resulted from production companies' high dependency on commissioners, some practitioners argued, referring to the long-standing tendency toward the model of 100 per cent financing by the commissioner and the so-called total buyout in German TV fiction.²⁰⁾ This tendency has long shaped the collaborative work in German TV series project networks — evident, for example, in how commissioning editors have an important say in script development — and has met immense criticism for supposedly weakening the position of both production companies and writers.²¹⁾ During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the traditional power of the broadcaster was arguably a plus for producers, as they could rely on these commissioners to absorb a great part of any financial losses and additional costs.

16) Niemeier, "Produzenten zwischen Solidarität und staatlichen Hilfen."

17) See e.g. *ibid.*

18) See e.g. Alexander Krei, "'Die Anforderungen an die Kreativen sind extrem gestiegen': Eyes & Ears of Europe Wird 25," *DWDL.de*, November 23, 2021, accessed September 13, 2022, https://www.dwdl.de/interviews/85374/die_anforderungen_an_die_kreativen_sind_extrem_gestiegen/.

19) See e.g. Niemeier, "Viele Produzenten sehen ihre Existenz durch Corona bedroht."

20) See Timo Niemeier, "Im Moment mache ich mir schon ein bisschen Sorgen," NfF-Geschäftsführer Eric Welbers im Interview, *DWDL.de*, June 16, 2020, accessed September 13, 2022, https://www.dwdl.de/interviews/77899/im_moment_mache_ich_mir_schon_ein_bisschen_sorgen/.

21) See Kerstin Fröhlich, "Die Innovationslogik der deutschen TV-Unterhaltungsproduktion," in *Handbuch Unterhaltungsproduktion: Beschaffung und Produktion von Fernsehunterhaltung*, eds. Katja Lantzsch, Klaus-Dieter Altmeyden, and Andreas Will (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010), 123.

Much less frequently than economic issues and the linked interplay in project networks, the analyzed articles on *DWDL.de* negotiated the issue of how German TV fiction could and should reflect the COVID-19 pandemic content-wise. Journalist Peer Schader criticized the majority of fiction shows for not portraying any signs of COVID-19, such as face masks, and noted a large gap between the reality of life (in Germany in March 2021) and fictional media images.²²⁾ Still, some German TV dramas integrated COVID-19 into their narratives, to varying degrees. For instance, in the TV film *Für immer Sommer 90* (Forever Summer 90, 2020, ARD) — also distributed as a miniseries through the online service of the public broadcaster ARD — Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten (Consortium of the Public-Service Broadcasting Institutions), which besides ZDF is the most important public broadcaster in Germany — the COVID-19 pandemic is omnipresent, as protagonist Andy gets caught up in his past and sets out to clear his name of accusations made against him during a road trip through Germany. An upcoming project titled *Der Dschungel* (The Jungle) for the German pay TV provider WarnerTV Serie plans to portray the pandemic “in the microcosm of a meat factory,”²³⁾ a setting that increasingly appeared in the German news media in 2020 due to many COVID outbreaks there and the problematic conditions of foreign seasonal workers. Already in May 2020, the drama anthology *Liebe. Jetzt!* (Love. Now!, 2020, ZDFneo) narrated stories of personal relationships in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Drinnen — Im Internet sind alle gleich* — this paper’s case study — was released even earlier. In the following section, I describe this particular fictionalizing of the pandemic in greater detail, looking at the aesthetic and content strategies behind *Drinnen*.

Aesthetic and narrative strategies of the COVID-19 comedy drama *Drinnen*

“ZDF Starts a New Daily Series — Namely, Today” read a headline on *DWDL.de* on April 3, 2020,²⁴⁾ *Drinnen*’s premiere date. ZDF had pulled off a coup: launching a fictional series that reacted to the pandemic so quickly and aired when COVID-19 was still a very new issue and dominating the news. *Drinnen* consists of fifteen approximately ten-minute episodes, which were released on an almost daily basis on ZDF’s online service and in a weekly compilation on Tuesday nights on ZDFneo, ZDF’s linear-programmed TV channel for an audience aged twenty-five to forty-nine (significantly younger than the viewership of ZDF’s main channel). Thereby, *Drinnen* contains a linear and an online version, similar to some previous series, such as *SKAM* (Shame, 2015–2017, NRK) and parts of its German adaptation *DRUCK* (2018–, Funk/ZDF). Like these predecessor (which point to new dis-

22) Peer Schader, “Corona als blinder Fleck in der deutschen Fiction: Tragt endlich Maske! Peer Schaders Hauptstadtstudio,” *DWDL.de*, March 14, 2021, accessed September 13, 2022, https://www.dwld.de/hauptstadtstudio/81912/corona_als_blinder_fleck_in_der_deutschen_fiction_tragt_endlich_maske/.

23) Jörg Winger, quoted in Thomas Lückerrath, “Wozu die Gründung von Big Window Productions, Herr Winger? DWDL.de-Interview zur neuen Produktionsfirma,” *DWDL.de*, July 27, 2020, accessed July 28, 2020, https://www.dwld.de/interviews/78652/wozu_die_gruendung_von_big_window_productions_herr_winger/.

24) Thomas Lückerrath, “ZDF startet eine neue tägliche Serie — und zwar heute: Zwei ‘Neoriginals’ mit Premiere in der Mediathek,” *DWDL.de*, April 3, 2020, accessed September 13, 2022, https://www.dwld.de/nachrichten/77041/zdf_startet_eine_neue_taeagliche_serie__und_zwar_heute/.

tribution and production ways in public-service drama), the online release had priority, why *Drinnen* can be categorized as a webseries.²⁵⁾

Protagonist Charlotte, played by Lavinia Wilson (possibly known to non-German viewers through her involvement in *Deutschland 86* and *89* [2018, 2020, Amazon Prime Video]), is shown working from home, in what came to be known as a *homeoffice* in German (“Homeoffice” was the initial title of *Drinnen*). In front of her computer, Charlotte struggles with her professional and private life. After she supposedly infects her boss, Veronika, with COVID-19, Charlotte becomes responsible for running her employer, an ad agency. In addition to a pitch for an important customer, her new responsibilities include dismissing a colleague. Privately, Charlotte also plans to dismiss her husband, Markus (played by Wilson’s real-life partner, Barnaby Metschurat), whom she has been cheating on for some time with various Tinder dates. Charlotte forces Markus to stay in the countryside in Brandenburg, where he is on a short vacation with their two children, because she increasingly believes she has gotten COVID-19. In addition, she worries about her parents, who don’t take the pandemic seriously. Her mother attends secret Pilates classes, and her father starts smoking again, although he suffers from asthma, increasing his coronavirus risk along with his advanced age. Charlotte’s younger sister, Constanze, stranded in Thailand, scatterbrained and unreliable, is hardly of any help. A serial, cross-episode storyline centered on a family secret also gradually emerges, when we witness Charlotte leaving WhatsApp voice messages to a person who never responds: it is her sister who died in a car accident, and Charlotte blames herself for her death, having denied her sibling a lift, we eventually learn.

Drinnen uses a particular narrative format to portray Charlotte’s work, love, and family struggles in the face of the pandemic: the chamber play, or *Kammerspiel*. Due to the restrictions on gatherings, primarily in 2020, other productions also similarly showed actors in their own homes, performing on their own or with their real-life partners and roommates: for example, the miniseries *Liebe. Jetzt!* and *Ausgebremst* (Thwarted, 2020–2021, Warner TV Serie), about a desperate driving instructor chatting to strangers in a driving simulator or, in the UK, the comedy *Staged* (2020–2021, BBC), on two actors rehearsing a theatre play through a series of video calls during the lockdown.²⁶⁾ What distinguishes *Drinnen* to most TV dramas on COVID 19 is its general restriction to only two views. In the first, we see an extract of Charlotte’s/Lavinia Wilson’s apartment and the protagonist acting in it: a static webcam setting that is also shown to the outer world, or more precisely to other people likewise inside (*drinnen*) their homes. Whenever Charlotte sits at her computer or uses her smartphone, a specific section of her home is visible, including a child’s chair at the dining table and a pinboard with children’s drawings and a child’s photo — all clear hints at her family [illustration 1: screenshot]. In the second view, we again and again see Charlotte’s computer screen and her different digital practices there [illustration 2: screenshot].

25) On the term “webseries” and German examples see Markus Kuhn, “Die WG im Netz: Deutschsprachige Webserien-Genres im Spannungsfeld kultureller und medialer Transformationsprozess,” in *Transmediale Genre-Passagen: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, eds. Ivo Ritzer and Peter W. Schulze (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016).

26) See Jessica C. Molano, “Theatre as a Means of “Interpreting” Lockdown: The Case of *Staged*,” in *Theater(s) and Public Sphere in a Global and Digital Society*, Volume 1, ed. Ilaria Riccioni (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 177–185.



Illustration 1: Charlotte at her computer and in her living-room, screenshot from episode 6

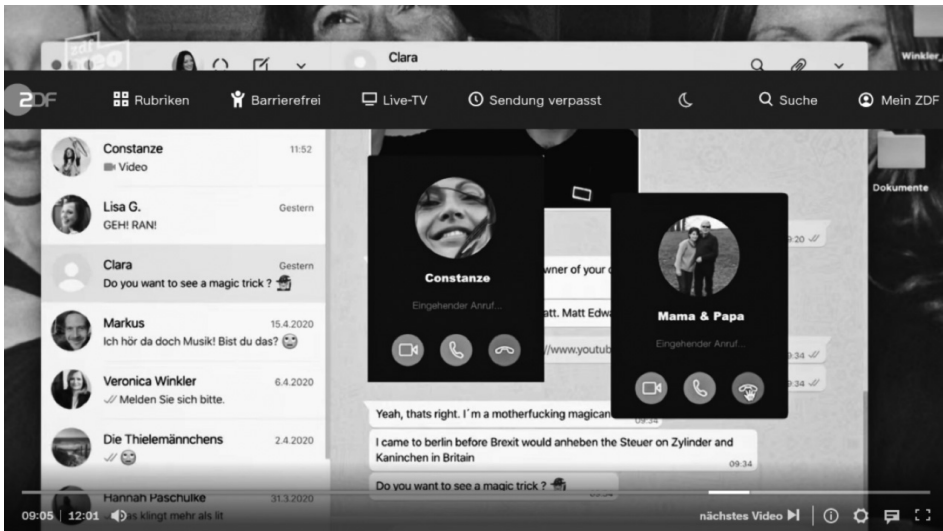


Illustration 2: Digital practices on Charlotte's computer screen, screenshot from episode 15

In one shot, Charlotte's face is reflected on her computer screen. Lavinia Wilson described the aesthetic-formal approach of *Drinnen* in an interview with *DWDL.de* as “exactly one room, with exactly one window to the world, namely the screen of her [Charlotte's] laptop computer.”²⁷⁾ Lucia Haslauer, one of two responsible commissioning editors

27) Jan Freitag, “Spontanität mitnehmen, Produktionsbedingungen nicht’: Lavinia Wilson im DWDL-Interview,” *DWDL.de*, April 8, 2020, accessed September 8, 2022, https://www.dwdl.de/interviews/77142/spontanitaet_mitnehmen_produnktionsbedingungen_nicht/.

at ZDF, spoke of a “screen-only format.” In contrast to some live comedy sketch shows on German television that were quickly developed during COVID-19 and its contact restrictions — such as *Die Sat.1 Comedy Konferenz — Promis in Quarantäne* (The Sat.1 Comedy Conference — Celebrities in Quarantine, 2020, Sat.1) — *Drinnen* did not use actual online-conferencing platforms, thereby avoiding poor image quality, as a first review of the series on *DWDL.de* highlighted.²⁸⁾ In this respect, an “instant” fiction production seems to be superior to a live comedy approach, which has less time for image editing or postproduction.

Through the view on Charlotte’s screen, *Drinnen* focuses intensely on the protagonist’s digitalized perspective and puts Wilson’s acting into a limited frame, which sometimes approaches stand-up comedy in presentation. Clearly, this fictionalizing of the COVID-19 pandemic takes place within the comedy genre. This comedic approach and the ironic stance (which also characterized other TV dramas on the pandemic²⁹⁾) become apparent in, for example, the protagonist’s somewhat hypochondriacal and exaggerated fear of infection and an overblown portrayal of the daily COVID-19 situation in the spring of 2020. For instance, when Charlotte calls a COVID-19 hotline, she is on hold for seventeen hours. The staff answers right at the moment she is away from her computer and phone to take a shower.

A comedic approach also characterized other COVID-19 series,³⁰⁾ as well as various viral videos shared through social media and instant-messaging platforms in early 2020, such as several clips on the toilet paper shortage in Germany. Very likely, comedy was a way for many people to deal with the often stressful and worrisome situation during lockdowns, contact restrictions, and alarming news. Given this tendency, *Drinnen*’s genre choice is no surprise. Haslauer, the commissioning editor, described the goal as offering a fictional character through whom to narrate the pandemic “also with a wink.”

However, in our interview, Haslauer also stressed an aim to avoid any cynicism in the comedic take. The cross-episode storyline around Charlotte grieving for her dead sister and blaming herself, in particular, possibly worked against any potential cynicism around a difficult situation for society. This strand of the plot is more subdued than Charlotte’s hectic online life and adds a more serious tone, through which *Drinnen* approaches drama or dramedy (a mixture with comedy).

The never-read WhatsApp voice notes, from Charlotte to her dead sister, not only work as a secret confessional, through which the viewer gets closer to the protagonist, but also take up the broader topic of *Drinnen*: beyond — and even more than — the pandemic, the series is about communication and its frequent failure, especially in today’s society and in the eponymic “inside,” the internet. Through Charlotte’s use of various platforms and apps, private and professional life flow together. The heroine is permanently distracted and overwhelmed by the different communication channels, including newsfeeds on the pandemic.

28) Lückerrath, “ZDF startet eine neue tägliche Serie — und zwar heute.”

29) See Dietze, “Quarantäne Als Therapie,” 83.

30) Dietze, “Quarantäne Als Therapie,” 87.

For the depiction of the crucial topic of digital communication and its linked stress and struggles, the particular form of *Drinnen* — the “screen-only format” (Haslauer) — is once again decisive. Through the protagonist’s screen and from her perspective, we see a quick and seemingly unorganized montage of different images, windows, apps, messages, notes, and memories popping up. This montage represents an aesthetic approach to representing “the internet,” which is closely linked to the show’s main topic of communication and clearly visible in its ironic subhead, *Im Internet sind alle gleich* (On the Internet All Are Equal).

The show’s portrayal of the internet includes several real-life online services, especially from major tech companies, wherein we can see a further “platformisation of public service broadcasting.”³¹⁾ Such a platformization had previously been discussed primarily in respect to distribution, whereas *Drinnen* mainly characterized its content and aesthetic. The interviewed editor Haslauer justified the visibility of real-life platforms, devices, and brands with the limited production time (in which making dummy apps was hardly possible) and with the goal of authenticity. She highlighted the aim of depicting the “whole range of tools and the trouble with these tools” and getting close to the viewers’ own multifaceted digital and internet use.

The taking up of current social media phenomena likewise aimed at proximity to viewers’ own lives. Very recent posts popping up on Charlotte’s screen suggested that she was using the same or similar media almost simultaneously with the audience, reminiscent of “real-time” approaches in earlier television series, for instance, in the Norwegian transmedia youth drama *SKAM*.³²⁾ In *Drinnen*, the temporal locating achieved through social media content also served to portray the pandemic at a very specific time.

With her extensive and up-to-date online practices, Charlotte is situated as part of a specific age group, so-called digital natives, and to a particular class that can work from home and online, and therefore still receive an income and be comparatively safe during a threatening pandemic. In the *DWDL.de* interview, Wilson reflected on the social status of her character, stating that “many people in the country and around the world” were more severely affected by the pandemic and its restrictions than Charlotte, who has a large apartment and too much work rather than too little.³³⁾ Haslauer, the editor, also referred to social inequalities when arguing, that the producers of *Drinnen* tried to not only represent “the privileged of society” through Charlotte and her ad agency colleagues. Haslauer emphasized in particular the minor character of Lisa, a nurse who briefly but repeatedly reports to her friend Charlotte from her stressful hospital workplace, thus stopping “the fun factor,” as Haslauer put it. According to Haslauer, an overly light and cheerful narration of the early COVID-19 days was also avoided through other characters such as Charlotte’s boss, who is actually suffering a COVID-19 infection. But, in the end, *Drinnen* narrates

31) Sven Stollfuß, “The Platformisation of Public Service Broadcasting in Germany: The Network ‘Funk’ and the Case of Druck/Skam Germany,” *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 16, no. 2 (2021).

32) Vilde S. Sundet, “From ‘Secret’ Online Teen Drama to International Cult Phenomenon: The Global Expansion of *SKAM* and Its Public Service Mission,” *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 15, no. 1 (2020).

33) Freitag, “Spontanität mitnehmen, Produktionsbedingungen nicht.”

the pandemic primarily from a very privileged point of view, as the minor characters and subplots from perspectives other than that of the digitally adept ad woman Charlotte remain quite sketchy.

Haslauer confessed that the show narrates in a “fragmentary” way in general. “We don’t go into depth for any characters or elaborate conflicts, but only touch on many things,” is how she described the narrative strategy, which, obviously, resulted from a very quick development and shooting timeline. Time pressure, in general, characterized the making of *Drinnen* and its production strategies in fictionalizing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Building a project network in the face of the pandemic

Two main issues were decisive for the emergence of *Drinnen*, Haslauer’s retrospection suggests: first, ZDF’s desire to give producers security and work, in light of the many canceled shoots in 2020, and, secondly, an aim to touch upon “contemporary issues and crisis” in fiction in such a way that they serve “a basic social mood.”

According to Haslauer, the initial idea to fictionalize the COVID-19 pandemic very quickly and by focusing on the computer screen of a person working from home came from Frank Zervos, head of one of ZDF’s two fiction departments (Hauptredaktion Fernsehfilm/Serie I). It might be argued that Haslauer, through these references to her superior and her employer, portrayed both in a positive way and attributed creativity and innovation to the public broadcaster ZDF against the backdrop of “self-interest, promotion, and spin,”³⁴⁾ which generally characterizes interview statements by television and film professionals, according to scholar John Thornton Caldwell. In German fiction, however, it quite often happens that the idea generation, as the foundation for later screen idea work groups and project networks, first occurs within the broadcaster and its editorial departments.³⁵⁾ Screenwriters, however, have repeatedly criticized script initiation by producers and commissioning editors, saying that too little thought is given to the narrative itself and too much to program schemes and themes.

For *Drinnen*, Haslauer’s interview suggests, the creative professionals still had great freedom to elaborate the plot, as the idea by ZDF for a quick, personalized “screen narration” on digital work-from-home life during the pandemic was vague. Furthermore, it could be said that the strong institutional rooting of *Drinnen* provided a crucial basis to enable the quick production, distribution, and decision-making. Multiple times, Haslauer emphasized that the support of principal people and departments at ZDF, especially the editorial team and head programming director, helped to speed up the broadcaster’s ordinary process, whereby the responsible editor has to collect “many small green cards” before production can start.

From a rough idea, an entire project network had to be founded to realize *Drinnen*. First, a specific production context within ZDF was selected: the editorial department *Das*

34) Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 14.

35) See Florian Krauß, “From ‘Redakteursfernsehen’ to ‘Showrunners’: Commissioning Editors and Changing Project Networks in TV Fiction from Germany,” *Journal of Popular Television* 8, no. 2 (2020).

kleine Fernsehspiel (The Little Television Play). It traditionally focuses on “auteur” and debut films,³⁶⁾ with rather low budgets, which is why practitioners have associated it with both artistic freedom and precarious labor conditions. In recent years, *Das kleine Fernsehspiel* has increasingly opened up to miniseries, such as the political satire *Eichwald, MdB* (2014/2019, ZDF), often through its subdepartment Quantum. Quantum, according to the ZDF site, is a “format lab” in which single films, web series, and multimedia projects that “explore new avenues in content, technique, or form” are developed.³⁷⁾ *Drinnen*, in the view of Haslauer, fit Quantum’s lab approach very well, as the show pursued an experimental goal, namely, a quick fictional response to current events.

Due to *Drinnen*’s placement with Quantum, Haslauer and her colleague Max Fraenkel (now a producer for the production company Studio Zentral, a subsidiary of ZDF) became the responsible commissioning editors. Through Fraenkel, there was also a personal link to Funk, the online media service of ZDF and ARD for adolescents and young adults aged fourteen to twenty-nine. Having already supervised the German *SKAM* adaptation, *DRUCK*, Fraenkel brought a particular expertise in online distribution to the *Drinnen* project. The third editor, Sarah Flasch, came from ZDF’s department for nonfiction entertainment, including live shows, and this is why, according to Haslauer, Flasch was much better trained in responding quickly to current events.

The question then became: Which producers were capable of realizing the “screen-only format” in a limited time frame and with all the challenges of technical logistics and postproduction being further complicated by COVID-19 regulations? Haslauer’s retrospection made clear that this issue was decisive for the selection of the production company — a next, crucial step in creating the project network. It is well-known from studies on TV series production in project networks that, besides expertise in the planned content, management skills are a crucial criterion when selecting the producer.³⁸⁾ For *Drinnen*, where both the aesthetic approach (described above) and the shooting procedure under the pandemic required a lot of technical equipment and skill, competency in leading a project network became even more important. According to Haslauer, the production company, btf — bildundtonfabrik (image and audio factory) convinced ZDF that they were the right choice not only through a brief pitch on the story by Philipp Käßbohrer (one of btf’s two CEOs and later an executive producer on *Drinnen*) but also through their concept for production under the pandemic contact restrictions. Very likely, experiences and competences in nonfiction productions, which have quicker production processes, as well as the online orientation of such shows’ content, promotion, and distribution, also helped btf win the contract for *Drinnen*. The Cologne-based production company is known especially for Jan Böhmermann’s satirical late-night show *Neo Magazin Royale*

36) See e.g. Knut Hickethier, “Das Fernsehspiel oder der Kunstanspruch der Erzählmachine Fernsehen,” in *Das Fernsehen und die Künste*, eds. Helmut Schanze, Bernhard Zimmermann, and Helmut Kreuzer (Munich: Fink, 1994), 333–335.

37) ZDF, “Quantum — Das Formatlabor,” *ZDF.de*, accessed September 15, 2022, <https://www.zdf.de/filme/das-kleine-fernsehspiel/quantum-das-formatlabor-des-kleinen-fernsehspiels-serien-100.html>.

38) See Arnold Windeler, Anja Lutz, and Carsten Wirth, “Netzwerksteuerung durch Selektion: Die Produktion von Fernsehserien in Projektnetzwerken,” *montage AV* 10, no. 1 (2001), 103, <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/94>.

(2013–2019, ZDFneo). bft increasingly added fiction to its production portfolio, such as the Netflix teen dramedy *How to Sell Drugs Online (Fast)* (2019–), and now also represents comparably young players in TV fiction production in Germany.

The other production company on *Drinnen*, eitelsonnenschein, focuses on fictional comedy with a high degree of improvisation, particularly through its head, the director Lutz Heineking Jr. He and his company thus brought further “on the fly” competence to the emerging *Drinnen* project network, enabling its fast production. Heineking, who had already closely cooperated with lead actor Lavinia Wilson (for the mockumentary *Andere Eltern* [Other Parents, 2019–2020, TNT Serie]), also directed *Drinnen*.

When deciding whether to join the project network, several production members regarded experiences from past cooperation and the resulting mutual trust as crucial,³⁹⁾ corresponding to the well-known feature of TV series production of building on former project networks.⁴⁰⁾ Under the COVID-19 regulations, previous teamwork and the reliability it engenders became even more important, as all production members were spatially separated. They could only communicate with each other online — just like *Drinnen*’s protagonist Charlotte and her colleagues. In such a situation it helps to already know each other from previous face to face exchange.

The collaborative screenwriting of *Drinnen*

Given the still new scenario of the digital workplace and the time pressure, stakeholders in the *Drinnen* project network had to reach decisions very quickly under difficult communication processes. Haslauer stated that roughly three weeks after the pitch paper submission by bft and Philipp Käßbohrer, *Drinnen* was green-lighted and production began. Under the tight schedule, editorial supervision differed from the usual processes. According to Haslauer, the editors’ dramaturgical supervision of the screenwriting, or their “content support,” was significantly lower than in other projects. Instead, Haslauer and her two co-editors dealt more with the “whole administration of the project management” within ZDF, including technical, distribution, and certification issues, to make the show’s “instant” production and release possible.

In general, many processes were less subdivided and run in parallel. According to Haslauer’s report, this was also true of the screenwriting process: the editors (from the commissioner) and the producers (from the production company) did not give notes separately, step by step, as it is the common practice, but rather collaboratively in a Google Doc shared by the four screenwriters. The writers informed the supervisors, through Slack or similar tools, when new content was added to the Google Doc. Digital techniques and practices clearly shaped *Drinnen* screenwriting process, as Haslauer’s description confirms.

Through the short timeline and collaborative Google Doc, the note-giving producers and editors partly became creative idea generators, too, as they contributed concrete ide-

39) See e.g. Freitag, “Spontanität mitnehmen, Produktionsbedingungen nicht.”

40) See e.g. McRobbie, “From Holloway to Hollywood,” 111.

as where they were not satisfied with the emerging script. Haslauer summed up this collaborative screenwriting process as “just very, very forward” and emphasized the mutual trust.

Collaborative traits of script development within the screen idea work group also emerged through there being four writers. All had worked for projects by the leading production company bft, three for the above-mentioned satirical late-night show *Neo Magazin Royale*. Therefore, the writers had particular experience in comedy writing, including for nonfiction shows, but less for drama serials. To fill this expertise gap, the ZDF editors considered adding an accomplished drama writer to the team. In the end, they decided against adding a supplementary writer, as they feared “smash[ing] the group dynamics,” as Haslauer put it.

Getting the recruiting right is generally an important step and challenge in building writing teams or writers’ rooms, and even more so if the exchange can be only digital, as during the height of the pandemic. Recruiting is linked to the question of which people and institutions have a say in the selection. For *Drinnen*, it took place primarily within the production company bft and their networks, through Max Bierhals, who became the head writer, as well as through the creator and bft head Philipp Käßbohrer, who, according to Haslauer, constantly gave input and made the crucial decisions. Here, clear hierarchies become visible. They point to recent approaches to the showrunner in the German TV industry⁴¹⁾ and arguably were necessary to enable the very quick, digital-based production under the COVID-19 regulations in the spring of 2020.

When the rapid collaborative screenwriting process began — and, according to Haslauer, even when the first episode was already online — the narration around Charlotte’s messages to her dead sister was not yet fixed. In contrast to other serials, there was simply not enough time to elaborate the story arc for the whole series and season first, before writing the episode scripts. Thus, only a vague, fragmentary foundation undergirded the collaborative script development. The cross-episode storylines also were a challenge, as the writers were mostly not highly trained or experienced in this narrative style, due to their previous focus on comedy shows. Against this background, Haslauer described herself and her co-editor as the team members most well-versed in fiction.

Despite the involvement of director Lutz Heineking Jr. and his eitelsonnenschein production company (both well-known for highly improvised series), all of *Drinnen*’s dialogue was scripted, Haslauer reported. She attributed the low degree of improvisation to the show’s comedy genre, where timing of punchlines is crucial. Very likely, the low improvisation also resulted from the production team’s digital-only exchange, through which varying acting and directing approaches became more complicated, and from the immense time pressure. Often, scripts were finished only one day before shooting, and hence only one or two days before online release.⁴²⁾ Even though a few breaks occurred amid the

41) See Florian Krauß, “Writers’ Room and Showrunner: Discourses and Practices in the German TV Industry,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Script Development*, eds. Craig Batty and Stacy Taylor (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

42) Freitag, “Spontanität mitnehmen, Produktionsbedingungen nicht.”

otherwise daily broadcast of the fifteen episodes, thus providing a one-day head start, the script work, as well production and distribution, were very closely timed.

Production and distribution under time pressure and contact restrictions

The shooting of *Drinnen*, during the height of the pandemic, was shaped by not only the immense time pressure but also the digital exchange from people's various homes and an increased flexibility. Makeup and costuming, for instance, became additional tasks of the actors. Likewise, the show's main setting was not found by a contracted location scout but simply was main actor Lavinia Wilson's own living room. The secondary setting, the country house where Charlotte's husband is staying with the children, also belonged to Wilson and her family.⁴³⁾ While only selected sections of these locations were shown in *Drinnen*, the border between production work and private life nevertheless became blurred in the shooting of *Drinnen* — reminiscent of the work situation of many people, from all kinds of industries, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shooting in Wilson's homes required new filming techniques, making *Drinnen*'s entire production a highly digitalized process. The editor Haslauer also brought up such techniques when she highlighted postproduction as being highly crucial for the "screen-only format." The increased relevance of postproduction is also indicated through the relatively high number of team members with the title "editor," among them Julian Schleef, head of postproduction. Haslauer attributed a certain authorship to Schleef by pointing to all the information visible on Charlotte's computer screen and "screen gimmicks" not included in the scripts but rather contributed by Schleef. Given this late content-related work, Schleef — the central figure in postproduction and, according to Haslauer, "a creative head" — can be seen as part of the screen idea work group for *Drinnen*.

Like the editing and script work, different production phases often flowed together for the quickly realized series. For instance, Patrick Stenzel, one of the writers, also contributed to promoting and distributing *Drinnen* on social media platforms. In doing so, he often cooperated with Max Fraenkel, the editor with connections to the Funk platform. Fraenkel, however, stated that hardly any time was available to develop an elaborate distribution strategy for *Drinnen*, in contrast to other ZDF fiction productions. Still, a certain distribution approach naturally emerged through the producers' rapid reaction to the pandemic: the story of Charlotte isolated at home took place at the exact moment when many viewers were experiencing a similar work and life situation, and so we might attribute a kind of "real-time approach" to the show's distribution. Fraenkel described how this immediate release helped gain visibility for *Drinnen* in the German television landscape very quickly.

Drinnen's rapid production and distribution translated into an immense workload for all actors in the show's project network, especially during the COVID-19 restrictions in March and April 2020, the time of the development and production. Since schools and kindergartens were closed, several production members were additionally responsible for domestic care work during this time. In retrospect, Haslauer evaluated the production of

43) See *ibid.*

Drinnen quite ambivalently: on the one hand, she attributed “a lot of fun and a great energy” to the project; on the other, she stated that such a quick and flexible production process is only possible “at the expense of people” and “eats up substance,” and so it can only be an exception.

In the light of such an ambiguous assessment, we can say that Haslauer was partly critical of the “instant” series, which can be considered a new ZDF drama format established through *Drinnen*. The goal of instant drama is to fictionalize contemporary issues very quickly, with no more than six months from script development to distribution. Already before the breakout of COVID-19, attempts had been made to produce serial fiction more quickly, flexibly, and cheaply, especially in approaches to teen TV drama⁴⁴⁾ and with the involvement of emerging creatives. But the pandemic intensified this transformation of public-service drama in Germany. Thus, *Drinnen*, with the speed and flexibility of its project-based making, points to broader changes not only for the public broadcaster ZDF but also German drama production in general. While *Drinnen* is often regarded as an innovative role model in this context, we must also look critically at such “instant” productions. For the involved practitioners, both the push to fictionalize COVID-19 very quickly and to produce under the tight pandemic restrictions meant immense pressure.

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44) See Florian Krauß and Moritz Stock, “Youthification of Television Through Online Media: Production Strategies and Narrative Choices in DRUCK/SKAM Germany,” *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 16, no. 4 (2021).

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Filmography

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Ausgebremst (Annette Hess, 2020–2021)
Deutschland 86 (Anna Winger, 2018)
Deutschland 89 (Jörg Winger, 2020)
Drinnen — Im Internet sind alle gleich (Philipp Käßbohrer, 2020)
DRUCK (Alexander Lindh et al., 2018–)
Eichwald, MdB (Stefan Stuckmann, 2014/2019)
Für immer Sommer 90 (Jan Georg Schütte, Lars Jessen, 2020)
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Liebe. Jetzt! (Alexander Lindh et al., 2020)
Lindenstraße (Hans W. Geißendörfer, 1985–2020)
Neo Magazin Royale (Jan Böhmmermann, 2013–2019)
Die Sat.1 Comedy Konferenz — Promis in Quarantäne (Hugo Egon Balder, Ruth Moschner, 2020)
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Staged (Simon Evans and Phin Glynn, 2020–2022)

Interviews

Haslauer, Lucia. Interview by the author via Zoom. September 6, 2022.
 Fraenkel, Max. Interview by the author via Zoom. September 7, 2022.

Biography

Florian Krauß, Ph.D., research fellow at the University of Siegen, Germany, and visiting scholar at the universities Copenhagen, Bologna and Utrecht. He was previously a substitute professor in Media Literacy at the Technische Universität Dresden, a lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Siegen and research associate at the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF, Potsdam. He additionally works as a freelance script editor for Bayerischer Rundfunk (Bavarian Broadcasting), a member of the public-service ARD network. He is the author of the book *Qualitätsserien aus Deutschland: Produktionspraktiken, Erzählweisen und Transformationen des Fernsehens* (Quality Drama from Germany: Production Cultures, Narrative Styles and Television's Transformations, 2023) and co-editor of the anthologies *Teen TV* (2020) and *Drehbuchforschung* (Screenwriting Research, 2022). Further recent publications on media industry and television studies in *Critical Studies in Television*, *Journal of Popular Television*, *VIEW Journal of European Television History & Culture*, *SE-RIES International Journal of TV Serial Narratives*, and others.

