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Intervention Theatre: Performance, authenticity and expert knowledge in politicians' travels to post-/conflict spaces

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Abstract

This article explores the role of official travel activities by politicians to post-/conflict spaces in German foreign policymaking. Starting from the observation that official travel justifications stress the value of authentic insights and unfiltered information, while journeys in practice are meticulously planned and staged, it asks what kind of knowing is possible, how actors make sense of the staged nature of fieldtrips, and how multiple performances create and/or undermine notions of authenticity and first-hand expertise. The article shows that official on-site visits are composed of multiple conscious performances by all actors involved, but that these performances do not undermine the notions of authenticity and expertise. On the contrary, knowledge authenticity – or truth claims on the basis of authentic insights – and related expert authority are produced through travels-as-performance. The emphasis policymakers put on on-site presence and (the performance of) localised knowledge contradicts intervention literature's generalised finding of a prioritisation of technocratic over localised knowledge. The article draws on politics/performance scholarship and authenticity theories in tourism studies to make sense of a wealth of empirical material on the claims, practice and functions of German MPs' journeys to post-/conflict spaces as part of broader political struggles over policy knowledge.

Keywords

Politics, performance, authenticity, international intervention, conflict knowledge, expertise, fieldtrips, on-site visits, German foreign policy, peacebuilding

Introduction

Western policymakers frequently travel to sites of international peacebuilding and humanitarian interventions. From military bases in Afghanistan to Syrian refugee camps, they ‘see for themselves’ the ‘situation on the ground’. This commonplace justification of official trips suggests a possibility for first-order observation, unfiltered information collection and authentic insight. The programmes of on-site visits, however, tend to be meticulously choreographed by embassies, troops or aid organisations and involve a great deal of symbolical transaction between participants. Rather than being mere exercises in first-hand information gathering and on-site experiencing, policymakers’ visits to post-/conflict spaces are composed of multiple performances, understood here as ‘actions, events, or behaviours that are relational and self-conscious’ (Reinelt and Rai 2015, 4).

Analysing the example of German members of parliament’s (MPs) travel activities to post-/conflict spaces, and drawing on insights from scholarship on politics and performance and authenticity theories in tourism studies, this article explores the performative practice of political on-site visits – the ‘intervention theatre’ – and its connection with claims to ‘authentic knowledge’ and ‘expertise’ in policymaking about conflict/intervention.¹ It analyses what kind of knowing is possible, how the actors involved make sense of and/or strive to transcend the choreographed and staged nature

of on-site visits, and how the performances during fieldtrips create and/or undermine notions of authenticity and expertise in policymaking about conflict/intervention.

In the literature on conflict expertise and policymaking, politicians' first-hand information gathering and experience through on-site visits has received little attention. Most works in the growing body of studies about exchanges at the nexus between science, expertise and politics conceptualise policymakers as commissioners, receivers, interpreters, users and/or manipulators of expertise (cf. Boswell 2011; Leander 2014; Leander and Wæver 2015). While this may well cover the majority of roles that politicians take on in policy-relevant knowledge production, it is not a comprehensive view. MPs' travel activities offer an interesting case, in which policymakers themselves become active information gatherers and evaluators – at least according to the public descriptions of their activities. By focusing on questions of performance at the interface of expertise/knowledge and politics as experienced during on-site visits, it is possible to capture this first-order aspect of policy knowledge production in a critical way, which exposes different layers of performance, experience and function.

This article argues that, rather than understanding performance or staging in a pejorative sense as spoiling the idea of authentic insights and first-hand information gathering, official on-site visits in post-/conflict spaces are indeed composed of sequences of multiple conscious performances by all actors involved, both for one another and for domestic (and international) audiences. Knowledge authenticity – or truth claims on the basis of authentic insights – and related expert authority are produced through travels-as-performance in the first place, with the fact of travelling being one of the major performative acts itself. Drawing on authenticity theories, the article suggests that 'authenticity' and 'expertise' are socially constructed categories,

which rely on preconceived positivist ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of conflict/intervention and about ways of knowing about ‘reality’. The production of these categories is one part of wider symbolic struggles over (the credible performance of) different roles in democratic politics and the definition of ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ in conflict/intervention-related policymaking. These assumptions, together with the rigid practicalities of on-site visits, structure what and how travellers see/experience/know, for the most part reproducing pre-existing imaginaries of conflict/intervention. In other words, the article argues that while the rationale of on-site visits rests on an implicit hierarchy of ways of knowing, in which first-order experience/information takes a commanding position (*seeing is believing*), the praxis of field visits is dominated by existing world views, beliefs and stereotypes and by broader struggles over political roles in democratic politics, which structure the travel experience (*believing is seeing*).

That (the performance of) localised first-order observation takes on such an important and highly valued role in politicians’ struggles over conflict/intervention-related policymaking is in itself remarkable. It points to the need to add more nuance to current literature, which stresses/assumes the dominance of technocratic over local knowledge in international interventions and global governance (cf. Autesserre 2014; Coles 2007; Sending 2015). Autesserre (2014), for instance, found in her study into the ‘dispute over which (and whose) knowledge matters most for effective peacebuilding’ in the DR Congo, that ‘thematic knowledge’ and ‘technical expertise’ trump ‘local knowledge’ and ‘country expertise’ among intervention practitioners. This article, in contrast, suggests that in their quest for, and performance of, policy knowledge and expertise German politicians put the ‘local/country’ above the ‘thematic/technical’.

There are two main reasons why the German case is specifically suited to study political on-site visits. First, due to Germany's past, military participation in international interventions is a fairly recent phenomenon starting only in the early 1990s. As a foreign policy instrument, it was (and partly still is) heavily contested by some parties and party factions, thereby creating a specific demand for knowledge and justification. MPs frequent on-site visits in zones of conflict and intervention have to be understood against this background. Second, unlike most of their counterparts in other troop-sending countries, German MPs have to document their parliament-financed travels since 1992. For this reason, the German case provides the researcher with much more complete documentation and information about the number and destinations of journeys than other countries, providing an exceptionally good starting point for more in-depth explorations.

Accordingly, this research draws on dozens of travel reports, press releases, travel programmes, travel planning documents (e.g., email exchanges between MPs' offices and German embassies) and parliamentary debates about German participation in international interventions since the early 1990s, sourced from the websites of the *Bundestag*, political parties and individual MPs, and the German Green Party's archive (*Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis*) in Berlin visited in December 2014. This public documentation with its obvious bias towards MPs' self-representation has been cross-checked and looked at critically through formal and informal interviews with officers and soldiers of the German armed forces (*Bundeswehr*) in 2011-12, a discussion with members of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 2012, and in-depth interviews with four MPs and a parliamentary assistant in Berlin in June 2015.² Interview findings and documents have been further corroborated with participant

observation during a 10-day fieldtrip to international military camps under German command in Rajlovac (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Prizren (Kosovo) in June 2004, which involved standard procedures for official visitors set out by the *Bundeswehr*.³

The article proceeds with the first section introducing the questions driving this research through the discussion of two empirical observations about performance, authenticity and expert status in politicians' travels to post-/conflict spaces. Second, it provides an overview of foreign travel activity among German MPs, exploring its justifying rationale (*seeing is believing*) and showing that such travels are common practice in German foreign politics meriting closer scrutiny. The third section engages with the performance dynamics during travels, arguing that official journeys to post-/conflict spaces can be best understood as sequences of multiple performances by the different (teams of) actors and for a number of audiences (*intervention theatre*). Finally, the article analyses how these performances are linked to notions of authenticity (and related truth claims) and expertise during on-site visits and embedded in wider (domestic) political struggles (*believing is seeing*). The article concludes with reflections on the findings' implications for scholarship on conflict/intervention knowledge and expertise.

'Authentic insight' or 'staged performance'?

This research into politicians' fieldtrips as performance started with two observations. In 2010, after a talk given to a small audience of German MPs, ministerial staff and diplomats in Berlin about statebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), a Green Party

MP challenged the sceptical evaluation of the intervention by drawing on her own experiences.⁴ These consisted of two journeys to BiH. The first had taken place in October 1996, barely a year after the end of the Bosnian war, whose horrors had still been present in the travel delegation's conversations with victims and witnesses and the places it visited, not least a hillside road in the Sarajevan district of Grbavica, from which Serb soldiers had besieged the city (other participants' travel reports: Müller 1996; Nachtwei 1996; Poppe 1996; Trittin 1996). The second journey had taken place almost 10 years later, on the occasion of the 2005 commemoration of the massacres of Srebrenica.⁵ The travel programme involved a visit to a school in a Sarajevan district, which during the war had been occupied by Serbs. The visitors were taken there to see that children from different ethnic groups now shared the school again (critically: Swimelar 2013). In a clear act of retrospective 'sensemaking' (Weick 2008), the MP, who had been a strong advocate of humanitarian interventionism in internal disputes over the Green Party's commitment to pacifism in the mid-1990s, interpreted the progress (in her eyes/experience obvious) between her two field visits to Sarajevo as a clear indication of the success of peacebuilding in BiH.

The MP's experience contrasted starkly with a talk by a reserve officer about the German Armed Forces' work routines in Afghanistan some weeks later.⁶ The talk touched upon the many official visits, which the *Bundeswehr* on a mission have to organise and accompany, and for which specific visit programmes are arranged. In an anecdote, the officer described how one programme point had been 'happening upon a dog squad in training'. What for MPs looked like a coincidental encounter with the dogs and their handlers practicing searches for bombs and unexploded ordnance, however, was a show staged specifically for the visitors. The performance mimicked military life

on a mission, yet its purpose was not primarily to provide information but to create a specific impression about the armed forces' 'good work' and, not least, to entertain, to create a positive experience.

In light of this highly staged character of official field visits, in a narrow sense of conscious purposeful performance, the Green Party MP's reliance on her own first-order impressions need to be questioned more deeply. First, on a practical level, there are obvious limits to what MPs can experience/know about a conflict or intervention given the range of actors meticulously planning their access/exposure to chosen parts of that reality. The school visit had been planned and this specific school chosen by the organisers on the ground (the Heinrich Böll Foundation's Sarajevo office)⁷ with a specific purpose in mind (showing progress in multi-ethnic reconciliation and education reform). The on-site visits provided intellectual and affective experiences, which (in this case) confirmed preconceived political imaginaries. The questions of who controls the means of social performances during on-site visits and what kind of knowing is possible in this highly choreographed and staged environment therefore need to be centre-stage to any attempt at understanding politicians' first-order observations. Furthermore, even mundane logistical and organisational activities, such as deciding over the specific travel schedule or choosing the school to be visited, are by no means merely 'technical', but indeed highly political in nature – an aspect to be kept in mind, although not the main focus of this article.⁸

Second, regarding the question of authenticity of experience, while 'the dog squad training' and 'the school visit' were performances in the sense of an action that is 'aware of the act of doing something, and to show doing it' (Reinelt and Rai 2015, 4), they were at the same time part of the routines and realities of interventions, where

official visitors have to be handled on a daily basis and which therefore are not less ‘real’ than other actions taking place without this audience. Indeed, a lot of what constitutes intervention practice is of performative character, with patrols through towns and villages being a very visible example of a practice meant to demonstrate ‘presence’ at least (cf. Higate and Henry 2009). The interesting question is thus how the actors involved and their different audiences make sense of this nature of official on-site visits, in which ‘performance frames a reality which is not, and yet also is’ (Reinelt and Rai 2015, 13).

Third, the Green Party MP enjoyed a certain expert status among the talk’s audience, whose members mostly lacked on-the-ground experience in BiH. The fact of ‘having been there’ weighed much more in this situation than the (inchoate) information gathered during these visits. Politicians’ on-site visits therefore also have to be explored with regard to the question of how they create perceptions of authentic insight and expert authority/hierarchies among peers and public. In order to explore these different levels and questions, a first step is to explore how politicians themselves and the parliament as institution justify MPs’ official foreign travels and determine their official function in the democratic policymaking process in Berlin.

Seeing is believing: travel activity and rationale among German MPs

When asked about their most frequented information sources on conflict and intervention, German MPs named open and confidential information provided by the government; professional discussions with members of the expert community,

especially national think tanks and persons with work experience in the regions concerned; systematic press reviews; and own travels to the countries in question.⁹ Especially MPs of opposition parties expressed caution or suspicion against government information, while all MPs presented on-site visits as a possibility to gain independent first-order information and insight. In this sense, on-site visits seem to be an obvious answer by policymakers to the problem of gathering ‘relevant’ and ‘unfiltered’ information about a policy issue at hand. In their travel reports and press releases, MPs across all parties stress accordingly that their official journeys to post-/conflict spaces serve to ‘*get one’s own picture* of the current security situation, the mood among the soldiers and the progress in reconstruction’ (Lamers 2010, emphasis added). They state that, ‘only when you are on site can you get an *untainted impression* of what our soldiers are accomplishing in their theatres of operation’ (Gädechens 2012, emphasis added), and they also claim that direct conversations with soldiers and civilian aid workers on the ground are ‘*much more authentic*’ than information received in the form of ministerial assessment reports (ibid.).

Official reports about MPs’ foreign travel activities, usually issued twice per legislative period by the president of the German parliament, likewise suggest that the journeys have great added value and that on-site visits allow for ‘immediate’ and ‘unfiltered’ first-order information gathering. With regard to individual travels, for example, the reports point out that these are

first and foremost *targeted at information gathering and the exchange of experiences and opinions*. These travels furthermore serve to strengthen the exercise of the MPs’ control function vis-à-vis the government. For an

acquisition of information about the political, economic and socio-political situation in the respective states and regions, *which is unmediated and as little filtered as possible, is often only achievable in this manner*' (Deutscher Bundestag 2011, 30, emphasis added).¹⁰

'Being on the ground' is seen to help MPs cut out the intermediaries or brokers – ministerial staff, think-tank experts, media representatives, academics or others – who transform data into specific knowledge in their reports and briefings, thus already providing a specific interpretation of a situation. In contrast, on-site visits seem to enable MPs to gather information and experience without interference, thereby ensuring the authenticity of data and information and, in extension, enhancing the quality and relevance of knowledge through own insight and interpretation.¹¹

Accordingly, foreign travels are a common activity among German MPs. From 1991-2015, the German *Bundestag* recorded between 202 (1998) and 826 (2008) official parliament-financed journeys of individuals or groups of MPs per year. Journeys amounted to an average annual cost of €2.31 million with a peak of €3.62 million in 2008 (see Table 1).¹² These figures do not include foreign travel financed by party factions of the *Bundestag*, since these do not have to be reported to the parliamentary president.¹³ There is a general fluctuation pattern in foreign travel activities, which stems from the exigencies of different phases in the parliamentary term. Travel activity decreases during election years when MPs campaign in their constituencies, but rises considerably during the other three years of each four-year term (see Graph 1). The overall number of journeys has been on the rise after the 2005 elections, suggesting a general trend towards more travels.

[INSERT: TABLE 1 and GRAPH 1 about here]

The parliamentary presidents' reports, issued fairly regularly since an according resolution in 1992, justify the necessity for MPs' travel activities with the *Bundestag's* constitutional obligations of controlling the government, taking foreign policy-related decisions including the deployment of the German armed forces, and fulfilling numerous international roles and obligations in an increasingly globalised world (cf. Deutscher Bundestag 1993-2015). All this is said to have resulted in a 'parliamentarisation of foreign politics' and increased responsibilities for German MPs in European and overseas affairs. The reports thus state that,

In order to satisfy their international obligations, it is *absolutely necessary* for the representatives of the German *Bundestag* to *cultivate an intensive cooperation with foreign politicians and institutions*. In this way, the representatives can *collect on site the information and experiences necessary* for their tasks and react to the international status quo and emerging conflict situations in an appropriate way (Deutscher Bundestag 2011, 2, emphasis added).

Unsurprisingly, the majority of journeys undertaken by German MPs have had European destinations. From 1991-2015, 65% of travels on average were directed at European countries including Turkey, while the remaining 35% combine journeys to all other continents. There were peaks of trips to European countries with over 75%

between 2002 and 2005, as well as peaks of travels to non-European destinations with 45% in 2010, half of these directed at countries in Asia and the Middle East. While only a minority of the non-European journeys are directed at post-/conflict spaces, the percentage of on-site visits in such countries/regions is nonetheless significant, with some years showing substantial peaks. In 2010, for example, travels to Afghanistan alone made up 11% of all travels to non-European destinations and 5% of total travels.

[INSERT GRAPH 2 ABOUT HERE]

Graph 2 shows the number of parliament-financed trips to the three main theatres of German engagement in international interventions since the mid-1990s, namely Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Afghanistan.¹⁴ Ups and downs can be explained by case/region-specific developments in those years.¹⁵ Other travel destinations in post-/conflict spaces at some point or another include Djibouti, DR Congo, Haiti, Iraq, Israel and the Palestinian territories (which are frequent destinations at all times, often in combination), Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Sudan/South Sudan, Ukraine and others. This analysis suggests that journeys to post-/conflict spaces are an integral part of German foreign policymaking. What remains to be explored is how such journeys relate to the stated ideals of authentic insight and unfiltered information gathering and which functions they assume in the policymaking process.

Intervention theatre: MPs' on-site visits as multiple performances

The parliamentary reports list four main types of MPs' foreign journeys. Delegation journeys are an important part of the work of parliamentary committees, which involve members from all parties represented in the parliament – in this context especially the three committees for defence, human rights and humanitarian aid, and economic cooperation and development.¹⁶ The other types are travels by official parliamentary delegations, parliamentary groups,¹⁷ and individual MPs. In addition, parties' main representatives/speakers (*Obleute*) in the parliamentary committees are occasionally invited to accompany ministers on their journeys, and the *Bundeswehr* actively offers MPs the opportunity to visit theatres of operation and meet soldiers from their constituencies.¹⁸

MPs generally see accompanying a minister as least effective in terms of independent information gathering, since such travels are structured by the minister's visiting schedule, serve mainly representational purposes and are in great part geared towards the accompanying journalists (e.g., Nachtwei 1997).¹⁹ In contrast, journeys by parliamentary delegations, self-financed group journeys organised within the party factions, and above all individual trips are seen as most promising when it comes to independent information gathering, since the scope for MPs' input into the visiting programme is greatest here. Individual travel motivations tend to differ, however, depending on MPs' disposition to either accept the visiting programme as suggested by the *Bundeswehr* and the involved ministries and embassies, or to explore the foreign country in light of a specific guiding question and with own ideas about discussion partners. What all types of travels share is that they are composed of sequences of multiple performances by the different actors (hosts as well as visitors), who strive to enact specific messages and democratic roles.

Performance is understood in this article as '[a]ny action that is framed, presented, highlighted or displayed' (Schechner cited by Reinelt and Rai 2015, 4) and that shows the characteristics of relationality and self-consciousness. Performance, whether by individuals or institutions, is self-conscious/reflexive in the sense that 'it "knows" it shows', and it is 'transactional – between the performer(s) and the spectators or recipients of the act' (Reinelt and Rai 2015, 4). The most obvious political performances are state ceremonies (such as commemorative parades) and political rituals (such as parliamentary debates) (Rai 2015; Baringhorst 2004). Relationality means that performance cannot be understood solely from the viewpoint of enactment; it always takes place in a broader socio-political context, which determines the conditions (of possibility) for a performance, and it needs an audience to interpret and react to the performance, be it in an accepting or challenging way. Reinelt and Rai (2015, 2) claim that democratic politics and theatrical performance are not just similar, but that they indeed share the same 'grammar' or set of rules (cf. Apter 2006). Among the shared principles are, most centrally, performances' need for publics; their purpose to 'affect their constituencies in aggregate form' (Reinelt and Rai 2015, 4); their claim to represent; a need for presence and visibility; and the dependence of the recognition of roles and enactments as legitimate/illegitimate on broader power structures and questions of identity (Reinelt and Rai 2015, 12-14).

Travel-related actions and events like 'happening upon a dog squad training' or a 'school visit' are self-conscious and relational performances in the above sense, which are structured by this grammar of politics/performance. They are consciously planned events based on on-site presence and affectual experience (Bliesemann de Guevara 2016, 64-70) and on the visualisation of messages. They show specific aspects meant to

represent a broader ‘reality on the ground’ (the troops’ good work; the success of international peacebuilding efforts). They are targeted at, made sense of, or challenged by audiences, without whose interpretation and reproduction the events remain isolated and meaningless. And their production is based on specific conditions of access to the means of performance, which in these two cases did not lie in the hands of the visitors, but those of the organisers on site (the Böll Foundation; the *Bundeswehr*). In more general terms, however, roles of actors, extras or audience are much less confined and tend to alternate.

While ‘the stage’ belongs to the on-site actors, the visiting politicians can appropriate it for their performances targeted at different audiences, too. MPs engage in performances for their hosts (the military and aid agencies), the recipients of intervention (the Bosnians, Kosovars or Afghans), their peers in Berlin, and domestic publics. They do so, for instance, when they meet with soldiers originating from their constituency, talk to local women’s NGOs, publish expressive pictures of their on-site visits on their websites (often posing with military equipment/personnel, sometimes also with ‘locals’), or when they invoke their journey in parliamentary debates or report about it to the German press upon their return. In this sense, the ‘intervention theatre’ of politicians’ on-site visits consists of multiple simultaneous performances of different (teams of) actors, coming closer to Goffman’s (1990) meaning of everyday performances than to the more one-directional performance and ‘hyper-visibility’ of a political ceremony or ritual (Rai 2015).

Policymakers’ journeys to zones of conflict and intervention are composed of sequences of such performance acts and events, with little or nothing left to chance. Usual travel programmes are dense successions of appointments with international and

national discussion partners, riddled with on-site visits of projects, cultural sights, or other sites of interest depending on the journey's focus and practicalities.²⁰ The military is very keen to provide visitors with a unique experience, while policymakers in turn appreciate military vehicles and personnel as props/extras in photos documenting their official visit (Bliesemann de Guevara 2016, 61). Even 'leisure times' tend to be planned and staged, such as the casual informal evening talk at the military camp (but with handpicked soldiers), for which the *Bundeswehr* uses the English fantasy term 'beer call'.²¹ Such events seemingly outside of the formal visiting schedule resemble what, drawing on Goffman's (1990) differentiation between front-stage and backstage spaces/behaviour, has been described as 'pseudo-backstage' in tourism literature (Daugstad and Kirchengast 2013, 183-189): a staged back-region, which gives visitors the impression to get an authentic temporal and situational glimpse of the 'inner circle' of their hosts, in this case the intervention practitioners.

Visibility and presence are important factors in travel programmes: what is conveyed as information and insight must be tangible through encounters, places and objects. What is not visible/present is hard to be experienced and thus often left out of the narrative, while the visible receives special emphasis (cf. Edkins 2015). The missing is selectively represented by placeholders, such as memorial stones or plaques to soldiers killed in action in the field camps,²² while other invisibilities remain hidden, such as the social logics behind the politics of the intervened that may contradict the intervention narrative (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kühn 2010). The culture of visibility/presence, which is engrained in the very idea of on-site visits, dominates travel programmes, and those who plan these programmes (hosts or travellers) determine what is visible/remains invisible. Underlying the dominance of visibility/presence is a

positivist epistemology of knowing that finds its expression in the public travel rationale as the ‘collection of unfiltered information’ and ‘own experiences’ of a reality that is out there, independent of interpretation, and can in principle be acted upon based on ‘facts’.

Performance to transmit specific messages is also what typically characterises discussions with intervention practitioners and members of the national elite and civil society of the intervened country. Again, the need for routinisation plays a major role in how such visits are handled. Tom Koenigs, a Green Party MP and former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Afghanistan from 2006-2007, describes the routine with which central actors in Kabul handled the constant flow of visitors and discussion partners as part of their daily tasks:

As a seasoned traveller, you notice a certain routine in the battle-tried actors on the other side: I do not believe that I left any kind of impression on General Petraeus, commander of 130,000 ISAF soldiers from 47 nations, in the short half hour of our visit. [...] I for my part only remember the big glamour at the end. With a pithy “This is a rite among us soldiers” he let a coin slide into my hand at the farewell handshake, which I almost dropped in my surprise (2014, 98).

Other discussion encounters may be more informative for the visitors than the one described here, especially when national development agencies, international organisations or NGOs brief about projects, progress and problems in their respective areas of commitment. Nonetheless, performance remains the structuring logic of such encounters, with expertise and authenticity demonstrated through props and actions

such as PowerPoint presentations and on-site tours/demonstrations (for the example of a police training centre in North Afghanistan, see Bliesemann de Guevara 2016, 62).

The practicalities involved in policymakers' on-site visits create the conditions of possibility for these multiple performances. The temporality of such fleeting visits of three to five days, and the necessity for the actors on site to accommodate visits with their other duties and daily routines, mean that there is a need for visits to be meticulously planned and condensed. The need to routinise the handling of the constant influx of visitors leads actors 'in the field' to develop modularised standard programme points, which can be pieced together depending on visit theme and duration.²³ Furthermore, official journeys are logistically dependent upon facilitators such as the embassy or the armed forces for transport, and for security reasons have to be approved and accompanied by police forces of the German Federal Criminal Police Office, adding to the need to plan.

The majority of official travellers therefore do not leave the limited and sanitised space that intervening agencies create in the countries of deployment, and only few manage to 'circumvent' security protocols and other restrictions. Such circumvention requires special initiative, as in the example of the Green Party MPs who managed to travel to Iraqi Kurdistan despite severe security concerns, because they acquired Peshmerga protection due to one MP's long-standing commitment to the Kurdish question and her good relationship with Iraqi-Kurdish leaders (Nachtwei 2007).²⁴ Not surprisingly perhaps, it is mainly MPs from (current opposition) parties on the left of the political spectrum, the Green Party and the Left Party (*Die Linke*), who take the pains to engage in such self-organised fact-finding missions (e.g. Buchholz and van Aken 2010; Ströbele 2010; van Aken et al. 2011).

Such attempts to break through the standard choreography of field visits notwithstanding, it can be argued that what the majority of MPs experience during their journeys is indeed doubly staged: not only are the visitors presented with a condensed mimesis of ‘life in the intervention zone’, which is framed by the limited temporality and the practicalities of the fleeting visit; they also mainly experience the space that is inhabited and defined by the international interveners (Bliesemann de Guevara 2016, 60-63). This space is structured by the fortified camps and compounds and the security-regulated mobility and hotels, which characterise it as an international workspace (Andersson and Weigand 2015; Duffield 2010; Smirl 2016), and also by national governments which may control foreign access to parts of their country (Fisher in this issue; Lewis in this issue). Even where the intervention occupies roughly the same geographical space as the intervened society, in terms of social space and interaction it is fundamentally set apart from the latter, leading to completely different experiences of ‘Afghanistan’ or ‘the DR Congo’ among interveners and intervened (Autesserre 2014; Smirl 2015). This renders it necessary to explore the notion of ‘authentic insights’ through on-site visits, and the claims to ‘truth’ and ‘expertise’ based on such travels, in more detail.

Believing is seeing: performance and/of authenticity

According to the official rationale underpinning politicians’ foreign travels, the notions of ‘authenticity’ and ‘information gathering’ as used in public travel documentation are based on the positivist ontology of a reality existing outside of (artificial) performance

and interpretation, and on a positivist epistemology that this reality can be known through direct encounters with it. What this study suggests, by contrast, is that authenticity and the expert status derived from on-site visits are socially constructed and interlinked categories evaluating (providers of) information and experience, which are the effect of, and thus dependent on, acts of social performance (cf. Carroll 2015).

In performance/politics studies, Alexander (2004; 2011; also Alexander, Giesen and Mast 2006) makes an explicit link between ‘the problem of authenticity’ and performance. He suggests that ‘[t]he challenge confronting individual and collective symbolic action in complex contemporary societies, whether on stage or in societies at large, is to infuse meaning by re-fusing performance’ (Alexander 2004, 55). In this sense, the perception of authenticity marks success of a performance in conveying the intended meaning, while ‘failure suggests that a performance will seem insincere and faked: the actor seems out of role, merely be reading from an impersonal script, pushed and pulled by the forces of society, acting not from sincere motives but to manipulate the audience’ (ibid.). Key to a performance’s success or failure in generating ‘authenticity’ is the interaction of all elements of performance. This does not only concern the performing side (actors, scripts, enactments, props); only if there is also a fusion between the performance and the audience can a performance appear authentic instead of contrived and out of place (Alexander 2004, 529).

Authenticity has been a central topic in tourism studies, where four different theoretical understandings of authenticity are discussed: objectivism, constructivism, postmodernism and existentialism (Wang 1999; Rickly-Boyd 2012; critical: Timm Knudsen and Waade 2010). The basic idea of objective authenticity is that of the ‘originality’ of objects, sites, customs etc. in the sense of judgment or measurement by

experts. In this perspective, the perception of authenticity can only arise from ‘authentic objects’, drawing the focus exclusively to the essentialist question of genuineness of the material side of a journey (Wang 1999, 351-353). As MPs’ travel documentation shows, however, choreographed travel programmes can also be experienced as authentic. Thus, although original objects may well contribute to the overall experience of authenticity among travellers in post-/conflict spaces – such as military vehicles in Afghanistan or Kosovo, which visitors are allowed to board, or a plastic bullet used by the British Army in Northern Ireland, which is handed to a tourist on a Troubles-themed tour around the murals in Belfast²⁵ –, the fact that staged events are often experienced as authentic suggests that material genuineness is not sufficient.

Postmodernist understandings of authenticity and concepts of existential authenticity share the assumption that (the perception of) the genuineness of the object world is not essential. While the former show that authenticity is not necessarily central to the postmodern tourist, who may well accept staged authenticity, simulacra and hyper-reality as long as such substitutes enable enjoyment and modern conveniences (Disney World being an example; Wang 1999, 356-358), the latter argue that authenticity is central, but refers to a state of Being of the self, which can be experienced by the subject as both an intra-personal and an inter-personal experience (Wang 1999, 358-365; Brown 2013). For existential authenticity it is irrelevant whether the travel as such has been experienced as authentic. What counts are the bodily feelings of self and/or experiences of family ties or *communitas*, which help the traveller experience his/her ‘true self’, but which ‘is experienced only within a “liminal zone”, where one keeps a distance from societal constraints [...] and inverts, suspends, or alters routine order and norms’ (Wang 1999, 361). The connection between politicians’ field

visits, liminality and affect has been explored in previous work, showing that existential authenticity can be an important factor in how MPs experience ‘the field’ (Bliesemann de Guevara 2016). Yet, existential authenticity is only one and perhaps not the foremost effect of official field visits.

Authenticity as referred to in German MPs’ travel reports can for the most part best be understood in social-constructivist terms as,

[travellers] are indeed in search of authenticity; however, what they quest for is not objective authenticity (i.e., authenticity as originals) but *symbolic* authenticity which is the result of social construction. The toured objects or others are experienced as authentic not because they are originals or reality, but because they are perceived as the signs or symbols of authenticity. Symbolic authenticity has little to do with reality out there. It is more often than not a projection of certain stereotyped images held and circulated within [traveller]-sending societies [...] (Wang 1999, 356, original emphasis).

There are two crucial points that arise from the social-constructivist view on authenticity for the argument of this article. The first is that authenticity does not reside within the category of the ‘visited’ (sites, persons), but that it is ‘a *projection* of [travellers’] own beliefs, expectations, preferences, stereotyped images, and consciousness onto toured objects, particularly onto toured Others’ (Wang 1999, 355, original emphasis). What MPs experience as authentic thus depends on their preconceived intervention imaginaries, which in turn have to be understood against the background of the general complexity and fragmentation of democratic societies

(Alexander 2004, 545) and are closely linked to personal worldviews, political party membership, and previous intervention-related decision-making in parliament (Bliesemann de Guevara 2014a).

This explains the plurality of experiences of authenticity/inauthenticity among MPs. Politicians who reject military interventions outright, or who are in favour of humanitarian interventions but criticise how these have been implemented, are much less likely to experience the highly choreographed side of official field visits as ‘authentic insight’ than MPs who represent a less critical position.²⁶ For the most part, MPs of this latter category contend themselves with the immediate experience of being on site, taking the intellectual and sensual encounters at face value and not questioning the framing of the intervention through the specific travel programme. This tendency must be understood in a context, in which the majority of MPs is interested in justifying their decisions for an intervention vis-à-vis both the German public and the agencies tasked to implement interventions. Legitimation, not scrutiny, drives the majority of post-decision travel activities.

In contrast, intervention-critical policymakers employ strategies to transcend or outperform the ‘intervention theatre’ staged for them by their hosts on site, claiming in turn that their information and insights are ‘authentic’ and ‘unfiltered’ since gleaned independently. For some critical MPs, this means gathering as much information from different sources as possible and cognitively processible:

As far as it is manageable and achievable, I try to pick up on the fragmentation, inconsistency, diversity, contrariness of such a country or part of a country. [...]
I only want to get involved with this [complexity] in a limited way; otherwise I

would lose myself in it. And then I have certain foci – simple in the case of Afghanistan: aspects of the security situation in one’s own area of command [...]; developments, also in their nuances, [...] and overall trends; and then, how is the overall reconstruction situation – although nobody really knows this. Those on site can usually say something about their sectors or projects, but nobody has complete overview.²⁷

Transcending the standard staging of official travels through a strategy of gathering information from diverse sources comes at its own risks in terms of policy narrative coherence and ability to take decisions: ‘When you visit Afghanistan, the number of questions increases over time, the uncertainty increases over the course of the travels’, the same MP reflected.²⁸

Other critical MPs aim at transcending the neat performances of choreographed on-site visits by organising their own programme, driven by targeted questions. Such visits often highlight the blank spaces in standard programmes and aim at challenging the German government’s official narrative about an intervention or event. The aim here is not to complete the picture or to identify ‘areas of opportunity’²⁹, but rather to find targeted information that puts into question dominant truth claims.³⁰ An illustrative example is the Left Party’s campaign to bring the perspective of victims and bereaved into the parliamentary debate about the infamous Kunduz event of 4 September 2009, in which the *Bundeswehr* requested the bombing of two fuel trucks allegedly hijacked by Taliban fighters, which killed and injured numerous Afghan civilians.³¹ A journey by two MPs of the Left Party, accompanied by a Green Party MP, was explicitly framed as fact-finding trip aimed at juxtaposing the German government’s official version of the

incident with the stories of Afghan victims and bereaved about what had happened (Buchholz and van Aken 2010; Ströbele 2010). The journey and the personal stories gathered from the Afghan interlocutors only constituted a first step in a broader effort to challenge the official narrative about the Kunduz incident.³² During a parliamentary session, 50 Left Party MPs held up signs with the names and ages of the Afghan victims – a performance which violated the procedural rules of the *Bundestag* and for which the MPs were excluded from the session (Spiegel Online, 2010). Further activities included public talks, media interviews, an exhibition and a memorial ceremony on the day of the first anniversary of the bombings, at which the travelled MPs gave presentations making recourse to their on-site talks in Afghanistan.³³

The journey provided the material for this larger political effort in three ways. The MPs used personal stories of those affected by the bombings to substantiate and bring to life their overall message that Afghans are not primarily ‘potential Taliban’, but that ‘[t]hese are human beings, who die!’³⁴ Second, visual materials were used to personalise the events by ‘putting names and faces to the victims’. And, not least, the journey endowed the MPs with the expert authority to speak on behalf of the Afghan victims and bereaved, as no other MPs had taken the pains to access the Afghan side of the story.³⁵ Such ‘fact-finding’ journeys, however, are not less performed than the standard on-site visit.

Here the second crucial point arising from a social-constructivist understanding of authenticity comes in: ‘origins and traditions are themselves invented and constructed in terms of the context where one is and in terms of the needs of the present’, and this construction ‘involves power and hence a social process’, as Wang (1999) states referring to Hobsbawm and Ranger’s seminal work on the ‘invention of tradition’. The

quest for authentic insights into ‘the reality on the ground’ thus always involves struggles over interpretation. Such acts of interpretation can involve performance in the form of an on-site visit, which ‘walks the talk’ to enact the narrative. Critical MPs’ fact-finding journeys are acts of conscious purposeful performance in the context of such struggles over interpretations of interventions, their legitimacy and their (unintended) effects.

MPs and their different types of travels thus perform different functional roles in democratic policymaking, drawing on different scripts, props etc. to make their respective, partly clashing truth claims. These roles include most importantly the articulation of different interests, opinions and experiences in society; public claim-making (problematization); decision-taking regarding action/inaction on these claims (policy solutions); and scrutiny of and accountability for public action/inaction (Parkinson 2015, 21-25). Politicians’ official travels are one way among others of enacting one or several of these roles for peers in Berlin and for a broader German public. The specific symbolic effect of foreign travels is that they endow the traveller with a certain status of country/topic expertise: ‘The pressure to travel is relatively high, for if you talk about a country [...] the question is practically inevitable [...]: “So when was the last time that you’ve been to [xyz]?”’³⁶

That travels are a performed element of broader political struggles over interest articulation, claim-making, decision-making and scrutiny/accountability, and not just a functional mechanism to gather information and insight, becomes visible when studying how the fact of a journey and claims to authentic insights are used in the policy process. MPs engage in travel activity because they are aware of the power that credible claims to first-hand observations have in shaping policy narratives. As Koenigs (2014, 96,

emphasis added) notes, ‘I travel to Afghanistan once a year; I have to stay tuned after all, have to know how “the situation on the ground develops”, and *be able to tell what happened next.*’ This is echoed in another MP’s observation referring to the standard travel programmes that, ‘sometimes you think this is just an obligatory appointment and you are going to be bored, and then all of a sudden *you get told a fantastic story after all, which you can retell and circulate here* [in Germany].’³⁷ In this sense, official journeys are just one act in the play of intervention-related policymaking, whose specific meaning and function can only be understood in the broader context of the spectacle of democratic politics (Apter 2006; Reinelt and Rai 2015).

Conclusion

Official travels by politicians to post-/conflict spaces are multiple performances in a narrow sense of the term. Their highly staged nature is enabled and fostered by the temporal and spatial conditions and the practicalities of such on-site visits, but the latter are insufficient to explain their performative practice and political functions. Indeed, visitors and visited use official travels to enact roles and messages in broader struggles over the establishment/challenge of shared working definitions of German intervention politics and Germany as an intervention society (Daxner 2014).

The role of official foreign travels in these struggles over interest articulation, claim-making, decision-making and scrutiny/accountability is structured by the ontology and epistemology that dominates the field of policymaking. A positivist understanding of the world and how it can be accessed, closely linked to a need for

pragmatic decision-making, decide over the policy value of knowledge and expertise (Perera, in this issue), and this also applies to MPs' own information gathering 'on the ground'. The idea of a world that exists, and is accessible, independently of the beholder, whose interpretation constitutes only a second step after unfiltered information and authentic insight have been gathered, explains why the act of travelling is so central to MPs' status as country expert among their peers: on-site presence to assess 'the situation on the ground' enacts the fundamental ideas of objective information and authentic insight (cf. Bake and Zöhrer, in this issue). 'Truths' are unlikely to be heard unless they are performed within these dominant categories.³⁸

At the same time, however, the highly staged practice of on-site visits reveals the socially constructed nature of the categories of 'authenticity' and 'expertise': while both are real perceptions prevalent among MPs, they do not exist despite, but because of the performative side of on-site visits. Contrary to what the official objectivist-functional description of German MPs' foreign travel activity suggests, 'unfiltered information' and 'authentic insight' are not dependent upon the material genuineness of on-site encounters. Rather, travels constitute symbolic actions, in which on-site events and encounters are perceived as signs/symbols of 'authenticity' and 'unfiltered information' about a 'reality', which is in fact a projection of varied preconceived intervention imaginaries among the travellers. They see mostly what they believe already (rare counter-example: Bliesemann de Guevara 2016, 68-70).

This study has some important implications for scholarship on conflict knowledge and expertise. Most basically, it suggests that politicians/MPs need to be included in attempts to comprehensively study the field of conflict expertise. While the focus on practitioners in organisations that create knowledge and/or implement political

action is certainly justified given the sheer amount/range of such actors, MPs in donor/troop-sending states should not be overlooked: it is their decisions over policies, budgets and deployments, which frame practitioners' scope for action in the first place.

Second, while research is increasingly concerned with big data and evidence-based policymaking, these trends played a surprisingly small role in German MPs' reflections about their information sources, in which a lot of emphasis was put on the traditional values of 'seeing (and hearing) for oneself'. This may point to different roles practitioners (ministerial or agency staff) and politicians play: MPs enact publicly highly visible roles/messages and therefore have a stronger need for effective performance, with on-site visits offering much better opportunities for enactments of authenticity and expertise than abstract data and statistics. That said, the population of peacebuilding practitioners is indeed further differentiated depending on their degree of localisation, with 'international locals, i.e., individuals who have spent a long time in a country, perhaps have a local partner, and have built up extensive local—international networks, often in central positions of decision-making (Kostić in this issue).

In this sense, third, policymakers' on-site visits provide an interesting prism through which to question trends in studies about conflict knowledge/expertise worthwhile exploring further. This article suggests that it would be wrong to assume a knowledge hierarchy in global governance and international intervention, in which technocratic knowledge trumps local/country knowledge by default. While this may well be the case in many international work contexts, there seem to be arenas of policymaking (and perhaps also policy implementation), in which this hierarchy is reversed. Policymakers' enactment of, longing for, and appreciation of authentic

insights into ‘the situation on the ground’ and ‘country expertise’ certainly warrants a more nuanced approach to conflict knowledge and expertise.

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Notes

¹ Evidence from other western troop-sending/donor states suggests that their practices, purposes and effects of official travels are similar to the German case, hinting at broader implications of the findings/arguments presented in this article.

² These interview partners were chosen because they are commonly regarded as committed to and highly knowledgeable of German foreign and defence politics. They are therefore least likely to engage with such journeys in a superficial way.

³ This trip was undertaken before I became interested in political journeys as research topic; the field notes and own experiences nonetheless helped immensely to put later research into context.

⁴ ‘Der westliche Staat – ein sperriges Exportgut?’, Salon Junge Wissenschaft, Parlamentarische Gesellschaft Berlin, 16 June 2010.

⁵ ‘Ten Years After Srebrenica’, Greens/European Free Alliance Meeting, 10-11 July 2005, Sarajevo/Srebrenica.

⁶ Helmut Schmidt University Hamburg, 2010.

⁷ The Heinrich Böll Foundation is financed by the Green party and as such promotes “Green” values and politics at home and abroad (see <http://www.boell.de/en>). All major German parties have their own political foundations.

⁸ The political nature of the mundane everyday logistics of peacebuilding has been a topic, for instance, in feminist literature on peaceworkers and in peacebuilding literature of the ‘local’ and ‘everyday turn’.

⁹ Interviews with MPs, Berlin, June 2015.

¹⁰ German quotations have been translated by this author.

¹¹ This obviously overlooks the ‘politics of logistics’ (see previous section).

¹² MP Tom Koenigs (2014, 98) claims that, ‘The travel budget of the *Bundestag* is bigger than that of the Foreign Office.’ Due to a lack of accessible information about the Foreign Office’s travel budget this was not verifiable.

¹³ Information about these travel expenses is recorded by the parties, but not publically accessible.

¹⁴ The figures combine different travel types (by individuals, delegations etc.), regardless of the number of participants in each travel. It is safe to assume that the number of travelling individuals is many times higher than the number of travel events.

¹⁵ The striking peak of 51 official visits to Afghanistan in 2010-11, i.e., was caused by the London Conference on Afghanistan in 2010, where donors decided to increase the number of NATO soldiers, while simultaneously developing plans for a phased handover of responsibilities to the Afghan government and security forces (cf. Deutscher Bundestag 2011, 11, 33; Keul 2010; Koenigs 2011a, 2011b; Nachtwei 2010; Schäfer 2011; Ströbele 2011).

¹⁶ The UK equivalent to this are the House of Commons Select Committees, which engage in comparable travel activities.

¹⁷ Parliamentary groups are informal, loosely connected interest groups of representatives across party boundaries, who may engage in exchanges with similar groups from other countries. In 2015, there were

54 parliamentary groups registered, e.g. on ‘Arabic-speaking states of the Middle East’, ‘Eastern Africa’, ‘SADC states’ and a ‘German-South Asian parliamentary group’ (Deutscher Bundestag 2015, 22-30). The UK equivalent is All-Party Parliamentary Groups.

¹⁸ Equivalents can be found in other western troop-providing states, such as the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme organised by the UK Ministry of Defence, which aims to strengthen links between parliament and army.

¹⁹ Interviews with MPs, Berlin, June 2015.

²⁰ For example, a six-day journey of the heads of the Green Party and its parliamentary faction to Bosnia-Herzegovina in October 1996 led the politicians to Zagreb and Trogir (Croatia), as well as Mostar, Sarajevo, Tuzla and Banja Luka (Bosnia); it involved talks with a range of German and international officials (*Bundeswehr*, German embassies, OSCE, UNHCR, EU, etc.), Bosnian politicians, media and civil society representatives; and it included site visits such as a tour of the divided city of Mostar, a view over Sarajevo from a street in the district Grbavica, and a visit to a refugee settlement, among others (Nachtwei 1996, 5).

²¹ Interviews with *Bundeswehr* soldiers, Hamburg, 2011-12; participant observation, Rajlovac and Prizren, June 2004.

²² Since 2014, the memorials from field camps abroad are integrated into a ‘Forest of Remembrance’ in Germany after the end of the mission (see www.bundeswehr.de – search word ‘Wald der Erinnerung’).

²³ Interviews with *Bundeswehr* soldiers, Hamburg, 2011-12; participant observation, Rajlovac and Prizren, June 2004; analysis of MPs’ travel reports and programmes.

²⁴ Interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

²⁵ Participant observation of a mural tour, Belfast, January 2016.

²⁶ Interviews with MPs, Berlin, June 2015; analysis of MPs’ travel reports.

²⁷ Interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

²⁸ See previous note.

²⁹ See previous note: ‘The basic orientation I have developed is that in such crisis zones I look for areas of opportunity [...]. Because otherwise the visits to the capital were exasperating given the political developments [...], depressing [...], and the only thing through which one could cope with such a visit

then were encounters with people, with projects, with hospitals, with all sorts of people who even in the shit manage to do something positive.’

³⁰ Interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

³¹ The official NATO report first talked about ‘between 17 and 142 deaths’ (critical: Mettelsiefen and Reuter 2010).

³² Interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

³³ See www.linksfraction.de/fotostrecke/opfern-namen-gesicht-geben/ (accessed 15 April 2016).

³⁴ Interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

³⁵ Interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

³⁶ Interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015; cf. Bliesemann de Guevara (2016: 67).

³⁷ Interview with MP, Berlin, June 2015.

³⁸ The same can be observed among (some) conflict think tanks, who base their claims to expert authority on presence on the ground (Bliesemann de Guevara 2014b, 620-624)

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