

Does the Internet Deliver?

Eight Values as a Yardstick for the Production, Moderation and Regulation of Public Communication on the Internet

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Introduction

- 1/ Freedom or Control?
- 2/ Equality or Inequality?
- 3/ Gains or Losses in Diversity?
- 4/ Power Levelling or Power Concentration?
- 5/ Integration or Disintegration of the Public Sphere?
- 6/ High or Low Information Quality?
- 7/ High or Low Discourse Quality?
- 8/ Security or Vulnerability in the Network?

Introduction

IN SHORT

What Distinguishes the Following Analysis?

It takes a *communication science* standpoint. This study aims to contribute towards the transferring scientific knowledge and – as far as possible – presenting the relevant results in a succinct and comprehensible way. Critical discourse on the Internet, which above all takes place in journalistic media and in many places on the Internet itself, follows different rules from those of science. Theses presented there are not supported by scientific findings for the most part. In many respects, spectacular individual cases or quotations from whispering Silicon Valley visionaries must suffice to support generalisations, assessments and forecasts.

The abundance of scientific studies available on all conceivable aspects of the Internet, on the other hand, continues to attract too little attention. Hence, the following will emphasise the theoretical derivation of statements and their empirical validation. This does not always lead to simple and concisely presentable results. It is necessary to mention complex results, uncertain findings and gaps in research.

Nor is it the role of science to independently direct normative expectations at society.¹ But it can make societal valuations an object of research,² help to define and operationalise them more precisely, empirically measure whether societal expectations are met, and make recommendations on how they could be better met through production, moderation and regulation. Pre-assumptions about people, society and political communication in normative theories have to be consistent with reality, i. e. empirically proven.³ However, it cannot absolve practitioners, politicians and lawyers of the responsibility for reflective implementation. Evaluation criteria must be explicitly introduced and placed in a theoretical frame of reference.⁴

The *aim* is to assess public communication on the Internet as comprehensively as possible. Thus, we not only apply one evaluation standard, and it should also be possible to understand how the value judgements are formed. The societal expectations on public communication on the Internet will be defined through eight values.

What are the *limitations* of the study? The analysis primarily focuses on *public*, i. e. generally accessible, communication on the web. Other media and communication in the private sphere are largely disregarded. In addition, the study confines itself to *journalistic communication* upon

In order to answer questions about the production, moderation and regulation of public communication on the Internet in a theoretically profound manner, a normative orientation framework is required. Societal expectations must be theoretically justified and specified, and statements about their fulfilment should be empirically substantiated. That is the aim of this study. This analysis will also take account of the last two and a half decades, during which society gained experience with the Internet and learned what opportunities it offers and the risks entailed. Eight values are used as a yardstick to evaluate the state of the Internet. This is done based on empirical research regarding much debated topics such as free speech, digital divide, network power, propaganda, filter bubble, echo chamber, fake news, hate speech, cybercrime, and privacy. The following overview does not claim to be complete. However, it should elucidate the essential current empirical research. Its intention is to create an interface between science, practical design and normative regulation; the absence of which is a frequent subject of complaint.

which societal expectations are focused. The study is oriented towards the *public sphere*, where current news is disseminated and opinion formation on political issues takes place. The mediation and moderation of this public sphere is, at least in the traditional mass media, the domain of *journalism*.⁵

Values as Evaluation Standards for Media-Brokered, Public Communication

In order to assess public communication as envisaged here, standards must be defined substantively, to which there is the highest level of consent, and which can be given a theoretically sound foundation. *Values* are determined by an internal connection with the good; this connection is characterised by subjective evidence and affective intensity. Values are ethically and legally institutionalised as human rights above all. Only with fixed, sufficiently precise and consensus criteria for societal expectations can the performance of individual media providers or the public media as a whole be measured empirically. The British communication scientist Denis McQuail has derived the values freedom, truth, diversity, equality and solidarity as well as order and cohesion for media from normative theories.⁶ They do not lead to a closed system of values,⁷ and indeed even their meaning and classification varies. Nevertheless, these values can be exploited as fixed points in a normative analysis.

The following eight values are selected as benchmarks for media-brokered, public communication: *freedom, equality, diversity, distribution of power, integration, information quality, discourse quality and security*. They are assumed to be broadly uncontroversial, institutionalised and guaranteed in liberal-democratic media systems. Some of these values are important for society as a whole (freedom, equality, integration, diversity, distribution of power and security). The others, by contrast, relate primarily to the quality of public communication (quality of information and discourse).

The Relationship Between the Values and their Operationalisation

The *horizontal* relationship between the values can be considered definitively and causally. The mentioned values overlap in their meaning in some cases, and hence they are not always clearly defined. For example, the diversity of content could be added to the quality of information and discourse. In addition to the semantic relationship, their causal (influential) relationship must also be taken into account. To some extent, values promote the realisation of other values, but they also somewhat hinder their fulfilment. In particular, there is often a tension between freedoms on the one hand, and the values of equality, integration, diversity, distribution of power, security, quality of information and discourse on the other. Where the achievement of one objective may render it difficult to achieve another, it is important to find an appropriate balance and not to maximise the achievement of one value at the expense of another. In the liberal tradition, the value of “freedom” tends to be given priority in this balance of interests; with the media being given the other goals as a self-imposed duty in the spirit of a responsible approach to freedom.⁸ The relationship to the value “security” is of crucial importance.

From a *vertical* perspective, the question arises as to whether these overriding abstract values have been appropriately *operationalised* for achieving them in specific norms intended to guide action and measuring them in quality indicators. Are the standards for the design of services and regulation suitable for promoting the fulfilment of value? And are the right indi-

cators selected in quality studies when it comes to measuring value fulfilment? In addition, the question arises as to how values can be realised under different parameters. What conditions, for example, are created by traditional mass media and the Internet or various contexts within the network, e. g. the various social media? Since there are rarely only one, but rather several functionally equivalent ways of fulfilling value, this is also a question about the necessary creativity and innovation for finding suitable ways to achieve social goals in a new medium (such as the Internet). Notes on the justification and application of these values will be added and their degree of fulfilment assessed in the following sections.

- 1 On the value judgement dispute and the freedom of value of science see Dahrendorf (1968); Weber (1995[1919]).
- 2 Dahrendorf (1968: 82–83).
- 3 Kepplinger (2014) discusses a number of normative theories of political communication from these points of view, regarding extreme positions as unrealistic.
- 4 Althaus (2012) distinguishes between different levels of justification for evaluation criteria and calls for a theoretical frame of reference (at the fourth and highest level).
- 5 The present text is based on an earlier study published in German in 2018 and whose findings focused mainly, although not exclusively, on Germany.
- 6 McQuail's list of values varies slightly in his various publications: McQuail (1992: 65–80) distinguishes freedom, justice and equality, order and solidarity as values, and adds diversity (McQuail 1992: 141–181) and objectivity (McQuail 1992: 183–236) as further principles. McQuail (2003: 49–64) derives the following values from normative theories: truth, freedom, order and cohesion, solidarity and equality, and – somewhat vague and out of turn – correct purposes and responsibility. McQuail (2013: 54–72) mentions truth, freedom, equality, diversity, solidarity, order and cohesion. Christians et al (2009: 3–64) also summarise normative theories. Their central expectations are free and equal access to public debate, conflict resolution through deliberation and truth (Christians et al. 2009: 71–73). To discuss the question of which values can be decisive for media regulation see Lunt/Livingstone (2012: 10–15).
- 7 “What is offered is no more than one argued proposal for arranging the most frequently occurring normative terms and ideas in a single coherent structure of meaning. There is no implication, however, that this constitutes a closed or unified system of values. The most difficult task is to find an entry point: to identify the irreducible core, the most economical statement of key principles, from which other subprinciples can be derived or to which they can be related.” (McQuail 1992: 66–67)
- 8 McQuail (1992: 66, 2003: 72–73). This is expressed in the social responsibility model of the media, where weaknesses of the liberal model should be remedied (Siebert/Peterson/Schramm 1956: 83, 94).

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The Author

Christoph Neuberger is a full professor for communication science at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin and the executive director of the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society ('The German Internet Institute'), Berlin, which is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). Previously, he was a professor at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (2011–2019) and the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster (2002–2011). After his dissertation and habilitation at the Katholische Universität Eichstätt, he held a visiting professorship at the Universität Leipzig (2001/02). He is a regular member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities (BAdW) and the National Academy of Science and Engineering (acatech). He was awarded with several prizes, such as the Schelling Prize of the BAdW for outstanding scientific achievements (2016). His fields of research include the Internet public sphere, online journalism, activities of the press and broadcasting media on the Internet, search engines, social media, journalism theory, media quality, as well as media regulation.

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Contact:

Anna Hoffmann
International Media Programmes
European and International Cooperation
T +49 30 / 26 996-3388
anna.hoffmann@kas.de

Dr. Sören Soika
International Media Programmes
European and International Cooperation
T +49 30 / 26 996-3388
soeren.soika@kas.de

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