

Does the Internet Deliver?

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

0/ 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?

Gains or Losses in Diversity?

IN SHORT

The diversity of content on the Internet is not automatically guaranteed by the fact that there are hardly any technical barriers to participation in public communication. On the contrary, it must be assumed that there are a number of possible causes for a limited diversity of supply and use. Therefore, there is still the need for design and regulation to ensure diversity.

As opposed to the case of equality, which considers the opportunities of actors for participation, the focus here is on a special outcome, i. e. the diversity of media content.¹ Content diversity can be defined, justified and measured along several dimensions. For example, it is possible to look at the diversity of topics, opinions, actors and spaces that find their way into the public sphere.

The expectation of diversity relates to contents that find their way into the public domain. This input should then be the subject of real discussion.² Diversity is necessary for democratic opinion formation. In principle, any speaker³ should be able to participate in this, and no topic or opinion should be excluded from the start. The collective gain of knowledge has to emerge from the equal competition of different positions, in which only the rational persuasiveness of the arguments counts. No single position should dominate this process and be able to steer it in a particular direction. Lack of diversity means that some speakers, topics and opinions are excluded or unevenly represented. Diversity is often measured by the number of independent media providers and their market shares. In their research overview, however, Van Aelst et al.⁴ warn against excessively simple conclusions: an increase in the variety of offers does not necessarily lead to a greater *diversity* of content (*diversity paradox*⁵). Nor does a wider use of these possibilities follow directly from more diverse content.⁶ Here too there is a shortage of research and findings differ, however.⁷

Factors Reducing Diversity

The *optimistic view* says that in the case of the Internet, the diversity requirement is almost automatically fulfilled because everyone has unhindered access to the public. This means that all speakers, topics and opinions must be represented. This is opposed by the *pessimistic view*, which points to a number of factors on the network that reduce diversity:⁸

- › Interest in *expressing political views* online is limited among Internet users and unevenly distributed among different population groups.⁹ This calls into question the assumption that the diversity of content on the Internet is much greater than in the traditional mass media and that the content is a representative picture of issue preferences and opinions in a given society.

- › In addition, there is a strong *co-orientation between suppliers*. They observe each other and adopt each other's content. Blogs, for example, often adopt topics from professional journalistic providers. The Internet also facilitates monitoring between editorial offices. They are based on Google News, which bundles a large number of news offerings, and on leading media such as Spiegel Online. This enables users to keep abreast of the news situation and find out what influential editorial offices are writing. This also leads to a certain alignment of content.
- › Diversity is also reduced in journalistic *research* because editorial offices prefer to use the same search tools ("Googleization" of journalism¹⁰) and similar sources (e. g. Wikipedia).
- › The behaviour of users on their websites, which can be closely monitored by *audience monitoring*, is also transparent for the providers. The orientation to "click figures" results in adapting to the majority preference, which is also detrimental to variety.¹¹
- › This effect is self-reinforcing when *users* themselves learn what the most read posts are through rankings, and are encouraged to view them as well.¹²
- › The economic crisis in journalism is also reducing diversity. The proportion of contributions designed exclusively for a medium's own website has therefore remained low, while a high proportion continues to be taken over from the traditional parent medium in a cost effective way, and *reused*. There are therefore only a few new professional journalistic providers, which only publish on the Internet.

Content analyses demonstrate that there are no significant differences in the degree of diversity between the offers of press, broadcasting and the Internet. The websites of legacy media, especially public service broadcasters (PSB), contribute more to diversity on the Internet than online-only websites.¹³ Another study showed that German television news of PSB have a greater diversity online than on television.¹⁴

In addition, a clear distinction must be drawn between the diversity of offers – discussed so far – and the *diversity actually perceived*, especially in the case of the Internet. Only if the supply is also translated into diversity of use, will the users be broadly informed and exposed to different points of view.

- › In view of the *abundance of supply*, however, each user only perceives a fraction of the entire content. Whether they will seek all opinions represented on the Internet on a currently controversial topic, is highly questionable.
- › The possibility of *actively searching for content* on the Internet leads to *selective exposure*, which is guided more by one's own preferences for topics and opinions, than is the case with the traditional mass media.
- › In addition, users' preferences overlap to a large extent, resulting in a *concentration of attention* on a small number of services with correspondingly high reach.¹⁵
- › To discover something new, *search helps are available*. However, search engines such as Google also prefer pages that are already highly networked (*page rank*), and thus increase the concentration of attention.

- › While in the traditional mass media, press and radio reach is achieved through direct contact with an offer, content is dissipated on the Internet, e. g. as retweets, so that reach increases *indirectly and cumulatively*. Who can control the diffusion of information on the Internet as a network becomes a key question of power.¹⁶

Overall, it must therefore be assumed that the diversity of Internet offerings on the user side is only being partially exploited. Factors on the supply side also reduce diversity.

- 1 McQuail (1992: 141–181, 2013: 65–67).
- 2 On the term “diversity”, its justification and research see Rössler (2007); Zerback (2013); Jandura/Udris/Eisenegger (2019).
- 3 “Speakers” are understood here as representatives of particular interests of groups in society.
- 4 Van Aelst et al (2017: 10–12).
- 5 Van Aelst et al. (2017: 11; H. I. O.). See also Rössler (2007: 503–504).
- 6 Van Aelst et al. (2017: 11).
- 7 Van Aelst et al. (2017: 11–12).
- 8 Neuberger/Lobigs (2010: 34–35); Lobigs/Neuberger (2018: 46–49).
- 9 Lehman Schlozman/Verba/Brady (2010); Emmer/Vowe/Wolling (2011); Vonbun/Schönbach (2014); Puschmann/Bastos/Schmidt (2017); Hölig (2018).
- 10 Neuberger/Nuernbergk/Rischke (2009).
- 11 Blanchett Neheli (2018); Haim (2019).
- 12 Engelmann/Wendelin (2015).
- 13 Neuberger/Lobigs (2010: 97–125); Humprecht/Esser (2017).
- 14 Steiner/Magin/Stark (2019).
- 15 Hindman (2009: 90–91).
- 16 On the determination of power in and through networks see Castells (2009: 42–47); Nahon (2011).

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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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