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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High or Low Information Quality?

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IN SHORT

The technical potential for higher information quality is scarcely exploited on the Internet. Professional journalism – essentially due to the Internet – has fallen into an economic crisis. The ability to recover the cost of quality journalism is questionable, at least over the longer term. There is no prospect that amateurs (citizen journalists) can achieve a similarly high quality of information as professional journalistic editors. Here not only must the quality of the content be taken into consideration, but we must also ask how the users deal with it. There is still a preference for traditional mass media websites, and their quality is also highly valued. However, social media are gaining in importance for political information and news. Beyond the websites of well-known journalistic brands, users often lack contextual references, which makes quality judgments more difficult for them. In particular, the truth of the information disseminated in social media has become open to scrutiny.

The information quality of journalism can be measured using professional standards,[1] such as objectivity, newsworthiness, independence, background reporting and the separation of news and opinion. The objective is to inform the recipients as responsible citizens.[2]

The *optimistic view* is that the Internet will lead to better, multimedia and interactive journalism. Joshua Quittner[3] expected this in 1995 in a much acclaimed article in the online magazine "Hotwire". The weaknesses of the press and radio could thus be overcome by technology, he imagined.

Crisis of Professional Journalism, Hardly any Gain from Citizen Journalism

Today the *pessimistic counterthesis* is in the ascendant: professional journalism finds itself in an economic crisis. The quality of information will deteriorate – at least in the longer term, if websites can no longer be financed through old media – because professional journalism lacks a business model on the Internet.[4] On the one hand, readers and advertisers are migrating from the press to the Internet, and they are unable to win them back as customers willing to pay on the other. This is why the *shift in the use of news* is a cause for concern: from the traditional mass media to the *Internet* and then again to *social media*.[5] In particular, social media are able to fulfil expectations associated with the Internet for more participation and interaction in public communication. Yet, there is a lack of comprehensive quality assurance because it is possible to bypass the journalistic gatekeepers (*disintermediation*). The question of what contribution intermediaries should make to ensure the quality of information, is open and controversial.

Social media can be used by laypersons to create their own *citizen journalistic offers.*[6] Some authors consider citizen journalism to be as efficient as professional journalism: Chris Anderson,[7] former editor-in-chief of the magazine "Wired", claimed that "collectively blogs are proving more than equal to mainstream media". A polemical, much-quoted criticism of Web 2.0 and the idea that amateurs could be superior to experts and professional journalists as a whole, however, derives from Andrew Keen.[8] In his book "The Cult of the Amateur", he disputed that amateurs – even as a whole – have the expertise and understanding of trained journalists´ roles.

Even though studies show that bloggers and other lay communicators often see themselves as "journalists" and claim to align themselves with journalistic norms,[9] content analyses of offers

and the public's assessment tend to argue against the idea that social media report on a larger scale, but at a similarly high level to professional journalism. On the whole, it can therefore be assumed that there is not so much competition as a *complementary relationship.*[10]

While in professional journalism news production and quality assurance largely take place within the editorial department, in participatory journalism contributions are only reviewed and further elaborated *after* publication. What is more, they do not necessarily have to undergo a collective review (*wisdom of crowds*[11]) as a substitute for an editorial review. The conditions for participative journalism should – at least in the daily news area – be considered rather poor; time pressure and the rapid loss of topical value are unfavourable conditions for the regular collection, checking and presentation of news on a voluntary basis. Although "non-journalists" may possess specialist knowledge, journalistic competence and understanding of roles has to be acquired during training. Hence, laymen's offers are most likely to provide high quality special interest coverage.[12]

Few wide-ranging quality comparisons have been carried out to date. However, available studies confirm the assumption that professional services are superior to participatory ones.[13]

Quality from the Perspective of the Audience

To what extent is the audience on the Internet able to correctly assess the quality of offers and make differentiated judgements about them? The growing volume of supply and the juxtaposition of offerings with unclear or differing information quality, make it difficult for users to make appropriate assessments and selections.[14] Online blurs the boundaries between the scopes of the different standards; the *contexts collapse.*[15] Since the Internet is a hybrid medium offering an enormous variety of contexts. The same applies to hybrid formats (such as social media), and hybrid brands (such as Facebook). The medium, formats and brands therefore hardly provide metacommunicative indications of the quality of reporting. In the case of para- and pseudo-journalistic offers, from the user´s perspective it is often unclear whether they are based on journalistic standards.[16] This grey area around journalism includes, for example, citizen journalism, algorithmically controlled news (such as Google News) and offers that pursue particular interests and thereby imitate "journalism". This reception situation is further aggravated by *decontextualisation*:[17] contributions are often taken out of context, e. g. on search engine hit lists or recommendations in social media, so that metacommunicative references to the context of origin, such as the brand of the provider, are not available for supporting the assessment.

What is the consequence of the disorientation resulting from the lack of contextual references and the lack of quality transparency? Recipients either have to invest more effort than with traditional mass media in order to find out the identity of the offers, and how high their quality is. Or they simply develop an attitude of ignorance, in which they are indifferent to nuances in identity and quality (*news fatigue*[18]), and no longer specifically look for high-quality information.[19] A third possibility is to use professional journalistic Internet content whose identity and quality is already known. However, according to Wolfgang Schweiger,[20] there are various arguments in favour of a fourth possibility, namely a *knowledge illusion* where there is a difference between the subjective assessment of being well informed and a low level of information: "The use of Facebook and other SNS gives citizens the feeling of being well informed. Politically active citizens also increasingly turn to these news sources. However, this does not necessarily guarantee an increase in knowledge. Hence, the risk of pseudo-informedness increases with political

involvement. This risk is highest in the low-educated sector. With their limited media competence and occasional overloading with content, they are most likely to be subject to the danger of disinformation."[21]

In contrast, there are also studies demonstrating that the audience on the Internet still focuses on what is known and proven. Of course, users still clearly distinguish between the quality of professional journalistic offers and social media.[22] This is confirmed by the representative Digital News Survey 2018, according to which trust in digital-born media brands is lower than in traditional media brands.[23]

Truth on the Internet

The truth of the information disseminated is of central importance – a value whose recognition and observance, however, is currently being questioned ("fake news", "post-truth age"). The Internet enables information with uncertain, controversial or absent truth content to be broadly disseminated because there is no obligation for journalistic gatekeepers to verify published information. Andrew Rojecki and Sharon Meraz[24] distinguish between rumours, gossip, lies, propaganda and *factitious informational blends*, i. e. half-truths used in campaigns (as a form of *negative campaigning*) against political opponents, and already observed by the authors during the 2004 US presidential campaign. Political motivation is also behind fake news, such as the news distributed on the Internet during the Ukrainian conflict[25] and the US presidential election campaign of 2016.[26] There is increasing evidence that the propagandistic dissemination of false information on the Internet is intended to influence public opinion formation in democracies. The network also provides a favourable breeding ground for conspiracy theories.[27]

They are defined as speculative or false allegations of alleged secret actions by elites with significant harm to others.[28] Van Aelst et al.[29] see an increase in tendentious false information and half-truths on the Internet. Especially in echo chambers, where like-minded people stick together, the tendency to interact with different ideas of reality is low; the provision of information for refutation (*debunking*) has correspondingly little effect.[30] The confirmation of a common identity and shared political attitude takes precedence over the neutral search for truth. Schweiger[31] worries about a "vicious circle" in which users increasingly obtain knowledge from aggregators that rip news items out of context, and from alternative media that reinforce their existing opinion, but increasingly less from journalistic suppliers that provide a news overview. This reduces the competence to judge the quality of news and also the confidence in journalism, which in turn strengthens the aversion to it.[32]

1   McQuail (1992: 183–236, 2003: 68–70, 75–79, 2013: 57–61).

2   Kovach/Rosenstiel (2007).

3   Quittner (1995).

4   Alexander/Butler Breese/Luengo (2016); Newman et al. (2019: 10–11, 33–36).

5   Newman et al. (2017: 10); Lobigs/Neuberger (2018: 71–72).

6   Kim/Lowrey (2015).

7   Anderson (2006: 69).

8   Keen (2007).

9   Ji/Sheehy (2010); Zúñiga et al. (2011); Mortensen/Keshelashvili/Weir (2016: 371–372).

10 As a research overview see Engesser (2013: 53–104); Bosshart (2017: 180–227).

11 Surowiecki (2004).

12 According to a survey of 172 journalistic nonprofit Internet offerings in 2012, only 26 percent reported on general interest news (Mitchell et al. 2013: 6). The others dealt with specific topics or investigative research.

13 Engesser (2013) measured the quality of 112 German- and English-language offers from the field of participative journalism using 30 criteria. For this he combined a survey and a content analysis. However, he did not draw any comparison with professional journalistic websites. A cluster analysis revealed the three types "commercial playground", "local media mirror" and "exclusive topic page". The strengths of the participative-journalistic offers lie in the quality criteria argumentativeness, authenticity, legality and correctness, whereas weaknesses lie in equality, objectivity, publicity, relevance and transparency. Participatory journalism is characterised by a reference to oneself and to the direct world, positivism and the promotion of sympathy; the separation of news and opinion is neglected.

14 Schweiger (2017: 79–80).

15 Davis/Jurgenson (2014).

16 Neuberger (2012: 52).

17 Schweiger (2017: 80–81, 84–85).

18 Associated Press (2008: 37).

19 Neuberger (2012: 52).

20 Schweiger (2017: 172–173).

21 Schweiger (2017: 173). Translated from German.

22 Neuberger (2012); Lobigs/Neuberger (2018: 72–73).

23 Newman et al. (2018: 16–18, 41–43).

24 Rojecki/Meraz (2016: 28).

25 Khaldarova/Pantti (2016).

26 Barthel/Mitchell/Holcomb (2016); Allcott/Gentzkow (2017).

27 Zubiaga et al. (2016). "Conspiracy theory" is defined as a speculative or false allegation about secret actions by elites that result in significant damage to others (Sunstein/Vermeule 2009). Conspiracy theories find surprisingly high acceptance among the population in the USA (Allcott/Gentzkow 2017: 36) and Germany (Schultz et al. 2017: 256).

28 Sunstein/Vermeule (2009).

29 Van Aelst et al. (2017: 14–16).

30 Zollo et al. (2015); Del Vicario et al. (2016); Edy/Risley-Baird (2016); Shin et al. (2017).

31 Schweiger (2017: 111).

32 As news is increasingly drawn from the Internet and here again from social media, the question of how the audience interprets and assigns truth in this context becomes urgent (Marchi 2012).

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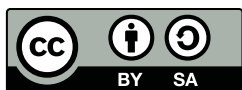
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