

The Fourth Power under Pressure

Journalists between political PR and web activities

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

Thank you for your invitation and the opportunity to talk to you about the risks and challenges journalism faces today in the digital world. The debates about the future of journalism and the role of mass media in the digital world are not new to anybody here in this room. Each and every one of us can witness the massive changes the digital revolution has begun to bring about. And if you wonder why I say “begun”: I am convinced that we have only seen just the beginning of that revolution. Sometimes I say that we may have seen the end of the beginning, but I am not too sure about that.

Journalists never had and probably never will have an easy job. That is probably the reason for so many interesting and exciting experiences every one of you could tell about, and it is probably the reason why so many of you are such interesting and exciting people. Journalists are a very special species, and, to state it from the very beginning, in my eyes they are not an endangered species. But, as in many other spheres or professions, only the fittest will survive. Therefore, the aim has to be to enable as many journalists as possible to be fit enough. In order to do that, we have to find out what is going on or what is going wrong. That is what this conference is all about, isn't it?

General developments

I don't believe that I can tell you anything new about the role journalists or generally the media play in modern democratic societies, not only when it comes to gathering and distributing news and information and shaping opinion, but also in recruiting and controlling processes of political power. Ultimately, people form opinion largely through the media, especially TV, newspapers and radio, in this order. This function of the media is exactly why they often are referred to as the fourth power. This is not new and was a common understanding of the role and function of mass media in the "pre-digital era." But now we have the worldwide web.

At a first glance, the worldwide web appears to be a win-win situation for communication in general and for journalism especially. Media companies receive a new distribution channel and users get new offers and, ultimately, the opportunity to become their own broadcaster. *Berthold Brecht's* radio theory seems to have come to pass because now everyone can finally share everything with everyone.

But this deserves a closer look. Yes, such tools do exist which everyone can use to publish to the world the topics and views he or she thinks to be important. And without a doubt this journalistic content contributes to the spread of news and information and helps to form opinion. But there is another aspect: These digital offers are changing our conventional media and thus, in the end, journalism. And the medium hit hardest is the newspaper. TV and radio have their own struggles with the new

developments caused by digitization, but so far they are still going strong, whereas many newspapers are fighting for their existence.

In my country, in Germany, print journalism is increasingly at risk - especially on the regional and local level. Since the turn of the century, daily newspapers have lost almost one-third of their paid circulation and more than one-fifth of their turnover. If the circulation numbers fall, advertising revenues decline. Sinking revenues in turn mean that less can be spent for or invested in journalists and their work. And this line continually points downwards. In consequence, regional and local papers, which are the weakest link, have to fight for their existence. They are merged with other papers, they have fewer editions, they are closed down. Today, in roughly 60 percent of all German districts and bigger cities there is only one local newspaper left. Consequently, the number of newspaper journalists has fallen by roughly 20 percent since the year 2000.

Under such circumstances, the opportunities for quality journalism in newspapers are not good, to say the least. Many users have come to believe that journalism online is for free, and maybe this mentality was not opposed strongly enough by publishers in the very beginning. As long as this mentality is not replaced by a greater willingness to pay for content, all business models that require money in exchange for content will erode. The way back – behind a paywall - is insecure for traditional publishers and for new online journalists alike.

In addition, the advertising market is reacting, too. Online advertising has a decisive advantage over advertising in print. The internet protocol makes it possible for every click on the worldwide web to create a data track. This is how user profiles can be obtained, and advertising campaigns can then be designed in such a way that their banners or ads only reach certain users. And so for instance online advertising from automotive manufacturers can reach those users whose online browsing reveals that they are interested in cars, that they might possibly belong to a certain socio-economic group or appear to be on the go a lot. This so-called behavioral targeting prevents wasted coverage and ensures that certain target groups can be addressed very effectively. Therefore, it is no wonder that more and more large media agencies are reallocating their advertising budgets. Even TV is getting into trouble as well with the advent of smart TV, i. e. the TV set connected to the internet.

Thus, from an economic perspective, conventional media are feeling the pressure from two sides, and it is a pressure with financial consequences: On the consumer market, new, free content is available in abundance via the net. And on the advertising market the online world offers less wasted coverage at lower prices. The result is less revenue for traditional media.

And this also effects the way how journalism works. Less revenue means less staff which in turn means a concentration of the work process. In addition to writing, journalists take on technical tasks like taking photos, audios and videos and editing them or operating content management systems. And on the content side, the fact that journalistic work has gone from the core tasks of researching and reporting, delivering opinion and analysing trends and developments to an industrial packaging of

content for as many sales channels as possible cannot be overlooked. There is increasingly less leeway and time for background information, to say nothing of investigative research.

Public Relations

If we follow the business logic of the internet economy, then content has to be acquired at the lowest possible price and marketed on as many value added segments as possible. What could make more sense than taking advantage of content that is accessible free of charge? I mean of course the output of PR agencies. They offer complete texts with photos, quotes and video material. And more and more newspapers see a way to ease their problems by taking advantage of such services. In radio and on TV, similar phenomena are occurring as well.

It is a pity that many papers as well as those broadcasters which are financed exclusively through advertizing, use pre-formulated or even perfectly ready-made and curated material from PR agencies. The reality of job cuts and time pressure makes it more and more tempting to use the prepared material without checking its content and, unfortunately, usually without indicating where the material comes from. Thus, the boundaries between editorial content and advertising, between serious news and PR are becoming blurred. In the past, there were strict rules to be followed, which didn't happen all the time and everywhere, but in the digital world, these rules seem to be forgotten too often.

In the US, five times as many people work in PR than in journalism and they earn roughly \$20,000 more a year than journalists. While the number of full-time journalists in the US has sunk by roughly one-fifth to roughly 40,000 in the last ten years, the number of jobs in PR agencies has risen by roughly one-fourth to more than 200,000. More and more freelance journalists are changing sides, many at least for a certain time. They argue that without a second mainstay it is no longer possible to make a living with conventional journalism.

But this is really not that problematic, the PR people often say. After all, journalists and PR experts really do the same thing and serve the same cause; ultimately, both groups inform the public, don't they? I personally don't accept this argument. If we want independent media and want to prevent targeted disinformation, we must not confuse interest-driven PR with journalism. Journalism aims for a verifiable presentation of reality from as many different sources as possible. This is not done by favoring an interest-driven perspective.

Even politics has long since realized that through PR the new media can be used effectively. This phenomenon, that politicians distribute their work and opinion through their own channels, poses another threat. Twitter, Facebook, Google Hangouts, Periscope or other such tools all try to circumvent the fourth power by trying to address the public directly. To a certain extent, this is nothing else but political advertising, which is ok, but there is the danger that journalism is increasingly losing its role

as an intermediary between politics and the general public. Collecting, checking, selecting, processing and distributing news are no longer merely reserved to conventional mass media and the journalists employed by them.

In our globalized, real time media society, politicians are focusing more and more on building their own image in the media in an effort to attract enough attention in the constant flow of news. Here, Facebook and Twitter play an important role. Just as the media are available anywhere and anytime so too can users (basically all the voters) be reached anytime and everywhere. It is the ubiquity of the net which is increasingly calling into question the role of the traditional media in political communication processes.

By the way, political PR professionals could also take advantage of the mechanisms of behavioral targeting. Today, many parties and politicians are aligning their programs pragmatically according to what has been previously established in surveys as the supposed will of the people. If, in future, parties align their campaigns specifically to voter profiles, which can be determined online, we have to brace ourselves for even more short-lived activism instead of sustainable political strategies.

User generated content and social media

The system of journalism is currently undergoing a huge structural change that has been triggered by the internet. I am talking about user generated content and the social media now. What used to be a rather passive journalistic online audience has now suddenly become a multitude of authors who research and write, evaluate and comment quite independently of professional journalism. On the one hand, this increases political participation. On the other hand, not everything that is published online measures up to journalistic criteria.

The roles of sender and recipient are no longer separated on the internet. Just how easy it is today for every citizen to become a broadcaster is evident with the video platform *YouNow*, which makes live streaming possible for everyone. And providers like *Periscope*, *Meerkat* or of late even *Facebook Live* allow direct video transmissions to everyone everywhere. For some, such user generated content is a new media philosophy, for others, merely a new business model where platform providers no longer have to pay money for expensive content, but at the same time earn money with advertising appearing right beside such offers. *Facebook* is a good example for this.

The problem here is that the most important currency in the fight for online clicks is attention. Everything has to be as eye-catching as possible to attract sufficient attention. There is a tendency to mimic the nature of tabloids and trivialize things, to personalize stars and to be scandalous; these

tendencies cannot be overlooked. It is self-evident that this user generated content attracts much attention which journalistic content has to compete with.

The offer has meanwhile become so extensive that some people lose their orientation in the cross-media information whirl. Almost all of the users are always online with a smartphone. This makes information more quickly accessible, and participation is also made easier. Online petitions and forums can be organized on specific topics; news and opinions can be posted, liked or shared. If things go well, citizens acquire new opportunities to be informed and participate. In this way, a counterbalance can arise to the published opinion that confronts the established media with the voice of the people. But what does this mean for journalism?

The internet makes it possible for journalists to contact users directly. To this end, online communities are useful as is the commentary function at the end of articles. These features allow for discourse and the identification of topics, research and access to expert knowledge. A study conducted on behalf of the Media Authority in North Rhine-Westphalia last year showed that many newspapers already place great importance on this user dialog. Of course, we all know that the recipients can only contribute selectively and sporadically to journalistic work. And so-called trolls use the commentary function at the end of online articles to polemicize or even for propaganda purposes, but nevertheless, there are opportunities user generated content and social media offer, which have to be taken into consideration when adapting to the online world.

Challenges and perspectives

The mystique of conventional media is fading. Despite or perhaps precisely because of the huge amount of information available, many readers, viewers and listeners no longer feel as informed as they would like to be. The relationship crisis between media makers and media consumers cannot be overlooked. Conspiracy theorists use the word *Lügenpresse* or 'lying press' and accuse conventional media of propaganda or at least of disinformation. Experts warn of a crisis of credibility in journalism.

And the journalists? Some of them are openly subjected to abusive criticism. The public image of the branch is declining. Journalists are already being reprimanded across the board by some as being willing supporters of dubious interests. In the contentious areas of economic interests and the normative functions of information transfer and opinion forming, journalism is increasingly coming under pressure.

In light of this crisis of credibility being currently experienced by the media, we cannot ignore the debate on quality. The criteria for journalistic quality are clear. They include balance and variety as well as credibility, conscientiousness and journalistic professionalism. Providing background information or contextual knowledge is becoming more important.

It isn't advisable in my view to be as sensational as possible with information in an effort to compete for attention. I don't think this sort of strategy will pay off because once credibility gets lost, so does

the audience in the long run. Instead, journalists should operate as pilots in the worldwide web, as honest brokers in public controversies and as initiators of sustainable debates on the fundamental values of our open society.

Up until now, digital journalism used the worldwide web primarily as an additional platform for content which came from the analog world. But the online dialog with the audience is not that advanced yet. And there are still not enough offers where users can network in forums or blogs or even be involved in the research of journalists. This is why new ways are urgently needed to involve the audience in the journalistic process of how articles and opinion pieces come about. Moreover, journalists have to be more eager to try new things when dealing with multimedia as well as show interactive research and narrative forms.

The web has numerous technical options at its disposal for discussion and collaboration. Those who want to safeguard the future of journalism in light of the digital upheavals have to take recipients seriously and let them participate in journalism, much like the British daily newspaper, *The Guardian* does already. In such a communication process readers, listeners, viewers, Internet users and journalists can benefit equally. Online participation is in my eyes the best tool against the feeling of media disenchantment. But for this to happen, the audience and media have to redefine their roles.

The future of journalism depends on how it can stand its ground on the internet. The key is high quality content, meaning contributions that are as exclusive as possible and that can be underscored with

facts that can be researched right away, online. No, I don't mean copying existing articles. I want news to be watertight and easily verified online by third parties. To this end, so-called data journalism offers an abundance of possibilities. But many journalists still lack the tools for handling publically accessible digital data. They lack the tools when it comes to collecting, analyzing and preparing this data in a journalistic way. Initial and ongoing training in this area is required.

Even so-called robot journalism, where algorithms automatically generate texts from datasets can help relieve journalists of routine tasks such as weather, stock exchange or traffic reports in order to free up more time for genuine journalistic tasks like research or reader dialog. What is lacking in much of the journalistic content is a clear context, background information and analysis. Without these, media users in the information era are going to be overnewsed but underinformed.

Conclusion

I come to my conclusion. As a part of our society, journalism has to operate more analytically, more courageously, opener and, above all, more understandably than ever before. Otherwise, the pressure which public relations and the online economy exert on journalism will increase. What is needed is more of a constant exchange with active users, who have to be treated not just as customers but also as partners in the digital communication process.

I also think that society or the public have to become more aware of the value of journalism. We desperately need affirmation from society, politics and business in favor of independent journalism, which has to offer information and context, commentary and control, platforms for debate and ways to participate. A society which does not enable or facilitate such quality journalism calls into question its democratic foundation. At the same time, this also means that quality journalism is not possible free of charge.

A society in which the social fragmentation and individualization of lifestyles increasingly questions common sense has to rely on public forums where political decisions can be discussed transparently. That is why quality journalism will remain so important in the future. The question of how it is delivered, on paper or electronically, is not crucial. Instead, it is a matter of enabling quality journalism, promoting it in the public's interest, protecting and preserving it, advancing it and making its value known and keeping it. With this in mind, I see the necessity of a political guarantee for the existence

and development of quality journalism. In order not to be misunderstood: I don't think this can be done by public funding, but by creating the right framework and the right atmosphere in an open society.

The future of journalism doesn't just depend on journalists and publishers alone, but also on users, on society, on the economy, on the political will to protect and support its basic necessity. We need a new understanding of its role and relevance as a fourth power. What we need is a new enlightenment about its importance for society. Let me quote a German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who in 1784 gave this definition of enlightenment: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-imposed if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another."

So it is resolution and courage what we need. I am not a prophet, on the contrary, I am a historian, but in my eyes, with resolution and courage the future of journalism as a fourth power in our society can be secured. What is needed is a public debate about this, a new enlightenment, and you are the ones to initiate or to continue this debate. You have the tools, the knowledge, the opportunities. In the digital world, the quality of professional journalism is needed more than ever.

Many thanks for your attention!