Can a million toothless tigers make a difference?

Potentials and pitfalls of web-based accountability processes in German journalism

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Summary

While trust in German journalism is being challenged by recurrent journalistic misbehavior, the necessity of a functioning media accountability landscape is more pressing than ever. In fact, the German media system offers a notable variety of self-regulatory instruments that aim at safeguarding the quality of journalistic reporting. Their effects, however, seem to be limited: The German Press Council is taunted as a "toothless tiger" because of its lack of sanctioning power; media journalism has to cope with its inevitable problems of self-referentiality; and accountability mechanisms on the level of the newsroom are only slowly gaining ground.

This report discusses the potentials and pitfalls of web-based accountability processes in German journalism. Can they complement traditional instruments of journalistic self-regulation and compensate their deficiencies? Can they accomplish a better involvement of civil society actors in the debate about journalistic quality? As an analysis of the current data on Internet usage in Germany shows, the conditions are quite favorable: The Internet has a rising significance in people's everyday life; however, the disposition to actively participate in the production of online contents is still low in most parts of the society – just as the willingness of many newsrooms to support user integration.

Qualitative expert interviews, which were conducted for this report, demonstrate that a considerable diversity of online practices fostering media accountability in Germany has been developing in recent years. Different case studies substantiate the assumption that the multitude of new voices, which is characteristic for the novel kind of media criticism in the Social Web, may well have a positive impact on practical journalism. At the same time, it becomes clear that recent innovations in media accountability are far from being a panacea for the deficits of traditional journalistic self-regulation. Particularly, the editorial handling of journalistic mistakes still leaves much room for improvements. The case of user comments on online news stories shows that web-based accountability processes may even lead to new ethical problems which have not been tackled systematically so far.

1.   Context factors in the development of web-based media accountability practices

1.1.   Media legitimacy

In normative theories, journalism is considered to be a "key profession" for modern democracy, a precondition for the creation of a public sphere, supposed to be bringing transparency into social relations (cf. e.g. Langenbucher 2003). However, social trust in journalistic performance seems to be frail in Germany. According to a survey by the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research, no more than 11 per cent of Germans have a high respect for journalism. On a scale with 17 different professions, journalists rank 13th, with only military officers, union leaders, politicians and book sellers gaining less public trust. The professions with the highest prestige are doctors, priests and professors (cf. Allensbacher Archiv, IfD-Umfrage 10015/2008[1]).

Similar results are produced by the market research institution GfK which has been measuring people's trust in different professional groups in 17 European countries and in the USA since 2003. According to the "GfK Trust Index 2010", firefighters, teachers and doctors enjoy the highest levels of trust, both in Germany and internationally, while journalists rank in the lowest quarter of the scale. From a comparative perspective, however, German journalists receive at least average ratings: While 42 per cent of the German respondents said they would trust journalists "very much" or "a little", only 21 per cent did so in the United Kingdom. Trust in the journalistic profession was highest in Portugal where it gained the confidence of 66 per cent of the respondents (cf. GfK Trust Index 2010[2]).

But these critical assessments do not take into account that journalistic performance may vary in different media types and publications. The study "Journalism 2009" by the Macromedia University for Media and Communication (MHMK) shows that trust in journalists is considerably higher if they work for public service television (cf. Table 1). In this representative survey among 1,000 German citizens, 69 per cent of the respondents believed the PSB corporations to be particularly trustworthy, while national and regional daily newspapers only gained the confidence of less than 50 per cent. The least trusted media types are online magazines (18 per cent) and private television (15 per cent). According to the same survey, the most respected German publications are the weeklies *Der Spiegel* (82 per cent) and *Die Zeit* (80 per cent) as well

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[1]   http://www.ifd-allensbach.de/pdf/prd_0802.pdf

[2]   http://www.gfk.com/imperia/md/content/presse/pressemeldungen2010/–100609_pm_trust_index_2010_efinal.pdf

as the daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (76 per cent); only 8 per cent of the respondents considered the tabloid *Bild* as trustworthy (cf. MHMK 2009[3]).

Table 1: Trust in different media types (%)

I particularly trust journalists from the following media…	
Public service television	69
Regional newspapers	46
National newspapers	42
Radio	37
Magazines	25
Internet	18
Private television	15

Source: MHMK 2009

What are the reasons for these discrepancies in public opinion towards German journalism? Wolfgang Donsbach and his team searched for possible explanations in a representative survey among 1,054 adults that was conducted between November 2007 and January 2008. They identified five main reasons that foster distrust in journalism and finally lead to a "disenchantment of the profession" (cf. Donsbach et al. 2009: 130ff.):

- the immoral journalist: German citizens feel that many journalists transgress ethical boundaries too often, for example in their coverage of victims, when they accept the suffering of relatives for commercial reasons.

- the powerful journalist: Journalists are considered as too powerful. Many citizens believe that they are even more influential than politicians.

- the commercialized journalist: Journalistic coverage is perceived as distorted because of economic pressures by PR departments and advertisers.

- the boulevardesque (tabloid, yellow) journalist: According to many citizens, the journalistic supply does not meet the demand. Instead of boulevard reporting, the audience wants more factual substance.

- the run-of-the-mill journalist: Many citizens are losing the ability to identify journalistic performance because of tendencies towards de-professionalization.

Similar arguments were also addressed by many of the German experts that were interviewed[4] for the MediaAcT project: "The German media have a credibility problem, because only a very small group of people still knows their function and their mode of operation", says Anton Sahlender, deputy editor-in-chief and readers' representative of the daily *Main-Post* (Würzburg).

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[3] http://www.martin-welker.de/wp/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/pm-studie-journalismus-2009_mw.pdf

[4] We like to thank Andreas Block, Janis Brinkmann and Andreas Sträter for their help in preparing and conducting the expert interviews.

The consequence is a negative image of journalists as a "band of paparazzi and a pack of lurid drools". This has damaged journalistic credibility.

Moreover, the German media themselves contributed to ruining the public image of journalism: The understanding of public service corporations and national dailies as "quality media" was devastating, because it suggested that other media were not able to live up to this quality claim. "This idea batters the reputation of journalism", Sahlender states.

But despite all the criticism, media journalist and blogger Ulrike Langer emphasizes that the credibility of German newspapers is still rather high, in comparison to other countries like the USA. "This is not the result of a higher newsroom transparency", she explains. "The main reason is the fact that the media structures are still more or less intact over here."

Nonetheless, all of the experts agree that a broad debate about quality in journalism is desperately needed in Germany. "There is a huge necessity to establish trust in journalism", media consultant and blogger Robin Meyer-Lucht says. Trust was not only a prerequisite for journalism to fulfill its normative functions. For the media companies, it was also commercially relevant, because it helped to establish brands and strengthen the bonds between media and audience.

However, "the societal discussion about quality in the media does not have a broad basis in our country", says Sigrun Müller-Gerbes, media journalist and member of the German Press Council. "There is a small academic minority with an interest in this topic, but most of the ordinary readers do not take part in the discussion." Müller-Gerbes claims: "The debate about journalistic quality should be kept alive in as many different places as possible. It is an important corrective. The discussion about media criticism is not an extravagance, but rather leads to a more serious examination of journalistic contents." Therefore, it should be supported by a multitude of different voices.

1.2. Media self-regulation and professionalism in journalism

As recent overviews demonstrate, the structures of the German media system offer many possibilities for the initiation of media accountability processes (for the following cf. Eberwein 2011). Among the traditional instruments of media self-regulation, the German Press Council[5] and its Code of Ethics[6] play a central role. Though often criticized as a "toothless tiger" with little or no sanctioning potential, the Press Council is the main catalyst for media-ethical debates in Germany. Its work has been focusing on print media for more than half a century, but since 2009, the Council's Complaints Committees are also paying attention to online publications,

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[5]   http://www.presserat.info/service/english/keyfacts-in-english.html
[6]   http://www.presserat.info/uploads/media/Press_Code.pdf

though they are not responsible for audiovisual media. With their Broadcasting Councils (*ARD*) and the *ZDF* Television Council, the public broadcasting corporations have established internal regulatory bodies whose members, however, are appointed by state actors. Even if these bodies fulfill, to some extent, tasks similar to those of the Press Council, they are not institutions of media self-regulation in the sense of vocational ethics. The same is true for the State Media Authorities which are responsible for the licensing and supervision of commercial radio and television broadcasting.

Besides, different self-regulatory mechanisms at the level of newsrooms are slowly gaining ground: While the *Main-Post*'s Anton Sahlender has been acting as the only serious ombudsman at a German news outlet for quite some time, several other dailies are now taking on this concept, trying to gain profit from the advantages it entails for the communication between journalists and audience. As an addition to the prevalent Press Code by the German Press Council and the less influential Media Code by the journalists' association *Netzwerk Recherche*[7], other media organizations are also adopting codes of ethics on the level of the newsroom – a practice that was rather uncommon in Germany until recently. A couple of new reader advisory councils are supposed to provide newsrooms with suggestions about neglected topics. Even the idea of a correction corner, which German media have disregarded for a long time, seems to have become more popular now, as current examples from the *tageszeitung* (taz) or the *Berliner Zeitung* illustrate.

Moreover, journalistic reporting about the media is of central importance for the public debate about journalistic performance, not only because it is a media accountability instrument itself, but also because it may serve as a multiplier for other instruments in their attempts to obtain public attention. Germany has a rich tradition of media-critical reporting, with authors like Heinrich Heine, Ferdinand von Lassalle, Theodor Lessing and Siegfried Kracauer as prominent antecedents of the discipline, which still prevails, offering users a broad range of media journalism in all types of publications, both offline and online.

Taken together, the variety of established media accountability instruments in Germany may serve as an indicator for a rather high degree of professionalism, which is characteristic for German journalism in an international comparison.

The problem is that public interest in issues of media self-regulation and accountability seems to remain at a low level, despite recurring critical interventions by interested minorities. Particularly the German Press Council has been in the focus of scientific debates again and again, its impact on practical journalism being severely under question (for a recent contribution to this debate cf. Pöttker 2010). The main argument is that the Press Council lacks publicity, which

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[7]   http://www.netzwerkrecherche.de/nr-Positionen--Positionen-des-netzwerk-recherche-/Medienkodex-des-netzwerk-recherche

would be a necessary precondition for giving authority to its demands to stick to professional journalistic standards. But this authority is undermined by the Council's failure to effectively communicate its decisions to a larger public – a failure that may also have structural causes: The members of the Complaints Committees traditionally come from the journalists' and publishers' associations, while representatives from the audience, from organized civil society groups or from the academic world have never been admitted. Consequently, the complaints procedures appear opaque to any outsider – a circumstance which, of course, challenges the Council's image and acceptance in the public sphere.

So far, there are no empirical studies on the reputation of the German Press Council among media users, but there is much evidence that most citizens do not know of its existence. Even within the journalistic profession, knowledge about the Council's aims and agenda is sparse. In a survey among members of the German Journalists' Union (DJV), less than half of the journalists were able to name the Press Council as an institution of journalistic self-regulation, dealing with issues of vocational ethics. Detailed knowledge about the codified "Guidelines for journalistic work", which are supposed to offer ethical orientation in the daily newsroom routine, hardly exists. A mere 6 per cent of the respondents were able to give an approximate number for the paragraphs the Code of Ethics contains and only 5 per cent could reproduce one of the Guidelines (cf. Fischer 2006).

Among those journalists with a more specific knowledge about the Press Council, critical assessments are not uncommon. As another journalist survey exemplifies, more than four fifths of the respondents consider the Council to be "important for the press", "expedient" and "competent"; however, more than 60 per cent have the impression that its influence on journalistic reporting is marginal and that its procedures remain obscure (cf. Reinemann 2010).

Some of these arguments resonate in the qualitative interviews conducted for the MediaAcT project. According to the German experts, however, the biggest problem of the established instruments of media self-regulation is their insufficient adaptation to prevailing Internet practices. "In the light of the Internet, traditional institutions like the Press Council appear to be out of date with regard to structure and procedures", argues Klaus Meier, professor for journalism studies at the Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. "Even the term 'Presserat' comes from an older world. Media Council would be a better name." According to Meier, the Internet offered many new possibilities to the Council, which were only used in 5 per cent of the cases. "The Press Council must practice more transparency and act publicly", he says.

"Anonymity is no longer acceptable in the Web 2.0 era", journalist and blogger Thomas Mrazek insists. The Council should "give chapter and verse. Cases should be discussed online. In Web 2.0, I want absolute transparency about mistakes. Anything else will only arouse suspicion. You cannot create trust like that."

Until now, the Press Council is far from embracing all of the promises of online communication. At least the organization has redesigned its website in 2009, offering users the opportunity to lodge their complaints online by using an online form. The number of complaints has firmly increased since then. "The processing is much faster; the barriers are much lower", Sigrun Müller-Gerbes explains. But despite the Council's enhanced competence to deal with complaints about online journalism, the type of complaints has not changed, she adds. "Most of the cases are concerned with too sensational representation and privacy violation of victims." Anyway, the biggest part of the complaints was still concerned with print media, as online content often derived from print publications, the so-called 'shovel ware'.

Nonetheless, several experts believe it to be useful if the Press Council adapted its Code of Ethics to online journalism. "Otherwise, many problems will simply be blanked out", Anton Sahlender says.

Other instruments of media accountability could also benefit from the principles of online communication – for example the ombudsman. "The Internet offers excellent possibilities in this context. There are considerable facilitations for the dialogue with the reader", Christoph Neuberger, professor at the Institute for Communication Studies and Media Research of the LMU Munich, is convinced, evoking the concept of a cyber ombudsman in the digital age. Klaus Meier also likes this idea: "Ombudsmen must publish their columns online and offer the possibility to comment on them and to discuss issues", he demands.

But from his own experiences as a readers' advocate, Anton Sahlender knows that the concept of ombudsmanship is far from being fully-fledged in Germany, as it does not have a long tradition. "What we need is a network where we can exchange ideas and arguments. But we do not have anything like that on the national level", Sahlender says. He knows that several regional newspapers are currently in the process of installing the post of an ombudsman. There has been a lot of interest in Sahlender's own work at the *Main-Post*, but so far the attempts to imitate his role have not been convincing. In Sahlender's opinion, a readers' representative must intermediate between readers and staff. He has the task to explain the editorial standards and guidelines and, doing so, contribute to the transparency of media. Maybe the Internet can be helpful in the process of striving to achieve this aim?

Generally, all experts acknowledge the potential of online communication to support media accountability practices. But before we analyze in detail the different facets of media accountability online, a cursory review of the research concerning Internet usage and current trends online journalism seems instrumental.

1.3. Internet user cultures

Internet usage in Germany continues to rise. According to the ARD/ZDF-Onlinestudie[8], an annual representative survey on German web usage, 49 million Germans from 14 years onwards used the Internet at least occasionally in 2010. This equates to a share of 69 per cent of the population. Compared to the previous year, the group of Internet users has increased by 5.5 million and 76 per cent of users are online daily (cf. van Eimeren/Frees 2010). In a European comparison, German Internet usage is well above the average, though not among the highest ranks, as the data from the most recent Eurostat survey show.[9]

Table 2: Internet users in Germany 2010 (at least occasional)

	Percentage
Overall	69.4
Sex	
Male	75.5
Female	63.5
Age	
14-19 years	100.0
20-29 years	98.4
30-39 years	89.9
40-49 years	81.9
50-59 years	68.9
60+ years	28.2

Source: van Eimeren/Frees 2010: 336

In Germany, Internet usage is most widespread in the group of adolescents up to 19 years of age, where everybody is online (cf. Table 2). Nine out of ten persons under 50 years of age use the Internet at least occasionally, while among those above 50 years of age, less than every second one is online. This means that the familiar gap between younger and older generations continues to be a characteristic feature, while the gender gap has decreased in recent years.

Despite rising Internet usage, the traditional electronic media maintain their dominant role in people's everyday life. Television and radio are still the prevailing media types, with an average usage duration between 244 and 187 minutes per day (cf. AGF/GfK, 1. half-year 2010; ma 2010/1). At the same time, Germans are online no longer than 77 minutes a day, according to the ARD/ZDF-Onlinestudie 2010. Apparently, the relationship between the Internet, TV and radio so far has a complementary character in Germany, rather than a competitive one (cf. van Eimeren/Frees 2010: 348). Only among the youngest media users are the proportions moving: Adolescents up to 19 years old are already spending more time online (110 minutes) than

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[8]   http://www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de
[9]   http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-QA-10-050/EN/KS-QA-10-050-EN.PDF

watching television (107 minutes) and listening to the radio (106 minutes) (cf. van Eimeren/Frees 2010: 348). In contrast, newspaper usage time is considerably lower, both in the overall population (23 minutes) and among teenagers and twenty year olds (10 minutes) (cf. van Eimeren/Ridder 2011).

What are the motives for Germans to go online? According to the ARD/ZDF-Onlinestudie 2010, most users want to "send and receive e-mails" (84 per cent) and to "use search engines" (83 per cent), at least once a week. Further prevailing practices are "searching for particular products" (47 per cent), "surfing on the Internet" (44 per cent), and "home banking" (33 per cent) (cf. van Eimeren/Frees 2010: 338). In contrast, the idea of actively contributing to the publication of online contents sparks little interest in German Internet users. Only 7 per cent find it "very interesting" to post texts or other materials on the Internet – even less than in the years before (cf. Busemann/Gscheidle 2010: 360). It seems that, after a short phase of experimentation with the Social Web in its various forms, the concept of active user participation is actually losing support.

Among the applications associated with the Social Web, private social networks and communities obtain the highest usage rates: 33 per cent of the German onliners utilize them at least once a week (cf. Table 3). Wikipedia and video platforms like YouTube enjoy a similar acceptance rate. Usage of all other participatory Internet applications is far less common: Professional social networks are regularly used by no more than 4 per cent of the Internet users, photo sharing sites and weblogs reach 2 per cent, link sharing sites and *Twitter* only 1 per cent. For all of these applications, it has to be noted that active contribution to the Social Web is rather an exception. This is particularly obvious in the case of Wikipedia, which 97 per cent of the users only visit in order to retrieve information, while no more than 3 per cent have ever published any data themselves. In the case of weblogs and *Twitter*, the gap between public attention and actual usage stands out: Although there are several German blogs which are believed to have a considerable influence on public opinion, general blog usage is rather low, and only a minority of 40 per cent of the blog users have ever published or commented on a posting. The number of activists running their own blog is even smaller: Only 11 per cent of the blog users are currently responsible for such a product and 29 per cent state that they operated a weblog in the past. Similarly, *Twitter* is another application which is predominantly used passively, that is in order to retrieve Tweets by other users. Only one third of the German *Twitter* users have ever published a message themselves, the majority remains inactive (cf. Busemann/Gscheidle 2010: 362ff.).

With the help of these data, Social Web users may be divided into different groups, along the dimensions "individual vs. public communication" and "creative vs. contemplative" (cf. Gerhards/Klingler/Trump 2008). The "entertainment seekers" and the "information seekers"

belong to rather passive groups and are each represented by almost one third of the Social Web users. The "communicators", which usually restrict themselves to comments on other web contents, make up another big category. Among the smallest groups are those with a high degree of activity, for example the "producers" or the "self-promoters".

Table 3: Usage rates of Web 2.0 applications in 2010 (%)

	Daily	*Weekly*	*Monthly*	*More infreq.*	*Never*
Private social networks and communities	17	16	4	2	61
Video portals (e.g. YouTube)	9	21	15	12	42
Wikipedia	6	25	27	16	27
Professional social networks and communities	1	3	2	1	93
Photo sharing, communities	0	2	6	11	81
Link sharing	0	1	1	1	98
Weblogs	0	2	2	3	93
Twitter	0	1	0	2	97

Source: Busemann/Gscheidle 2010: 362

The empirical data on Internet usage in Germany demonstrate that there is still a large gulf between potential and practice. This difference is also exemplified in the expert interviews by the MediaAcT project.

On the one hand, Web 2.0 instruments such as social networks, blogs and *Twitter* may be considered as new "anarchical" tools for ordinary people, as Thomas Mrazek puts it. "The Internet makes discussions easier and gives a voice to those who have not been heard before. The unknown individual can create a blog in two minutes and disseminate opinions with its help. During recent years, simple publishing techniques have reached a dimension that was never thought of before. These dynamics were unpredictable", Mrazek states.

On the other hand, the practical implementation of the undisputed potentials of online communication still seems to lack substance. "There is much room for improvements", Ulrike Langer says, adding rather skeptically: "I believe that this development will still take a long time in Germany." Compared to many other countries, particularly the Anglo-American ones, the opportunities of the Social Web have hardly reached any practical relevance in Germany. "It's no surprise that we don't have any German online innovations with a worldwide impact", Langer laments.

To sum up, it must still be noted that general Internet usage is rather high in Germany, compared to other European countries. The participatory potential of the Social Web, however, is far from unfolding its full power and leaves much to be desired. How does this situation affect the current developments in professional online journalism?

1.4. Trends in online journalism

Under the influence of the Internet, the identity of professional journalism has to assert itself against manifold challenges. In the course of the current media shift, new types of communication are becoming more important as generators of a topical public sphere (cf. Neuberger 2009): As the Internet tears down the barriers for publication, the impact of lay communication gains ground, enabling ordinary media users to 'disintermediate' journalistic gatekeepers. Profession and participation are accompanied by the technologization of public communication, in which interactions between human and machine add new possibilities to journalistic performance, for example in the selection of huge data volumes.

As a recent research project at the University of Münster demonstrates (cf. Neuberger/Nuernbergk/Rischke 2009a), the relationship between profession, participation and technologization may take on varying forms, such as competition (or substitution), complementarity and integration. What are the characteristic features of current German online journalism?

The participatory potentials of the Internet have led many enthusiasts to believe that traditional mainstream media could be replaced by a new network of web-based actors in which media users do not only receive, but actively contribute to the production of journalistic content (cf. e.g. Bucher/Büffel 2005). The debate about the role of non-journalistic bloggers – and the influence they might exert on professional journalism – was particularly vivid in recent years (cf. e.g. Neuberger/Nuernbergk/Rischke 2007). However, surveys among bloggers and journalists show that both groups clearly differ with regard to their aims and self-conception. Although many bloggers state that journalistic tasks like sharing knowledge and offering orientation are among their key motives for maintaining a blog, they also refer to other characteristics which dissociate them from professional journalism. For example, the prevalent criteria of news selection are largely irrelevant for the majority of bloggers, and many of them do not refrain from publishing unchecked facts or rumors (cf. Armborst 2006: 141ff.). At the same time, many online journalists are skeptical about the assumed benefits of the blogosphere. According to a survey by Christoph Neuberger et al. (2009b), a journalistic effort is attributed most notably to *Bildblog*, but most of the respondents do not believe that blogs can secure a certain quality standard by keeping watch on each other. Obviously, only some of the journalistic actors regard the blogosphere as a competitor. From their perspective, the real threat for professional journalism does not lurk in the audience market, but rather in the advertising market, as new advertising vehicles on the Internet put the established revenue models to the test.

How do professional online journalists integrate participatory and technical elements in their products? A content analysis by the Institute for Journalism at the TU Dortmund (cf. Sehl

2010) shows that German online news sites have adopted a considerable variety of web applications which can enhance journalism's communicative potentials. According to this study, the most wide-spread elements are online letters-to-the-editor, e-voting, online comments and bulletin boards. However, most newsrooms tend to reduce their users to the role of commentators on professional journalistic contents. Integrating user-generated content is an exemption until now. These findings are backed by the online journalist survey by Neuberger et al. (2009b) who conclude that users of journalistic products on the Internet have to content themselves with the same role that they already had in traditional mass media. They can only comment on those topics that the newsroom allows to them. Their possibilities to publish contents autonomously and to take part in editorial decision processes are severely restricted. Moreover, the editorial assistance of user participation is cautious at best. Taken together, Neuberger et al. get the impression "that the integration of the audience is still in a fledgling stage and needs to be developed" (Neuberger et al. 2009b: 292).

The predominant relationship between profession, participation and technologization seems to be characterized by complementarity. According to Neuberger et al. (2009b), participatory websites can be complementary to journalism when they serve as critics of professional journalists – or when they turn into a resonating chamber for user comments. Another example for a complementary connection is the practice of journalistic news-gathering on the Internet. Several studies have illustrated the paramount significance that search engines, particularly Google, have obtained for everyday newsroom work (cf. Machill/Beiler/Zenker 2008; Springer/Wolling 2008; Wyss/Keel 2008). Neuberger's survey among online journalists shows that sources from the Social Web are also gaining more prominence (cf. Neuberger/Nuernbergk/Rischke 2009c). Almost 100 per cent of the online newsrooms use Wikipedia as a source in news-gathering processes, mostly as a reference for background knowledge. Only 24 per cent of the newsrooms do not make use of weblogs, which are considered, first and foremost, to be a helpful tool for detecting new journalistic topics.

Although the integration of participatory elements into German online journalism is still fragmentary, these findings demonstrate that the new web-based types of public communication, which emerge in the course of the current media shift, can have an impact on the quality of journalistic performance. To what extent are they able to support the development of innovative media accountability processes? The expert interviews, which were conducted for the MediaAcT project, permit a first overview and systematization.

2. Web-based accountability practices initiated by the media

2.1. Actor transparency[10]

Actor transparency involves practices where media organizations offer contextual information about their ownership and ethical codes, as well as about the journalists producing the news stories. In German journalism, there are many practices that exemplify the potential of web-based actor transparency, although the proliferation of the different techniques strongly varies.

- Whereas bylines are a common feature of most journalistic publications, both offline and online, it is not yet a regular standard to offer a gallery with pictures and profiles of the newsroom members, as for instance *Zeit Online* does.[11]

- Public information on company ownership is available at several websites, as the case of the Spiegel Group illustrates,[12] but is not the norm; it usually requires more research with the help of the obligatory imprints to discover which companies stand behind a news publication.

- The application of ethical codes on the level of media organizations is still not widespread in Germany (cf. above), but if such a code exists, it is usually easily accessible, as the examples of the WAZ Media Group[13], Axel Springer[14] and the West German broadcaster WDR[15] demonstrate.

- One rare sample of a published mission statement can be found on the website of the *Financial Times Deutschland*.[16]

- Several newsrooms have adopted the practice of presenting themselves and their editorial decisions in a continuously updated blog, the most prominent example being the *Tagesschau-Blog[17]*, in which almost 40 writers from the newsroom of the main newscasts on the first German TV channel explain their editorial strategies (cf. Case 1).

All German experts that were interviewed for the MediaAcT project stress the importance of actor transparency in order to improve the public's trust in journalism. "The public in general

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[10] The typology of practices has been defined by the research team in the Work Package 4 of the MediaAcT project. We reproduce an excerpt of the definitions in each section, but the reader is invited to see the introductory document for this collection of country reports for more details.

[11] http://www.zeit.de/impressum/index

[12] http://www.spiegelgruppe.de/spiegelgruppe/home.nsf/Navigation/– 2B9246186F708D07C1256F5F00350C61?OpenDocument

[13] http://www.waz-mediengruppe.de/fileadmin/template/Inhalte/Downloads/PDF/– Aktuelles/Kodex.pdf

[14] http://www.axelspringer.de/artikel/Leitlinien-der-journalistischen-Unabhaengigkeit-bei-Axel-Springer_40856.html

[15] cf. epd medien 80/2008, pp. 29-31

[16] http://www.ftd.de/intern/zeitung/:mission-statement/1046.html

[17] http://blog.tagesschau.de

does not yet demand transparency, but the intellectual audience certainly does", Klaus Meier says. From his own research he knows that transparency can lead to a rise of trust. But the public still have to learn how to deal with transparency – just as most newsrooms in Germany are currently doing.

Transparency of authorship is an issue of particular importance to the experts. Especially online it was necessary to provide texts with names in order to be credible, Sigrun Müller-Gerbes states. "It is important for the users to be approachable as well. All big newspapers use their authors' names, instead of hiding their staff behind the big information flow. Especially online journalists should pride themselves on being providers of trust."

Thomas Mrazek also stresses the special potential of the Internet to promote actor transparency. "Online news sites do have the space and technical facilities to present the author of a news story. If these possibilities are used by editorial staffs, the trust of the public will increase", he says. For reasons of principle, readers wanted to know the author: Who is writing here? A journalistic biography provided transparency: "It is important for readers to see in detail what kind of professional background an author has, when he is reporting on a big economic scandal. Does he really have business acumen from his education or through other experiences?"

According to Robin Meyer-Lucht, "showing and naming authors is important for reasons of branding of a journalistic product. That will create a stronger bond between journalists and audience. The name of a paper is a brand and the name of a well-known editor a sub-brand." Naming the author was even more important in the case of longer texts. Meyer-Lucht observes a tendency of quality media to mention the full names of their editors in online articles as well, not only by abbreviations.

Christian Jakubetz, journalism educator and blogger, believes that actor transparency has now become totally normal: "Nowadays, every journalist must be candid about who he is, what he does and how he operates. This kind of transparency is a standard that journalists must put into practice and users ought to expect", Jakubetz says.

Despite these optimistic assessments, several experts are skeptical about the state of actor transparency in German media. This dimension of media accountability was not so well developed, Christoph Neuberger says. "Of course you can find pictures of single staff members, but further possibilities to realize newsroom transparency are just sparingly being used." As a positive example he refers to the *Tagesschau-Blog*, but that was an exception.

In addition, Ulrike Langer is critical about a narrow understanding of actor transparency. In her view, transparency of interests needed to be taken into consideration as well. "This is being put into practice in Anglo-American papers. In Germany, the *Financial Times Deutschland* does that, too", Langer says. For example, when interests of publishing companies were being

touched-on or when the publishing house or its publications were being reported on, then these interests needed to be made public. In Anglo-American journalism, readers could often find a disclaimer resolving the situation. "In Germany, this rarely happens", Langer states.

Dissociating herself from the other experts, Sigrun Müller-Gerbes doubts that the influence of online communication will resolve the current problems. The concept of editorial transparency had been debated for a long time now, as well as before the advent of the Internet. But: "There is no more media credibility now than in the pre-Internet era. It is a hard job for journalism to prove itself online and to create trust. It is a matter of media branding", she says. Of course, actor transparency was a helpful element in this process – but the related practices did not need to rely on the Internet solely.

2.2. *Production transparency*

Production transparency denotes practices where media organizations disclose to users information about their sources and the professional decisions made in the process of producing news. The Internet offers many possibilities to enhance production transparency: Hyperlinks can be used to indicate the journalist's sources; corrections columns, both offline and online, can help to highlight and explain journalistic mistakes; weblogs by individual journalists or newsrooms may be a useful means to shed light on editorial decision-making and production processes – as do *Twitter* and *Facebook* accounts; Wiki-like platforms may simplify collaborative news production and help to involve citizens in the processes of story writing. Does German journalism make use of these potentials?

A scrutiny of the current practices must come to ambivalent conclusions: Although there are best-practice examples for all of the above-mentioned approaches, they are far from becoming an undisputed professional standard.

- Of course, naming the sources for a news report is an accepted norm in German journalism, but only a few mainstream media use links to make original source material available – even though this practice has been prevailing on many net-native sites like *heise.de*[18] for a long time.
- The same tendency can be observed for the editorial handling of journalistic mistakes: Although some mainstream newspapers have adopted the practice of publishing a regular correction column in their print edition (cf. above), media-internal online forums for the discussion of minor and major errors are rare. If at all, most online media tend to correct

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[18] http://www.heise.de

their mistakes rather tacitly; a public display of editorial lapses – as in a recent blog posting on *taz.de*[19] – is an exception.

- Several link collections indicate that a multitude of media blogs have enriched the German media scene during recent years – both journalists' personal blogs and newsroom blogs.[20] Not all of them, however, discuss current issues regarding news production. But there are noteworthy cases: Among the personal blogs by journalistic actors, Stefan Niggemeier's site[21] stands out, offering not only regular doses of sharp media criticism, but also many insights into the development of his journalistic articles. In the category of editorial blogs, the *Tagesschau-Blog* is again the most prominent example (cf. Case 1), but other newsrooms are cultivating similar concepts, for instance the regional daily *Trierischer Volksfreund*[22], the weekly *Zeit*[23] or the web-radio channel *DRadio Wissen*[24].

- Microblogging[25] and social network accounts[26] are also becoming increasingly widespread with German news outlets. Most journalists and newsrooms use these accounts to promote their products, but there are also examples, in which these channels are employed for a reflection on the quality of editorial performance, as the *Twitter*[27] and *Facebook*[28] accounts by the *Main-Post* readers' representative Anton Sahlender may illustrate.

- In comparison to the other practices, strategies for collaborative story writing are most uncommon in German journalism; nonetheless, there are instances in which the potential of this approach is convincingly demonstrated, as in the case of *einestages*[29], a project by *Spiegel Online* where editors and readers alike contribute to the collection of eyewitness reports on issues from contemporary history.

The irregular implementation of online practices regarding production transparency is mirrored in the interviews by the MediaAcT project. The experts almost unanimously describe this dimension of media accountability as fundamentally important, but when asked to assess its current status in practical journalism, they lament notorious shortcomings concerning this matter.

This may be illustrated with regard to the question of transparency of sources, which all experts believe to be essential and a journalistic standard: "To me, a text is only reliable if sources are being mentioned – always considering source protection, of course", Sigrun Müller-

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[19]   http://blogs.taz.de/hausblog/2010/08/30/die-haeufigsten-fehler-der-taz-autoren
[20]   http://leanderwattig.de/wiki/index.php/Medienunternehmen:_Blogs
[21]   http://www.stefan-niggemeier.de/blog
[22]   http://blattkritik.blog.volksfreund.de
[23]   http://blog.zeit.de/zeitansage
[24]   http://blog.dradiowissen.de
[25]   http://leanderwattig.de/wiki/index.php/Medienunternehmen:_Microblogging
[26]   http://leanderwattig.de/wiki/index.php/Medienunternehmen:_Social-Network-Accounts
[27]   http://twitter.com/MP_Leseranwalt
[28]   http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000329465812
[29]   http://einestages.spiegel.de

Gerbes states. Anton Sahlender adds: "Especially in cases of critical reports a newsroom must show why the story has run this way. This openness underlines credibility as it makes clear that journalists try to be honest with their public. It is important to show the process of how journalists weigh the pros and cons in selecting and editing their stories."

This issue is not questioned by Ulrike Langer, but she points out that full production transparency is rarely put into practice in German online journalism. "We can find it in many texts on *Spiegel Online* and increasingly on *Zeit Online*. There the editors link to original documents and original sources. It is almost always possible to link to original sources, but German media usually do not do so." According to Langer, the reason was a certain kind of "portal thinking". Most media wanted visitors to stay on their own pages – and not to go outside or to competitors. This way of thinking should be replaced by media considering themselves as providers of good content and as competent guides to original documents, Langer demands.

Robin Meyer-Lucht also finds that most German journalists are still slightly afraid to link to external research data. As a compromise he suggests: "It might be best to provide links, but only below the text, so that it can be read from beginning to end."

Sigrun Müller-Gerbes recalls that it meant extra work for a newsroom to add links to a text. The editor had to consider whether he can take responsibility for the link and for the content of the site involved. "At my paper, the *Neue Westfälische*, reader comments are always published without links, as a matter of principle, because we are not able to check the content. A newsroom must be attentive not to give things away", Müller-Gerbes says.

So is the extra work really worth it? In the case of links as a means for creating production transparency, Klaus Meier adds a skeptical perspective. Until recently, he had also believed that links in online journalism would create trust. But a recent experiment showed that users did not value this as a priority. "Online journalism can lead to an increase of trust if names of and background information on the authors are being published", he says. At the same time, links were considered as less important (cf. Meier/Reimer 2010). However, this hypothesis still needed to be checked empirically.

Shortcomings in production transparency are particularly obvious with regard to the correction of journalistic mistakes. According to Anton Sahlender, public corrections are indispensable on the Internet, as mistakes can be rectified easier and more rapidly online. "Journalists have the damn duty to correct mistakes and to explain them to the public, even more so if it is a matter of essential modifications", he says – and sets a good example in his ombudsman column when he criticizes his own paper's reporting about ethnic minorities.[30]

However, most online newsrooms hardly ever pay attention to their own errors and mistakes, Thomas Mrazek criticizes and adds: "Obviously, transparency isn't valued very high

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[30]   http://www.mainpost.de/specials/leseranwalt.artikel/art18771,5966348

here." Ulrike Langer has a similar impression: "In Anglo-American quality papers and magazines, as well as in their online versions, every mistake is carefully mentioned. This does not happen in Germany." According to Langer, a possible reason might be vanity: "Journalists consider themselves to be in a more prominent expert position than the readers: We explain the world to you. In this frame of mind it is impossible for journalists to be liable to errors. Often journalists are not the real experts in certain fields and in every detail. In those cases, they should gratefully accept legitimate criticism and publicly thank for that. By correcting mistakes, quality and credibility will improve", Langer states.

The significance of transparent corrections is emphasized by Sigrun Müller-Gerbes: "A correction online is a means for sending a signal to the users: We are taking this seriously." This was also taken into consideration in the Press Council's complaints procedures: "If a correction is published immediately, no sanction will be imposed", Müller-Gerbes explains.

Research has also substantiated that a discussion of mistakes in editorial weblogs may have a positive influence on journalistic quality. According to a study by Kristina Wied and Jan Schmidt, newsroom blogs were particularly effective because the publicity of their debates would trigger a degree of pressure in the journalistic actors to act accordingly (cf. Wied/Schmidt 2008). In the newsrooms Wied and Schmidt analyzed for their case study, editorial blogs were not only introduced to encourage self-reflection and transparency, but also to integrate users into news production processes by inviting them to contribute topics and external expertise – sometimes with remarkable success.

Case 1: Tagesschau-Blog

The *Tagesschau-Blog* is Germany's best-known editorial blog. It was started on August 8th, 2006, by the newsroom *ARD-aktuell*, which is responsible for the main newscasts "Tagesschau" and "Tagesthemen" of the first German TV channel. Since its launch, almost 40 authors from this newsroom have contributed to the blog, among them the editor-in-chief, Dr. Kai Gniffke, and the deputy editor-in-chief, Thomas Hinrichs.

According to a recent empirical study (cf. Theis-Berglmair 2009), different motives led to the blog's creation. The editorial staff wanted to convey insights into newsroom work and explain how the newscasts are being produced; moreover, it desired to foster user feedback and participation. Thus, the *Tagesschau-Blog* may be considered as an innovative media-internal accountability instrument which comprises the three dimensions of actor transparency, production transparency and responsiveness.

Theis-Berglmair's analysis shows that these different dimensions are also reflected in the editors' postings. Although a majority of the entries offers nothing but commentary on current news topics, many postings clearly describe the editorial self-conception and reflect on news decisions. In several cases, the intensity of user reactions reaches a considerable extent, as for example the lively feedback on Gniffke's posting "May we display executions?" from January 2nd, 2007, in which he debates the journalistic treatment of Saddam Hussein's death.

Theis-Berglmair understands the blog's efforts to justify editorial decisions as a kind of public relations measure, which is sometimes criticized by users as 'self-adulation'. This perspective is supported by the recurring references to the newsroom's self-conception and profile, which can be found in the postings by the editors-in-chief. However, the study leaves open the issue as to whether the *Tagesschau-Blog* is actually able to impact on the quality of journalistic coverage.

2.3. *Responsiveness*

"Responsiveness" may be regarded as a third dimension of web-based accountability initiated by the media, comprising all practices that enable the public to send feedback to a media company and obtain a response from the newsroom. Some of these techniques derive from well-known offline practices: a news ombudsman may make use of the Internet to converse with their audience, for example by publishing an online column, which users can comment on; the traditional format of the letter-to-the-editor may be substituted by e-mails or by web-based contact forms, making it less costly for the user to transmit his feedback; the easiest way for a user to communicate with the newsroom is to issue a comment directly under the respective journalistic text. Besides, there are several new instruments which are unique to the Internet: Newsrooms establish editorial weblogs as a means to address the public and generate feedback – or they allow users to open their own blogs under the brand of a journalistic news site; *Twitter* may also serve as an expedient tool for exchange between journalists and audience; the communicative potential of social networks like *Facebook* offers even further possibilities.

An analysis of the responsiveness of German online journalists shows that there is – especially thanks to the diffusion of the Social Web – a growing variety of web-based instruments which can be used as a feedback channel for the public. However, not all of these instruments have developed into stable media accountability practices so far, and in many instances their impact on practical journalism remains unclear.

- As noted above, the role of the ombudsman is still not prevalent in the German media system – and among those ombudspersons that do exist, not everyone uses a regular online column or other web-based instruments to invoke public feedback. However, besides the omnipresent Anton Sahlender (cf. above), the daily *Frankfurter Rundschau* offers a notable best-practice example: Under the pseudonym "Bronski" an editor acts as online ombudsman, publishes and discusses reader mailings in his *FR-Blog*[31] and mediates with the newsroom – a singular occurrence in German journalism.

- Basically every respectable news site provides e-mail addresses or a contact form for direct feedback to the newsroom; however, there are not too many mainstream media that directly link their articles to the authors' e-mail address, as for example *Spiegel Online* does.[32]

- Direct comments on single news stories are also a standard on most journalistic websites – and in many cases the quantity of contributions is overwhelming, at least on those sites with large readerships. The weekly magazine *Stern*[33] felt so overburdened by the flood of comments (and their often poor quality) that it deactivated the comment function on its website in 2010, inviting users to discuss the newest articles on their *Facebook* site[34] instead (cf. Case 2).

- Buttons which users can click on to report errors in news stories are not a common feature in German journalism; an invitation like "Reporting errors without registration", to be found on the editorial watch-blog by the daily *Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine*[35], is a rare exception.

- Most German editorial weblogs are also used to generate user feedback, but the intensity of responses is sometimes poor. Several media also motivate users to publish a personal weblog on their website: The daily *Trierischer Volksfreund* was among the first German newspapers to integrate audience blogs into its community;[36] a similar concept has been adopted by *DerWesten*, a regional online news site by the WAZ Media Group.[37]

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[31] http://www.frblog.de
[32] http://www.spiegel.de
[33] http://www.stern.de
[34] http://www.facebook.de/stern
[35] http://www.hnawatch.de
[36] http://blog.volksfreund.de
[37] http://www.derwesten.de/nachrichten/weblogs

- It has already been stated that the significance of *Twitter* and *Facebook* for German online media is growing (cf. above). This trend also attracts user input. As recent rankings show, *Spiegel Online*[38], *heise.de*[39] and *Welt Online*[40] are the news sites with the most incoming links by *Twitter* users;[41] *Spiegel Online*[42], *Bild*[43] and the monthly magazine *Neon*[44] are examples for mainstream media with high numbers of fans on *Facebook*.[45]

In the interviews by the MediaAcT project, the state of responsiveness in German journalism was also a topic of concern. But although there was a consensus that new web-based instruments offered many new impulses to user participation, the experts disagreed on the extent they actually had a positive influence on the quality of journalistic performance.

Klaus Meier states that he observed a general trend towards "process journalism". Journalistic texts were no longer considered as finalized products, but rather as works-in-progress. "When a journalist receives feedback from outside the newsroom, this leads to an improvement of the product. In 'process journalism' the contents are developed in cooperation with the audience", he says.

Christian Jakubetz complements this perspective with his personal experiences. The possibility to comment on a report or to send an e-mail to the author was absolutely advisable, as his own work for *Bildblog* showed. Users often provided important information for follow-ups. Moreover, the credibility of a story increased when users were offered the possibility to react to it. "We quickly noticed that it is profitable for a site like *Bildblog* if people realize that there is a person behind each story who communicates with the public", he says.

But Jakubetz also had negative experiences with user feedback. An ironical text, which he had once written for a trade journal, led to fierce criticism by the whole online community, he recounts. After an article by the renowned media journalist Stefan Niggemeier "the whole Niggemeier pack had a go at me. Within one day, more than 200 comments were filed under my text. There you can see how fast users jump on the bandwagon if it is kicked loose by an a-blogger like Niggemeier. The persons concerned are hardly able to defend themselves in cases like these", Jakubetz says. He quotes another a-blogger, Sascha Lobo: "Niggemeier could carve runes into an oak on the outskirts of Leipzig – the people would be enthusiastic just the same."

Sigrun Müller-Gerbes also constrains her judgment: "Of course, a newspaper must be responsive, offline and online, but the editorial staff must still have the time to do their job. If a

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[38] http://twitter.com/SPIEGEL_Top
[39] http://twitter.com/heiseonline
[40] http://twitter.com/weltonline
[41] http://www.deutschetwittercharts.de
[42] http://www.facebook.com/spiegelonline
[43] http://www.facebook.com/bild
[44] http://www.facebook.com/neonmagazin
[45] http://leanderwattig.de/wiki/index.php/Ranking:_Medien-Marken_bei_Facebook_–_nach_Anzahl_der_Fans

reader sends us an e-mail, we have to react – that's for sure. But not every anonymous comment deserves a response", she argues.

Similarly, Robin Meyer-Lucht asserts that it was important for journalists to communicate with the public, but for him it was also important to have time for research. "You have to calculate what is more important: dialogue or research? In the end it is a matter of having a sound balance between investments and profits, especially in online journalism", Meyer-Lucht says, adding that "sometimes journalists simply don't have the possibility to reply to comments, certainly not in case of more than a thousand comments on one text."

Thomas Mrazek also finds that responsiveness was good, "but not for every journalist. Colleagues who work in the area of investigative journalism are not able to open up their files and reveal their sources", he says. But if a newsroom offered the opportunity to get in touch with journalists, it had to reply to comments. If it didn't, the offer was nothing but a "pseudo-opportunity".

For Anton Sahlender, the disadvantages of online feedback even outweigh the advantages. "The Internet has strongly influenced the debate culture, but it has rather led to a growing quantity and a declining quality of discussions. Debates are more numerous, but in many cases more impertinent", he says. This trend was particularly observable in bulletin boards or online comments. "The people leave the facts behind very quickly, they create allegedly new facts and in the end they let loose on each other." On the other hand the Internet contributed to gathering an authentic impression of public opinion: "You get to know people who wouldn't give notice otherwise." In order to secure basic quality standards, Sahlender is against the use of nicknames in online discussions: "We have to get back to real names. The standards that apply to journalists, who vouch for their articles with their names, must also be applied to commenting readers", he pleads. "In a democratic society, everybody must be able to discuss on par with others under his own name."

Ulrike Langer's criticism points towards another direction: "Most of the journalists have not yet learned how to deal with online comments", she argues. Consequently, the general state of responsiveness in German online journalism was badly developed. A positive exception was *Zeit Online* where journalistic texts have been produced on the basis of user comments and Tweets. Klaus Meier reports on similar practices in the newsroom of *DerWesten*.

But, as Meier adds, it is not always the journalists' fault if communication with the readership does not work. He recalls that the *Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine* had launched a watch-blog to invite readers to criticize the daily editions of the newspaper. A good idea – but "the experiences are disillusioning", Meier says. The blog can be found under a separate URL; consequently, the postings receive little attention and feedback is scarce. But generally, Meier regards blogs by editorial staffs as a positive achievement. "When newsrooms

enter the public sphere, nothing can be disguised. This improves their responsibility and their awareness of being a public organization, having to give account to the public. Online accountability leads to more justification", he states.

For Christoph Neuberger, the Social Web is of particular interest. From his own research he knows that "*Twitter* and *Facebook* have become a standard in German news journalism". According to a recent survey among the editors-in-chief of German online news sites (cf. Neuberger/vom Hofe/Nuernbergk 2010), only 3 per cent of the newsrooms do not use *Twitter*. The main reason for journalists to integrate *Twitter* into their website is to attract more readers and direct their attention towards the journalistic product. Two thirds of the newsrooms also use *Twitter* in order to interact with their readers – and they seem to benefit from this practice: In Neuberger's survey, the editors-in-chief reported that user Tweets had helped them to find out about certain events and topics that needed to be covered; they had also received ideas for news headlines and reports on errors. So far, however, little was known about the quality of this interaction and how it actually influenced the standard of journalism, Neuberger says.

The same is true for *Facebook*. "Most traditional media have developed a liking for *Facebook* buttons", Ulrike Langer says. "First and foremost, they want to attract younger audiences and expand their reach with them." Additionally, *Facebook* – just like *Twitter* – functioned as a "link slinger": "Links on *Facebook* generate traffic", Langer knows. She is skeptical, however, whether it will help German newsrooms to improve their dialogue with users: "If you really want dialogue then this needs to be supervised, but German newsrooms don't have sufficient staff for this."

In spite of this, Robin Meyer-Lucht thinks that a discussion on the Social Web will only be lively in the case of resonant, emotional topics. "Not every topic is suited for a debate. A complex issue like the financial crisis is much harder to comment on than a light and foamy topic on which every person has an opinion", he explains.

To clarify these suppositions, more empirical research is necessary, Christoph Neuberger points out – a claim that is also backed by Klaus Meier. The dimension of editorial responsiveness was particularly hard to measure, he states. "It is a matter of doing case studies." For communication studies, much remains to be done.

Case 2: Online comments

User comments on journalistic texts are an important indicator of the responsiveness of online journalism and may thus be regarded as a prerequisite for accountable reporting (cf. above). However, they can transmute into an ethical dilemma if they contain misleading facts or violate people's dignity.

Since 2009, when the German Press Council expanded its responsibility to journalistic online publications, the Council's Complaints Committees have been forced to deal with several cases in which readers had complained about user comments as being morally inappropriate (cf. Eberwein 2010b). At first, these complaints were a cause of uncertainty for the Press Council, because its Code of Ethics does not contain any guidelines on the handling of online comments. The underlying question was whether an organization of journalistic self-regulation should take pains to investigate these cases at all. In September 2010, however, the Press Council issued a statement in which it declared that it considered itself responsible for the monitoring of online comments only if they are published on "moderated forums" which are pre-checked by a journalistic newsroom. All other comments are excluded from the Council's jurisdiction.

Conversely, this means that a newsroom can evade sanctions by the Press Council if it abandons its comment section to an external site like *Facebook*, as was practiced by *stern.de*. A new trend?

3.   Web-based accountability practices outside the media

Besides the numerous practices of media accountability that the Internet has helped to introduce to German newsrooms, many other online initiatives for critical media observation have emerged in recent years. Among them, the group of media blogs stands out.

Germany has a very lively media blogosphere, with *Bildblog*[46] being the most influential example of a critical media watch site. Although it was founded as a watch-blog to examine the coverage of the notorious tabloid *Bild*, it has by now widened its focus and observes other media, too (cf. Case 3). Besides, there are many more blogs with a similar mission: *SpiegelKritik*[47] is keeping watch over the weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel*; the *ostsee-zeitung-blog*[48] focuses exclusively on the regional daily *Ostsee-Zeitung*. Other blogs restrict themselves to specific topics, for example, sports journalism (*allesaussersport*[49]) or TV entertainment (*TVBlogger.de*[50]). Moreover, a multitude of citizen blogs offer sharp media criticism on an irregular basis, for example the *Pottblog*[51], a long-lived weblog from the Ruhr Area that is known for its poignant comments on the regional newspaper companies, particularly the WAZ Group. All of the latter blogs share the common characteristic that they are far from reaching the share of readers that *Bildblog* is able to attract.

In German-speaking countries, the emergence of media blogs has triggered a notable scientific interest in this specific subgenre of the blogosphere and its relationship to mainstream journalism. A recent content analysis suggests that media watch-blogs may even have a higher journalistic quality than traditional journalism, especially with regard to topicality, variety, comprehensibility, entertainment value, interactivity and hypermediality (cf. Hutter 2009). Other studies point out that media criticism in blogs may be a potent means for monitoring the contents and form of journalistic coverage, especially in the area of tabloid journalism (cf. Schönherr 2008), and that users of media watch-blogs may be motivated to reflect on criteria for 'good journalism' (cf. Mayer et al. 2008). However, a comparison with the United States exemplifies that the German media blogosphere is still underdeveloped, particularly with regards to a lack of sustainable business models and possible schemes for self-regulation (cf. Fengler 2008). This critical assessment is backed by another content analysis (cf. Eberwein 2010a), which demonstrates that a key feature of many German-language media blogs is a lack of continuity in their reporting. Whereas a large quantity of their posts directly relates to news

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[46]   http://www.bildblog.de
[47]   http://spiegelkritik.de
[48]   http://ostsee-zeitung-blog.blogspot.com
[49]   http://www.allesaussersport.de
[50]   http://www.tvblogger.de
[51]   http://www.pottblog.de

gathered by mainstream media journalists, the variety of their topics is even more limited than that of the media pages in the daily press.

Similar discrepancies were also displayed in the MediaAcT expert interviews. On the one hand, the interviewees highlighted the rich potential which media watch-blogs may entail for the quality of journalism and media accountability; on the other hand, they also criticized the bloggers' performance. Concerning the assumed effects on journalistic actors, there was disagreement among the experts.

"Watch-blogs are an important corrective in German journalism", Thomas Mrazek says. According to his observations, the national media blogosphere is well endowed. "From the big *Bildblog* to the *ostsee-zeitung-blog*, there are many good sites on different levels", he states. Taken together, about 40 regularly updated blogs were monitoring the media in Germany.

Christoph Neuberger points out that media watch-blogs are particularly important in Germany, because the national blogosphere is very focused on media. "Most of the topics that German blogs and watch-blogs report on originate from the traditional media. Media topics, but also the media companies' performance, are big issues, particularly in the area of entertainment", he explains.

According to Neuberger, it is no surprise that *Bildblog* is one of Germany's most-favored blogs, "because the tabloid *Bild* has always been a target". The special thing about *Bildblog* was its dependence on user feedback: Most of its topics resulted from comments and replies by readers, Neuberger says (cf. above). *Bildblog*, thus, may serve as a good illustration that enlivens Neuberger's concept of watch-blogs as new "intermediary catalysts", which collect criticism with the help of the audience and carry it forward into the public sphere.

Klaus Meier is convinced that an actor like *Bildblog* can make a difference. "I am sure that it can affect the public, and it certainly has an influence on the journalistic level of *Bild*", he says. *Bild* editors would not state that openly, but sub rosa they acknowledged that they read *Bildblog* and adopted suitable corrections. "If the editors are being watched, the level of accountability will rise", Meier concludes.

Christian Jakubetz also believes: "Because of intensive media-watching, journalistic performance has improved." This assumption was proved by the example of *Bildblog*: "The nastiest and most blatant things in *Bild* have diminished", Jakubetz asserts. "If an editor knows that he is being watched, he will have to take pains. Nobody likes to be confronted with his mistakes permanently. If our media would work without making mistakes, there would be no need for watch-blogs. Consequently, journalists should be happy about this kind of control of their work."

Jakubetz is certain that many users would trust watch-blogs like *Bildblog*. The reason was: "We don't have any weirdos writing, but professionals who know what they are doing." Thus,

credibility would rise: "Until the very day I cannot remember a single story, in which a criticized person was able to prove *Bildblog* is wrong."

Other than *Bildblog*, many new blogs arise that criticize television and that are sometimes even designed like a TV broadcast. A popular example is the satirical web TV magazine *Fernsehkritik-TV*.[52] "Here, the people in charge do not use the Internet's possibilities of brevity and speed, but rather the opposite", Neuberger states. "In this area, many things are evolving right now, also in Germany."

Ulrike Langer could well imagine that a watch-blog for the publisher DuMont Schauberg might be developed in the near future. "That would be interesting. There are more than enough topics, you just have to seize them", she says. She knows of several cases where bloggers did a very good job by discussing abuses of big companies. Some blogs created a kind of digital public sphere, where online experts showed their knowledge. "Generally, the Internet has created an additional level of media criticism – and therefore simplified media criticism. Media observation has become more pluralistic. This independent level is an important supplement", Langer sums up.

Despite these hopeful assessments, several critical issues were raised during the expert interviews. According to Langer, the German blog scene as a whole is not as pronounced as for example in France and the USA where much more blogs exist. "Germany is underdeveloped with regard to its language area. There is still much room for progress", Langer says.

Thomas Mrazek points out that some watch-blogs needed critical watching themselves: "Many users of media blogs do not know who they can trust and what they can rely upon. In a maelstrom of conflicting interests, it is not easy to figure out which answers are the correct ones. Media bloggers, although they are professional media journalists in some cases, are not the very picture of integrity and morality. Sometimes they behave unethically, too", Mrazek says and refers to a recent conflict between Stefan Niggemeier and publisher Konstantin Neven DuMont as an example.

Anton Sahlender explains that he basically considers the critical tenor in German media watch-blogs to be justified, but he misses constructive criticism: "The former freelancers who are bloggers now, the Jakubetzes of this world, they can felicitously pick on our daily papers and conjure up their death, because it is easy to identify mistakes", he says. "But they do not offer an alternative. That is because they cannot replace traditional media."

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[52] http://www.fernsehkritik.tv

For Robin Meyer-Lucht, the potential of German media blogs is paramount, "because more people are keeping track of what's happening now. There are more eyes and more ears. That's a wonderful thing!" But at the same time, he notices that many bloggers are currently switching to *Facebook* and *Twitter* as sole forums for their media criticism. Is the heyday of media blogging already past?

Case 3: Bildblog

Bildblog is Germany's most famous media watch-blog. It was founded in 2004 by the media journalists Stefan Niggemeier and Christoph Schultheis, in order to critically observe the coverage of the Springer daily *Bild*, its spin-off *Bild am Sonntag* and their online edition *bild.de*. In April 2009, the watch-blog widened its focus, also discussing journalistic blunders in other media, both online and offline. Since January 2010, the Bochum-based blogger Lukas Heinser acts as *Bildblog*'s editor-in-chief.

Both existing research, as well as MediaAcT's expert interviews, demonstrate *Bildblog*'s potential as a possible corrective for German journalism, although systematic empirical evidence for the blog's influence on the *Bild* coverage is still lacking (cf. above). But how do the readers of *Bildblog* rate the media watch site? A web-based survey among almost 20,000 users, carried out in the autumn of 2007, offers first insights (cf. Mayer et al. 2008):

The data show that the entertainment value of *Bildblog* is its most important asset for attracting users. When asked why they would read *Bildblog*, almost 84 per cent of the respondents stated: "because it is entertaining". The blog's functions as a means for information and criticism rank second and third.

Regarding the assumed impact on the *Bild* coverage, the users' views are skeptical: More than half of the respondents (57 per cent) do not believe that *Bildblog* can "contribute to improving the quality of *Bild*". A clear majority of readers (62 per cent) is convinced that *Bildblog* "does not have a strong influence on *Bild*". However, 91 per cent state that "*Bildblog* makes clear to me which criteria should be applied to good journalism", showing that they ascribe at least an indirect effect on journalistic quality control to the watch-blog's postings.

Nevertheless, the willingness to actively support *Bildblog* is scant: Only 4 per cent of the readers would be ready to pay for exclusive contents; a general donation would be an option for no more than 10 per cent. The search for a sustainable business model for German media blogs remains unfinished.

It is no surprise that a microblogging service like *Twitter* is well suited for media-critical comments. As the available usage data show (for a secondary analysis cf. Neuberger/vom Hofe/Nuernbergk 2010: 27ff.), *Twitter* mostly attracts an "info elite" with a high news consumption; a substantial part of the users also has a high affinity to professions in the media and Internet businesses. Thus, their interest in media-related discussions is expectable. This is different in the case of social networking sites, which draw in considerably larger shares of the German onliners with different backgrounds (cf. above). Other than *Facebook*, sites like *wer-kennt-wen.de*[53], *lokalisten.de*[54] or the communities of the VZ Group[55] (*meinVZ, studiVZ, schülerVZ*)

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[53] http://www.wer-kennt-wen.de
[54] http://www.lokalisten.de
[55] http://www.vz-netzwerke.net

have become popular platforms, which are mainly used for communicating with friends and acquaintances. Can they be a vehicle for media criticism, too?

According to Thomas Mrazek, they clearly can. In his view, the most interesting characteristic of *Twitter* and sites like *Facebook* is that they are helping ordinary people to make their voices heard. "Of course, most of what is going on there is small talk. Users get the opportunity to say what they like – and they seize it", Mrazek says. "But first and foremost, these sites are communication tools. And they can be used for media criticism as well."

The plurality of voices, which is typical for social networks, was a big potential, Ulrike Langer explains. On a site like *Facebook*, "you can aggregate the intelligence of the crowd. Topics can be looked at from many different perspectives. It is easier to organize a thing like this on a *Facebook* page, because the people tend to identify with it. When people are members of a *Facebook* group, they are all equal, while in a blog somebody has to be the host", Langer says.

Robin Meyer-Lucht states that media criticism in the Social Web would be most effective if it was linked to other channels. "You have to imagine this as a stepped public sphere: On *Twitter* people take notice of a certain topic; then a blog will pick this topic up; and eventually it will be observed by professional media critics. Thus, a small wing beat can be amplified", he specifies. Accordingly, *Twitter* and *Facebook* could very well be considered as instruments of media criticism. Their potential had already been demonstrated in many instances (cf. Case 4). However, Meyer-Lucht adds, they would not be in the position to provide a systematic media observation. "The discussions on *Facebook* and *Twitter* are shaped by a kind of tendency towards the anecdote. They will never be comprehensive."

This is an essential limitation, according to Klaus Meier. "Most of the discussions in the Social Web circle around marginalia", he says. "Complex issues can hardly be explained on *Twitter*." Therefore, *Twitter* users would always pay attention to little details, while neglecting a broader perspective of media criticism.

Christoph Neuberger tries to sum up: "Trust in traditional mass media will probably not increase because of the Social Web, but instruments like watch-blogs or *Twitter* can certainly serve as eye-openers for the public." In order to describe the exact interdependency of their effects, however, further research is needed.

Case 4: Twitter

In the interviews by the MediaAcT project, several experts referred to examples of *Twitter* being used as an instrument of media accountability. The most notable case focused on Katrin Müller-Hohenstein, anchorwoman at ZDF German Television, who had used the phrase "innerer Reichsparteitag" when Miroslav Klose scored a goal in the match of the German national soccer team against Australia at the 2010 World Championship in South Africa. The phrase had been customary in the colloquial language of Nazi Germany, where it was used to describe a personal state of "supreme satisfaction". Hearing it uttered by a popular TV presenter caused an uproar – first of all among *Twitter* users, who commented on the verbal lapse in real time. Only afterwards was this criticism picked up by bloggers and professional media journalists, who carried the debate into the mainstream media. In the end, ZDF had to apologize publicly, promising that a blunder like this would never happen again.

The future development of web-based accountability practices outside the media is hard to predict, also because the current status has never been analyzed systematically. According to some of the experts, a possible trend might be the gradual formation of a digital public sphere, in which civil society actors who up to now have been mostly unorganized in their efforts to hold the media to account, finally find a common platform to make their arguments heard. Several groups from academia and non-governmental organizations have already shown how the Internet – and particularly the Social Web – can contribute to finding new forums for media accountability initiatives, such as:

- The Akademie für Publizistik in Hamburg, an institution for the education of journalists, has established a web-based Council of Ethics (Ethikrat)[56] which openly responds to e-mails from the public with questions concerning journalism ethics.

- Several universities with education programs in journalism or communications have integrated online journals or blogs into their courses of studies, giving students an opportunity to publicly reflect on current issues in media and journalism, thus offering a counterpoint to mainstream media reporting (as in the Dortmund-based web projects *Medien Monitor*[57] and *European Journalism Observatory*[58] or the *Trierer Medienblog*[59]).

- Many actors from the realm of communication and media studies have initiated personal or group blogs in which they discuss their newest research findings or invite debates about other media-related topics, sometimes reaching considerable audience shares (as Robin

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[56] http://www.akademie-fuer-publizistik.de/akademie/ethikrat/
[57] http://www.medien-monitor.com
[58] http://de.ejo-online.eu
[59] http://weblog.medienwissenschaft.de

Meyer-Lucht's *carta.info*[60], Christiane Schulzki-Haddouti's *KoopTech*[61] or Jan Schmidt's *Schmidt mit dete*[62]).

- The "Initiative Nachrichtenaufklärung" (Initiative News Enlightenment)[63], a cooperative project by several more or less renowned journalists and media scholars, has been naming the ten "most neglected stories" in German journalism annually since 1997; recently, the project redeployed many of its media-critical activities to the Internet (for example to its blog[64] and its *Facebook* site[65]), in order to strengthen its links to other civil society groups.

These and other online initiatives are a promising complement to the traditional journalism-internal instruments of media self-regulation and accountability, and – as recent debates on media ethics show (cf. Case 5) – the biggest potential seems to lie in their fruitful coexistence. The million new voices will probably not make a wild beast out of the "toothless tiger" which the German Press Council is accustomed to represent. But they will certainly provide more publicity for their joint cause, which is to stand up for a free and responsible media landscape. It remains to be clarified if this new publicity will eventually have a lasting impact on the quality of journalism.

Case 5: Networks of media accountability

On July 24th, 2010, German journalism was put to the test. When 21 people died in a mass panic at the Love Parade techno music festival in the city of Duisburg, party reporters suddenly had to turn into correspondents covering a catastrophe (cf. Sträter 2010). Not every journalist was able to cope with this challenge. Many instances of irresponsible reporting triggered a nationwide debate about media ethics that was singular in many aspects.

The most striking aspect, in the context of web-based accountability processes, is that new and established, online and offline instruments of media observation came to interact in a way that was rarely seen before in the German media landscape. On the media pages in the daily press, professional journalists were discussing the incident, while on the Social Web media users added their points of view – many of them had been eyewitnesses of the tragedy. On *Facebook* an instruction about the complaints procedures of the German Press Council was circulated; in the weeks after the event the self-regulatory organization, for the first time in its history, received more than 240 complaints on one single case – *Bild*'s journalistic treatment of the victims of the mass panic, which eventually resulted in a public reprimand.

The case demonstrates that instruments of media observation may prove most effective when they reach a necessary degree of public awareness, which is most probable if they are applied in parallel, integrating both journalistic professionals and media users, and amplifying each other in a network of media accountability.

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60   http://carta.info
61   http://blog.kooptech.de
62   http://www.schmidtmitdete.de
63   http://www.nachrichtenaufklaerung.de
64   http://www.derblindefleck.de
65   http://www.facebook.com/nachrichtenaufklaerung

4. Conclusions

The analysis shows that public trust in German journalism is currently being challenged by varying tendencies of de-professionalization. While the efficacy of traditional journalistic self-regulation leaves much to be desired, new kinds of web-based accountability instruments, integrating both journalism-internal and external perspectives, may be considered as an alternative approach in the effort of promoting a reliable and responsible media. Although the inclusion of participatory elements into online journalism is still fragmentary and the interest of users to actively contribute to the publication of online contents remains low up till now, the report reveals that web-based processes of media accountability can have a notable influence on journalism.

In Germany, a considerable diversity of online practices fostering media accountability has been developing in recent years. Among them are a large number of newsroom-internal mechanisms, ranging from the use of bylines and profiles of journalists, hyperlinks to original sources and contact forms to the establishment of online ombudsmen, newsroom blogs, editorial *Twitter* and *Facebook* accounts and collaborative Wikis, which all help to create transparency and responsiveness. At the same time, a lively scene of journalism-external media blogs and an increasing quantity of media-critical user comments on social networking sites are adding new points of view to public media observation. The qualitative expert interviews and different case studies, which were conducted for this study, substantiate the assumption that the multitude of new voices in the Social Web can make a difference and may, at least selectively, contribute to the improvement of journalistic performance.

However, it also becomes clear that recent innovations in media accountability are far from being a panacea for the deficits of traditional journalistic self-regulation. Particularly, the editorial handling of journalistic mistakes, which most newsrooms hardly ever pay any attention to, still leaves much room for improvements. The case of questionable user comments on online news stories shows that web-based accountability processes may even lead to new ethical problems which have not been tackled systematically so far.

These diverging developments demonstrate that the potentials and pitfalls of web-based media accountability processes do not lie far away from each other.

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