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"Weblogs Complement Journalism" – An Interview with Christoph Neuberger



What is the relationship between Internet blogs and conventional media? Do bloggers keep a watchful eye on journalists as a "fifth power"? Communications expert Christoph Neuberger on the importance of the Internet for journalism.

Mr Neuberger, in September 2009 a group of German bloggers drew up an "Internet manifesto" on the future of journalism. The manifesto is directed against publishers. What exactly is its aim?

It concerns the fundamental question of how Internet journalism works. In the *Hamburg Declaration* of June 2009, publishing houses called for protection against "content theft", that is to say protection of the content that is produced on behalf of publishers. This met with criticism among Internet journalists who had voiced their views in the manifesto. They warn against using copyright law as a lever with which to enforce the financial interests of the publishing companies.

Is journalism improved by the Internet?

One thesis put forward by the blogger manifesto is that "The Internet improves journalism". Do the publishing houses agree?



Ein Bloggerschicksal

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Es gehört nicht viel Mut dazu, Gott und die Welt zu

To the extent that publishers have expressed an opinion on this at all, this is certainly an opportunity which they will have recognized.

Understandably enough, however, publishers are looking particularly at how journalism can be marketed on the Internet, while journalists are focusing on the technical potential offered by the web – on the question, in other words, of how journalism can be improved by the Internet. There are repeated clashes between these two very different viewpoints.

How is journalism defined in this debate?



It is a question of whether Internet journalism is still understood according to the old gatekeeper principle. This is the model we are familiar with from the worlds of press and radio: editors decide which content is published and brought to the public's attention.

And it is also a question of whether journalism should instead be seen as having a more moderating function on account of it triggering a large information cycle on the web – in other words, whether professional journalism should pick up on what is written by bloggers, for example, while not insisting that its content should only be available on the publisher's own media website and also allowing short summaries to be disseminated in blogs and news aggregators like Google-News or perlemtaucher.de.

Blogs are often of poor quality

On behalf of the German Research Foundation (DFG), you have studied how the Internet is changing journalism. What have you discovered about the relationship between journalism and blogs?

Naturally, there are professional journalists who write blogs of high journalistic quality, in the context of a media website yet also expressing independent views. These aside, however, there are hardly any blogs which show genuine journalistic flair. At best, one may find isolated examples of journalistic achievement, but no continuous and universal journalistic offering such as that offered by the news published by conventional media.



Haften für eigene Zitate an fremder Stelle

Der Sportartikelhersteller Jala hat also den Blogger Frank alias Trainer Baade abgemahnt, weil der sich abfällig über die Marke geäußert hat. C Blogger löschte den Beitrag und unterschrieb eine Unterlassungserklärung. Doch das das Unternehmen fand einen Teil seiner „Schmahkritik“ später an anderer Stelle im Netz wieder: auf der Seite eines Newsaggregators namens „News“, der automatisch mit kurzen Auszügen auf ungeprüfte Internetseiten verlinkt. Damit hat Baade zwar nichts zu tun, aber Jala

A "complementary relationship"



So there is no competition between blogs and conventional media?

As we were able to demonstrate, there is, first and foremost, a complementary relationship. Nowadays, it is not only Internet news editors who use blogs as a source of research – traditional news

editors do the same. They look for inspiration, find new themes. On the other hand, blogs pick up on issues originally raised in the conventional media.

Blogs are no substitute for journalism, but they do play an important complementary role: as a research source and as a forum for response. They offer a domain in which follow-up communication takes place. This allows journalism to enter into a dialogue with the public and to encourage the public to discuss important political issues. This is very important from a democratic viewpoint.

Very few blogs are actually noticed

"Watchblogs" such as BILDblog.de and spiegeltecht.de monitor the conventional media and criticize journalistic failings. Have blogs become the fifth power?

That would certainly still be an exaggeration at this point. In its old form, however, BILDblog did serve as something of a model. The two journalists Christoph Schultheis and Stefan Niggemeier succeeded in mobilizing their readership to provide information about improper conduct on the part of Bild newspaper editors. This most definitely had an impact, and we were able to watch time and time again how quickly bild.de corrected its errors.



Do blogs strengthen democracy?

Speaking purely technically, the old demand that everyone should be able to make their voice heard has certainly been met. On the other hand, we know that very few blogs are actually noticed. There are journalists, nonetheless, who research small blogs and dig up issues to which they can give greater media impact. This was not previously possible. Journalism should change the way it views its role and should see itself more as an online moderator of society's self-perception.

"Blogs are impossible to reverse"

Do journalism and blogs have a future together?

I think so. Journalism will have to involve Internet users much more in future. Blogs are a development which is virtually impossible to reverse. On the other hand, there is always the question, lurking in the background, of what business model professional journalism might adopt on the Internet. An answer has yet to be found. Advertising and usage fees have proved to be less profitable than was originally presumed.

It is not only Internet journalism that lacks a financial leg to stand on, however. The Internet is also undermining the earning potential of conventional media, particularly daily newspapers. Ultimately, the Internet is likely to result in a shake-out on the media market.

Professor Christoph Neuberger has taught at the Institute of Communication Science at the University of Münster (WWU) since 2002. His areas of specialization include journalism and Internet research. From 2006 to 2008 he headed a DFG research project entitled "Vermittlungsakteure, -strukturen und -leistungen der aktuellen Internetöffentlichkeit" (i.e. Mediation actors, structures and achievements of the current Internet public sphere). This resulted in the publication in 2009 of his book *Journalismus im Internet. Profession – Partizipation – Technisierung* (i.e. Journalism on the Internet. Profession – Participation – Mechanization).

Dominik Reinle is a sociology graduate who works as a freelance journalist in Cologne, for the Internet editorial department of Westdeutscher Rundfunk, among others.

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