

Documentation

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Session at DW Global Media Forum

June 19, 2023, 2:30 PM – 3:30 PM, Rhine Lobby II

Speaker: Lara Berger, Karin Boczek, Harald Gapski

Divided by algorithms: Journalism in the “digital social machine”?

Dr. Harald Gapski, Head of Research at the Grimme-Institute, Dr. Karin Boczek, Assistant Professor for digital journalism at the Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt and Lara Berger, research associate and doctoral candidate at the University of Cologne reported on the topic of digital journalism and the algorithm-driven way of news publication online.

Harald Gapski started off by presenting the Grimme-Institute and its work: By referring to the Grimme Online Award, which focuses on journalistic quality on the web, and Karin Boczek as a member of the nomination committee, he introduced the session’s topic of digital journalism and its multidimensional implications. In addition, he contextualized the ambiguous term of ‘digital social machine’ with his fellowship work at the Center for Advanced Internet Studies (CAIS) in Bochum. The term ‘social machine’, originating from web science and describing socio-technological systems in which social interactions are hybrid and partially algorithmized, can be used to question and reflect upon phenomena and processes of societal datafication. Gapski’s take on the image of a machine has been two folded: as an explanatory model and as a metaphorical reflection tool in media education. The concept of a machine has been applied in various cases, e.g. in her keynote at GMF22 Maria Ressa made use of the “Hype Machine” by Sinan Aral for explaining why lies spread 6 to 7 times faster than facts from journalistic work, Shoshana Zuboff conceptualized the ‘Machine of Surveillance Capitalism’, Nadler et al. speak about the ‘Digital Influence Machine’ as well as Gry Hasselbalch, who refers to the ‘Society of the Destiny Machine’. Harald Gapski continued with showing a graph by Lischka et al. that transforms the concept of a machine to journalism in the digital age. On the one side there is the classic journalistic media system (‘editorial curated media’) that functions according to journalistic guiding values and may also be oriented toward public value, on the other side there is an algorithmic and intransparent functional logic at work (‘algorithmically curated intermediaries’), in which the aim is high interaction and attention rates. Furthermore, Gapski emphasizes the interplay of the two feedback loops: User reaction and algorithmic curation processes interact with each other, resulting in a specific dynamic, in which for example, hate speech provokes reactions and attention and at the same time serves the functional logics of the platforms. By asking for the reflection of the theoretical suggestions in empirical studies, he passes the word to Karin Boczek, who did research on the issue.

Looking at German media, Karin Boczek’s empirical findings prove that journalism does underlie enormous changes due to the evolution of digitalization. According to work by other researchers, e.g. Welbers and Opgenhafen (2019), Haim et al. (2021) and Lischka (2021), newsrooms are pushing so-called “engaging news”, which include soft, emotional and subjective news, to platforms to generate ‘Likes’ and therefore create potentially viral content. The scientists above could prove the use of a more engaging language on social media platforms compared to corresponding news website articles. Boczek’s sample shed light on four german quality media brands (Spiegel, Süddeutsche, Tagesschau, ZDF heute) and their content published on algorithmically curated intermediaries (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter). The exploration resulted in two surprising findings: First, only a fragment (1% - 44%, depending on platform) of articles of the websites have been distributed via Social Media platforms. These did not only consist of soft news, but specific topics. The study could not find indications for an effect on opinion content. Secondly, the content of the sample has not been adapted to be more click-able and did not include interactive features such as questions to its recipients (‘What do you think?’) or personalization. By providing two examples from the Grimme Online Award 2023 (*brudersteve* on TikTok and *handdrauf* on Instagram), Karin Boczek illustrated the existence of journalistic content online that is not represented in

traditional journalism. Finally, she stated that, against all odds, algorithmically curated intermediaries are spaces journalists and media creators choose for high quality content, including information, and for diversifying voices heard and topics discussed in Germany, assuming the reason must be low barriers for content distribution. The full peer-reviewed paper is available online with open access.¹

Lara Berger contributed to the session's issue by presenting the empirical findings of her own research she did at the University of Cologne about incentives in the digital era and the question: (How) does digitalization shift the emotionality of news headlines? The underlying assumption has been the natural tendency of journalism to focus on sensationalist content, since its headlines have to compete with thousands of others. Berger's threefold approach provides a comparative analysis of online and offline news from the same outlets and an experiment with professional journalists as well as readers. Using an fine-tuned machine learning model the headlines have been classified into the classes 'neutral' and 'emotional', while emotional headlines could be negatively or positively connotated. The study indicated that 40% of offline news headlines and 60% of online news are emotional (positively and negatively).

Within her experiment with journalists, the scientist worked with a sample of 201 full-time journalists between 18 and 80 with 2 to 42 years of work experience, who work for outlets from the entire political spectrum. The experimental design made those journalists choose between an either positive, neutral or negative headline for a given article about the German economy. The control group received flat payment, while the treatment-group was paid per click on the headline. The experiment's result discovered a clear tendency of journalists who got paid per click, to choose an emotional headline (60%), while about 38% of the control group with flat payment decided for emotionality and nearly two thirds of them went for the neutral headline. Carrying on with the third step of her research, Lara Berger presented the experiment with readers. 300 students in number were randomly exposed to one of the three headlines. She phrased the findings as follows: Those who read an emotional headline have beliefs that are more distorted from the content in the article. Those who read a positive headline feel better. Conclusively, she lists several caveats, e.g. that the comparative part of the analysis does allow for causal claims and only analyzes the dimension of sensationalism in headlines, suggesting the need to explore other aspects in further research. Lara Berger's research is also available online.²

After the scientists' input and presentation of thoughts and research on the topic of digital journalism, there was some time left for the audience to discuss several aspects that had been presented. It was asked if the empirical findings match with the experiences in their working environment, that for the most part takes place in other countries and (media-)cultural contexts. A journalist from the United States could, for example, identify with the findings, while another journalist observes a more drastic situation in Peru: She stated, the journalistic quality online would seem to be significantly lower in the South American country. The audience also discussed changes in the academic field and sensationalist tendencies in scientific publications, as well as opportunities and perspectives to (re-)gain 'quiet quality' online.

¹ Hase, V., Boczek, K., & Scharrow, M. (2022). Adapting to Affordances and Audiences? A Cross-Platform, Multi-Modal Analysis of the Platformization of News on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. *Digital Journalism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2128389>.

² Berger, Lara (2023). How digital media markets amplify news sentiment. Working Paper. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MtIUeL-Xp_Quumf_apx5eN8wOHvWv4B3/view.

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