

“Trolls” or “warriors of faith”?

Differentiating dysfunctional forms of media criticism in online comments

Media
criticism in
online
comments

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Abstract

Purpose – The idea that user comments on journalistic articles would help to increase the quality of the media has long been greeted with enthusiasm. By now, however, these high hopes have mostly evaporated. Practical experience has shown that user participation does not automatically lead to better journalism but may also result in hate speech and systematic trolling – thus having a dysfunctional impact on journalistic actors. Although empirical journalism research has made it possible to describe various kinds of disruptive follow-up communication on journalistic platforms, it has not yet succeeded in explaining what exactly drives certain users to indulge in flaming and trolling. This paper intends to fill this gap.

Design/methodology/approach – It does so on the basis of problem-centered interviews with media users who regularly publish negative comments on news websites.

Findings – The evaluation allows for a nuanced view on current phenomena of dysfunctional follow-up communication on journalistic news sites. It shows that *the* typical “troll” does not exist. Instead, it seems to be more appropriate to differentiate disruptive commenters according to their varying backgrounds and motives. Quite often, the interviewed users display a distinct political (or other) devotion to a certain cause that rather makes them appear as “warriors of faith.” However, they are united in their dissatisfaction with the quality of the (mass) media, which they attack critically and often with a harsh tone.

Originality/value – The study reflects these differences by developing a typology of dysfunctional online commenters. By helping to understand their aims and intentions, it contributes to the development of sustainable strategies for stimulating constructive user participation in a post-truth age.

Keywords Participation, Journalism, Incivility, User comments, Online media, Hate speech, Media criticism, Trolling

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The digital transformations of the recent past have confronted journalists with manifold challenges that are continuing to unsettle their profession to the core. Not only the structures of the journalistic system are in a state of constant adaptation because the “cost-free culture” of the World Wide Web started to overthrow journalism’s traditional revenue models and triggered the avalanche of a – mostly economic – “media crisis” that has attracted the attention of media researchers around the globe (Trappel *et al.*, 2015). At the same time, many new actors have appeared in contemporary digital public spheres. These often use social media or other participatory channels to either complement or openly question



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traditional journalistic outlets, which has led to a far-reaching power shift in the media professions that also affects the way journalists define their professional identity (Deuze and Fortunati, 2011). These challenges have created an urgent need to discuss and, if feasible, reassess the norms and values of journalistic practice in the digital age. However, although there are many hints that the professional ethics of journalism are currently going through a phase of disruption and re-negotiation (Eberwein and Porlezza, 2016), systematic inventories of the ethical challenges of digital journalism are still a desideratum.

This contribution intends to fill this gap, at least partly, by tackling one of the most disturbing problems of journalistic practice in participatory media surroundings: the issue of dysfunctional follow-up communication on Web-based news platforms. Indeed, the idea that user comments on journalistic articles would help to increase the quality of the media has long been greeted with enthusiasm among both media practitioners and researchers (Bruns, 2008). By the end of the 2010s, however, these high hopes have mostly evaporated. Practical experience has shown that user participation does not automatically lead to better journalism, but may also result in hate speech and trolling – and thus have a dysfunctional impact on journalistic actors who often seem to be helpless when it comes to dealing with such phenomena of online communication. At any rate, previous industry-driven initiatives to advise journalists on how to counterbalance online hatred – such as the five-point test by the Ethical Journalism Network (2019) – have not yet been able to prove any sustainable long-term effects.

The inadequacy of such initiatives may also be a consequence of insufficient insights about the originators of disruptive online comments, which is a necessary prerequisite for constructive dialogue. Although the phenomena of user participation in journalism have been in the focus of empirical journalism studies for at least a decade, researchers have not yet succeeded in explaining what exactly drives certain users to indulge into flaming and trolling. This paper aims at understanding the backgrounds of disruptive commenters and their specific motives for criticizing journalists and their output on the basis of a qualitative interview study. The concept and the results of this study are presented in more detail after a brief overview on the relevant theoretical foundations and other empirical research activities in this field of knowledge.

2. Theoretical framework and key terms

It is undisputed that journalism and the media fulfill an important public remit in democratic societies; the principle of press freedom – enshrined in constitutional law in many countries around the world – is a basic requirement for this. To illuminate this interrelation from a scientific perspective, journalism is often described – in the words of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1984, 1996) – as an autopoietic (though not independent) social system. As such, it implements the function of collecting, selecting, processing and verifying current topics from its system environment, i.e. from other social systems such as politics, economy, law, art, science, sports and so on. By supplying these topics to a (mass) audience as media products, it contributes to the creation of a public sphere and to the self-observation of society (Eberwein, 2013, pp. 43-68; Scholl and Weischenberg, 1998), thus making social coexistence possible in the first place.

However, in the digital media of the highly networked society of the 2010s, the fulfillment of the journalistic core function is no longer restricted to professional newsroom staff. Via social media and other participatory channels, audience actors can also become a part of the journalism system and contribute to the creation of the public sphere (Loosen and Schmidt, 2012). Indeed, there has been increasing evidence since the turn of the millennium that different forms of user participation can not only support the societal function of journalism,

but – in individual cases – even lead to a notable rise in its quality. Thus, for instance, empirical studies have shown that clues by users via online comments and social media are often a helpful instrument to raise awareness for neglected topics or mistakes in the coverage (Heikkilä *et al.*, 2012; Neuberger *et al.*, 2011). In ideal circumstances, they can even offer a basis for an equal deliberative discourse, involving all those actors concerned with the process of production and reception (Ziegele *et al.*, 2018). The notion understands the inclusion of the audience into the system of journalism as a chance to sustainably revitalize the waning trust in, and the credibility of, the profession.

However, Luhmann (2009, pp. 29-40) also repeatedly hints at the improbability of successful communication, and therefore it is unsurprising that the theoretical potentials of user participation in journalism are often overshadowed by substantial problems. In the practice of participatory journalism – across countries and in the most distinct thematic contexts – there are scores of alarming examples of trolling and hate speech that compromise the functionality of the journalistic system to a high degree (in lieu of many other international case studies, see Aghadiegwu and Ogbonna, 2015; Edström, 2016; Harlow, 2015; for a useful journalistic account of the trolling phenomenon, see Gorman, 2019). The battles of words in the comment sections of journalistic news platforms – which often get out of hand and sometimes even invoke criminal laws – appear to be particularly problematic because they are difficult for the responsible editors to moderate and also alternative forms of regulation mostly fail (Erjavec and Poler Kovačić, 2012). They can not only have serious implications for the victims of hateful messages (Slagle, 2009) but also are ultimately drivers of a confidence crisis that damages journalism as a whole.

Here, this paper's study takes its point of departure: phenomena such as trolling and hate speech are analyzed in detail to illustrate options to successfully and meaningfully integrate the initiators into the communication process within the journalism system. In the scientific literature, *hate speech* is understood as the “public communication of conscious and/or intentional messages with discriminatory contents” (Sponholz, 2018, p. 48); characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation are usually taking center stage (Nockleby, 2000). The origin of hate speech can often, but not exclusively, be traced back to so-called “trolls” – i.e. Internet users that purposefully cause disruptions and/or conflicts with their communicative behavior for their own amusement (Hardaker, 2010, p. 237). Such trolls have a comparably long and changeful history in the online (sub)cultures of the social media world (Phillips, 2015; Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2016). However, hate speech is by no means restricted to Web-based communication settings (Bleich, 2011). Consequently, in the context of research on online comments, the broader term “*incivility*” has prevailed, subsuming any form of insulting (follow-up) communication as long as it disturbs or prevents the democratic aim of deliberation (Papacharissi, 2004).

When this study focuses on the investigation of *dysfunctional follow-up communication* on journalistic news websites, this broad understanding of incivility serves as a general frame. At the same time, however, reference to the idea of societal functions in the sense of sociological systems theory is used to highlight their consequences for journalism and society. Dysfunctional online comments can, thus, comprise a broad spectrum of differently motivated, disruptive statements – from abrasive criticism over unrelated name calling to criminally liable insults and defamation.

3. State of research and open questions

Empirical journalism research has not yet succeeded in facilitating a deeper understanding of such forms of dysfunctional follow-up communication. Indeed, the analysis of participation in journalism and the media has become a key issue for many international

research institutions over the past years – and, above all, the specific example of user comments on journalistic coverage has motivated an (increasingly confusing) multitude of empirical studies (see, e.g. the synopsis by [Barnes \(2018\)](#)). Eventually, however, research questions prove to be increasingly fragmented and the benefit for newsroom practice often remained marginal.

The current state of research on user comments in journalism can roughly be systematized on the basis of the three stages of the public communication process (input, throughput and output) (similarly: [Springer, 2014](#), pp. 33-54):

- In the *input* phase, the focus is on the conditions of the formation of user comments. Examples can be found in research into the attitudes of journalistic actors toward user comments and concrete newsroom strategies for handling commenting audience actors ([Braun and Gillespie, 2011](#); [Chen and Pain, 2017](#); [Graham and Wright, 2015](#); [Heise et al., 2014](#); [Reich, 2011](#)). A recent online survey was concerned with both the perceived consequences of hateful comments targeted against journalists and the coping strategies used ([Obermaier et al., 2018](#)). Another example is the issue of which aspects of the content and form of journalistic contributions elicit the most comments ([Tsagkias et al., 2010](#); [Weber, 2014](#)).
- In the *throughput* phase, special emphasis is put on the substance and quality of user discourses. In this context, research has not only traced the content characteristics of comments in different issue fields; primarily, numerous studies have, with thoroughly contradicting results, analyzed how far user comments live up to the normative ideals of deliberative discourses ([Rowe, 2015](#); [Ruiz et al., 2011](#); [Strandberg and Berg, 2015](#); [Coe et al., 2014](#)). Here, one of the relevant questions concerns the aims media users pursue when writing online comments ([Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011](#); [Springer et al., 2015](#); [Ziegele et al., 2013](#)).
- In the *output* phase, research is primarily interested in the effects of user comments. So far, the impact on various independent variables has been tested – for example, public opinion ([Friemel and Dötsch, 2015](#)), risk perceptions ([Anderson et al., 2014](#)), third-person effects ([Houston et al., 2011](#)), trust in journalism ([Marchionni, 2014](#)) or the perception of journalistic quality ([Kümpel and Springer, 2016](#); [Prochazka et al., 2018](#)).

This, necessarily abbreviated, overview demonstrates that empirical research on user comments in journalism has reached a high degree of specialization. However, the phenomena of dysfunctional follow-up communication, which Thorsten [Quandt \(2018\)](#) recently classified under the umbrella term “dark participation”, remain underrepresented. What exactly drives certain users of journalistic websites to indulge in dysfunctional communication patterns such as trolling and hate speech? What is their specific (biographical, political, etc.) background? What are their views on the function and performance of journalism and the media? What are their motives for criticizing journalists and their output? And how do they want to be handled by journalists and other commenters? These questions are in the focus of the empirical study that is presented in more detail in the following sections.

4. Method

Considering that, up to now, there is hardly any evidence-based knowledge on disruptive commenters, which in turn considerably complicates the process of establishing contacts with them, the author opted for a two-step qualitative research procedure to answer the

questions above. For pragmatic reasons, the realization of both research steps was limited to a coherent language region, in this case: Germany, Austria and the German-speaking part of Switzerland. This restriction provided the advantage that all participants in the study could relate to the same, or at least a similar, set of issues that were prevailing in the public discourse at the time of the empirical data collection.

In a first preparatory step, the author and his team^[1] conducted *informal background discussions* with seven online journalists and social media editors of some of the leading online news outlets in the German language region, including tagesschau.de, FAZ.net, Rheinische Post Online and others. The aim of this preliminary survey was twofold: on the one hand, it should help to identify typical thematic contexts in which disruptive user comments are most prevalent (such as migration, the Middle East conflict and issues relating to gender or health/food); on the other hand, it was designed to collect hints of typical user profiles of noticeable commenters (and, if possible, a promising strategy to get in touch with them). Both types of background information were then used to prepare and systematize the main phase of the study.

This second step consisted of *problem-centered interviews* (Witzel, 2000) with media users who regularly immerse themselves in large quantities of dysfunctional commenting. They were selected on the basis of the criteria that were deduced from the insights of the preparatory study and were consequently expected to represent a broad spectrum of engagement with different media and varying controversial issues. Following the principle of theoretical saturation (Corbin and Strauss, 2015), new participants were added to the sample until their arguments repeated themselves and no longer contained new insights for the development of analytical categories. The interviews followed a half-standardized field manual that was aimed at helping the interviewers to structure the relevant issues under analysis and reflect them with the interviewees in a comprehensive manner. This manual was organized along the lines of the project's central research questions, with the aim of evaluating and understanding:

- the commenters' backgrounds;
- their views on the media;
- their motives for criticizing the media; and
- possible strategies for stimulating constructive user participation.

Despite substantial problems to make contact with many of the intended respondents (as it turned out in the course of approaching them via e-mail, many of them had created fake profiles for commenting on certain news platforms to deter contact and others simply never reacted), 22 telephone interviews were completed during the summer semester 2017, many of them lasting up to 80 min. While the interviewees were promised complete anonymity in the further research process and were informed about their optional right to discontinue their participation at any point of time, if desired, the interviewers took part in regular debriefings with the project leader, to help them cope with the sometimes intemperate and partially aggressive verbal reactions of the respondents. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed to enable subjecting them to a structuring qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014).

The following section of this paper summarizes some of the key results from the second part of the empirical study.

5. Results

5.1 Backgrounds of disruptive commenters

In the course of the data collection, the study initially needed to clarify the kinds of actors the interviewers had to deal with: which personal, professional, biographical, and – where

appropriate – political backgrounds were characteristic for the disruptive commenters in the sample of the study? Considering the small sample size and the used sampling procedure, the analysis does – of course – not allow for a representative view on the object of study or any other statistical inferences. However, the composition of the sample shows obvious parallels to the sociodemographic patterns in the samples of earlier, quantitative surveys of commenters in general (Ziegele *et al.*, 2013). On this basis, careful generalizations do not seem to be completely inconceivable.

Consequently, it can be noted that disruptive commenters appear to be predominantly male; at least in the sample of this survey, only one out of four participants was female. Moreover, it must be stressed that the respondents were mostly over 40 years old at the time of the study. Under normal circumstances, the typical commenters are, therefore, already middle-aged. Most of them can refer to strong social ties: about two thirds of the participants of the study were married; almost all of them maintained an extensive and lively social network of friends and acquaintances.

Furthermore, the higher-than-average educational attainment of the interviewees is noteworthy: many of them hold a university degree, a few have a doctorate. Without exception, all respondents were in employment, though not necessarily in the context of the media professions. Indeed, there were no journalists in the sample of the study, but some participants had at least indirect links to media practice (for example, through an occupation in advertising or the IT sector).

Furthermore, a striking aspect is that a good proportion of the surveyed commenters suggested having a well-defined political or social commitment, which – in many cases – results in active support for political parties (at both ends of the spectrum), NGOs (e.g. Transparency International), or other interest groups. Even those respondents that intentionally abstained from joining an organization (“I am operating in the lone fighter mode![2]”) displayed unambiguous political or other ideological positions, which they support in a confident way. In the course of the interviews, it became obvious that many of them shaped their worldview via incisive biographical experiences that also influence their habits as media users. Thus, several interviewees gave an account of direct or indirect involvement in situations of political turmoil, recurring experiences of discrimination, formative job-related disappointments, an unsuccessful struggle for child custody after a divorce, or instances of allegedly inaccurate reporting in journalistic media about themselves.

5.2 Views on journalism and the media

In addition to the individual backgrounds and circumstances of the participants, the study was expected to bring their views on the function and performance of journalism and the media into the focus. While the interviews progressed, it became apparent that most of the respondents are intensive and accomplished media users. Many of them indicated that they devoted almost all of their leisure time, often starting before work early in the morning, and almost always until far into the night, to reading and commenting on journalistic coverage. In doing so, they absorb a broad bandwidth of media formats, including both established “mainstream” media and specialized publications from the alternative spectrum. There are good reasons to do so, as one of the surveyed users explained:

I don't disregard any media. They all have a right to be there. I realized that we need them to get a broad sense of reality, and I always look at the other side to come to my own conclusions, eventually.

Almost without exception, the respondents hinted their media reception is accompanied by high normative claims, according to which journalists should fulfill a broad spectrum of societal functions (information, opinion, watchdog, integration, etc.). However, the expectations of the participants of the study are frequently disappointed. The interviews repeatedly revealed indications of a general dissatisfaction with current news journalism, which can be specified with a long list of recurring critiques: thus, “the media” are accused, for instance, of a one-sided selection of topics and lack of plurality of opinions. Moreover, the respondents criticize a supposed partiality of many journalists, an over-representation of specific (political) elites, a dominance of news agency journalism, the common “herd behavior” within the industry, as well as a questionable handling of mistakes.

Such perceptions of deficiencies inevitably lead to an erosion of trust in professional journalism:

A couple of years ago, I started to do some investigations myself, and I uncovered false, biased coverage over and over again [. . .] I don't believe anything just like that.

However, the surveyed users did not only voice their suspicion for the study, but in regular public comments on criticized coverage. The use of the comment function on journalistic news websites is only one of many channels, but is the one the participants of this study favor. Some interviewees reported making more than 100 comments per day, which can range from brief interjections to elaborate lectures about their personal views of the world. In many cases, however, use of this channel is complemented by making critical postings in blogs and via social media – or even by direct phone calls to the newsrooms. Although some of the commenters admitted that parts of their statements – online or offline – might be perceived as harsh or even aggressive in their tonality, they also claimed that their argumentative basis was, indeed, well reflected.

5.3 *Motives for criticizing journalism and the media*

The study's primary research question concerned the motivating factors that drive certain media users to criticize journalistic actors and their coverage, and therefore the interviews were designed to discuss those factors at length. After all, it became obvious that *the* typical “troll” does not exist – at least not in the sample of the interview study. Consequently, it seems appropriate to differentiate disruptive commenters according to their varying motives.

Internet users who only post destructive comments to annoy others and thereby inhibit an orderly discourse were more the exception than the norm in the study. Instead, most respondents presented themselves as a kind of “warrior of faith”. In many instances, they are impelled by a pointed (political, legal, fiscal) sense of mission, which they advocate in public and, if needs be, defend with rigor. The study distinguished at least five groups of motives:

- (1) *Pursuit of truth*: Some users devise disruptive comments because they want to disclose no less than the “whole truth”, which – in their view – is often blanked out or intentionally “covered up” in many professional journalistic articles.
- (2) *Opinion formation*: Others, in contrast, pursue a less absolute aim. They do not want to change journalism at the roots, but rather increase the plurality of published opinions. Their personal views (or sometimes also a verifiable expert knowledge about certain issues) are understood as purposeful contributions for stimulating a broader societal discourse.

- (3) *Provocation*: Still other commenters stress the element of provocation. They believe it is a necessary and inevitable strategy to challenge other users with irritating statements, because there is no other way to reach awareness in the online world. For them, however, provocation is not an end in itself, but rather a consciously applied instrument for attention management.
- (4) *Anger management*: Besides, there is a group of users who describe their online activities as an act of anger management. They are so disappointed by conventional journalism that they need to seek a channel for reducing their frustration. As one of the respondents put it, this can be found “preferably online, as compared to real life, right?”
- (5) *Entertainment*: Moreover, a couple of commenters admitted publishing disruptive comments just for fun. This type presumably comes closest to the image of the typical “troll”: he does not act as an advocate for a certain issue or a group of people, but rather wants to amuse himself with his inputs at the cost of others.

Practical experience with online comments suggests that this latter user type appears to be highly dominant on many news platforms. But in the sample of the study presented here, it was clearly underrepresented – which is basically a methodological problem: in comparison to other commenters, this last actor group was considerably harder to reach and to convince of the necessity of participating in the interview series.

5.4 Strategies for stimulating constructive user participation?

In addition to the proposed typology of different motives for critical comments on journalistic coverage, a further goal of the study was to collect practical suggestions for constructive editorial strategies for handling dysfunctional follow-up communication on news websites. Which concrete expectations and hopes do commenters have when addressing journalists and likeminded media users? And what can be learnt from the perspective of the newsroom? If one follows the pleas of the participants of the study, possible strategies for improving the functionality of journalistic follow-up communication diverge considerably. In detail, it is possible to differentiate between:

- reforms on the level of the journalistic system;
- innovations on the newsroom level; and
- options for user self-regulation.

Without doubt, the proposals for a *reform of the journalistic system* are the most radical – and, at the same time, appear to be the least constructive. “With the present staff and the given structures, it won’t work”, said one interviewee, for example. To reach the common aim of a bigger plurality of opinions in the coverage, central positions in the newsrooms would need to be reallocated. None of the respondents believes that critical comments on journalistic texts could initiate this process; but they do contribute to “the formation of an audience opinion”. Overall, however, a skeptical view prevails among the participants of the study who rate their intervention leading to a fundamental re-adjustment of the journalism system as being unrealistic.

In contrast, various interviewees’ recommendations encouraging *innovations at the newsroom level* clearly offer higher practical relevance. For example, one commenter demanded: “It would be a start if journalists showed a certain interest in dialogue.” Indeed, the wish to receive a concrete response to a comment was central for many participants of the study. Various case reports in the context of the interviews demonstrated that feedback,

regardless of its manner, can quickly turn into a confidence-building measure and can also help to dispel misunderstandings between media practitioners and users. A basic requirement for this would be a higher degree of openness toward user participation in general and digressive opinions in particular. Thus, another participant insists:

Journalists should just learn to endure other opinions – and more radical expressions – without reverting to the criminal code in the first instant, in order to push them aside. It's possible to tolerate this, to allow extremely differing positions to stand. That's opinion formation.

Besides the wish for dialogue and adequate forms of moderation, the demand for greater newsroom transparency is another recurring motive in many interviews. On the one hand, this concerns the procurement of more background information on the editorial workflow and decision-making processes (e.g. the question of whether a journalist was present on location in the course of research); on the other hand, it also includes better error management: "Mistakes should be handled in a transparent manner, this also happens rarely at present. You only see justifications, but never a simple correction".

In multiple instances, the participants point out that the criticism should gain increasing importance in the vocational training for journalists. Analogically, however, one respondent also highlights the need for a better promotion of media literacy, starting from early childhood: "Laptops at elementary school, media literacy in each school, belief in the power of the individual instead of censoring contents".

Despite all the criticism of journalism, some of the interviewed commenters also offered a self-critical view during the discussion, because they are quite aware their provocative postings often hurt both journalists and other media users, which certainly complicates a convenient exchange. Hence, some participants of the study revealed their individual strategies for avoiding dysfunctional comment battles. "Do not send everything at once!", one of the respondents recommended and another promised: "I resolved to pay more attention to stylistic undertones and not only the maximum of provocation" – even if this resulted in less "likes." Whether such insights can already be considered as specific *forms of user self-regulation*, shall remain open to comment. At any rate, they are evidence of a minimum of self-reflection on the part of the commenters, which is not insignificant for a discussion about an appropriate way of handling hate speech and trolling.

6. Consequences

In sum, the empirical study permits a nuanced view on the current phenomena of dysfunctional follow-up communication on journalistic news sites. With the help of problem-centered interviews with disruptive commenters, it shows that the commonplace idea of the typical "troll" must be adapted. Instead, differentiation on the basis of varying backgrounds and motives for criticism of journalism and the media seems expedient – as, for example, in the typology proposed in this paper. Despite the obvious differences in the motives of the surveyed media users, however, nearly all participants of the study are united in a central feature: their discontent with the quality of journalistic (mass) media, which they voice critically and often in a sharp tone.

Such allegations are usually perceived as irritating by journalistic actors – all the more when established rules of civility fall by the wayside. However, the study clarifies that even provocative comments by online users often intend to convey a relevant concern that is not unlike other forms of media criticism. By trying to understand the reasons for and aims of this Web-based media criticism, the study – with its qualitative research approach – provides new insights and arguments for the development of constructive editorial

strategies for handling user comments – and therefore an empirical data base that appears to be ever more important in an age of fake news and “post-truth” politics.

Anyway, only a small proportion of the interviewed commenters questioned the fundamental existence of journalism. Most of the respondents had thoroughly practical suggestions when asked for their ideas for raising journalistic quality standards: more transparency in the newsroom processes is at the top of their wish list, followed by better error management, more first-hand coverage and also improved possibilities for vocational training – to name just a few examples. More than anything else, the participants of the study expect an increased willingness by journalists to enter into a dialogue, which would be a prerequisite for working on solutions for the critical issues at stake. From the perspective of the users, such willingness is hardly discernable at the moment – at least in German-language newsrooms.

Without question, journalism would gain a lot if the industry representatives took this admonition seriously and lent an open ear occasionally to their most obnoxious critics. Feedback and transparency – this has also been illustrated by the empirical study – could form the first step for disappointed media users to clarify obvious misconceptions about practical work processes in the newsroom and therefore form a basis for confidence-building initiatives, which would be so important for the journalistic profession in the current state of change. Of course, it is not easy for journalists to enter into a constructive dialogue of their own free will, when they are subjected to diffuse criticism and hate speech. On the basis of the realized interviews, however, it can be demonstrated that most of the disruptive commenters have a clear need to exchange opinions. Indeed, many of them proceed in an earnestly reflected manner, using verbal provocation as nothing more than a consciously used means to generate attention in the often confusing discursive spaces of the digital present. The specific goals and motives of single “warriors of faith” only become comprehensible when they are listened to – at least for a restricted period of time. In the study presented here, at any rate, this strategy has proved successful. Naturally, empirical journalism and media ethics research must be prepared to assist each of the actor groups involved in this process. Requisite future research initiatives should include, among other things, more detailed investigations of the specific mechanisms of (functional and dysfunctional) feedback loops in practical news-work (for example, with the help of an in-depth analysis of selected cases in problematic issue fields), an identification of best-practice examples of newsroom transparency as well as a broader assessment of the potentials of user participation as a vehicle for media accountability (as compared to more traditional forms of journalistic quality management).

Notes

1. The author was supported by Miriam Bunjes, Michael Hackl and Susanne Behrens in various phases of the research process. They deserve his heartfelt gratitude!
2. All direct quotations without a detailed reference have been extracted from the interviews conducted for this study.

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