From Swarm Intelligence to Swarm Malice: An Appeal

Stephan Weichert¹,²

Abstract
In social networks, controversy, provocation, and incitement mutate quickly to an explosive mixture. Journalists, who aim for a factual moderation, are often highly frustrated to meet the criticism of trolls and haters. The essay addresses the following questions: How can newsrooms cope with the massively growing feedback from users? What responsibility carries the media and the civil society in designing a constructive net debate culture? And are there alternatives to foster an open-minded public discourse?

Keywords
social media, debate culture, digital journalism, trolling, dialogization

Trolling and Hate Speech in the “Digital Mediapolis”

Altogether, 359 Likes were counted for Timon Ruge’s Facebook post after he had announced, on June 12, that the editors of the daily Luebeck News would not post contributions on the refugee problem any longer. The online editor of the regional newspaper feared further hate speech comments by his Facebook community in response to the reporting on a Luebeck asylum home for 600 refugees.

“These polemical excesses” Mr Ruge wrote in the post, “contradict our netiquette and the otherwise friendly and factual culture of dialogue on this channel that we want to continue to cultivate” (Ruge, 2015). The reason for the sudden stop was the mass of hate, which Ruge and his editorial crew were no longer capable of handling.

By liking the post, at least 359 readers agreed with the fact that their local newspaper would no longer tolerate this kind of verbal attack. However, most of the 171 comments and lots of co-comments that still can be found below Mr Ruge’s Facebook post give a different impression of the moods on the social media platform of Luebeck’s publishing house, which has experienced at times in recent months.

Especially, the alleged “Luegenpresse” was showered this time with plenty of malice and criticism by the “social media mob.” Facebook-allegations included the accusation that the press “conceals problems” and “indulges hatred,” that the editors are lacking “a backbone,” or that “journalism normally works differently” (Ruge, 2015).

Mr Ruge’s team replied to the comments repeatedly that his editorial staff is of course continuing its reports about the asylum politics on the newspaper’s homepage—just not on their own Facebook page. However, the answer could not calm down the situation: The editorial staff was still verbally attacked, the accusations of self-censorship even accelerated. Already at this point, none of the disputants seemed emotionally uninvolved.

To understand the current dynamics of the digital debate culture (Weichert, 2014), we should take a closer look through the glasses of British scholar Roger Silverstone (2006). He described “Mediapolis” as a global, geography-free space projecting itself as a virtual political agora complementary to the real world. Unlike democratic communication modeling based on the ideas of the ancient Greek polis (Habermas, 1962), the digital transition allows people suddenly to gather and participate without being present in one physical location: Nearly anybody who wants to be involved can publish, interact, and debate within an imaginary but nonetheless real communication space—thus, for Silverstone, the (digital)

¹Hamburg Media School, Germany
²Hochschule Macromedia, University of Applied Sciences, Germany

Corresponding Author:
Stephan Weichert, Department of Digital Journalism, Hamburg Media School, Finkenau 35, 22081 Hamburg, Germany.
Email: s.weichert@hamburgmediaschool.com
media transform the world into a global habitat, by acting as agents and central interfaces in the mediation and interpretation of meaning—be it with moral, political, or cultural impact.

In his lucid analysis on “Media and Morality. On the rise of the Mediapolis,” Silverstone’s most important question remains Under what moral terms can and should the mass media contribute to social integration? Similar to the early ideas of Marshall McLuhan (1964) who imagined our environment as exclusively accessible through media, also Silverstone doesn’t think only in technological terms but defines “experience-ability” in categories of social processes, human interaction, and political-economic coordinates: In the so-called Mediapolis language and communication are the most important tools, and that’s the reason why each individual participates automatically in the negotiation of social meaning. Silverstone traces the impact not only of journalistic media on our daily lives back to the fact that they have the ability of agenda setting just as well as they could suppress and manipulate politics, markets, and consumers.

Although Silverstone’s media criticism is more than a decade old, it hasn’t aged a day. Even if it may seem somewhat abstract or unworldly to journalistic professionals, his plea to build an “ethic of hospitality and justice” for our globalized digital media culture is quite up to date. Moreover, it could be a key element for finding solutions mitigating the turmoil in German newsrooms that editors are currently facing. As many areas on the Internet will remain wild and impetuous, Silverstone’s approach is still useful as an intellectual starting point to better reevaluate the future of our digital debate culture, in general. Second, it reveals itself as a concrete proposal for the scope of actions on how editors can cope with their user’s interference.

It is getting more and more familiar that readers perpetually obtain position toward different subjects by clicking on the Like button on Facebook, by commenting, sharing posts, and retweeting to express mutual sympathy or antipathy. But the intensity and the dynamics with which they express their opinions within the newly arisen “Digital Mediapolis” (Weichert, Kramp, & von Streit, 2010) have intensified for some time. The sound in the “Filter Bubble” (Pariser, 2011) gets more and more unfiltered, impetuous, and damaging. At the very moment, these dysfunctional developments of social media debate culture have to be taken seriously because they quicken the disruption process of the positive assumption that user participation might reveal itself in an egalitarian “network society” (Castells, 1996) instead of a bad awakening in the middle of mistrust, slurring, and hate speech. As trolls and haters prove just about the opposite of the utopia of a functioning digital agora, the dream of a “participatory journalism” (Sehl, 2013; Singer et al., 2011) seems to be at stake here, too—or at least turns out to be a one-way street.

It is only natural that for many editors, the fostering of public discourse dealing with troublemakers gives them a feeling of a litmus test. This is also because, in dealing with alleged like cartels and troll factories, the technical systems are getting to their limits. Through this trend, some see the journalistic ecosystem seriously disturbed. Others see an attack on the identity of journalism itself or fear at least a decrease in its professionalism. Probably somewhere in between lies the truth. As a matter of fact, the strikes are coming closer. For those professionals who are trying to fight their way back at the social media front, the involvement of users can be somewhat time-consuming. But most of all, it can create turmoil in the newsroom and prevent journalists from their actual work.

So, it is no wonder that many editors grumble when they have to moderate forum comments on shiftwork. It is understandable, because someone who is mowing verbal weed for hours, eventually clicks away anything, even the constructive contributions.

Has Dialogization Failed?

The so-called “dialogization” (cf. Holquist, 1981) between news media and its public is—from an interdisciplinary perspective—a widely compatible and quite new concept for journalism because it highlights the communicative relationship between professional journalists and recipients in terms of exchange intensity and democratic potentials. Still, “participatory journalism” (Domingo et al., 2008) implies not only a neutral dialogue but also criticism as well as antisocial articulations of opinions or malicious notes (cf. Cheng, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2015). Without doubt, newsroom editors still earn a lot of praise for their journalistic efforts to engage their audiences; they have a lot of traffic and feedback to handle from sharing their content through social media, and they even benefit from valuable hints from an audience they could even involve into further research and investigation.

However, one could argue that dialogization has failed its purpose somehow: In reference to Habermas’ (1981) efforts in describing a theory of communicative action, the mere emergence of recent phenomena in deliberative democracies such as hate speech, shitstorms, and sedition are about to prove a whole line of scholars wrong—straightforward spoken, the digital public sphere as we know it might turn the widely spread doctrine of the Frankfurt School upside down. It seems pretty obvious that the model of a deliberative democracy for a very large part of the digital community isn’t worth a penny.

Certainly, this doesn’t have to mean much—as it is just a snapshot in media history, and so far it had worked out pretty well. Above all, every social media shitstorm often fades away as quickly as it had appeared. But for quite a long time now, it has been more than a rumor that professional journalists are in despair in dealing with their readers’ and viewers’ comments. And that the gap to the public might become rather bigger than lesser (cf. Weichert, Kramp, & Welker, 2015). And this tendency alone might be a reason
why the model of building communities in the public sphere has to be reviewed from a more antithetic point of view remains significant.

At least in German newsrooms, hardly anyone dares to speak out loud that many of them might have chosen the wrong track and that especially “social media editors” have now reached a dialogical low. The level of commenting is just drifting so drastically into a bottomless pit, no one had considered. Nor that it could be so exhausting for journalists to face the public dialogue continuously. The hope that the majority of users would be brought to reason was probably greater than the fear that the “dialogization” might fail completely.

On the other hand, the audience does adopt its role as a criticism and monitoring facility of the press only selectively and far less than one might have expected. This is the reason why the new-fangled paradigm of the audience as the “fifth force” is ludicrous (cf. Hamann, 2015). As much as this phrase may unfold some rhetorical charm in scholarly circles, it is still unrealistic and somewhat ridiculous. A new journalistic separation of powers, where users tend to be the critics of journalists (or even politics, economics) would not be given until there is a critical mass that, first, would bring itself in the public discourse less occasionally and, second, the bulk of hate comments would not predominate such as in the actual refugee discourse.

In debates, most users want to confer visibility to their own viewpoints. And for that, every means seems justifiable—the louder and more provocative, the better. Therefore just a fraction of users are interested on pure arguments based on facts. At the same time, the participation options are just not enough from the perspective what the audience really wants. There is obviously a lack of concrete option where participation in journalism is both encouraged and challenged. Only a few independent German journalistic outlets like Krautreporter offer a clever and well-thought strategy for public dialogue.4

So far standard practices are cumbersome, especially with controversial issues such as the Ukraine crisis, the civil war in Syria, the right-wing Pegida movement or—as in the case of the Luebeck News—the current asylum policy of the German Federal Government. Again and again, one can witness exuberant verbal excesses, which are hard to manage for most editors.

Often a shitstorm follows the next, numerous hate speeches reach a level that smaller newsrooms quickly run out of breath and staff. As a rule, the editorial management fails because in cases of crisis coverage fairly not all user comments can be spotted, let alone be weighted according to a systemic scheme, to curb the criticism waves. And this dilemma applies to almost all newsrooms, at least in Germany.

As it seems, the dream of swarm intelligence has transformed into a nightmare of swarm malice. Especially in the refugee debate with tons of xenophobic commentaries, the Internet shows its potential for cruelty and confusion as such commentaries are loaded with historical ignorance and conspiracy theories.

So it is no surprise that many digital journalists are taken back, some even overwhelmed by this feedback. Others go home with a pain in the stomach and a sense of not having done anything really productive. Behind closed doors, a lot of them say that they have to do the dirty work in the newsroom while their colleagues still work on the roads for real reports and features to carry out research or to make videos.

In the permanent mockery from the social media mob, there is no attack on freedom of the press, but one that appeals to the journalistic conscience: that on-site reports now more often apply as a sole journalistic luxury shows once again why the foundations of the profession waver. One reason might be the tunnel vision of many journalists that worsens the less contact they have with an unprejudiced audience. Instead, most of them have to deal with trolls while, conversely, even fewer and fewer users hardly get in touch with independent journalism. If it were up to the search engine optimizers, the quality of journalism would probably be measured only by its discoverability on the net or its sharing-index but not represent a value in itself, no matter how hard journalists are investigating.

Obviously, the prototypical Internet user is different than the one many editors would prefer alias one that takes part in serious discussions and in the best case is still willing to pay money for it. An army of Jacks of all trades that help decreasing the editors’ work, and that is rewarded in the end. That was the ideal for many journalists for quite a long time. Then they went into the gullies of the social networks where people are molested, harassed, and bullied—and that’s when their idols have been killed.

Brutalization of Morals on the Net

That might be one of the reasons why many German newsrooms are currently thinking about early warning systems for—how they call it contemptuously—“loser-generated content.” They want to develop internal codes of conduct for criticism waves in order to build up a system of trust factors, also giving the constructive comments more space. But with media technologies emerging so quickly most editors struggle with inventing adequate rules, so that the actual netiquettes often seem out of fashion and useless. Were Snapchat or WhatsApp, half a year ago, was hardly a concern, today many newsrooms are hot to use these platforms as additional distribution channels. But with these channels, the quality of the net debate changes abruptly.

In some newsrooms, there currently exist endeavors to cast the staff’s intuitive habits toward social networks in fixed guidelines. Thus, the social media team of the German public broadcaster Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR) tries to get ahead of “criticism waves and shitstorms”—by means of an internal memo.5 In addition to the existing guidelines,
which are available on their website,\textsuperscript{6} several comment strategies are recommended for the NDR staff to ensure a civilized discourse in the user’s section: “If a newsroom staff handles criticism transparently, objectively and friendly, experience shows that debates proceed more civilized and ebb away faster,” according to the memo. “Obvious campaigns for issues that have not taken place on the channel, in particular conspiracy theories and hate speech, can be deleted”.

It might be a quiet hope that through this kind of well-intentioned guidelines, the editorial staff gets verbal attacks gradually under control. And, at least, it’s a start. To civilize the discourse carefully but at the same time not restrict the joy of taking part in debates, the evil must be tackled at its root. And here again the approach of Silverstone comes into play: What is needed is not exactly scattered rules of how editors can survive a single shitstorm. If the project of a pluralistic Digital Mediapolis is meant to succeed in the long run, also users must learn to deal with each other in a sensitive and respectful way. Therefore, a peaceful coexistence is based on an outbalanced relationship of closeness and distance, which characterizes those forms of interaction in digital communications that are aiming to extreme excitement, agitation, anonymity, and voyeurism in relation to the addressees, but also require personal care, tolerance, and a high level of empathy on behalf of the sender at the same time.

In Silverstone’s world of thoughts, it is just this balance of moral power that finds its explosive force in the self-responsibility of each individual when it comes to rules that are designed to help sustaining the vision of a digital community. The social value of public discourse and its vulnerability to influences of all stripes are the two sides of same coin. It needs to find its equilibrium in a \textit{digital code of social ethics} that obliges users to a strong civil society engagement.

The consistency of public is changing constantly, and so is the digital sphere. Therefore, it is no coincidence but more the result of a permanent evolutionary process that social media bear a relatively uncontrollable, emotion-loaded crowd that, in a way, requires its own moral code as a community. A \textit{digital code of social ethics} could be one critical prerequisite for a social contract that also takes journalism—not necessarily participatory journalism but journalism in general—into responsibility. Digital journalism should be seen as an important cornerstone of a deliberative democracy by contributing to repair the defects in public debate and foster social integration.

Journalistic media are not meant to punish unwanted users with ignorance but to strengthen the involvement of constructive users who want to comment more and even participate in the journalistic production process. It lies in the journalist’s accountability to sort out what’s civil discourse and mere “bullshit” (cf. Nielsen, 2015), what’s hate speech and sincere critic, what’s legal and what should be banned, what’s private communication, and what’s publicly relevant.

I think, one of the main reasons for the growing antisocial debate culture in social networks might just be that the public and private sphere of users are no longer separated clearly. Any comment of a private user in social forums is also publicly available for all other users. But even a private tweet from, let’s say, a politician usually also seeks to influence the political agenda. And each Facebook post from a journalist is never just a private matter—or is it?

It is the twilight zone of what is publicly accessible and what is private, and this can be confusing for most users. Moreover, it can be considered a major cause of the brutalization of morals. Because only a few users consider it necessary at all to mince words and not to commit themselves to even a certain etiquette, the tone is getting rougher and the slugfest has become tougher.

In this respect, to many observers, it is clear that it is simply not enough for establishing an intact culture of debate to hope that at some point the growing anger in the comment sections will just fade away. To cut the wire to the audience instead would be far too radical, albeit an understandable step of total capitulation. Ultimately, the censorship reproach is a favorite among users. The suppression of free speech and especially counter-speech is regarded by many as an interference in the freedom of expression. Therefore, it is also seen as an attack on our democratic set of values, which causes even more agitation and vulgarity and gives the discussion about the “Luegenpresse” new impetus.

To other users, it seems that editors buckle before the trolls (with which they are not entirely wrong) or they don’t back down against those who subvert a committed discourse intentionally—as the Luebeck News were accused of lately. Against the troll group, these users complain, the editors show a weakness that has the opposite effect on a debate with equal footing. Rather than dealing with the troublemakers by changing factual arguments, the editors consequently censor themselves. Not surprisingly, both camps are disappointed in the end. And the newsrooms gain nothing. On the contrary, they are risking that readers and viewers avert their media brands permanently.

So one of the most important questions might be \textit{Do journalists expect too much of their audience?} Probably. Are there constructive, inspiring, witty user contributions on the net at all? Of course. But probably less than what journalists wish for. And what do editors hope for by actually letting the users participate? If the dialogue on an equal footing for the newsroom staff is mandatory, isn’t there a danger of depriving them gradually of their own autonomy? Or does it come to the point sometime where users are to be persuaded to pay for their exclusive participation—a keyword here might be “club culture”? And does this mean, conversely, that media companies should cancel the dialogue with its users, if they’re realizing that their investment in social media departments does not pay off in hard currency?
Solution Approaches for a New Net Debate Culture

Of course, the debate culture could also be redirected. For one, an ethical training for users would be helpful. In order to create a fair debate culture (also between users and journalists), it takes an active participation in the discourse of civil society about the value of public opinion. An approach of such digital media literacy would be to transmit the responsibility to the audience in the sense that it has to accept its new role constructively and recognize a need for development first at itself. The crux could thus be the closeness of tongue between users and journalists. When media professionals succeed not to treat their users from top-down and perhaps meet the level and tone of the current discussions, without being disrespectful, something changes.

An embracing and courageous moderation that is becoming more customary in debate forums from “Bild.de” to “Zeit Online” is another sustainable measure. Trolls are demotivated and toddle of while serious debaters feel more encouraged. The same applies to the creative exchange with users that already happens in the ideation processes like the younger newsroom staff of “ZDF heute+” is trying to achieve. What also seems to work are ironic additions like the Facebook page of the newspaper Die Welt called “The Die WELT intern,” which highlights the worst comments in a kindly but cynical tone.7

Finally, there is still an open discussion about the required entry of real names that gives hope for a way out of the dilemma. Just recently, the political magazine Cicero has successfully implemented the scheme and allows (in principle) no more anonymous user comments on its own website. This has many advantages and not only protects the nerves of the commentators. In effect, the editors do not even have the embarrassment of being prosecuted for improper comments that the users are posting.

But perhaps the commitment to one’s own opinion by submitting a means of identification is not radical enough. A third path could be an automated channeling of user feedback through technological filter systems, that is, an algorithm that not only separates the good from the bad wording by language or syntax recognition, but one that also sorts out and eventually extinguishes troll activity. This of course raises ethical questions of the influence of algorithms on our news ecosystem. But, on the other hand, haven’t they been a most common tool in the daily newsroom practice ever since editorial algorithms have emerged?

Some time ago, smart developers of the German data journalism agency Open Data City have tested such a tool with the name “Troll throttle,” with whom not only trouble-makers can be identified but also be relegated. On their blog, Michal Kreil and Linus Neumann invited trolls to enter captchas—aka security codes to differentiate between man and machine—and although these entries were probably correct, the trolls were repeatedly prompted to enter again—until they gave up over sheer frustration.

Another experimental setting of the “Troll throttle” was the “hellbanning.” Trolls were exclusively presented contributions from other trolls—out of the so-called “comment hell”—so that they voluntarily ran away due to lack of responses from the (normal) rest of the community. These form of intelligent ghettoization seems pretty unfair but as an extremely effective variant.

After all, what analysis and experiments can teach us about the aberrant behavior of trolls and haters, a system of reward and punishment might succeed. At least field tests (cf. Cheng et al., 2015) show that such stimulations from learning psychology actually help to reduce antisocial behavior in diverse comment areas. If trolls have been withdrawn from their platforms of public denunciation (in accordance with the maxim “do not feed the trolls!”), they eventually lose the desire to stir things up, whereas an excessively harsh communication climate in the forums rather helps to exacerbate their unwelcome activities. However, the implementation of a so-designed automated or half-automated users’ feedback system bears an evolutionary potential that journalists might focus on.

Conclusion: The Refugee Debate as Symbol of a Journalism Crisis?

A relevant surplus for science, society, and journalism is the sharpening of communication skills toward a qualitative valuable participatory culture of user contributions that are accountable for the functionality of a morally intact “Digital Mediapolis”: “Understanding how social users may steer individual discussion can help us better quantify their influence on other users” say Cheng et al. (2015, p. 11). In this regard, actual empirical research shows that participation of the audience does not necessarily bring advantages for the social media staff in newsrooms (cf. Lilienthal, Weichert, Reineck, Sehl, & Worm, 2014). First and foremost, editors are confronted with dialogic diarrhea in a delicate manner that demands for solutions at a professional level. Here, in particular, the handling of interferers such as trolls, haters, conspiracy theorists, and politically offensive extremists flag the spectrum of possible unsavory utterances.

In that sense, the participation also means a radical change of the journalistic mindset, and thus lots of editorial challenges for audience engagement. As the irritating influence of interferers may cause one of these problems being described as “antisocial media,” (Bartlett, Reffin, Rumball, & Williamson, 2014; cf. Cheng et al., 2015) it will always lead to “dissocial discourse” (cf. Lilienthal et al., 2014, p. 364) which is characterized by a poisoned climate for discussions within a community. Linked to this is the risk of digital media to unintentionally become a forum for political extremism or victim of smear campaigning that has a negative impact in the negotiation of social meaning.
No matter what compromises have to be found in the near future, currently almost all responsible media professionals affirm the following: They do not want to dismiss the comment option for their users, and they rely on getting debates under control (cf. Lilienthal et al., 2014, p. 131). However, the real problem is that nobody knows exactly what the majority of users really want, because, even in surveys, usually only a minority reports their honest opinion. So it is not unlikely that many users want simply to be left alone and certainly do not want to make use of their voice.

The idea that participation in this seemingly libertarian communication space leads automatically to digital maturity is a fatal fallacy. The most important learning of the emotional debate about the refugee crisis is that the technological evolution makes the public discourse in terms of class contradictions, race, gender, and origin neither egalitarian nor economically free. It is clear that the digital public sphere—a “Digital Mediapolis”—has emerged from digital corporations that are dedicated to profit maximization and has made the undermining of journalistic independence not only possible—but also due to political interest groups’ intervention even socially acceptable. Right now, the digital media culture turns out to be overrun by a monoculture of Black and White, one that shows itself not only completely commercial and malignity-driven but also in which switching off the dialogue with the users appears to be the last resort.

Therefore, the failed refugee debate in Germany symbolizes ultimately a communication crisis in civil society that troublemakers from the Pegida movement, right-wing parties, and Neonazi trolls are permanently fueling—so that almost everyone from the media is feeling a kind of phantom pain that is due to a failed vision of an egalitarian discourse in the sense of scholars like Silverstone or Castells. However, if we want to find a participatory self-determination under the seal of digitization, our society has to promote a democratic exchange of arguments in their own interest. Even if we take some effort to understand the use of social media in categories of “bullshit” like Nielsen (2015) proposed, it is for sure that the sensibility and tolerance against trolls and haters that is currently demanded of journalists is symptomatic of a grueling debate culture.

So what are the consequences of the kaput debate culture for our democracy and society in total? Maybe none. As it has been pointed out in an interview with the printed issue of “Der Spiegel” with the famous German blogger Sascha Lobo that private individuals can studiously ignore what’s going on in the Internet (cf. Nezi, 2015). This applies even more for baiting that builds up regularly but often subsides just as quickly. However, the psychological obstacles are lowering, because burning refugee homes on the streets seem not that far anymore from digital bullying against refugees on a computer. The recently growing hostility against refugees living in Germany is a consequence of several sexually attacked woman in Cologne and Hamburg on New Year’s Eve and proves just that.

As it seems, the previously rather diffuse social media mob is getting more organized. Therefore, we must not take racist or sexist appeals in social networks too lightly. Because as an active part of society, everyone has, says Lobo, also “a kind of duty” (Nezi, 2015, p. 17) in dealing with digitization. That is why every citizen carries always an ethical, even an ethical self-responsibility when it comes to digital dialogue.

Apparently every time shitstorms, hate speech, and sedition are breaking the rules, the moral balance in the digital public sphere suddenly gets disturbed. For the sake of our digital community, we need to pass these increasing tests of our social integrity in holding up with our value system. In deliberative democracies, this even means to foster, like in real life, more social engagement and civil courage in the refugee crisis—if it seems appropriate. A digital set of ethical codes could help us with building a social contract that is aiming for new moral standards in the digital era. Journalism should help with that.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. “Luegnerpresse” (“lying press”) is a war parole that was used during World War I (WWI) to denounce the press of the Weimar Republic as war opponents. Under the Nazi regime, it stigmatized publications of rivals as communist and Jewish. Nowadays, it is an increasingly popular swearword among Neonazi groups and members of the East German Pegida movement for abusing the allegedly wrongdoings and news biases of contemporary “mainstream media.” It is abused especially in the context of the asylum policy of the German Government (Haller, 2015).

2. Cf. http://www.ln-online.de (accessed 2 February 2016).

3. Cf. https://www.facebook.com/LNOnline?ref=nf (accessed 2 February 2016).

4. “Krautreporter” hit the headlines in September 2014, when they raised more than €1 million from crowdfunding to start their user-friendly platform.

5. The nonpublic memo is present to the author. One reason for the memo was the circumstance that Anja Reschke, editor-in-chief of the investigative Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR) program “Panorama,” set-off a heavy shitstorm after she commented on the reactions to the German asylum crisis August 2015. She was the first TV anchor who publicly dismissed public hate speech and called for a “rebellion of the decent,”

6. Cf. http://www.ndr.de/service/technische_hilfe/Kommentar-und-Foren-Richtlinien,richtlinien101.html (accessed 2 February 2016).

7. The Facebook Page “The DIE WELT Intern” (“Der DIE WELT Praktikant”) is an independent spin-off from the daily newspaper Die Welt that is published by Axel Springer SE.
It demonstrates how a courageous and sometimes cynical moderation helps to retain trolls and haters under control. Cf. https://www.facebook.com/weltpraktikant (accessed 2 February 2016).

8. Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZG4FawUtYPA (accessed 2 February 2016).

References

Bartlett, J., Reffin, J., Rumball, N., & Williamson, S. (2014). Anti-social media. London, England: Demos. Retrieved from http://www.demos.co.uk/files/DEMOS_Anti-social_Media.pdf

Castells, M. (1996). The rise of network society. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Cheng, J., Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, C., & Leskovec, J. (2015). Antisocial behavior in online discussion communities. arXiv:1504.00680 [cs.SI]. Retrieved from http://www.cs.cornell.edu/~cristian/Antisocial_Behavior_files/antisocial_behavior_trolls.pdf

Domingo, D., Quandt, T., Heinonen, A., Paulussen, S., Singer, J. B., & Vujnovic, M. (2008). Participatory journalism practices in the media and beyond: An international comparative study of initiatives in online newspapers. Journalism Practice, 2, 326–342.

Habermas, J. (1962). Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft [The structural transformation of the public sphere. An inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society]. Neuwied am Rhein, Berlin: Hermann Luchterhand.

Habermas, J. (1981). The theory of communicative action, Vol. 1: Reason and the rationalization of society. Boston, MA: Beacon.

Hall, G. (2015, January 3). “Lügenpresse!”—Ein neuer alter Kampf! [“Lying press!”—A new old battle cry] Die Presse. Retrieved from http://diepresse.com/home/zeitgeschichte/4628933/Lugenpresse-Ein-neuer-alter-Kampf

Hamann, G. (2015, June 25). Alles Lügen? Woher kommt das neue Misstrauen gegen die Medien? [All lies? Where does the new distrust of the media?]. Die Zeit, 26, 8–9.

Holquist, M. (1981). Dialogism: Bakhtin and his works. London, England: Routledge.

Lilienthal, V., Weichert, S., Sehl, A., & Worm, S. (2014). Digitaler Journalismus. Dynamik—Teilhabe—Technik [Digital journalism. Dynamic—Participation—Technology]. Leipzig, Germany: Vistas.

McLuhan, M. (1964). Understanding media: The extensions of man. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Nezi, A.-K. (2015). “Wir haben eine Bringschuld.” Interview with Sascha Lobo [“We have an obligation.” Interview with Sascha Lobo]. Der Spiegel, 34, 17.

Nielsen, R. K. (2015). Social media and bullshit. Social Media + Society, 1–3, 2056305115580335.

Pariser, E. (2011). The filter bubble: How the new personalized web is changing what we read and how we think. New York, NY: Penguin Press.

Ruge, T. (2015). In eigener Sache. Facebook-Page der Lübecker Nachrichten Online [On our own behalf. Facebook Page of Luebeck News Online]. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/LNOnline/posts/10152869539382231

Sehl, A. (2013). Partizipativer Journalismus in Tageszeitungen. Eine empirische Analyse zur publizistischen Vielfalt im Lokalen [Participatory journalism in daily newspapers. An Empirical Analysis of media diversity in local journalism]. Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos.

Silverstone, R. (2006). Media and morality: On the rise of the Mediapolis. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Singer, J. B., Hermida, A., Domingo, D., Heinonen, A., Paulussen, S., Quandt, T., . . .Vujnovic, M. (2011). Participatory journalism: Guarding open gates at online newspapers. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Weichert, S. (2014). Demokratie als Shitstorm? Implikationen zur politischen Debattenkultur durch Social Media. [Democracy as shitstorm? Implications for a political debate culture through social media]. Communicatio Socialis, 47, 203–213.

Weichert, S., Kramp, L., & von Streit, A. (2010). Digitale Mediapolis. Die neue Öffentlichkeit im Internet [Digital Mediapolis. The new public sphere on the Internet]. Köln, Germany: Herbert von Halem.

Weichert, S., Kramp, L., & Welker, M. (2015). Die Zeitungsmacher: Aufbruch in die digitale Moderne [The newspaper makers: Entering digital modernity]. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS.

Author Biography

Stephan Weichert, PhD, Hamburg University is a professor of journalism and digital communication at Macromedia University Hamburg. He serves as academic director of the graduate program for digital journalism at Hamburg Media School. He is founder of VOCER.org and VOCER Innovation Medialab, an innovation hub for journalism projects in the field of innovation and entrepreneurship. He is author and editor of numerous professional and specialist books and articles about digital journalism and the transformation of the public sphere. Among his research interests are social media and the public sphere, digital journalism, digital media ethics, automation and algorithms in journalism, news games and gamification, innovation management, and entrepreneurship in digital media.