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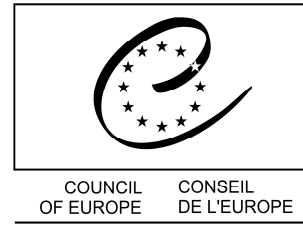
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Trust in the media

Introduction

Digital media, in particular online media, plays a major role in our daily activities (communication, information and education, e-commerce or entertainment). New types of content and of distribution appear every day. New providers emerge, for instance search engines that present increasingly important gatekeepers and content carriers that transform into integrated companies that also offer content. Furthermore, users themselves are becoming producers and blogs – even though most of the successful content is still made by journalists – become more influential in the political discussion. During the first years of this digital Revolution national and European policy makers focused mainly on how to ensure access for all citizens to these new media offers. In the meantime, broadband accesses have reached more and more households and this objective can in many European states be regarded as widely achieved. In consequence, more attention is now directed to the quality of content and on how to empower the users to make a conscious choice between the extensive media offers and to evaluate them critically.

Unquestionably, a critical, self-determined and informed decision of the user in particular in the area of news, education but also in entertainment or e-commerce is essential in order to get full benefit from the opportunities of new media. The Council of Europe as well as the European Union and national governments have launched various initiatives to strengthen media literacy at all levels of society[1]. However, faced with an increasing number of offers even the most media literate user is forced to make his or her decision mainly according to previous experience and according to confidence. It is almost impossible for the user to gather all information which is necessary for an objective selection process based on an analysis of the offer and a comparison with other services (indicators could be: political and financial independence, up-to-date, journalistic quality etc.). Therefore, it is essential to create new mechanisms and regulatory frameworks that allow the user to recognise a reliable news offer in the digital world. Key questions in this context could be: How can the number of reliable offers be increased and can they be made traceable and visible for the user?

In the first half of 2007 the German EU presidency held a media expert conference with the title "more trust in content – the potential of co- and self-regulation in digital media"[2] that took place in Leipzig from 9 to 11 May 2007. During that seminar more than 250 European media experts analysed different ways of ensuring trust in media content and of guaranteeing variety in the digital media. In the meantime, the discussions have proceeded and some of the announced activities have been successfully implemented. However, the questions brought up in Leipzig are still valid. The revolution of the media landscape continues. With the appearance of a new offer policy makers are challenged anew to search for new ways of ensuring diversity and reliability and to adapt and optimise already launched initiatives. On the basis of the conclusions of the Leipzig conference the German delegation has identified four main subjects that from our point of view present cornerstones of a reliable new media environment and that could be used to structure the discussions and the exchange of views and experiences during the ministerial conference. The first subject relates to content that is geared to the needs of children, young people and other groups with special needs. The second area deals with role of trusted providers for example public service media providers. The third part concentrates on the role of self-regulation schemes and the fourth part analyses the necessary conditions for an effective co-regulation system. Co- and self regulation are not only introduced by the revised EU-Directive on audiovisual media services[3] but also the European Convention on Transfrontier-Television[4] that is currently being revised and encourages the member states to make use of co- and self-regulation as a mean of implementation.

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[1] See with further reference:
http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/Themes/Education_en.asp
Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions: A European approach to media literacy in the digital environment COM (2007) 883 final, 20.12.2007;
[2] for further information see: http://www.leipzig-eu2007.de
[3] Directive 89/552/EEC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3.10.1989 on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Services Directive) last amended by Directive 2007/65/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11.12.2007
[4] see: European Convention on Transfrontier Television, Strasbourg, 5.5.1989; Text amended according to the provisions of the Protocol (ETS No. 171) which entered into force, on 1 March 2002

Content that suits children's needs

A promising way of opening up the potential of the digital world for children is to offer them as much content as possible which is geared to their needs. Thus, they can at the same time be protected from possible harmful content. The German Federal Government has had good experience with the initiative "Ein Netz für Kinder"[5] that was launched in Leipzig during the conference. In the framework of a public private partnership this initiative established a safe surfing area for children (www.fragFINN.de), with a large number of offerings, suitable for children that are monitored by a team of media education experts. This white-list can be searched by a search engine suitable for the search habits of children. Furthermore, the initiative provides a technical tool for parents to define this list as a user profile of their children and to restrict their surfing area to the listed offers. Part of the initiative is a newly established funding scheme of the German Federal Government for online content for children. We believe that "Ein Netz für Kinder" is an important step towards a safe, extensive and high-quality surfing area for children in Germany. White list content can enable young children to make use of new media offers and to utilise their potential for education, creativity and communication.

The German delegation encourages the exchange of best practices in this field. We propose including all stakeholders in particular content providers in the debate. White-list content can only be an additional measure to create a safe surfing environment especially for young children. Clearly, they can only be restricted in their choice until a certain age. Such initiatives should be accompanied by other media literacy initiatives.

Regarding the creation of content for children, practical experience in Germany has shown that it is important to involve children in the creative process. New media offers for children should also relate to the children's high interest for social platforms, where they can create their own content. In this respect it is essential to offer safe surroundings where it is possible to remove content to protect children from cyber bullying or similar dangers. The strengthening of children's sense of responsibility when they create and distribute their own content and when they communicate online is of major importance.

As long as there are no business models for such content, the German delegation regards supporting such offers by governmental means as a way of increasing the volume of content that meets special needs. In addition, already publicly financed providers of digital media have a particular obligation in such a situation. In this context, schools – as the most important conveyors of media literacy – and other educational institutions will play a key role.

Trusted providers

The changed pattern of media use, particularly amongst young people, challenges traditional media providers like broadcasting or press media and their social remit regarding the delivery of information, education, advice and entertainment. Private companies in particular, are faced with difficulties in evolving from traditional to new media because it still seems that there are no sustainable business models for refinancing a wide range of information offers on the Internet.

Various media providers, in particular public service broadcasters should be empowered to respond to the needs of the digital media environment by offering services on the Internet. In this context, the notion of public service value should be further developed. However, this notion must take account of the significant cultural, social and economic differences of the media landscapes in Europe and give European policy makers the possibility to respond to these different conditions.

The existing guarantors for trustworthy, relevant information content and the wide range of offline media are being joined by new providers in the online world, for example non-governmental organisations, initiatives and individual users. This development provides great opportunities in terms of participation on democratic processes or the expression of freedom of speech. Greater presence of established media providers and governmental safeguards should not be allowed to result in new information providers being crowded out or prevented from even developing in the first place. On the contrary, their development should be reinforced. Established institutions that have built up consumers' trust in other contexts than the media, such as libraries, universities, political educations

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[5] for further information the separate information leaflet that will be distributed during the conference and the website of the initiative www.ein-netz-fuer-kinder.de

facilities as well as entrants, such as civil society organisations, non-profit web based media and so on can play an important role as alternative content providers.

Like traditional media these new providers must respect fundamental values protected under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Journalistic standards and transparency safeguards that have been developed in an analogue world also apply in a digital environment. It is a major challenge for policy makers that seek to create more trust and relevance in the new media to strengthen new providers in their role as information handlers and in encouraging them to ensure rights and values.

With regard to the increasing importance and power of the user as a producer and disseminator of content the strengthening of media literacy is essential.

Self-regulation of the industry

The significant role of the industry in the fast development of new media must be recognised. Private companies should therefore be encouraged to pursue innovation and at the same time to fulfil certain fundamental standards and respect the rights of the users and content providers by self regulatory systems. In Europe, many governments have had good experience with self-regulatory mechanisms. Self-regulation is faster and more flexible than governmental regulations, which is of great significance for the Internet and for the fast moving media sector. In Germany, the "Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle Multimedia e.V." (Association "Voluntary Self-Monitoring of Multimedia Providers") that comprises all major Internet providers, is a key player in self- and co-regulation on the Internet. At the European level, associations such as the INHOPE International Association should be further supported.

The ability to develop common values and to commit themselves to these in the context of self-regulation is an important feature of trustworthy information providers. In a self-regulatory system, industry itself assumes responsibility which leads to more trust and confidence in the media. It can therefore have positive effects for the economic success of a company.

Additionally, it can support the implementation of aims set by national or international regulation if certain conditions are given. Self-regulation should as a general rule be effective, transparent and non-discriminatory, independent and accountable. It should also take into account the coordination of different media traditions in Europe. These cultural differences should be respected when common rules and standards are developed at an international level.

New media is characterised by the appearance of completely new stakeholders in the private sector. Among those search engines and electronic programme guides play a significant role. They help users to select between the diversity of offers available (gatekeeper function). Freedom of information, transparency, equal opportunities and non-discrimination are values that should control those services. The German delegation therefore encourages search engines and EPGs to enter into self-regulatory systems as well as traditional content carriers which are increasingly evolving into integrated media companies that also offer content.

Besides, the self regulation of companies is a system that could also be effective for the newest stakeholder in the media landscape: the user. Unlike professional journalists they are not bound by professional ethos. Instead of those professional codes, self-regulation measures that ensure for example the use of filtering software or rating systems should be strengthened. To this end, the users' ability to handle the media must be promoted as well as their understanding for the fundamental values and legal conditions (e.g. copyright law) that are the basis of a trustworthy media.

Trust in the co-operation between government and society

At European level, co-regulation is widely regarded as an effective tool to achieve regulatory objectives. The EU Directive on audiovisual media services proposes co-regulation in the area of protection of minors, human dignity and consumers. Good examples for co-regulation already exist in Europe. For example the regulation of advertising in Great Britain or France, the Dutch NICAM System or the broadcasting and telemedia sector in Germany (The State Media Authorities Commission for the Protection of Minors from harmful content, KJM). Basic requirements for co-regulation systems should be observed. Germany therefore supports the discussions and exchanges

of views at European level regarding minimum standards. These standards however should leave a certain degree of discretion for national policy makers to meet the special requirements of their market.

The discussions in Leipzig resulted in the following list of elements that have been considered as important for an effective co-regulation system: Sufficient incentives for the industry to participate in a co-regulatory system; openness for all participants and transparency of the system; an effective sanction system for implementing the specifications; a governmental regulatory body in the background ("hierarchy shadows"); a complaint system and awareness campaigns; a guaranteed procedure in accordance with the rule of law; evaluation of the results and adaptation of the system if necessary.

These requirements should be recognised as significantly important and should be the starting point for further discussions.

Based on the discussions during the Leipzig media expert conference and the experiences gained with regulating new media in order to create more trust in new media, the German delegation comes to the following conclusions:

- The creation of content that is geared to the needs of children should be strengthened and if necessary publicly supported. White-list content can be a useful contribution among other media literacy initiatives to open up the potential of digital media for young children
- Public service media providers play an important role in the creation of trust in the digital media. The notion of public service value needs further analysis.
- New content providers should be encouraged to respect fundamental values and common journalistic standards. However, they must not be crowded out by over-regulation.
- Self- and co-regulation are effective systems to achieve certain policy aims such as the protection of minors or consumer. To increase the effectiveness of these schemes, the European policy makers should agree on certain minimum standards. New stakeholders such as search engine or EPG providers or the user should be encouraged to enter into self- and co-regulation systems.