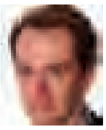
Lagging Behind or Choosing a Different Path? Information Behaviour in Germany



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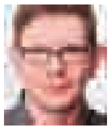

As the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* in 2012 and 2013 both show, Germany is a quite specific case with regard to information behaviour. Germans seem to be more loyal to established (mass media) news sources, and they are less likely to embrace new and individualised news services. This essay starts with a synopsis of the characteristics of Germans' information behaviour and discusses potential reasons for these particularities. This discussion will provide a basis on which to answer the question whether these results indicate that Germans are lagging behind the international trend in the development of news consumption or whether Germans are rather choosing a particular path into the new media environment.

Specific patterns of news consumption in Germany

According to the Reuters Institute news survey, news consumption in Germany is characterised by the following pattern. General interest in news is quite high among Germans; regional news in particular is more important than in any other market, and there is much higher interest in political news than in say the UK.

Consistent with last year, traditional media (TV, radio and newspapers) are particularly strong in Germany: news from newspapers 63% (highest with Japan), radio 51% (second highest after Denmark, clearly above all the other countries), and TV 82% (third highest after Denmark and France) are used by the majority of the German population. On the other hand Germans are least likely to use online news (66%) and second lowest (21%, after France) in social media and blogs. In addition Germany is lowest in tablet use for news as well as in mobile usage for news, and Germans are least likely to pay for digital news. The relatively low level of use of mobile and other online services that are rather characterised by short headlines might be the reason for the finding that Germans are most likely to read longer stories or articles than people in other countries.

In terms of the Reuters Institute user typology, 58% of the German population belong to either the 'traditional only' (33%, highest percentage of all countries) or 'mainly traditional' (25%, second highest) segments of news users. As in other countries this percentage is lower among the youngest age group (20% 'traditional only', 21% 'mainly traditional'). The most frequent segments in the youngest age group are those who combine some traditional and some online sources (in sum 78%); this is an indicator for a pattern of news consumption which represents a balanced functional combination of established mass media and new individualised digital services.

The role of regional information in news consumption

The German information environment (for a recent overview see Schroeder *et al*., 2011) is characterised by the pre-eminent role of regional communication spaces. Starting with the four military zones after the Second World War, the 16 states (*Länder*) of the Federal Republic of Germany still form a constitutive framework for political and cultural life today. This has been mirrored by the development of a highly regionalised newspaper landscape with a dominant role of regional or even local newspapers published by regional or local publishing companies. Over recent decades, and particularly during the recent crisis of newspapers, a major process of concentration has taken place, leading to a landscape that is dominated by a few strong publishing houses; however, this process has not changed the fact that the majority of Germans read 'their' regional newspaper every day. Among the nine countries surveyed, Germany is the European country that comes out highest both in terms of those buying a newspaper once a week (56%) and those with a subscription that includes home delivery (33%).

The development of radio in the western part of the country – until the middle of the 1980s exclusively offered by public broadcasters – reflected the regional structure, too. Public broadcasting stations were founded for each state or in some cases for two or more states. After unification in 1990 this regional structure was applied to the eastern part as well. The legal framework for commercial radio is also defined by each of the single states; thus the most relevant commercial radio stations are acting at a regional level. As a result, apart from a few special interest channels in news, culture and classical music the German radio landscape is almost completely regionalised.

The role of national public television

Besides the strong role of regional information provided by regional newspapers and radio, television established itself as the dominant news source for national and international affairs. This was supported by the strong position of public service television. The main news show of the first national channel (*Tagesschau* on ARD) that has just celebrated its 60th anniversary is by far the most renowned source of information in Germany; this is also true for the younger age group between 14 and 29 years (Hasebrink and Schmidt 2013). For the German television industry the end of this news show at 8.15 p.m. marks the beginning of primetime for almost all channels. In addition, the main news show of the second public channel (*heute* on ZDF) is also established as a major news source. Given these long established benchmarks for television news and some unsuccessful trials with popular news formats, the bigger commercial channels in Germany have also invested considerable efforts in their main news programmes. As a consequence TV news in Germany still stands for high journalistic standards and trust and has a significant impact on public and political debate.

The limited role of public service media in the online world

In some countries relevant established news providers have been the pacemakers of online development. This is particularly true for the UK where the BBC – as the Reuters Institute data show – successfully transferred its leading role as a trusted traditional news source into the online world. In Germany, despite their leading role among the traditional sources, public broadcasters have been seriously limited by European and national regulation in the development of new services. Instead a number of print media publishers and even commercial news channels have become, at a relatively low level, the most important online sources. One can assume that an earlier and more determined engagement of public service broadcasters in the area of online news would have increased the number of users of online news.

The role of early cable and satellite infrastructure

Another specific factor that shaped the development of the German media environment was the early decision to invest heavily in cable infrastructure. As a consequence, as early as the 1990s German television households were able to receive a large number of free German language channels (30–50) while viewers in other European countries like the UK, France, or Italy had far fewer options to choose from. This offers one explanation as to why the more recent developments in media technology and media services – such as pay TV, digital channels, online services – were less successful in Germany than in other European countries. Given the large amount of high-quality programming available it was harder for new services to demonstrate their added-value.

The role of cultural differences

Whenever we observe comparative findings about intercultural differences in communication behaviour it is tempting to attribute them to cultural differences or to specific national 'mentalities'. However there is still no consensus in academic research about how to conceptualise cultural differences in communication behaviour. In addition, given the multicultural structure of many of today's societies, it might be misleading to look for a 'typically German' form of communication behaviour. As comparative communication research consistently shows, differences *within* individual countries are bigger than differences *between* countries. Nevertheless some findings from comparative research can indicate general patterns of media use and communication behaviour. One such observation suggests that Germans are less likely than people in other countries to embrace new technologies and be willing to experiment with all the options they might offer (Livingstone et al., 2011; Hasebrink, 2012); instead there is a certain tendency to emphasise the potential risks of a new technology. It is not possible to provide more than speculative reasons for this kind of intercultural differences; at least it seems to be a plausible indicator within the general syndrome of

German mentality, which might be characterised by a strong need for systematic and reliable structures – technical innovations tend to challenge traditional structures and thus cause some concerns. This interpretation is supported by the finding that Germans are least likely (1%) to state that news should challenge their own views; instead they expect news to be impartial (76%) or to support their own view (23%). The intercultural comparison reveals that Germans rather prefer familiar structures that are not challenged by new exciting technical features or critical opinions.

Conclusions

Taking into account these arguments regarding the German media environment, the specific pattern of news consumption reflected by the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* looks highly plausible. Given a well-established, diverse, and trusted set of information sources, Germans seem to be less likely to change their patterns of news consumption than media users in other countries and the leading information brands from television, newspapers, and radio are doing well in retaining their important role. However, this does not mean that new digital services are not being adopted; Germans tend to keep their loyalties to established media while enhancing and supplementing their range of information sources with digital services. This is even true for the youngest group who, while they are most likely to make use of online news, still combine this with information sources provided by established media brands.

From a comparative point of view the level of digital news consumption is quite low; however, even in this country, the general trend towards digital news sources is obvious. Most Germans integrate online news into their everyday lives; as in other countries almost all members of the younger generations use a wide range of online services and combine these with traditional sources. In this way, established media brands play an important role as indicators of professional journalism – be it online or offline. The low readiness to pay for online news might be a consequence of the fact that most news media are offering their online news for free. Since Germans do actually spend quite a lot of money on newspaper subscriptions and the broadcasting licence fee, one can expect that there will be a shift from paying for these media to new services.

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