

## **“WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN LIVING IN BUBBLES” THE OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS IN THE DIGITALISATION OF MEDIA**

VOLKER SCHAEFFER

*Volker Schaeffer has worked as an editor, host and author at newspapers and media outlets of the German Broadcasting Service ARD for over 30 years. In addition to his teaching assignments, he is a member of the board of the Literaturhaus Köln and a Mercator Science Policy Fellow.*

Mr Schaeffer, what did your working day look like at the beginning of your career in journalism?

It was in 1986, so it was still very analogue: telephones with rotary dials and typewriters with Tipp-Ex correction fluid. At the newspaper, where I started as a reporter, they had just got their first computer: a big box with green flickering text. Articles were saved on floppy discs. In the radio studio there were records and tapes and, the height of digital modernity, the first CDs.

How have digitalisation processes affected you?

These changes took place gradually and you have to differentiate between different digitalisation processes. On the one hand, the digitalisation of production processes, in other words the way newspaper articles and radio reports are created: from typewriters to computers, from tape recorders to hard drives. This transition was largely complete by the year 2000.

And on the other hand, the digitalisation of the creative process and the process of consuming media, i.e. the relationship between the broadcaster and the audience. It has all fundamentally changed. The linear product, completed at a certain time, like a newspaper or a TV programme, has in many cases turned into a non-linear product that is played on different channels and is being constantly changed. There are no deadlines anymore. Things can constantly be updated and there are many outputs and platforms, and the metadata need to be taken into account. This naturally affects the way I think and work – it's no longer linear from the beginning to the finished product that I hand over to the recipient, but rather onion-shaped, circular and with different layers: “If you are interested in that topic then you might be interested in this topic.”

And in the digital age there are of course far more opportunities to investi-

gate and learn about the behaviour of readers, listeners, viewers and users. That, in turn, has an affect on our work: At what point did the user click out when reading an online article? Should I incorporate more cliffhangers to get more attention? What is the relationship between content, form and sales?

I do also notice, however, that certain analogue ways of working have never changed for me.

**Can you give us an example?**

My writings are still created today on a computer as they once were on a typewriter. As a reporter, I have always worked under pressure and with a deadline. Therefore, I had to have a plan from the start for what I wanted to say with my text and how I wanted to say it. So I thought about the content and structure in advance. Of course, it wasn't possible to make major revisions, or at least it would have required a lot of effort when typing on a typewriter. The clock is wound up beforehand and virtually unwinds while you're writing.

In contrast, working digitally is more trial and error. After all, it costs nothing to overturn everything again and correct it.

In my heart I still like to be an anonymous analogue guy with a purposeful way of working. But I am of course also happy about the digital blessings that have made research significantly easier. And about the potentiation of the outputs. And about the possibilities of being able to, as a journalist, better serve people with specific cultural interests.

**What trends do you see in your audience?**

The audience for quality journalism has a lot more opportunities to be a part of the process and contribute with their opinions. The user is also no longer just a receiver, but also a broadcaster: Discourse is possible because there are fast feedback channels. Bertolt Brecht's demand can finally be realised: "Radio must be transformed from a dissemination apparatus into a communication apparatus!"

This is the hope-impregnated answer of someone who is dealing with cultural content that is sometimes difficult to digest: cultural journalism in the digital age offers a platform for contribution and collective intelligence. Society is undergoing a process of continuous enlightenment by digital means.

But attention, time for a reality check: sometimes this dream works, but often it sadly doesn't. Many recipients also don't have any desire to take part in

discussions. They just want to consume something that is on offer or just to let themselves be entertained without becoming active themselves.

**Does quality journalism inevitably suffer if audience wishes, which have now changed, have to be met?**

I would be lying if I said “no” to that now. Journalists today have less time to develop their thoughts, even discuss articles sometimes, let them rest or even reject them.

In the best case, quality journalism changes in the future, because, due to the duplication of outputs with a professional error culture, it is put to the test more often than ever before and contemplates how it can continue improving. For lovers of certain genres and topics, the non-linear expansion of content does of course also offer advantages: People who are interested in, for example, the current “status of the rapprochement between North and South Korea” will find what they want more quickly than in the analogue times of paper. But, given the idea of newspapers or broadcasts being a “lucky dip”, quality journalism misses the opportunity to place other, perhaps unexpected topics next to the desired topic as “eye-catchers”. And hey presto! I'm sitting in my echo chamber of the digital age and am only hearing what I want to hear!

**Do you ever wish you could go back to the time before smartphones and social media?**

Absolutely! Sometimes I dream of Friday afternoons at the news desk of the paper. The articles needed to be written by 3pm but the photos wouldn't have been developed yet. So we would spend time chatting, smoking and finishing off a bottle of sparkling wine. Until 5pm when the photos for the articles arrived and we could finally write the captions. It's unthinkable today!

**Do online firestorms, fake news campaigns and echo chambers affect your everyday work?**

I wouldn't say they “affect” it in the sense of “define” or “dominate” it, but they are of course topics which we also pay attention to as journalists.

People who consume so-called quality journalism are not “better people”. Because even a supposedly enlightened audience is sometimes a little too trigger-happy with the send button, meaning discussions don't always go in the direction of enlightenment and gaining knowledge via dialogue, but rather in the direction of “I'm going to give you media types a piece of my mind!”

With “fake news” or “alternative facts”, the question arises as to whether fact checks are the method of choice, because often, the opponent doesn't want to be won over. As a facts and evidence driven journalist, acknowledging that is very difficult.

And in terms of echo chambers or bubbles, we have always more or less lived in bubbles, both when I used to get my information from the New York Times, The Economist, the Neue Zürcher Zeitung or the Süddeutsche Zeitung in the analogue age, or today from “nerd” communities on digital platforms. It's important to be very aware of it and to have mechanisms for dealing with it. It helps me as a journalist, for example, to not own a car and therefore get around mostly on public transport. On buses and trains I see lots of things that certainly aren't written about in the New York Times or discussed in my bubble.

**Do you expect increased state intervention through laws and regulations here?**

I'm putting my money rather on a mixture of civil society and technology. Do we really need to let every troll provoke a response from us? A certain equanimity, combined with clear requirements for platforms like Facebook and Twitter to deal with abusive comments from users will help immensely. And regarding technology, The Washington Post already has a system in place that scans user comments for offensive phrases, meaning the editors can intervene more quickly than before.

**What role does artificial intelligence play in broadcasting? Is any content already being written by machines?**

In journalism, everything that happens repeatedly, so everything to do with routines, is either already being done by machines or will be in the future. The same is true for the creation of stock exchange reports in business or the results in sport, for example. But if the spectators are fighting with the referee on the football pitch, I still need a good reporter as well.

**Will machines replace humans in the long run?**

They will definitely take over more tasks than in the past. If it goes very well, then we as journalists will have more time for our favourite pastimes, classifying and explaining the world. So, the machines do the boring data work, research and supply the foundation, and journalists then write the article or create content for radio, television or online media. This hybrid journalism has advantages, but it will only work if we learn how to sensibly handle the

algorithms early. As in the past, mechanisation has always lead to an intensification of work.

**How do you think traditional media will develop in the next few years?**

In the best case, we will manage to maintain and maybe even develop a good environment for quality journalism. I'm thinking of a network of expert knowledge and content. Everything else has already changed or will change at a rapid pace. Brands that function as newspapers or radio or television broadcasts will either rapidly disappear in the digital age or will need to be reinvented. There will continue to be listeners, viewers and readers who prefer a linear product, but there will only be fewer of them. Most young people don't have a radio or television, but luckily, that doesn't at all mean that they don't have an interest in information and entertainment – especially in discussions. Debates just don't take place in a small circle anymore, confined to paper or in a broadcast, but rather in digital forums much more purposefully. Because complex and difficult topics have a wider reach online than in mass media.