More relevant today than ever: past, present and future of media performance research
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Editorial

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Abstract
Media performance is constitutive for functioning democracies. But what is the situation regarding media performance in the age of digitalisation? And how can media performance continue to be assured under the current difficult economic conditions for the news industry? In this essay, we give a short overview of how media performance research has developed from the introduction of private broadcasting to the spread of the Internet and social media. In the course of this development, the initial focus of media performance research on media content has broadened to include media quality from the user perspective. We show how the contributions to this thematic issue relate with existing lines of media performance research, but also add new facets to them. Finally, we point to the directions in which research on media performance should evolve in order to keep pace with current developments in the media market.

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Media Performance in Times of Media Change" edited by Melanie Magin (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway) and Birgit Stark (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany).

1. Introduction

The Coronavirus crisis has shown how much modern societies depend on professional news media which provide the citizenry with reliable information. Media of high quality ensure a free political discourse, inform the public comprehensively about current developments, enable citizens' well-informed decision-making, and contribute to the integration of society. Media performance is thus constitutive for functioning democracies. Recently, however, fundamental structural changes such as the digital transformation of news markets and the "platformization" of news distribution and consumption pressurize the media (Diakopoulos, 2019). These developments raise the question how democratically valuable quality of news can be further ensured. The present thematic issue is intended to contribute to taking stock on the state of media performance research.

2. The Development of Media Performance Research

Research on media performance has a long tradition in communication studies. Various approaches to the analysis of media performance have been applied: the deduction of normative standards from democratic theory, the construction of legal norms as criteria of performance, the functional consideration of journalism as a specific system with distinct professional standards, and audience-centred approaches. Quality judgements can be based on very different aspects and levels of journal-

ism as well as on different perspectives. The decisive factor is the perspective from which the evaluation is made because the same product may be considered as high quality by experts, for example, but fail to be accepted by the audience.

Due to the multidimensionality of media performance, but also due to this diversity of approaches is the methodological question of how quality can be measured still being discussed to date. Since the publication of Denis McQuail's seminal book on *Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest* in 1992 (McQuail, 1992), media performance research has evolved into a distinct field of study. However, research on corresponding questions began much earlier. It has repeatedly flared up when structural changes in media systems seemed to endanger the democratic functioning of the media.

One such change in the 1980s was the introduction of commercial broadcasting in many European countries where previously there had been only public service broadcasters. It was widely feared that the public service broadcasters would adapt their supply in content and style to that of the commercial broadcasters which would lead to decreasing media performance (Schatz, 1994). In the meantime, it is not this thesis of convergence in terms of content that is steering the change, but technical media convergence. As a result, new models of editorial organization and cross-media work have led to first serious changes in journalistic quality. The ongoing digitalization, the spread of social media, and the increasing power of intermediaries such as Google and Facebook have led to further serious changes. In recent years, this has strongly changed working conditions, role perceptions, and practices of journalists as well as on the technical, legal, normative, and cultural framework of journalism.

Hence, media performance research received a new facet in the early 21st century when the rise of the Internet raised concerns about the survival of the traditional news media. These suddenly had to compete with numerous content providers online, and their economic basis was threatened by the migration of advertising revenues to the net. The necessity to select from a multiplied supply of both journalistic and non-journalistic sources gave users a more active role in the process of news distribution and consumption. As a result, media performance research came to realize that the highest media performance is of no use if users do not make use of it. This has led to an increased interest in media performance from the user perspective. By strengthening this perspective, media performance research now takes account of the fact that every political information environment has two sides: supply and demand (Van Aelst et al., 2017). However, both sides are still being investigated largely independently of each other: To date, studies regularly focus either on the quality of media content or on performance from the user perspective.

Most recent developments have further strengthened the user perspective in media performance re-

search. The news media have received new competition from the intermediaries—social media, search engines, and news aggregators (Webster, 2010). These are increasingly taking on the role of journalistic gatekeepers and have thus become content providers themselves. A growing number of (particularly younger) recipients consume news (only) online, often approaching them via the intermediaries (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andı, & Nielsen, 2020). In contrast to the social integration function of the news media, it is feared that the intermediaries foster audience fragmentation and ideological polarization since they provide every single user with personalised news (Stark, Stegmann, Magin, & Jürgens, 2020). The popularity of the intermediaries results in an increasing part of the advertising budget being spent for them which further reduces the resources for professional journalism and high media performance significantly (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019). To remain visible for the audience, news media must adapt to social media logics. Softening the news (Otto, Glogger, & Boukes, 2017) might be a strategy to adjust to these rules. These trends, often labelled with buzzwords such as sensationalization, tabloidization, infotainment, or soft news, are not new, but may intensify in times of 'audience metrics' and aggregation of news. This might result in a decline in media performance—and with it in a potential loss of reputation of the news media and users' trust in them. Even though users currently trust the news media more strongly than the intermediaries (Newman et al., 2020), there is great concern about a potential decline in media trust (Strömbäck et al., 2020). It is therefore obvious to link media performance research with research on media trust.

3. Current Perspectives on Media Performance

Media performance research has thus always adapted to current developments of the media markets without forgetting its origins. This characteristic combination of tradition and innovation is also evident in our thematic issue. As the research field as a whole does, it focuses particularly on the supply (content) and demand (user) perspective on media performance. The analyses show how values and norms of journalism change fundamentally in the context of structural changes in different national media environments and which methodological adjustments in research are necessary.

In light of the current platformization, Steiner (2020) examines to what extent traditional indicators need to be modified and expanded in order to adequately analyse the softening of news on social media. Her study thus establishes an urgently needed link between media performance research and research on intermediaries. A content analysis of four German media shows that the softening of political news on social media is less pronounced than often feared.

Udris, Eisenegger, Vogler, Schneider, and Häuptli (2020) take a comparative approach that is rare in media performance research so far. Their content analysis ex-

amines the provision of hard news (measured on three dimensions: topic, focus, style) through 53 Swiss media. Regression analyses on the influence of numerous structural factors on the macrolevel (media system) and the meso-level (media types) show that the media type can best explain the quality of content.

Fürst (2020) is also concerned with structural influences on media performance, albeit from a different perspective: How journalists' use of audience metrics affects media performance. Her analysis reveals a negative effect on news quality since audience metrics increase economic pressures on newsrooms. Moreover, a dominant, market-driven rhetoric erroneously equates measures of audience size with audience interests and good journalistic work.

Weiß, Kösters, and Mahrt (2020) propose a new procedure for analysing the diversity of political coverage by deriving value frames from democratic theories of citizenship and the cleavage approach. This procedure is more adequate for investigating viewpoint diversity than traditional indicators. The analytical potential of their approach is demonstrated by a content analysis of migration coverage in 16 German offline and online media.

In order to achieve its desired effect, media performance must be received by the users—and in order to measure its effects, we need precise knowledge about who uses which media (performance). Hasebrink and Hölig (2020) propose a new multidimensional conceptual framework for the definition of audience-based indicators for news media performance and show how strongly the performance users expect and perceive is influenced by different news brands and their specific contribution to public communication. The authors point out that future studies should combine data on supply and demand to find out who actually receives which performance.

Geiß (2020) already bridges this gap. By combining content analytical and survey data on the individual level, he examines the hitherto neglected question of how users' news selection affects the quality of information they receive. He shows that the quality received depends less on which mainstream media are used, but rather on how much news users consume overall. The findings also suggest that an alarming large stratum of society uses news media so marginally that there is no real chance of acquiring the most basic knowledge about even highly salient current affairs issues.

Steppat, Castro Herrero, and Esser (2020) confirm that individual usage patterns (media habits) influence which performance users receive, but that this influence must be considered against the background of the surrounding news environment. Their comparative survey in five countries (Denmark, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, USA) shows that users from less fragmented-polarized media environments and those of traditional media are more satisfied with media performance than users from more fragmented-polarized media environments and those of alternative media.

Fawzi and Mothes (2020) deal with the question how media trust relates with the media performance users expect and their evaluations of the performance they receive. Their representative survey from Germany makes the close connection between performance and trust very clear: The media often disappoint people's high expectations, which leads to lower media trust.

Both Picone and Donders (2020) and Sehl (2020) take on the changing role and increased criticism of public service media (PSM) in many countries to examine how citizens evaluate PSM in comparison to other media types. Survey data from four European countries—Belgium (Flanders), France, Germany, and the UK—show that users attribute a clear societal role and higher performance to PSM than to other media types. PSM is obviously still seen as a as flagship of quality journalism by the majority in these countries. For Flanders, the results show in addition that PSM have difficulties to reach young and lower-educated citizens, but that they still lead when it comes to trust.

4. Future Directions for Media Performance Research

The studies collected in this thematic issue provide good indications of the direction in which media performance research has developed most recently and should develop further: The different perspectives on media performance presented here—media structures, news production and distribution, content, and consumption—should be investigated in direct relationship to each other. A stronger focus on comparative research—including longitudinal comparisons—should provide further insight into the factors that hinder or promote media performance (Weiß et al., 2016; for an exception see fög—Forschungsinstitut Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft & University of Zurich, 2019). Besides, we see a particular need for further research in the following directions: Which role do and should different normative perspectives play in media performance research, and how does the normative standpoint influence the measurement of media performance? Which methodological approaches are and can be used to investigate current developments in media performance (e.g., aggregation of news)? How must and can the traditional indicators of media performance be adapted to the high-choice media environment and become more standardized than previously? How do the implementation and use of personalized recommender system affect the perception of media quality? How can computational methods be applied in media performance research—which requires more intense interdisciplinary collaboration between social science and computer science? How can media performance research contribute to the investigation of disinformation online ('fake news')? And how can it be linked to media literacy research, focusing on how users deal with media content of varying quality?

Answers to these questions could help the media to develop strategies with which they can ensure their

survival. Media users could learn therefrom how to find and use reliable, high-quality content in the current information flood. Media policy could draw important conclusions therefrom to take measures ensuring democratically valuable media performance. Against the background of the most recent developments, media performance research is perhaps more relevant today than ever. We hope that our thematic issue will give new impulses to the field.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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