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Interactivity Potentials and Usage of German Press-Title Websites – An Empirical Investigation –

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für die Telekommunikations- und Medienwirtschaft

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Abstract

There is little empirical research to support the common assumption that a high(er) degree of interactivity offered by popular press-title websites is positively related to frequency and extent of their usage. Therefore, this study analyzes various facets of interactivity offered by 101 German-speaking press-title sites and their correlations with site usage criteria. Findings suggest that while specific interactivity features of online *newspaper* websites and a newspaper site's overall interactivity are significantly related to site usage frequency and intensity metrics, interactivity facets of on-line *magazines* are not.

Since about the mid-1990s, most press corporations publishing widely circulated German-speaking print titles have extended their product spectrum by providing online editions of their print titles via the World Wide Web [WWW]. Managers and scholars seem to almost unanimously advocate a silver bullet in publishers' constant struggle for an increase in their readership or, in this case synonymously, online usership: Specific user-responsive media features, it is argued, could only be provided in an online media environment (cf. McMillan 2002b, p. 163). These features are commonly referred to as interactive media or as highly interactive electronic information supply (cf. Boczkowski, 2002, p. 276; McMillan & Hwang, 2002, p. 29; Loosen & Weischenberg, 2000, pp. 71-72; Massey & Levy, 1999, p. 524).

Publishing companies' motivation for equipping their online information offers with "interactivity" features is based on the assumption "... that increased interactivity will lead to increased likelihood of behaviors such as returning to a website, referring others to the website and purchasing from a website" (McMillan, 2002a, p. 278. Further cf. Loosen & Weischenberg, 2000, pp. 75+79; Ha & James, 1998, pp. 458-459). Accordingly, many media managers and business scholars tend to share positive connotations about the construct of interactivity in the context of telecommunication network based online press information service offers (cf. Goertz, 1995, p. 477; Jensen, 1998, p. 185; Downes & McMillan, 2000, pp. 157-158; Schultz, 2000, p. 205; McMillan, 2002b, p. 163). In light of these connotations it is striking that almost no scholarly studies exist which empirically explore levels of interactivity offered by press-title websites and relation between the latter variable and the site's usage frequency and intensity.

Therefore, this paper develops an option of how interactivity of online press-title sites may be operationalized in order to address two research questions:

1. What single interactivity facets and what aggregated levels of interactivity are present on (German-speaking) press-title websites?

2. On (German-speaking) press-title sites, what correlations do exist between various interactivity dimensions and site usage metrics?

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Specifying interactivity

Scholarly reflections on the meaning of the complex construct of “interactivity” have a long tradition not only in media and (mass) communication research but also in other fields such as sociology, psychology, and business administration (cf. Rafaeli, 1988; Heeter, 1989; Jensen, 1998; Kioussis, 2002; McMillan, 2002b). In the context of online media in general and press-title websites in particular, the term interactivity is rather unanimously used to refer to two basic variants of bi-directional communication processes involving human individuals and networked computers. These are a user’s interactivity *with* a computer or website and her interactivity *through* a computer network or website (Goertz, 1995, pp. 478-479; Boczkowski, 2002, p. 277; McMillan, 2002b, pp. 165-166). In both archetypes, the interacting parties orient themselves referring to preceding episodes in a dialog during which information is exchanged—ideally without substantial delay between speech and response (Rafaeli, 1988, pp. 118-122; Jensen, 1998, pp. 188+200; Kioussis, 2002, pp. 359-360).

With regard to man-machine or -media interactivity, technological systems are classified as (more) interactive if users may themselves “actively” control within certain technological boundaries (a) what content (b) within what time frame and (c) in what form they would like to access via the system. Accordingly, a high(er) level of “interactivity with content” (Boczkowski, 2002, p. 277) or “adaptive interactivity” (McMillan, 2002b, p. 174) requires website features such as navigation support, choice of media formats (e.g., text, audio, static or moving images), non-linear access to other areas of that same or even outside the website, or the option of tailoring the displayed content to the user’s personal preferences (Heeter, 1989, pp. 221-225; Go-