

- Es gilt das gesprochene Wort -

- check against delivery -

Keynote Speech of Kai Diekmann, Editor-In-Chief of BILD

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

the news of the week was: the internet search-engine “Google” will buy the video portal “YouTube”.

YouTube is a company with only 67 employees, that gives film-makers a digital platform for their video clips: films of wedding celebrations, sketches, attempts by would-be singers, animal films, cartoons, clips of sporting events. One of the most successful video clips was called “Sad”. It showed, for a period of 4 minutes, a young girl lying on her bed, gazing sadly and silently into the camera – no words, no music, no camera movement.

YouTube was founded only 16 months ago, as a start-up, with only a handful of servers. But the price Google is paying runs up to more than 1.6 billion dollars. The reason? Very simple: YouTube can justify it deserves such an incredible amount of money: It’s a very strong brand, has excellent liking ratings, and above all: YouTube – is accessed – more than – 100 – million – times a day – by a large community of users.

Why am I telling you about these video clips of sad girls, juggling dogs or Michael Jackson look-alikes? What do they have to do with Agenda Setting? Unfortunately a great deal!

These issues have a lot to do with Agenda Setting, because they show a development of fundamental change. A fundamental change affecting everything that – since Walter Lippmann’s standard book “Public Opinion” – has constituted the basic requirements for Agenda Setting.

The book “Public Opinion” was published in 1922. In those days the world was still in order. Or appeared to be so in the eyes of journalists. Newspaper articles enjoyed the same power, importance and respect as acts of parliament! The reader was passive. He was the recipient without a voice.

Public opinion in those days meant the opinion of leading commentators. Despite the fact that elections sometimes revealed that voters didn't always share those views.

This media-wonderland has changed and is changing still. Traditional media are losing their impact. Instead, new opinion communities are emerging: blogs, chatrooms, forums.

Five years ago hardly anyone wanted to use an internet platform to discuss the latest news. The reason: it simply took ages, because the transfer rates were far too slow. But, as we all know, this problem has been solved. Thanks to the Web Version 2.0 the internet is in itself the base for a new kind of mass communication. Web 2.0 means a revolution to the use of media.

I don't know, how many of you know the short animated film "The Bonker" by the German cartoonist Walter Moers. For those of you who don't: The film shows a rather depressed Adolf Hitler, singing to himself in the bath-tub of his Berlin bunker – alone with his dog "Blondi" and a bottle of cognac.

A German TV channel showed the "Bonker"-Film. About 800.000 people watched it. But in the internet – on YouTube, MyVideo and other platforms – hundreds of thousands more people enjoyed the short cartoon. And even more will be watching it – all in all a much bigger audience. The internet defeated television. The internet has made its way into people's homes and lives – as television did fifty years ago. Today, people use the internet to share ideas and cooking recipes, rate the service and quality of car dealers, restaurants, airlines – and even of the media.

Interestingly, all these platforms have one thing in common: outstanding credibility.

Behind professional reports people often suspect dishonest motives. But the blog-world is regarded as the motherland of reliable information, a world that seems to be completely authentic. That's only partly due to the rather individual or – to put it less kindly – dreadful spelling of many users.

More importantly, the information transfer is free of charge – and to many users this alone qualifies as a guarantee for impartial, unbiased reports. In contrast, the professional press is often dismissed in the internet through negative remarks about "paid journalism".

I sometimes wonder if all these sceptics of paid work also get their teeth fixed by unpaid amateurs – or rather by “paid” dentists. But in the web just mentioning “paid journalism” often puts an end to any claim of credibility by traditional media.

You may wonder why – of all media – it had to be the internet that gained the lead over newspapers, magazines or television, when it comes to credibility. My guess is, that the direct personal contact causes this impression of authentic and reliable information.

On the other hand, specialized knowledge plays a pretty minor role. That’s the absurdity: No one cares whether the blogger or chatroom-user has any idea what he is talking about. No one wants to know what resources – if any – he is using to get his information and how trustworthy these resources are. What’s important, however, is the feeling of playing an active part in the opinion-building process, in other words: not being a mere recipient.

To put it another way: if you read the New York Times, BILD or SPIEGEL magazine, you merely receive media, you passively consume information. But in a chat-room, you talk to “friends”. The credibility gap is enormous.

So it’s not really surprising that rumours, conspiracy theories and even obviously false urban legends survive in the web for years. People simply cling to such false information and pass it on – all thanks to that mysterious plausibility lead attributed to the Web.

We shouldn’t fool ourselves: It’s not just the simple or uneducated people that trust in such grass-roots information. We are all alike – we rely on recommendations by friends, family or neighbours. In other words: we trust amateurs more than professional rankings; whether we are buying a car, choosing a restaurant or booking a hotel.

It’s what I call the “taxi driver syndrome”. Imagine a couple of businessmen, media people or politicians in Germany discussing current domestic problems. I bet, that at least one of them will deliver a story on how taxi drivers see the world.

They always begin with: “This morning a taxi driver told me...” And I have no doubt that some of those present here tonight could give us the news from their taxi trip to the Petersberg. Because taxi-stories seem to be so authentic, so full of feeling, so “straight from the horse’s mouth”.

The taxi driver is regarded as the man in the street and the people's voice, the guy who gets around, talks with loads of people and knows where the shoe pinches. The taxi driver as the phenotype of an average citizen, the bottom line of what the voter expects.

This has given taxi drivers a huge lobby and political influence – completely out of proportion compared to their marginal social function. This syndrome could in fact be the topic for next year's keynote speech, Mr Schatz. Title: The extent to which taxi drivers influence agenda setting in this country. And the question, whether one shouldn't ban politicians from taking taxis altogether...

But that's another story. What I'm trying to point out is the fact that new opinion forums have established themselves in the Web. What has happened is nothing less than the public emancipation from traditional media usage.

Spreading information is no longer a one-way street. Grass-roots journalism – citizens' journalism – etcetera. – they all describe what is called "user generated content". In the past, outsiders who wanted to take part in the process of forming opinions had to send "Letters to the Editor". Nowadays, readers themselves become publishers, editors-in-chief – in other words: creators and designers of public opinion!

Nobody can predict the consequences of this new type of journalism. No one can tell at present, how it will alter the process of forming public opinion and the interaction between citizens, media and political institutions. Both political agenda and public opinion are still essentially determined by the classic media.

But will our children – who spend far more time with computers, Gameboys or Play Stations than with books and newspapers – will those children still get informed via print media or TV? And: will they still trust these media or will they prefer chatrooms and weblogs instead?

These issues affect the cornerstones of how we understand democracy. How is democratic opinion-making going to work, if the sovereign people stop deciding rationally? What, if they rely on rumours, urban legends, gossip and internet fairy tales, and no longer care for statements by experts who put their name and their responsibility behind what they say?

I believe, that along with this public emancipation from the traditional media goes an emancipation from rationality and journalistic standards. Research and checking facts, the classic job of the traditional media, are usually unknown to many forums, weblogs and chatrooms.

What matters in these new community centers are often not the hard facts, but “soft” factors: how friendly or witty a chatroom-member is, how many supporting comments he receives in a forum, how quickly he responds. The power of the Web, the great emotional commitment, that users have in discussions, is also its weakness. Where emotion dominates, argument is up – and gone.

One may argue that the popular sovereign, the citizen, never was rational and certainly not “omnicompetent”. One may argue that – at least for most people – many situations are far too complex to cope with. And, what is even more disturbing: One may also argue, that our so-called rationality is built on prejudices. Prejudices by class, origin, environment, nationality or gender.

If you look at history, the famous Walter Lippmann says, you will recognise that everything can – and has – been explained rationally – purely as a consequence of history, race or progress:

Be it imperialism, slavery, class murder or racial hatred.

To illustrate this, Lippman chose a particular example. He described an island, cut off from the rest of the world. The people living on this island – English, French and German – did not learn about the start of World War One until six weeks later. Until then, they lived peacefully together. “They trusted”, Lippmann writes, “the picture in their heads”. But six weeks later they had to learn that their neighbour was their deadly enemy. And everything that was true yesterday, was suddenly wrong. So much about the foundations of our thinking.

These may be gloomy prospects. But they are only gloomy for someone who doesn’t know humans. And who really believes in people as rational beings. At times they may have been rational, at least in the upper classes.

The Renaissance with its cold-blooded rationality of keeping power, even to the extent of murder, offers a number of examples. But the great majority of people were no Italian Renaissance princes. They were simple people – who put more trust in their heart and their gut than in their head. More *homo sentiens* than *homo sapiens* – the human who feels, not the one who reasons. Because people, as some say, have the annoying habit of being human.

Mass communication has to focus on these people in a democracy. We must – as indeed the Web does – reach people first and foremost on an emotional level. Only then can we hope to

convey a couple of ideas, facts and good principles. And – in other words – to set the agenda. Ladies and gentlemen, let me stress, that I am talking about mass communication here, not about publications for postgraduate philosophy students.

Anyone who wants to be successful in mass communication, anyone who seeks to set an agenda for the majority of people, has to appeal to emotions. That's the only way to reach people. Or, as the Germans say: If you want to preach, you better start filling up the church.

How do you appeal to people on an emotional level? You know the answer as well as I do – no doubt. In addition, hundreds of books explain, that effective advertising only works on a highly emotional level. And hundreds of other publications analyze the impact of pictures and the power of headlines.

Since it was first published, BILD – that's the newspaper I stand for – has been extremely successful in this emotional appeal to the reader.

Our award-winning headline "Wir sind Papst" – "We are Pope" was the essence of an emotional outcry in Germany. Just in the moment, when – for the first time in 800 years – a German had been elected to the Holy See.

That's the reason why nearly four million people in Germany go out and buy BILD – despite rain, wind or snow – six days a week. And even more people, nearly 12 million, read BILD every day. It goes without saying that BILD, with these 12 million readers, can put themes on the agenda. But that's not what I want to talk about tonight...

The crucial questions are: How long will BILD be able to continue setting these topics? How should we – and all other classic media – react to the threatening new communities in the Web? Will we have to develop similar interactive and emotional platforms for shared opinions? And will we in fact be able to do that? Or do we have to realize that grass-roots journalism is so popular and credible because it is in opposition to the big, classic media brands?

Difficult and unpleasant issues. It's these issues, however, that we should think about and talk about. Not the *status quo*, and not the past.

Thank you!