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Europe loses ground

Cultural media from the perspective of the Internet

Speech held at the 17th European Meeting of Cultural journals

The Republic of Letters? Cultural journals in a European public space

Tallinn, Estonia 14–17 May 2004

The Europeans have invented the internet, but the Americans have come up with all business ideas for it. Moreover, American newspapers have proved much more generous when it comes to giving free access to their articles and publications. If Europe wants to create a public sphere, then European newspapers must finally wake up to the chances that the Internet provides.

The Internet is by and large considered an American invention, a myth that is even kept alive in the US. A short look back into the history of this technological revolution corrects this mistake. The qualitative leap, which first lifted the Internet from the sphere of universities, computerfreaks and the military, took place in Europe. The British Tim Berners–Lee invented the html–standard, which turned the net into the world wide web and rendered it practicable and usable for millions of users. The MP3–standard, which reduces music files to a twelfth of their original size and brought the music industry to the brink of ruin, was developed by a few scientists at the Fraunhofer–Institut für Integrierte Schaltungen (the Fraunhofer Institute for Integrated Circuits) in Erlangen, Germany. And finally the net in its current format could not exist if it wasn't for the Finnish Linus Thorvald who invented the Open Source–software Linux. This software did not catch on in the sphere of personal computers but more for servers, i.e. those computers that feed the contents into the net and turn it into the net in the first place. Without Linux, the entire netpopulation would have to pay licence fees to Microsoft. The net would have developed in a rudimentary form at best.

So it was Europe that first turned the net into a mass media and yet it is everything but a European success story. Surprisingly, all the authentic business ideas that are connected to the Internet have all been developed in the US. Yahoo remains the most important entry portal to the Internet and offers today endless differentiated and useful tools for millions of clients. Amazon has not only turned around the book trade but has quietly and almost unnoticed fundamentally altered the entire literary public. Ebay radically puts into question the existing practices concerning distribution and pricing of the retail trade and customer relations on a worldwide scale. Google has become synonymous with the Internet and combines a monopoly position à la Microsoft with a nice image à la Apple.

Europe supplied the free industrywide standards for the incredible rise of the Internet, but only the Americans had the irresistible ideas for its use. The

inflexible group— and power structures of the European economy which, despite the Internet— and stock exchange boom four years ago, made the development of authentic Internet ideas impossible have to be counted amongst the reasons. The failure of the Bertelsmann—group, one of the biggest media groups worldwide in the Internet book trade is exemplary here. Whilst Jeff Bezos had started with Amazon in a small warehouse in Seattle, Bertelsmann had invested from the beginning between 150 and 300 million Euro in order to beat Amazon and to control the international market. Bol however never reached more than 20 percent of the Amazon turnover. As ridiculous as Thomas Middelhoff's conduct as a global player seems, all the more pathetic was its end: Bertelsmann ceased the Internet trade and sold thousands of email addresses of its German clients for a symbolic amount to Thalia, its biggest competitor in the German booktrade. Amazon.de meanwhile had emerged out of nothing to become Germany's biggest bookseller.

The European clumsiness in the use of the Internet is sadly repeated in the European or at least west European public spheres – or *Öffentlichkeiten* – and reaches down to the exclusive circles of the intellectual public. Very different to the US, where most dailies remain free of charge online, many newspapers in Europe have said goodbye to the Internet audience. *El Pais* in Spain, the Italian *Corriere della Sera*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Germany provide their content only to paying subscribers. New readers for the printed product will surely not be gained like this, since these readers are altogether so used to the Internet that they only register those media that are online in the first place. However legitimate the refusal to provide contents free of charge that are expensive to produce is, the question remains whether the free presentation of newspaper's contents has so far hurt them economically. The real attack on newspapers did come from the Internet, that much is true, but not through the contents part but via the job— and real estate section which the newspapers will hardly win back – here the Internet is simply too handy. And here the European media groups have once more displayed their ignorance more obviously than before.

The policy of going off to sulk in a corner somewhere, which many media groups have followed after the hysteria of the boom and the panic of the crash that was in fact their own making, will not however benefit newspapers nor the public.

Much worse, catastrophic even, is the scenario of Europe's intellectual circles, at least when one considers the presence of the cultural journals as a criterion. The case of *Micromega*, the Italian cultural journal that became the focal point of the intellectual opposition against the Berlusconi government and which until today refrains from any Internet presence, is a glaring example. How much power the journal and the Italian intellectuals could have received if one had opened up to the international public! In Germany, journals such as the *Lettre Internationale*, the *Kommune*, *Merkur* or *Literaturen* provide some rudiments of their contents free of charge – but even in Germany the possibilities that the Internet provides have hardly been utilised. In France, whose intellectual papers have once belonged to the central organs of cosmopolitan thought, *Esprit* has, after a long absence introduced an Internet address that is plastered with shopping cart symbols and Euro signs. One can not even read the editorials of the current issues that after all are supposed to advertise the choice of themes for free. Journals such as *Commentaire* or *Le débat* – amongst the best intellectual addresses in France – don't even manage to put a comprehensible table of content online. Thus one sets out freely onto the road to international insignificance through arrogance and ignorance.

It seems as if the European media were afraid of the Internet, as if they only saw the risks but none of the formidable opportunities that it provides.

In the year of the EU accession of ten new countries, European intellectuals are desperately looking for a new European public sphere but they can not find it. The individual countries – at least this goes for Western Europe – are concentrated upon themselves and are fixated positively or negatively upon America. If one was to measure the cultural influence of Germany upon France and vice versa, then one would have to identify a drastic decline since the fifties. At the same time, the big European papers have never been able to build networks. Tentative attempts such as Pierre Bourdieu's *Liber* have become stuck in the initial stages. Universities are connected, but they are lacking the general public. The cultural journals act on the margins and are barely noticed by the big newspapers.

The saddest embodiment of Donald Rumsfeld's word of the "old Europe" was the work of the German philosophy professor Jürgen Habermas, who wanted to launch his "Kerneuropa –initiative" against the Iraq war and the "new Europe" via various European newspapers. He published his own article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and assigned his colleagues to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, to the *El Pais* and in the *Corriere della Serra*. None of these papers however published the articles online. An interested intellectual in Madrid, Paris or Berlin would have had to go the main train station and purchase four newspapers from three different countries. A few days later, the debate was quickly forgotten.

Had Habermas invested a few thousand Euros to build his small website, had he published his article and those of his colleagues simultaneously in English, the sensation would have been big. Newspapers would have been forced to report. Maybe they would have intervened with their own contributions into the debate. Simultaneously the public would have been able to discuss in forums on "Kerneuropa.org" and through the use of the English language, the entire international public would have been able to participate.

European intellectuals have to note that Europe as an institution is gaining power, as a public space however it hardly exists. At the same time, the public has become entirely globalised on the net, as the debates after 11 September have shown. The big American media put a lot of archive material on Afghanistan, bin Laden and terrorism online then, and a week later one could observe that the German *Spiegel* was quoting entire paragraphs from the *New Yorker* without however naming the source. When Arundhati Roy in *Outlook India* published a furious polemic against the Americans, then European media took note almost simultaneously, thanks to new Internet services such as [Arts&Letters Daily](#) or [Perlentaucher](#).

This example shows that from the perspective of the Internet, the contrast does not lie between Europe and America but between the English speaking public and all others. An Internet service provider such as *Arts&Letters Daily* which selects the "Articles of Note" for its daily press briefing exclusively from cultural magazines and quality media, can rely on hundreds of sources. Amongst the "articles of note" this week was an article from the English language version of the Arabic newspaper *Al Ahram* as well as an article from the *Guardian* or from a obscure journal of an American university institute.

Even in the English speaking countries, some media might shut themselves off from the Internet, but as a general rule, American or British newspapers grant a

freer access to their content without giving everything away for free. The *New York Times* practises one of the most accessible and best Internet service of all quality newspapers and according to its own sources makes a profit from it. American cultural journals are also much more generous with their content. Often, they have sponsors. They are not primarily interested in selling their contents but in disseminating them to the widest possible audience. They are opening up to an audience that previously hardly took note of them and which today finds them simply via Google. When Samuel Huntington writes in *Foreign Policy* about the Mexican minority in the US, then the *FAZ*, a newspaper that cuts itself off from the net, will mention it already the next day.

The tendency towards the English language will become even more irresistible through the Internet. English will once more change the European public for good. Europe will undergo a development that has already taken place in the Third World: its central debates will take place in English and new media and new networks will develop that will constitute this new public. From the perspective of the Internet, Europe appears as a patchwork of identities and idioms, which differently from the patchworks in Africa or India, seemingly rest autonomously within themselves.

What is uncanny about all this is the fact that especially the two big countries of the "Kerneuropa" Germany and France rather ignore this development and hide with their behaviour behind an apparent globalisation critique and their insistence on the "old way of doing things". The globalisation critique misjudges that in the tendency towards English there lies also a chance, namely a chance to register a regional difference within a globalised idiom in the first place, whilst also searching for the compatibility with all other identities. India would not be the world's biggest democracy without the English language.

Uncanny however is also the fact that up until now, only one big daily newspaper has the means to constitute a European public with an English speaking newspaper: the *New York Times* with the *International Herald Tribune*.

Published 2004-06-22
Original in German
Translation by Tessa Hauswedell
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