

## **Stuck in First Gear: The Case of the German Political “Blogosphere”**

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Germany is a technologically advanced democracy with free media and high levels of literacy, yet political blogging has not developed as rapidly in Germany as in the United States or other European democracies such as France and Poland. Using data obtained from in-depth interviews with 28 leading national and regional political bloggers in Germany in spring 2011, this study identifies a complex combination of factors that these bloggers say have impacted the emergence of political blogging in Germany: fears associated with Internet technologies; hostility of traditional news media toward blogs; continued trust of the population in traditional news media, notably public broadcasting; and legal challenges faced by political bloggers.

*Keywords: political blogs, Germany, national context, blogging, new media adoption*

### **Introduction**

In Germany, political and public affairs blogging has developed slowly despite potentially favorable conditions such as a free press, high levels of literacy, a large pool of potential readers with Europe’s 100 million German speakers, and access to cheap and fast broadband services (Reitze, Woeste, Ridder, Breunig, & Woldt, 2009). Although blogs—defined as publicly accessible websites with “regularly updated information, commentary, and links” (Lowrey & Mackay, 2008, p. 64)—exist in Germany (Albrecht, Lübcke, & Hartig-Perschke, 2007; Bieber, 2010), the German political “blogosphere” has not come to wield the political influence that it does in the United States or other European democracies such as Poland and France, where it has developed more rapidly (Berendt, Schlegel, & Koch, 2008; Crampton, 2006; Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmohl, & Sapp, 2006).

This study investigates why political blogging has not gained much traction in the German news media landscape. Based on in-depth interviews with 28 leading independent political and public affairs

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bloggers in Germany, we explore the factors that these bloggers have identified as inhibiting the growth of a political “blogosphere” in Germany. These include: privacy-related fears among the public associated with the use of Internet technologies; the hostility of traditional news media toward blogs coupled with the general population’s continued trust in the traditional news media, which are believed to be pluralistic and representing diverse points of view; as well as significant legal challenges to blogging.

We propose that these factors are rooted in a larger ethos that tends to privilege existing established practices and institutions, particularly the wide range of established news media over less established entities such as social media. We make the case that, in Germany, the political blogosphere is not perceived as an institutionalized entity and consequently lacks legitimacy within the country’s relatively diverse news media landscape.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

Theoretically we draw on new institutionalism in sociology, which argues that institutions embody ideals, rules, and values that are viewed as legitimate and that social action is geared toward maintaining such institutions (North, 1990). In this view, institutions and actors in society embody collectively defined cultural understandings of the way the world works. These accumulated meanings allow people to make sense of their surroundings and to keep societal structures functioning (Sorge, 2005). This perspective emphasizes “the construction over time of a social definition of reality in such a way that certain ways of action are taken for granted as the right, if not the only way to do things” (Scott & Meyer, 1994, p. 234). These shared cultural scripts define patterns of appropriate economic, political, cultural, and social activity by individuals and types of practices and behaviors, and thus underscore the legitimacy and purpose of institutions (Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1994). The linkages between institutions and such scripts have been widely studied by political economists seeking to explain why Western democracies have not “converged” but instead have adopted different varieties of capitalism regarding the role of the state and regulations—a key variable impacting such convergence have been people’s deep-seated ideas and beliefs (Kerr, 1983).

In Germany, this shared cultural script is reflected in a wide public acceptance of the legitimacy of established institutions (Thelen, 2003). Germany can be understood as a country characterized by a culture that underscores “continuity” and places value on “order, consistency and predictability” (Dyson, 1996, p. 199), maintained through an emphasis on regulation and faith in institutions. This also broadly impacts the acceptance of new innovations and practices in the country. Fukuyama (1995) links the contemporary trust in institutions in Germany to the country’s history as a culturally homogeneous group-oriented society characterized by powerful communitarian traditions and institutions. This, he argues, results in the creation of distinct institutional “insiders and outsiders” (p. 252) while also underscoring the significance of professional and organizational roles and identities. It is this emphasis on institutions and associated professional roles that, in Fukuyama’s view, sets Germany apart from other Western nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, where institutions occupy a more contested terrain and the boundaries between institutional insiders and outsiders are comparatively more flexible.

In the context of news media, the landscape in Germany is characterized by strong formal institutions: a great variety of influential and widely read privately owned newspapers and magazines and a post-World War II broadcasting system that was originally modeled on the BBC (Meyn, 2004) but now represents a diverse dual system with public and private broadcasters. Collectively, these news media institutions hold considerable sway over the public in Germany. A nationally representative study (Ridder & Engel, 2010) of Germans (including 14- to 29-year-old participants), found that television, especially public broadcasting, remains the leading medium for obtaining national and international news and forming political opinions, while newspapers are the most frequent source for regional news (Hasebrink & Schmidt, 2012). This is also true for a younger demographic, as a survey of 12- to 19-year-old Germans indicates: More than half seek news in newspapers or on television (Feierabend & Rathgeb, 2011). Indeed, a 46-year longitudinal study conducted by public broadcasters ARD and ZDF found that, although the Internet has been integrated into German media consumption and audiences use it for information, "fun" and "useful advice for everyday living" (Ridder & Engel, 2010, p. 539), they do not turn to it for political news and information. It is against this institutional context that new media developments have emerged in Germany.

Studies on blogging in Germany have examined the role played by political bloggers in the 2005 federal elections (Albrecht et al., 2007), the use of blogs by politicians (Gasser & Gerlach, 2012), and the relationship between German political blogs and traditional news media (Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010). Although editors-in-chief of German news media have begun to use political blogs to find sources and story ideas, this trend has been limited, Neuberger and Nuernbergk conclude, because these editors do not view blogs as a significant source of competition. Similarly, Nuernbergk (2010) found in a network analysis of linking patterns that German traditional news media rarely link to political blogs. Similarly, Hyun (2012), in a cross-national comparison of the political blogospheres in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, found traditional news media in Germany are less likely to link to political blogs, and German political blogs are much more likely to link to government and traditional news media websites. Buhl (2013) also discovered that political blogs do not play a significant agenda-setting role in Germany.

A recent national survey found that only 19% of Germans identified blogs as a form of journalism compared to 71% for newspaper websites and 57% for television and radio station websites (Neuberger, 2012). Neuberger also found that respondents saw blogs as representing the blog author's point of view and that they accessed blogs for information about issues of daily life. In contrast, respondents associated traditional news media sites most often with credibility, objectivity, and expertise and chose them most frequently to obtain information about politics and current affairs. This is in line with the findings of Hanitzsch (2013), who examined data related to trust in the media drawn from 80 countries. He found that, although a decline in trust in the media has occurred in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, many countries belonging to the democratic corporatist model, including Germany, have not experienced a significant change in media trust. In Germany, only 11% said that blogs and other social media could substitute traditional journalism and were "skeptical" that "untrained communicators" (Neuberger, 2012, p. 53) could accomplish what trained journalists could do.

These studies demonstrate the limited scope and significance of the German political blogosphere. However, they do not examine the factors that might have impacted its growth. It is this gap in the literature that our study addresses.

### Method

To analyze the reasons underlying the comparatively limited development of political blogging in Germany, we interviewed independent bloggers (i.e., those operating blogs not affiliated with traditional news media). We felt that this group could offer the most significant insights into factors that, in their experience, have constrained the development of political blogging in the country. Moreover, none of the previous studies on political blogging in Germany used extensive interviews with political bloggers to understand how they evaluate the development of blogging in Germany and their own role in the German news media landscape. We also wanted to give bloggers a voice in debates over the meaning of social media versus traditional news media.

As Li and Walejko (2008) have pointed out, probability sampling of blogs and bloggers remains difficult, because it is impossible to identify the population precisely. Consequently, we employed a nonprobabilistic model and decided to use a snowball sampling technique to identify political bloggers. For initial contact, we identified leading independent bloggers on Deutsche Blogcharts, the most widely accepted ranking of the top 100 blogs in Germany until fall 2011 (Nuernbergk, 2010).<sup>1</sup> This ranking assessed German blogs according to the number of citations and links collected via the blog search engine Icerocket, the number of tweets linking to blogs via the analytics platform backtype, and the number of unique visitors to a blog via Google Ad Planner software (Schröder, 2011).

Using this list, we contacted bloggers from the top 25 blogs that posted on politics and public affairs and asked those who responded to suggest others who could be useful. In total, we approached 50 bloggers via e-mail or at a national blogging conference in Germany. Of those approached, 28 responded, resulting in in-depth interviews with them between January and April 2011, either via telephone or Skype. Interviews were conducted in English or German (by a native German speaker). Bloggers were drawn from a variety of national and regional blogs mainly clustered in Berlin and in the West German states of North Rhine–Westphalia, Bavaria, and Rhineland-Palatine. A minority came from Baden-Württemberg, Lower Saxony, and Hamburg as well as the East German states of Saxony and Thuringia. All but three bloggers were men; the bloggers' ages ranged from 29 to 73 years, with a median age of 37 years.<sup>2</sup> Most interviewees were former journalists, current freelance journalists, academics, or workers in technology-related fields. Demographic and blog data were obtained from self-reports and information on the blogs, which we triangulated with information about the blogger available online elsewhere—for instance, in newspaper articles.

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<sup>1</sup> The site closed in October 2011 (Schröder, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> In our examples, we will identify the gender of a blogger only if the blogger was a woman; all other quotes came from men.

Interview questions focused on the bloggers' interactions with readers, other bloggers, and traditional news media; perceived challenges and threats; and their views on the position of political blogging in the German news media landscape. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by a native German speaker when necessary. Transcripts were then analyzed using grounded theory and open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This involved each transcript being read and analyzed paragraph by paragraph to identify recurring ideas and categories. In the second stage, we determined to what extent the identified categories were reflected in all transcripts. Finally, the interviews were considered collectively to discover thematic patterns in the bloggers' discourse regarding challenges to the growth of political blogging in Germany. The process of coding revealed that the bloggers' responses could be classified into three categories: fear and suspicion of Internet technologies among the wider public, particularly with regard to privacy issues; hostility of the traditional news media toward new media and the Internet and continued public trust in mainstream media; and legal challenges faced by bloggers.

We do not claim that our 28 interviews are representative of the experiences of all political bloggers in Germany, but they do provide valuable insights into challenges that many bloggers independently identified. After 28 interviews, little new information emerged and the responses became increasingly repetitive.

### **The State of the German Political Blogosphere**

Most of the bloggers we interviewed indicated that independent bloggers in Germany tend to be one-man bands who perceive their role primarily in terms of highlighting issues and perspectives that, in their opinion, are ignored by traditional news media. Several interviewees highlighted the benefits of being able to engage actively with their blog readers and felt that blogs had the potential to impact the public agenda. An example that many cited in this context was that of "Wir-in-NRW" [We in NRW], a blog based in Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). Focused on state politics, this blog is popularly perceived to have played a role in the defeat of the conservative Christian Democratic Party, led by state prime minister Jürgen Rüttgers in the 2010 state elections (Bönisch, Brandt, & Wassermann, 2010).

Interviewees, however, also acknowledged that, in contrast to the United States, where independent political bloggers have been influential in holding public officials accountable (Meraz, 2009), such cases remain relatively rare in Germany. Similarly, Berendt, Schlegel, and Koch's (2008) comparison of the 100 top German-language blogs with top U.S. blogs demonstrated that, in Germany, popular blogs tend to be operated by "leisure time and semi-professional bloggers with relatively little interest in politics and media analysis" (p. 72). They found that German blogs rarely mention public figures, have a weaker link network, and are "nearly void of political topics" (p. 95), concluding that German blogs still need to gain "societal significance" (p. 95).

Our interviewees' perceptions about the state of the German blog scene were not particularly positive. Many referred to the absence of a coherent German political "blogosphere" with a significant number of nationally recognized blogs. They noted that even the capital, Berlin, lacked a blog that followed national politics on a daily basis. They also said that, although small blogger communities exist,

they are limited to topical specialties or geographic locations, resulting in a fragmented political blogging landscape with limited networking and among bloggers. This is in line with the research of Berendt, Schlegel, and Koch (2008), who found that only 4% of German-language blogs linked to other blogs. This contributes to the public perception that the political "blogosphere" in Germany lacks institutional standing, in the view of our interviewees.

Most of the bloggers we interviewed agreed that, compared to the more dynamic and influential political blogospheres in the United States or other European nations such as France, Germany seemed to be "a developing country," with a very small audience reading blogs. A 33-year-old national blogger in North Rhine–Westphalia said that, although the blog he writes for was "supposed to be one of the largest in the country, hardly anyone outside the blogosphere knew of it." This is supported by the nationally representative ARD/ZDF Onlinestudie (2013b), which reported that, among Germans 14 years and older, only 1% to 4% have used blogs at least once a week, and 6% to 16% said they used them sometimes between 2007 and 2013. Our interviewees also noted that the tendency in Germany was to either not take blogs seriously as an alternative to traditional news media or see them as niche publications with little wider relevance. As a 34-year-old blogger in Thuringia commented:

Interestingly, nobody has a problem with blogs from China, Iran, and North Africa, because they are assigned a certain important role in society. But with German blogs, they are presented as toys for geeks and nerds; and users who are not as Internet-affine also perceive them as such.

### **Challenges to Political Blogging in Germany**

The limited development of political blogging in Germany, according to our interviewees, stems from the combination of three factors. The first of these is widespread fear and suspicion of Internet technologies among the wider public, particularly with regard to privacy issues.

#### ***Fear and Suspicion Related to Internet Use***

In line with Hagen's (2000) observation that Germany is characterized by technological pessimism, bloggers identified a pervasive sense of suspicion and skepticism associated with Internet technologies as a significant factor impacting the development of political blogging in Germany. Although this might seem surprising given Germany's status as a technologically advanced nation with relatively high levels of Internet penetration and broadband access, the Internet is often seen as a threat, particularly in terms of privacy and data protection issues (Movius & Krup, 2009). Almost 40% of Germans do not use the Internet or use it only sparingly, fearing privacy and data loss; another 20% use it reluctantly, believing it puts them at significant risk (Deutsches Institut für Vertrauen und Sicherheit im Internet, 2012). The same study also found that almost 75% of Germans 14 years and older want the German government to take steps to ensure online security. In fact, Germans express the highest levels of concern about Internet security and privacy among all European countries (Unisys, 2009).

Such concerns, several bloggers said, were clearly reflected in the debate over Google Street View, which aroused many negative reactions in Germany. More recently, negotiations about a free trade agreement between the European Union and the United States have generated concerns about how private data would be treated by U.S. companies such as Facebook and Google (Pauly & Schult, 2013). Commenting on such fears, a 33-year-old regional blogger in North Rhine–Westphalia said:

The problem with the Internet is that a lot of people more often see dangers along the lines that Google and Facebook act as data octopuses and that there's fraud on eBay etcetera. But they don't realize the same things happen off-line. The opportunities, which in my opinion the Internet offers, are seen only in the background.

These fears, interviewees emphasized, make Germans hesitant to engage with blogging, consistent with the low levels of blog use revealed in the annual ARD/ZDF Onlinestudie (2013b). In fact, online participation as a whole appears rather limited in Germany: 77% of adults used the Internet in 2013 sometimes; 46% of those online participated in online networks or communities occasionally; and only 7% of those online used the microblogging service Twitter sometimes (ARD/ZDF Onlinestudie, 2013a, 2013b). Thus, only a digital avant-garde goes beyond personal social networks to information-driven publicly oriented sites. Germans use social media mainly for personal communication and identity management (Busemann, Fisch, & Frees, 2012). Germans are also more reluctant to post comments on public sites; and not only are fewer comments posted on political blogs compared to countries such as Great Britain (Bihl, 2007; Cision, 2009), but the interest in posting comments declined from 10% in 2006 to just 7% in 2010. Busemann and Gscheidle (2010) found that 59% of Germans are not at all interested in posting online. In 2012, the same authors found that less than half of Germans using blogs, post themselves; similarly for Twitter, of the small numbers of Germans who have used the service, 60% prefer to access it only to retrieve information (Busemann & Gscheidle, 2012).

### ***Traditional News Media Hostility, Information-Related Biases, and Continued Trust in Traditional News Media***

Our interviewees also underscored the role played by traditional news media in Germany in fostering people's wary attitudes toward the Internet. Unlike U.S. news media, which tend to view technology in positive, even celebratory, terms and as an important aspect of the economy, German news media tend to focus on negative aspects of the Internet (Hagen, 2000), with the national weekly and opinion leader *Der Spiegel* frequently publishing cover stories titled: "Does the Internet Make Us Stupid?" ("Macht das Internet doof?" 2008); "Web Without Law" ("Netz ohne Gesetz," 2009); "The Insatiables" ("Die Unersättlichen," 2011), referring to Facebook; "The Bouncer" (Müller, Pauly, Rosenbach, Schmundt, & Stöcker, 2012), referring to Google; and "Be Quiet Will You! Guide to a Digital Diet" (Tuma, 2012). Commenting on this trend, interviewees mentioned that newspapers frequently carried reports about Internet fraud and dangers to children online.

The bloggers we spoke with also noted that blogs are not perceived as legitimate or socially sanctioned by the public in Germany. As a 35-year-old blogger in Bavaria with national readership put it:

Germans are waiting for a sort of permission to blog publicly, that it is formally allowed. But of course that isn't happening. . . . Bloggers in Germany are seen as obstructionists; and individualism is not as highly valued as in the United States.

This is in line with our theoretical framework applying Dyson (1996) and Fukuyama (1995), who have found Germany to be a country that values community and established authorities as insiders, rendering newcomers as outsiders. Bloggers in our study confirmed that, in their experience, German audiences tend to favor obtaining information from sources that are perceived as established and authoritative—that is, traditional news media. Although levels of trust in traditional media have declined to some degree in recent years, compared to the United States—where the public retains “a deep skepticism about what they see, hear and read in the media” (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009, para.1)—German audiences continue to demonstrate greater trust in mainstream news outlets (Edelman, 2013). As a national blogger from Berlin said:

People still think traditional news media do quite a good job . . . not like in the United States . . . here it is still very nuanced . . . so people don't have enough of a reason to go to other publications.

Underpinning this sense of trust, interviewees argued, is the fact that traditional news media in Germany are still seen as quite diverse by most Germans and are widely viewed as expressing a range of views and perspectives. This is confirmed by Czepek and Klinger (2010), who found that, in contrast to other “polities,” ensuring that a “diversity of ideas” is expressed in the media is “the central objective of media regulation in Germany—far beyond a mere guarantee of fair market competition” (p. 832). In fact, diversity in public broadcasting is anchored in Germany's state media laws through the concepts of external and internal plurality (*Außenpluralität* and *Binnenpluralität*), which are deemed essential to the formation of political opinion (Branahl, 2010). As a result, public broadcasting is mandated to offer programming that provides a comprehensive overview over international, European, national, and regional events and promotes European integration and social cohesion on a regional and national level. Private broadcasters—although not bound to abide by such mandates—are required to “express a plurality of opinion” and give “appropriate opportunity” (Czepek & Klinger, 2010, p. 838) to diverse social and political groups. In addition, the authors write, private broadcasters are called upon to carry regional content as well as content from independent providers. Although print media is not regulated in terms of content, and regional monopolies exist, the newspaper market too is “relatively diverse” (Czepek & Klinger, 2010, p. 821).

Public trust in the media is reflected in national studies such as Neuberger's (2012), which found that among its 1000 participants in Germany, 63% associated newspaper and magazine websites with regular coverage, 57% each with objectivity and credibility, and 53% with expertise; 60% stated they use such websites to obtain current affairs information regarding Germany, followed by the websites of broadcasters (44%). The same study found that only 11% of respondents believed that blogs and social media could substitute for traditional journalism. Germany's two public broadcasters, ARD and ZDF, enjoy especially high levels of trust, with almost three-quarters of Germans saying the broadcasters deliver thorough and comprehensive coverage, provide an overview of the most important events of the day, and



feature expert correspondents; two-thirds said ARD and ZDF are credible, and over half indicated that they are important for political decision making (Zubayr & Geese, 2011).

Many interviewees mirrored this finding; some explicitly compared the situation in Germany with that in the United States. For instance, a 39-year-old national blogger in Bavaria commented:

In Germany, the trust in traditional media is in principle higher than in the United States, also because we have a strong backbone with public media. In the United States you have a political bifurcation . . . in your opinion you are either liberal or conservative. The demand here is to host discussions and dialogue. The media function more like a forum. Leading media have a standard of objectivity and show different sides . . . they play a different role than in the United States.

But while traditional news media retain considerable authority in Germany, according to our interviewees, they nevertheless tend to be opposed to bloggers. In Bavaria, for instance, media literacy materials for schools by the Bavarian newspaper publishers association identified blogs as unreliable and disreputable information sources compared to newspapers (Bayrische Staatsregierung, 2010; Niggemeier, 2011). Most interviewees also commented that traditional news failed to acknowledge the existence of independent bloggers or openly disparaged them. This 35-year-old blogger in Rhineland-Palatine explained:

We've now existed for over four years and it took three and a half years until [the regional paper] mentioned us first in an article; they tried to ignore us.

Moreover, Berlin-based bloggers noted that, in the capital and center of political journalism, where journalists and politicians mingle in exclusive clubs, bloggers are not accepted as part of the news media, and in many cases were not allowed to attend press conferences. In fact, journalists covering national politics protested the government spokesperson's use of Twitter to directly communicate with the public (Bundesregierung, 2011; Stöcker & Knoke, 2011). This tension between old and new media practitioners reflects a divide between institutional and noninstitutional groups and practices, or, as Fukuyama (1995) writes, "insiders" and "outsiders." The bloggers we interviewed added that only rarely could they convince traditional news media to acknowledge their contributions, particularly when covering local issues. Lamenting this fact, a 44-year-old regional blogger in Baden-Württemberg said:

There have been two, three, five cases in which I could almost prove that [the regional newspaper] copied from me virtually word for word.

Similarly, a 37-year-old national blogger in Bavaria said that the Deutsche Presse-Agentur (German press agency) picked up a story from his blog without attribution. He said he tweeted this to his 10,000 followers and forced the press agency to identify him as the source.

This lack of attribution and recognition is underscored by Nuernbergk (2010), who found that, whereas political blogs linked to mainstream news media sites, the latter rarely reciprocated. Similarly, Bihr (2007) found that traditional journalists who cover politics claimed that blogs had little relevance to

their work. According to Neuberger, Nuernbergk, and Rischke (2009), who surveyed editors in print, online only, and broadcast newsrooms in Germany, just 12% agreed that blogs constituted a new form of journalism and only 10% agreed that blogs could avoid bias. The vast majority of editors did not associate blogs with credibility, relevance of information, and accuracy—all qualities that they strongly associated with professional journalism. Only 12% believed that blogs could strengthen journalism (Neuberger et al., 2009). According to Eberwein (2010), the “majority of journalistic actors view the diversity of voices within the [German] blogosphere rather skeptically” (p. 143). Such institutional disdain for blogging and bloggers was manifest in a recent incident in which a subsidiary of the Deutsche Presse-Agentur claimed that, although bloggers who sought stories independently could not be force-fed press releases, they could be bribed with \$150 or more to produce the desired content (Knop, 2013).

### ***Legal Threats***

Among the institutional challenges that negatively impact political blogging, our interviewees also identified the German legal climate, pointing to laws such as the federal treaty for the protection of minors [*Jugendmedienschutzstaatsvertrag*] (Beckedahl, 2010). This amendment would have required website operators to classify content according to its suitability for different ages. Many participants claimed that such a classification for blog posts would have created considerable inconvenience and extra work for them. Although this amendment has been shelved for the moment, the fact that it could be revived remains a source of concern among bloggers. Other legal challenges include a new version of a copyright law [*Leistungsschutzrecht*] (Schweer, 2011) and regulations about the use of software such as Google Analytics and Google AdSense. A 37-year-old national blogger in Lower Saxony said this new copyright law would have “disastrous consequences for bloggers,” because it would treat quotes from newspapers as copyrighted material.

Regarding Google AdSense, German data protection officials have decreed that using third-party advertising on a website constitutes an unauthorized relaying of personal data—that is, the IP address (Datenschutzbeauftragter, 2011). This means that unless a blogger’s website hosts all of its banner ads on its own server, the blogger would need permission from visitors to show them the ads. Because this is unlikely to be granted (given that viewers rarely want to see ads), this would result in bloggers being unable to profit from the pay-per-click advertisements, which several bloggers said are part of their already low revenue.

Similarly, German authorities have contemplated prohibiting the use of Google Analytics, a feature used by many bloggers to collect visitor statistics. Government officials have argued that Google Analytics enables profiling by cookies or IP address, again violating privacy. At the time of this writing, the use of such software has not been banned, but some German states warn website owners that if Google Analytics is banned in the future, the website owners could face a fine for having it used previously (“Datenschützer droht Analytics-Nutzern mit Klagen,” 2011; Tomik, 2010).

Interviewees also voiced their vulnerability as individuals lacking institutional affiliation to legal action by those who view their writings as damaging. As a 44-year-old regional blogger in Baden-Württemberg described:

Companies and others try to stop us by going to court because we write something and they reprimand us. The possibility to receive a cease-and-desist-letter is very high. I worked as a journalist for 20 years and never got such a letter. But in the past one and half years I got three as a blogger. It's really funny because during the time I wrote for *Der Spiegel* or the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, big media, this was no problem because the media were too big. . . . But now companies think it's a blogger, a single-person-show, we will fight him.

Interviewees suggested that the legal climate in Germany, whether in terms of governmental legislation or corporate actions, poses significant challenges for bloggers lacking institutional standing; they frequently find themselves targeted by both.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The bloggers we interviewed pointed to three factors that inhibit the growth of political blogging in Germany: fears associated with Internet technologies; hostility of traditional news media toward blogs coupled with the continued trust of the population in traditional news media, especially in public broadcasting; and legal challenges faced by political bloggers. But these factors need to be viewed in a larger context defined by the dominance of established institutions such as the traditional news media and their relatively high level of content and opinion diversity.

As new institutional theorists have argued, institutions operate by upholding established practices that seek to underscore their legitimacy within the public arena while limiting the possibilities of institutional change and development (North, 1990; Thelen, 2003). This is certainly evident in Germany. For instance, the information biases fostered by traditional news media and their attempts to undermine independent political and current affairs blogs as credible sources of information can be understood as opposition to competitors who appear to lack institutional status and as an effort to reinforce their own claims to authority and legitimacy. A similar stance toward political bloggers as noninstitutional actors is also revealed in actions by the German state, which has sought to impose various legal and financial regulations that pose significant challenges to these bloggers. Such perceptions are also demonstrated on the part of the German public, which continues to demonstrate greater trust in the traditional news media—particularly public broadcasting—viewing them as more trustworthy and credible institutional entities compared to political blogs. In fact, German traditional news media have been relatively slow to embrace new media practices, particularly those of a participatory nature (De Keyser & Sehl, 2011)—a fact that has further impacted the institutional standing of such practices within the public realm. Thus, while political bloggers in Germany have tried to change or at least to challenge what North (1990) would call “the rules of the game” (p. 3) through the use of new technology, they have not achieved institutional standing and hence public acceptance in Germany. To use Fukuyama’s (1995) term, blogs remain “outsiders,” defined by their independence from the formalized and regulated structure of the German news media industry. But this independence results in a denial of the institutional standing crucial to gaining legitimacy in public perception. This also contributes to blogs being perceived as a niche, especially with the wide range of news and opinions offered by existing news media. The result is a circular problem that defies easy resolution.

What does this mean for the future of political blogging in Germany? The interviewed bloggers offered mixed opinions. Some said the practice would eventually catch on, with some small blogging communities developing larger audiences and impacting public discourse. Others argued that Germany was unlikely to develop a robust political blogosphere such as in the United States or France.

Although it is difficult to make assertions about long-term developments of the German political blog scene, this study contributes to an understanding that adoption of new media varies significantly depending on national context and can even be found between neighboring states such as France and Germany, typically considered part of the same larger geographical and political entity of Western Europe. These differences, we suggest, are due to the variations within institutional cultures based on the power of elites, economic and political goals, and people's beliefs (Kerr, 1983). Germany's emphasis on media institutions as insiders, with rules to embed a wide range of news content and opinion, clearly impacts the adoption of new media practices such as political blogging. Consequently, it is advisable to forego broad-brush assertions regarding the impact of Internet technologies that operate on the basis of what Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) termed "naïve universalism" (p. 77) and assume that technological shifts inevitably engender similar trends in media and cultural contexts across the globe. This view also recognizes that media systems are "embedded in their social environment which is also culturally—and nationally—shaped" (Thomass & Kleinstauber, 2011, p. 25). We argue it remains crucially important to develop a comparative focus and to examine specific institutional factors that have fundamental implications for the process and extent of technology adoption.

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