The Pirate Party – A new star on the horizon of media accountability or a blended, self-serving movement?

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ABSTRACT

The past five years have seen the rise of a political movement known as the Pirate Party, which, at present, has been institutionalized in 42 countries. It is of interest in the context of media accountability for two reasons: The Pirates are convinced that media accountability is up to the individual. They take stands on media, media politics and on media coverage. But what kind of media accountability actors are the pirates? Have they entered the market as a new and systematic media watchdog? Using a screening, this study investigates the Pirates' position on media policy in their programs, press releases and websites. By examining several countries from the European Union (Belgium, Germany, France, UK, Luxemburg, Austria), Switzerland and the United States between January and December 2011, this study intends to find out whether there is systematic and continual observation of the media. In addition, an exemplary look is given at how the Pirates' opinions on media regulation and on media self-regulation are commented on using classic media outlets.

The core result: the Pirate Parties in the investigated countries did not serve as "media watchdogs" in conventional or classic ways. For example, only the German Pirate Party regularly criticized journalists. The Pirates choose media topics and they respond to media coverage. Until now their Internet-competence is only slowly acknowledged as a serious political statement or as an expertise. To summarize, the Pirate Party is neither a new watchdog nor a fusion nor a new star. To be sure, however, their radical attitudes towards freedom and against regulation will inspire the long overdue discussion on the extent and limits of Web-based media accountability within our societies.

1. Introduction

New media as well as the constant development of information techniques create different possibilities and structures for media observance and they create new media observers (Bennet, 2003; Debatin, 1999, 2010). Formed within a few years on a global basis in numerous countries, the Pirate Party is the first political actors to declare the defense of civil rights in the digital age and the fight for a transparent Internet policy as their programmatic key note, and the first to turn "accountability" understood as liability for media actions, thus media accountability, into one of their central requests (PPI, 2010). These core convictions apply to the Pirate politicians on a cross-border foundation. On the national basis these convictions cement themselves in their reactions and positions towards the current media topics discussed. Two points will illustrate why it is relevant to look at the Pirate Parties in particular in

the context of Web-based media accountability. In the first place, the Pirate politicians take on the role of an actor when taking a position towards the media, media policy, media coverage towards questions of liability and when participating in the construction of media policy as members of Parliament. Secondly, there is a diametric difference between the positions of the Pirate politicians and the positions currently prevalent on the adjustment of media accountability – the Pirates see media accountability not primarily as the responsibility of institutions within the media system, like the Press Council or the media companies. For them, the individual should be held responsible. This is reflected in the statements of party members on party websites. The Pirates place emphasis on a preferably unrestricted use of the Internet and on the discourse of well-informed citizens. According to them, the role of journalists is to moderate this discourse. Every opinion should be represented and discussed in public, the integrity of the individual is said to be sufficient supervision; further rules like privacy protection would be needless. An example: the news coverage of the mass murder committed by Anders Breivik on July 22nd 2011 in Oslo and Utøya led to constraint or deactivation concerning the audience's comment function on Swedish websites for fear that the commentary

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functions would be abused for racist statements after the assaults. The chairwoman of the Swedish Pirate Party, Anna Troberg criticized the move, saying that an extreme opinion does not vanish when it is forbidden but it will find a niche, which is very delusive. On the contrary, extreme opinions must be perceived, countered, but not censored – another reason why radical openness within the Internet is important (Bührig, 2011).

The study at hand analyzes how far a new and critical media observer emerges with the foundation of Pirate Parties in different countries. How systematic, to what extent, to which topics and in which ways do the Pirates observe the media landscape? Section 2 begins with the clarification of central terms; followed by an illustration of the phenomenon of the Pirate Parties in an international context as well as a theoretical embedment. The subsequent Section 3 will explain the method with which the role of the pirates as media observers will be examined: initially a comparison between different countries will detect how far Pirate politicians practice media watching. For this purpose, press releases of Pirate Parties from selected countries will be analyzed on certain criteria, derived from the party programs and the mode of media watch. Section 4 follows a case study on Germany, because in this country the Pirates were by far the most active and they practiced media observation on a regular basis. Also, one can assume that the Pirates are noticed more intensely by the established media and their role as a media observer can be emphasized since their entry into the Berlin City Parliament in the fall of 2011 with a vote of 8.9 percent.

With the help of a content analysis, the study measured if the Pirates were actually heard in media coverage when it came to "their" topics, for example on data retention or Internet neutrality. A short conclusion (Section 5) will complete the analysis.

2. Media observance and observation in the media

"Media accountability" can be defined as responsibility for media actions, or more precisely as "any non-State means of making media responsible towards the public" (Bertrand, 2000, 108). It explains "voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answer directly or indirectly to their society for the quality and/or consequences of publication" (McQuail, 2005, 207). Media managers and journalists, citizens and politicians are counted as the main actors of media accountability. For this study the term serves solely for a distinctive tie and explanation of a higher topic; the central category of this analysis is the media watch. The terms media watch and media criticism are being used synonymously, as a description for the attentive observation of media, media work, media workers and institutions. Media criticism or media watch in this sense means a competent criticism, which takes place regularly and activates discourse by examining concrete media and media phenomena, thus not only generalization. Media criticism essentially takes place on an intra- and intermedia basis. Intramedia meaning a medium, which observes itself or at least its own category. Intermedia means the "reciprocal observation by different actors of the media system (transl.)" (cp. Bleicher, 1997, 77; Bleicher, 2006, 219; Jarren, 1997; Schmidt, 2005). The most common form of media criticism is the criticism on media coverage. Its primary role is to make journalistic errors of performance transparent and is also an instrument to secure a quality standard in journalism (Beuthner & Weichert, 2005: 47; Russ-Mohl & Fengler, 2000). New forms and formats of media broaden and change the circle of actors of media criticism. Besides journalists, there are also politicians and citizens who comment critically on media, for example in watch blogs (cp. Bleicher, 1997: 78; Fengler, 2008; Hunsinger, Klastrup, & Allen, 2010). The observation of media does not only stick to the micro level. According to Hickethier (1997: 62) media criticism sets "norms and lays claims, it formulates standards of quality, demands an ethic of communication for the mediaworkers,

for the operators of media, whether they are entrepreneurs or authorized by public law, and eventually also for the media users".

Following Weischenberg's onionskin model (cp. Weischenberg, 1992: 68) there is another sphere connected to the level of norms which can be observed critically, besides the media actors and the media institutions.

Still following Weischenberg, this study understands media criticism as the observation and annotation of procedures on four central levels of the media system. This includes the context of roles, functions, structure and norms (cp. Weischenberg, 1992: 68–70).

The context of roles applies to the media actors, their demographic features, social and political attitudes, role models and to their professionalism. Media actors are integrated into the contexts of norms, structure and functions which influence what and how they produce. The media statements are embedded in the functional context: This level is about observance of the efforts and effects of media broadcasting (sources of information and groups of references, patterns of broadcasting and display formats, construction of reality, etc.). In addition, the economic, political, organizational or technological structures of media institutions can be the subject of observance. Ultimately, critiques can also be executed on the norms of the media system, thus on social general conditions, historical and legal basic principles or measures of communication policy.

Through the Internet, a demand for new reflection and review emerged on all levels of criticism; the Pirate Party belongs to the actors who actively interfere in this discourse (Bartels, 2009; Blumberg, 2010).

An electronic member survey within the German Pirate Party in the spring of 2011 (cp. Neumann, 2011) showed that the motives for entering the party were contrary to expectations. Motives were not primarily based in the field of Internet policy, but mainly rooted in the discontent with the policy made by established parties, the strengthening of civil rights and the debate on data retention. Internet policy ranked fifth (cp. Neumann, 2011, 101). The members marked topics related to media and new media as the most important topics, right after the "transparency of the political system," which included free access to public content, the freedom of information act, privacy protection and data security (cp. Neumann, 2011: 125).

To core topics of the Pirates like copyright or data security there can be no national solution in the digital age. That is why the Pirates see themselves as an international movement of people who are connected worldwide. They developed a non-governmental-organization in 2009, from a loose association in 2006, and then evolved into an official world federation (http://www.pp-international.net/) in 2010 in order to increase communication and cooperation. Meanwhile, there are 61 Pirate Parties worldwide who have joined the PPI, among them 26 are "ordinary member(s)" (cp. PPI, o.J.).

Above all, the Pirates demand an open culture of communication based on the Internet (United States Pirate Party, 2012).

The American Pirates published a collection of essays in January 2012 (http://www.nosafeharbor.com/), in which they put their requests into a historical and international reference by using specific and numerous quotations. Among others they quote Benjamin Franklin ("They who can give up essential liberty to obtain al little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety"), Mark Twain ("Only one thing is impossible for God: to find any sense in any copyright law on the planet"), Albert Camus ("The only way to deal with an un-free world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion") and Thomas Jefferson ("Timid men prefer the calm of despotism to the tempestuous sea of liberty."). They obviously seek to underline the timelessness, the time overdue and the universal validity of their positions. This collection of essays bundles the Pirate-positions into three groups of