Of shitstorms and »candystorms«

Interview with sociologist Christian Stegbauer

As a network researcher, sociologist Professor Christian Stegbauer also deals with communication in social media. That people prefer to stay in a bubble with like-minded others rather than get to grips with different opinions and ways of thinking was in his view inherent to digital communication from the outset. He considers many of the utopian ideas of a digital culture of participation to be exaggerated.

Dirk Frank: Professor Stegbauer, the noughties saw some very ambitious expectations in terms of what the internet and social media could achieve with regard to participation and democracy. Even representatives of the digital Bohème, such as Sascha Lobo, are meanwhile critical observers of Facebook, etc. Has the utopia transmuted to a dystopia?

Prof. Christian Stegbauer: When the internet started to take off back in the 1990s and the first web browser became available, lots of people thought that a type of communication would now be possible which was free of prejudices. Attributions regarding a person's appearance, origin, etc. supposedly no longer played a role. Many people in sociology shared this utopia too. However, if you had thought about it for a while, you would have realized even back then that this cannot be. A structure of inequality forms on the internet too, but it looks a bit different from when the people communicating with each other are present face to face.

In your book about shitstorms, you say the following: »The narrative of the internet, that it facilitates a better world, has survived into the present«: Remarkable that we're talking here today more about the negative effects.

The narrative still exists in the case of major internet companies such as Apple and Facebook. They tell us that with their products they're creating a better world, from which we all supposedly profit. And despite all the negative aspects of the internet we can also say, of course, that access to information has considerably improved. In the framework of a study, I dealt with Wikipedia, which can be seen as a positive alternative to the large internet companies because lots of people create knowledge there that serves the community as a whole. By contrast, Facebook and Google appropriate things that others create and make enormous profits with them.

One criticism of Facebook refers to the fact that we don't learn anything anymore about some of our friends. The multiplier effect makes sure that we only communicate with friends where there is lively exchange, the others are sidelined.

As a network researcher, I would say that Facebook is doing something here which accommodates our needs very well. The algorithm tries to make life easier for us by primarily displaying messages from people with whom we've previously interacted. Facebook wouldn't be possible otherwise because we wouldn't be able to process the countless messages in our network. What Facebook does here accommodates the user. However, the algorithm has a side effect, so to speak, which we call a filter bubble.

This filter bubble hypothesis is quite controversial.

That's right, critics say that most people not only gather information via Facebook. I would, however, argue to the contrary: It doesn't just depend on the filter bubble. In network research, the concept of homophily is very prominent; according to this, we surround ourselves with people who are similar to us and have the same opinions. If I express an opinion that my environment doesn't share, I run the risk of being shut out. What's more: Not everyone gets involved to an equal degree. There are activists who are much more strongly represented with their opinions and thus shape my perception of what my Facebook friends think. It's therefore not the case that everyone has the same voice, but instead there is a kind of power-law distribution. As a result, we get the erroneous impression that the opinion of particularly active people is also the opinion of all the others in our respective circle of acquaintances.

What advantage do network research tools offer in this context?

People are not alone in the world; they base their actions on others. This is at the heart of network research when we examine the structure of relationships. Because traditional social research does not consider this, network research is an alternative to traditional social research methods. This applies above all for standardized surveys in quantitative research, where no relationship between interviewees nor between interviewer and interviewee is allowed because that could falsify the results in the sense of a natural science measurement. However, that which actually makes a person is first of all his relationships. These determine what he thinks and how he behaves. In qualitative research, by contrast, the focus lies on the individual and his subjectivity and the relationship aspect is thus neglected.

To call something a »shitstorm«, it's often enough that someone is pilloried in a few comments on the internet. But doesn't there, in your understanding, have to be a certain quantitative factor for a shitstorm?

I wouldn't know how we could define the term exactly or demarcate it. In some cases, a few attacks are sufficient if the person on the receiving end of the shitstorm feels strongly affected. Sometimes, shitstorms are even useful. ING-DiBa's advertising clip with former basketball player Dirk Nowitzki is a well-known example. In the video, Nowitzki is handed a slice of ham by a butcher who asks him: »What did I always says to you back then?« And Nowitzki answers: »So that I grow up big and strong«. A wave of indignation from vegans and vegetarians ensued. The agency which made the clip for ING-DiBa later reported that lots of customers had taken the bank's side in these shitstorms.

In Germany, this positive feedback is known as a »candystorm«.

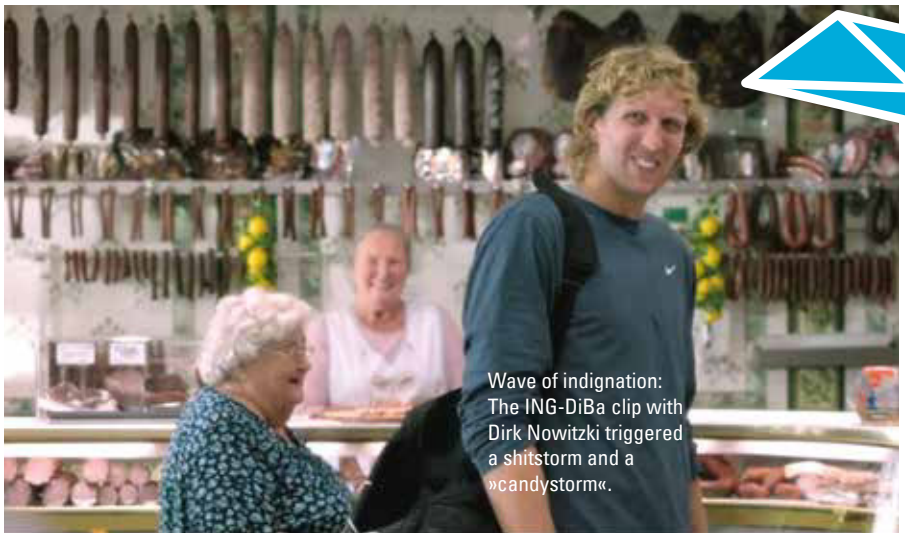
Yes, there are several examples for this. The Miniatur Wunderland theme park in Hamburg received a letter from someone who had spoken out against allowing not only needy people free entry in the framework of a special deal but asylum seekers too. The company published the letter on Facebook and a huge »candystorm« followed.

You say that shitstorms occur when the demarcation from other groups increases to such an extent that we no longer encounter any other way of thinking.

I've studied a forum called Multikulti-Watch where it explicitly says: »Anyone who does not believe that we Germans are discriminated against compared to asylum seekers and foreigners will be blocked without prior warning.« That's an official threat: If someone speaks out against it, he'll be kicked out. As an individual, the fact that people contradict you is apparently hard to bear. From a social science perspective, however, it can be explained by the theory of structural balancing: If you have a liberal opinion and everyone in your own circle is against foreigners, then you could suddenly have a whole bunch of people against you. Indeed, different-minded people are frequently unfriended on social platforms. This is a social mechanism that also leads to opinions in the social domain aligning themselves with the ostensible majority opinion.

In your opinion, do shitstorms cause lasting damage?

Negative communication destroys the basis for a possible discourse. You can argue your point, provided you both



Wave of indignation: The ING-DiBa clip with Dirk Nowitzki triggered a shitstorm and a »candystorm«.

acknowledge each other and each other's opinion. At that moment when the basis is destroyed, a negative reciprocity emerges or a reciprocity in conflict, as Georg Simmel once called it. In fact, we should try to be forbearing and not join in at the same level. However, that is in fact against the social rule of paying back like with like. In the case of famous people, such shitstorms mostly subside after a couple of days. But with politicians who have taken a stance against the right wing, for example, it's likely to be more protracted.

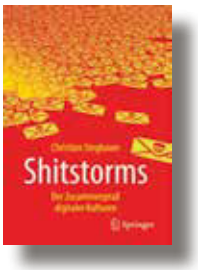
I guess we just shouldn't simply allow everything. But that's exactly what you're also lamenting, that many mass media switch off the comments function due to vast public pressure.

For the media, it's often the only possibility to moderate this in a very regulated manner. However, moderation is expensive, and then – under certain circumstances – an accusation of censorship follows.

You also mention in your book that criticism of right-wing populist positions is very often associated with people's limited abilities to express themselves in writing.

In milieus such as the middle-class and conservative FAZ newspaper, for example, readers who write letters to the editor attach great importance to meticulously respecting every full stop, comma and upper and lower case. There, you're only acknowledged if you write correctly. However, as a matter of principle we should not disparage people because of their education. The better educated are at an advantage in terms of political participation anyway. However, as far as communication on the internet is concerned, the threshold has lowered. People without the ability to express themselves in sophisticated language will surround themselves accordingly with people to whom that's not so important. However, this widens the social divide even further.

A very topical issue right now is right-wing radicalism, whose representatives also and above all organize themselves on the internet. Does network research have something to say about this phenomenon?



Christian Stegbauer
Shitstorms.
Der Zusammenprall digitaler Kulturen
Springer, 2018

When examining a shitstorm against the Hessenpark museum, I came across some extreme cases of threats of violence. When the solution offered is to »just burn Hessenpark down« and employees there are threatened, this stirs up hate. You ask yourself when this violence will one day erupt in reality. In the rhetoric of the Alternative for Germany political party, for example, people like to talk about »knifemen«. That does not now mean that the people who talk like that necessarily resort to violence themselves. But it creates a mood that gives a certain backing to those ready to do so. Right-wing groups attempt every day to scandalize topics, which also includes staging shitstorms. Sometimes such an operation transfers out of a small circle of sympathizers to a wider public. In the case of the Hessenpark museum, the complaint was that asylum seekers were allowed in free of charge, while Germans, even those on income support, had to pay. Now we could, of course, say that in a certain way this was unfair. On the other hand, for the purpose of integration it's important that migrants learn something about the culture of the country that has taken them in. The line of argument then looks quite different again.

At one point in your book you say that the indignation exhibited on the internet stands not only for the »broken promises of future technology« but also for their »partial fulfilment«. Does the internet also give citizens a certain »power«?

As a citizen, you no longer have to hide from »those at the top«, the authorities. In terms of democracy, that is something fundamentally positive. There are shitstorm-like protests which are positive in a certain sense because they campaign, for example, for consumer rights. If a company has brought a product onto the market that does not deliver what it promises, through massive protests consumers can get the company to back down. But in a constitutional state, you also need certain protection for specific groups as well as respect for institutions. We should therefore not tear down all barriers, even if that would sometimes be desirable from the perspective of radical democratization.

The interview was conducted by Dirk Frank.

About Christian Stegbauer

Already in the 1980s as a student assistant at Goethe University, **Christian Stegbauer** was entrusted with a small study on mailboxes. Later he wrote an article for Forschung Frankfurt (Issue 4, 1995) on the introduction of email there: He is now an associate professor for sociology at Goethe University and currently conducting research on the formation of microcultures in social situations. How this occurs is explained in the book »Grundlagen der Netzwerkforschung: Situationen, Mikronetzwerke und Kultur« on the basis of everyday behaviour. His book on »Shitstorms« shows under which conditions shitstorms develop.

stegbauer@soz.uni-frankfurt.de