News Quality from the Recipients' Perspective

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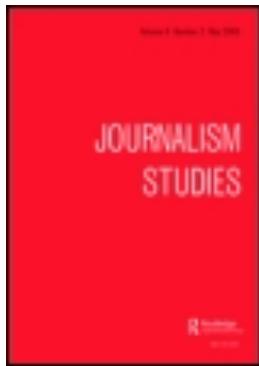
News Quality from the Recipients' Perspective

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NEWS QUALITY FROM THE RECIPIENTS' PERSPECTIVE
Investigating recipients' ability to judge the normative quality of news

Juliane Urban and **Wolfgang Schweiger**

Fierce competition on the Web, increased commercialization and a turbulent economic environment may prompt media organizations to violate journalistic quality norms in order to remain competitive. Media users or recipients are then more likely to be confronted with factually inaccurate, incomplete or biased news. One would hope that at least some recipients prefer high-quality media over low-quality media and this preference will counteract pressures on media organizations to downgrade their product. But this hope is based on the assumption that recipients can evaluate the quality of news appropriately. Communication scholars, however, typically argue that recipients are unable to judge media with regard to these normative quality criteria since they lack the appropriate background and professional knowledge to make such judgements. This study investigates how far this is true. A series of 2 × 2 factorial online experiments test whether recipients of news recognize the quality of news items measured by the criteria of diversity, relevance, ethics, impartiality, objectivity and comprehensibility. Results indicate that recipients do recognize differences in quality to some extent where they reflect issues of relevance, impartiality and diversity. But recipients found it hard to evaluate the ethics, objectivity and comprehensibility of a news item. Furthermore, media brand images proved to be an important heuristic when recipients have to evaluate news quality. The results show that it is difficult for recipients to judge news coverage with regard to identified normative quality criteria. However, the audience is by no means completely unable to identify a lack of quality in the news.

KEYWORDS   audience analysis; credibility; experiment; journalism; media brand image; news quality; normative quality; user quality

Introduction

The world's media is changing as fast as ever. In 2011 the amount of information created and disseminated on the Web surpassed 1.8 zettabytes, a nine-fold increase from 2006 (Gantz and Reinsel 2011, 1). Likewise, the amount of news available on the internet increased dramatically. For example, the Federation of German Newspaper Publishers identified 658 newspaper websites in 2009. In 2002, there were only 400 such websites (BDZV 2010). Next to these traditional media offers, there exist a myriad of portals, corporate websites, weblogs, forums, social network sites and others where Web users can catch up with the latest news.

However, the quality of these news services varies hugely, as now anyone—media professionals, companies, organizations, institutions as well as private media users can distribute information. Basically, any kind of content can be put on a website as long as it

is not obviously illegal. Even professional media websites, such as the news websites of traditional newspapers or TV stations, do not publish only high-quality news. Severe cost and time pressures, as well as staff shortages in online newsrooms, increase their susceptibility to shallowness, inaccuracy or even mis-information (Salverria 2005; Craig 2011). Fierce competition on the Web as well as general changes in the media system, such as concentration of media ownership for example, increasing commercialization and economic difficulties of the media industry, may lead to a violation of journalistic quality norms in order to remain competitive (Bogart 2000; Beck, Reineck, and Schubert 2010).

These developments have consequences. For media users, the chance of being confronted with erroneous, incomplete or biased news on the internet but also in traditional media increases. If media users do not receive unbiased, relevant, comprehensible and varied media information, they cannot act as well-informed, competent and active citizens in a democracy. Now, one can argue that the sheer amount of news available remedies the problem as recipients can get a fair overview of a topic by using multiple sources. However, this argument is based on the assumption that recipients can appropriately evaluate the quality of news regarding those "normative" (Meijer 2001; Hasebrink 2011) quality criteria. There are plausible arguments why recipients may have problems with evaluating the normative quality of news. First, normative news quality criteria are abstract, complex, and thereby hard to understand for media users. Second, even if recipients fully understand the criteria, they need background knowledge and practical experience to judge news on these criteria (Erlei 1992). In sum, it is not clear whether or not recipients are able to evaluate the actual normative quality of news.

Literature Review

Normative News Quality Criteria

Defining quality is a tricky task. It implies that the objective nature of an item has to be valued as being suitable or unsuitable to satisfy certain claims. Hence, there is no quality in an item itself, but only some kind of convention to interpret certain objective indicators as high or low quality (Wallisch 1995). This is especially true for media products such as news since what constitutes good news depends on the perspective from which it is viewed. For example, journalists may judge news quality in relation to the amount of research they carried out before writing it. By contrast, recipients may evaluate how much they enjoyed reading an article.
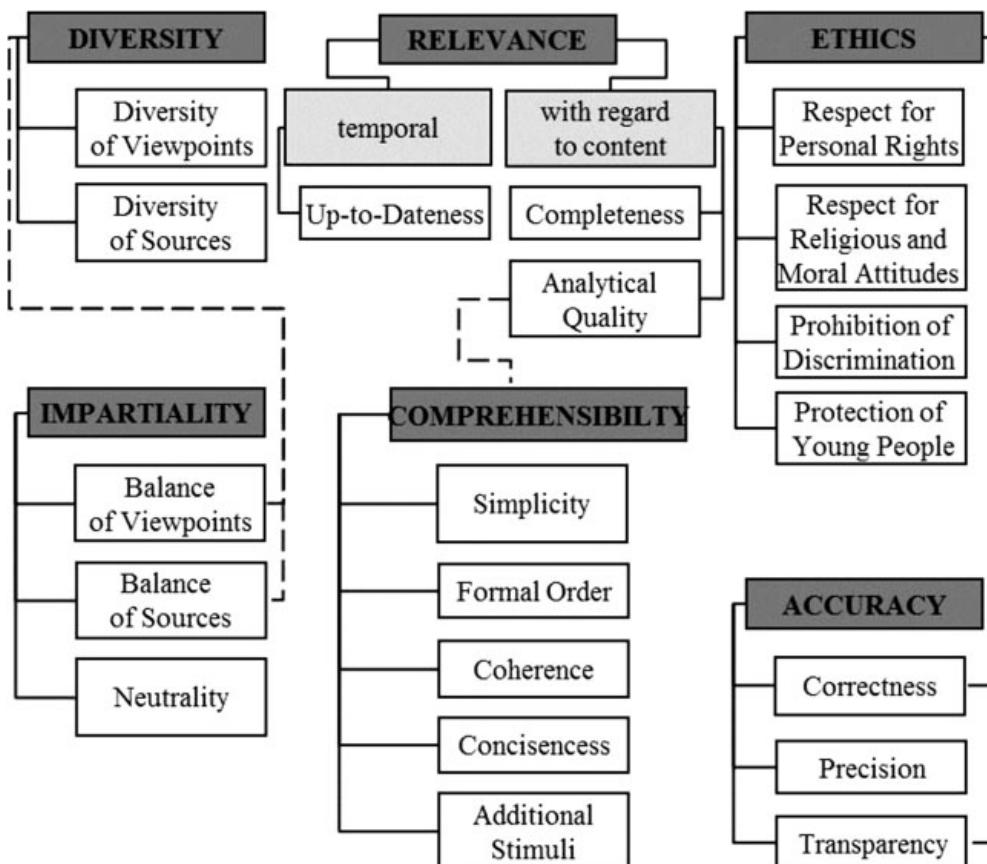
As mentioned above, we are going to focus on the quality of news from a normative perspective. From this perspective, news quality is defined by scientists (speaking on behalf of recipients) as relating to the functions of news media in modern democratic societies (McQuail 1992; Hagen 1995). Generally speaking, journalism mainly compensates consequences of functional differentiation in societies. This differentiation results from the loss of traditional roots as well as spatial and functional differentiation in politics, economics and other societal sub-systems (Bekel, Moller, and Williams 2002, 25–26). Thus, journalism has to promote "a greater understanding of the issues and problems facing society" (Hasebrink 2011, 324) and actively generate a common public sphere where relevant issues are freely debated by political actors and citizens (Habermas 2006). The foundation of this is the provision of adequate information for citizens about currently relevant issues. Additionally, in democracies journalism is always part of the societal and political system with certain values, norms and operating principles. Journalism has to

accept, preserve and mediate those values (Arnold 2008, 496–497). Thus, in terms of societal values, journalism has to obey general law and principles as bases for a prosperous human community. Those specifications are set in media law or codes of conduct for journalists. In terms of political values, journalism has to "maintain checks and balances on the political process, and thereby increase the efficiency of government and help to resolve social conflict by giving a multifaceted description of events" (Jacobsson and Jacobsson 2010). High-quality journalism tries to satisfy all of these tasks.

There are several catalogues of normative quality criteria (e.g. McQuail 1992). German researchers especially have addressed the topic (Schatz and Schulz 1992; Poettker 2000; Arnold 2009). A review of those catalogues results in six basic quality dimensions. Firstly, all social groups and ideas should have the chance and expectation of being mentioned in journalistic coverage (*diversity*). Second, news is expected to focus on actual and socially relevant issues and to present the important aspects of those issues (*relevance*). Only if information is complete and accurate can citizens understand societal problems, form adequate opinions and make adequate decisions (*accuracy*). Fourth, even if information is complete and correct it can only be useful if it is understood by recipients (*comprehensibility*). To ensure citizens' free and competent opinion formation, journalism needs to guarantee a neutral and balanced coverage of all facts, demands and positions (*impartiality*). The compliance of *ethical standards* is the final quality dimension for news coverage.

Figure 1 summarizes the six quality dimensions and concrete quality criteria which are frequently associated with these dimensions for single news items.

The assignment of some quality criteria to certain quality dimensions is only analytical, which is illustrated by the dotted lines (as alternative paths of allocation).


FIGURE 1
Normative quality dimensions and criteria (based on own literature review)

News Quality and Recipients

In research about media quality, recipients' quality evaluations are less appreciated than quality evaluations by scientists, journalists or media experts. Scholars mostly argue that the audience is unable to judge whether normative media quality is reliable because they lack background information and journalistic knowledge (Erlei 1992; Beck, Reineck, and Schubert 2010).

Studies which explicitly focus on news quality from the audience's perspective can be divided into three groups. A first group investigates recipients' quality expectations to deduce quality criteria (Bogart 2000; Pew Research 2012). These studies confirm that recipients' news quality expectations reflect the normative quality criteria mentioned above, by and large. Audience members attach importance to a neutral and balanced coverage (Willnat and Weaver 1998; Tsfati, Meyersand, and Peri 2006), and a great diversity of opinions and comprehensibility (Gladney 1996; Dahinden, Kaminski, and Niederreuther 2004). Furthermore, many of these studies reveal that most media users have a limited understanding of news quality (Lieske 2008). When openly asked what signals a good newspaper, only a few recipients formulate sophisticated rationales (Arnold 2009; Fiedler 2012).

A second group of studies investigates how far certain quality perceptions of recipients influence their decision to select or use a certain media product. They can show that recipients use news which they perceive as relevant, accurate, impartial and comprehensible more often than news which they perceive as less relevant, accurate, impartial or comprehensible (Wolling 2002; Emmer et al. 2011). So, on the one hand, normative criteria are important criteria when it comes to evaluating news. On the other hand, they are important criteria for the selection of news as well.

A third group of studies investigates recipients' quality evaluations of specific media channels or products (Newhagen and Nass 1989; Abdulla et al. 2002). These studies suggest that recipients are able to determine the normative quality of news coverage to a certain degree. For example, quality media are usually rated higher than tabloid media by people who use both media types at least occasionally (Zubayr and Geese 2009). However, like the first two groups these studies help little to find out about recipients' ability to judge the quality of a single news item.

Firstly, the level of analysis in these studies is quite broad. Most of them ask for recipients' evaluations of whole media brands like the *New York Times* or whole media genres like newspapers or news websites. Hence, the results cannot say much about recipients' concrete evaluations of different news items. They rather express an aggregate opinion over a variety of articles, sections and editions. It remains unclear which part of the coverage was judged. An example from radio research should illustrate that point. Eberhard (1962, 236–239) and Kliment (1996) found that German radio listeners evaluate the quality of radio channels according to the music played. In both studies, the news quality had no impact on the overall quality judgement. Schoenbach and Goertz (1995) even found that music judgement directly affects news service judgement. Thus, it is problematic to infer from recipients' general channel evaluation their judgements of radio news services.

Second, recipients' quality evaluations of media products were virtually never directly compared to the scholarly defined and content-analytically measured quality of those media. Consequently, we cannot say whether recipients' evaluations are appropriate

or not because we do not know the actual strengths and weaknesses of the media objects under evaluation.

Third, there are several other factors which may influence audience's quality judgements, such as attitudes towards a media brand, personal media experiences or media routines (Lee 2010; Tsfati 2010). Only a few studies control these factors:

1. In a survey, Rager (1993) confronted participants with three news articles and asked them to rank them with regard to quality. At the same time, the normative quality of the articles was content-analysed. Only 25 per cent of his participants ranked the articles in the same order as the content analysis.
2. In a 2 × 2 experimental design, Trepte, Reinecke, and Behr (2008) presented participants with identical articles which only differed in terms of media type (newspaper versus blog) and ethical quality (ethical neutral versus ethical questionable). Here, most participants recognized the ethically questionable version and rated it significantly lower for quality.
3. Jungnickel (2011) chose a similar approach to Rager. Applying quantitative content analysis, she identified newspaper articles with very high and very low quality across seven quality dimensions (diversity, relevance, accuracy, impartiality, transparency, lawfulness and comprehensibility). Then she confronted participants in a 2 × 2 online experiment with either a high-quality or a low-quality article on a political or sports topic. Results illustrated that recipients realized some of the quality differences (diversity, impartiality and comprehensibility). However, differences in transparency and ethics were not recognized.

All three studies applied anonymous news sources. Therefore, they cannot draw conclusions about how media brand images may influence the quality judgement of single news articles. This gap is filled by the present study.

What is meant by media brand image? "Consumers ascribe a persona or an image to the brand based on subjective perceptions of a set of associations that they have about the brand" (Nandan 2005, 264). So media brand image describes the overall personal attitude towards a media title. Following social-psychology, this attitude consists of several cognitive and affective perceptions (Zajonc and Markus 1982; Bagozzi and Burnkrant 1985).[1]

Cognitive perceptions include recipients' perceived general credibility of the brand (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1982) as well as quality perceptions (Burgoon, Burgoon, and Buller 1986), ideas on gratifications that can be obtained (Lichtenstein and Rosenfeld 1984), and so on. Affective perceptions refer to the emotional affinity or feelings towards a medium. This includes concepts like sympathy, acceptance or popularity. Taken together, all these factors constitute the image recipients have of a media brand.

The literature hints at the fact that media brand image influences the quality evaluation of single news items. Above all, credibility studies reveal image transfers from the source of information—either the author or the medium—to the information given. Media users assess credibility of a brand they do not know based on their knowledge of a similar brand they do have familiarity with (Johnson and Fahmy 2006). For example, recipients judge news sites associated with established and credible news organizations as more credible than all other types of news sites on the internet (Flanagin and Metzger 2000; Fineberg and Stone 2002). Attitude change is more likely to happen if the source of information is perceived as trustworthy and competent (Benoit and Strathman 2004; Chung, Fink, and Kaplowitz 2008). Furthermore, loyalty to, or liking of a source, promotes attitude change. For example, several studies found that liking an advertising medium can positively influence attitudes towards TV spots (Schumann 1986; Murry, Lastovicka, and

Singh 1992) and banner advertisements (100world.media 2000). Lastly, support for the influence of media brand image on the quality evaluation of single news items can be found in a study by Slater and Rouner (1996). The authors revealed that (besides message characteristics) media brand expertise assessment moderately influences the perception of writing style of an article stated in that brand. So it is plausible to assume media brand image influences the quality evaluation of single news items.

However, the impact of a brand's image in the evaluation process might depend on recipients' ability to recognize quality differences in news items. This is suggested by dual process theories of attitude formation. Both the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) and the Heuristic Systematic Model of information processing (Chen and Chaiken 1999) forecast a more peripheral attitude-formation if recipients are not able or not willing to evaluate information properly.[2] Thus, the ability to recognize article quality can influence if a quality judgement is formed on a central (systematic) route or a peripheral (heuristic) route. If recipients recognize the actual quality of a news item, their quality evaluation will be mainly based on this knowledge. The media brand image should be less effective. By contrast, if recipients are unable to formulate adequate quality judgements they might draw heavily on their attitudes towards a media brand as heuristics to evaluate the quality of the news article.

In sum, news quality research dealing with audience evaluations of normative quality dimensions is fragmentary and inconsistent. There is some evidence that (1) the factual normative quality of news articles (as measured in a content analysis), (2) the recipients' personal evaluations of those articles, and (3) their image of a media brand are inter-connected. However, the degree of correlation is unclear. The studies neither analyse the combined influence of actual normative quality and users' attitudes towards a media brand, nor do they systematically investigate how far recipients' evaluation abilities vary between quality dimensions. The relevance of this second aspect becomes evident when we recall why news coverage has to fulfil the six normative quality dimensions mentioned here. Only diverse, relevant, accurate, comprehensible, impartial *and* ethical news coverage enables individuals to act as responsible citizens and voters in a democratic society. If one of these requirements is violated, such behaviour is not at all or only partly possible. In this sense, if recipients want to make an informed judgement, they have to recognize specific shortcomings in terms of all six quality dimensions. If, and only if, they are then able to decide whether they have to search for further information on an issue.

Research Questions

The present paper investigates recipients' ability to appropriately judge news quality referring to different normative quality dimensions. So the main research questions are:

RQ1: Do recipients recognize normative quality differences in single news items?
As mentioned above, recipients' perceived media brand image seems to have an impact on recipients' quality evaluations of an article published in this brand:

RQ2: How does the perceived media brand image influence recipients' quality evaluation of a news article in this medium?
Based on the theoretical considerations and empirical observations mentioned above, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: The more positive the perceived media brand image, the more positively recipients evaluate the normative quality of a news item from this brand.

H2: The less able recipients are to recognize quality differences in single news items, the more important the perceived media brand image becomes in the evaluation process.

Method

To investigate the research questions and hypotheses, a series of six between-groups 2 × 2 factorial online experiments was designed. Each experiment focused on one of the six quality dimensions shown in Figure 1.

Design

For each experiment, researchers took one good-quality political article on a contemporary topic and manipulated it in two ways. As the first factor, one of the six quality dimensions was manipulated resulting in a (1) high- and (2) low-quality version. As we assumed the media brand influences the individual process of quality evaluation, the media title was manipulated as a second factor. Version 1 presented the logo of the well-respected, high-circulation German quality daily newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. Version 2 applied the logo of the biggest tabloid paper in Germany, *Bild-Zeitung*, known for its sensationalist coverage, frequent exposés of people's personal lives and vicious campaigns against politicians who have fallen out of favour.[3] The news article and page layout were changed to resemble each of the publications. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of the four versions of the news article. They were told that the article had actually appeared in a newspaper within the past week.

The variation of quality dimensions was based on the associated quality criteria from Figure 1. Table 1 illustrates the manipulations. In the impartiality-experiment, for example, the high-quality article presented a well-balanced selection of sources and viewpoints and was neutrally written, whereas the poor-quality article was unbalanced and written judgmentally. The other five quality dimensions were kept constant. The same procedure applied to the other quality dimensions/experiments except for ethics. Here, the criteria are too different to be varied in a single article (see Figure 1). So we decided to focus on the prohibition of discrimination in the ethics-experiment. This was because quality variations with regard to this aspect were recognized most frequently in a pretest with $N = 31$ media students.

All articles in the experiments were based on actual media stories. All resembled actual news topics and were of equal length. They were written by the first author of this paper and reviewed by a professional journalist. A quantitative content analysis of all articles, which served as a manipulation check, was conducted by trained media students.

Procedure

The experimental study was conducted as a series of six two-wave online questionnaires. In the beginning of the first questionnaire, participants answered some questions on their general media use. These questions permit an easy entry to the survey and help analyse whether regular media consumption improves quality evaluation skills of recipients. Next, participants were exposed to one of the articles which—depending on the experimental group the participant was assigned to—were of either low or high quality and either branded as *Bild-Zeitung* or *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*.

TABLE 1

Variation of quality dimensions in six experiments

Quality criteria	High-quality version	Low-quality version
Experiment 1: Diversity (topic of article: Scholarship programme for talented students)		
Number of different viewpoints reported	Five	Two
Number of different actors	Three actors cited	One actor cited
Experiment 2: Relevance (topic of article: Unrests in Southern Sudan)		
Completeness	Complete information: What happened? Where? When? Who was involved?	Fragmentary information: What happened? When? Who was involved?
Analytical quality	Information on causes, consequences, evaluations and claims of/from the event were provided	Information on consequences and evaluations of/from the event were provided
Up-to-dateness	Article date one day after the event	Article date one week after the event
Experiment 3: Accuracy (topic of article: Scholarship programme for talented students)		
Correctness	No contradictions or errors in the article	Two contradictions or errors in the article
Transparency of author and sources (name, function, circumstances of quote)	High	Low
Precision of quantitative information	Exact quantitative data, if those are required	Vague or no quantitative data, if those are required
Experiment 4: Comprehensibility (topic of article: Unrests in Southern Sudan)		
Simplicity	Easy terms, simple phrasing	Difficult terms, complex phrasing
Formal order	Clear formal structure, paragraphs and subheadings	No recognizable formal structure, no paragraphs or subheadings
Coherence	Logical sequence of information with explicit interconnections	Random sequence of information without interconnections
Conciseness	Precise text without unimportant information, short sentences	Imprecise text with a lot of unimportant information, long, convoluted sentences
Additional stimuli	Use of some direct quotations and figures of speech to create a diversified text	No use of direct quotations and figures of speech to create a boring text
Experiment 5: Impartiality (topic of article: Raising retirement age in Germany)		
Balanced viewpoints	Yes	No
Balanced actors	Yes	No
Neutrality: Does the author refrain from personally evaluating the reported situation	Yes, no explicit or implicit evaluation	No, explicit evaluation given
Experiment 6: Ethics (topic of article: Raising retirement age in Germany)		
No discrimination	No discrimination of older employees, neutral phrasing	Discrimination of older employees by use of stereotypes and derogatory phrasing

The article was presented without any further instructions, so recipients were free to decide how to read the article. The time participants spent reading the article (reception time) was automatically recorded through the survey software. After reading the article, participants were asked to give an overall quality evaluation on the article as well as to judge the article with regard to the six quality dimensions. The overall quality evaluation was measured on a five-point scale from "very bad" to "very good". The evaluation of the six quality dimensions followed Trepte, Reinecke, and Behr (2008) and Jungnickel (2011). Every quality criterion from Figure 1 was transferred into a statement which participants had to evaluate on a five-point scale from "do not agree at all" to "agree entirely".

In the follow-up survey one week later, data on the perceived brand image of both newspapers was collected with the help of a five-point semantic differential. The image was measured by 14 items (inspired by Merbold and Johanssen 1977; Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1982; Burgoon, Burgoon, and Buller 1986; Ridder and Engel 2010) referring to the general credibility ("competent—incompetent", "trustworthy—untrustworthy"), the general quality of coverage ("diverse—not diverse", "contains relevant information—contains irrelevant information", "unbiased—biased", "ethically inoffensive—ethically offensive", "contains accurate information—contains inaccurate information", "transparent—not transparent", "comprehensible—incomprehensible") as well as brand sympathy ("I like—I don't like", "pleasant—unpleasant") and acceptance ("indispensable—dispensable", "close to me—not close to me", "recommendable—not recommendable").[4]

Sample

All experiments were carried out simultaneously between 23 January and 15 February 2012 in Germany. The basic population were German onliners (individuals who use the internet at least sometimes) between 18 and 65 years of age. Participants were recruited from a representative online panel with the help of a professional panel provider. For each experiment, independent samples were chosen via quota sampling (age, gender, education).

Quotation was successful despite a slight over-representation of higher-educated individuals. In each experiment, between $N = 520$ and $N = 537$ participants took part. The response rate was about 33 per cent per experiment. For the present analysis we excluded all participants who read the article for fewer than 10 seconds, as a pretest showed that participants who read the article for a shorter time were not able to even capture the basic content and had thereby no chance of recognizing quality variations. In consequence, the sample size narrowed to between $N = 365$ and $N = 427$ per experiment.

A between-group randomization check referring to general media use and the image of both newspapers was performed at the outset of the analysis. It revealed successful randomization with no between-group differences in all six experiments.

Results

RQ1 asked if recipients recognize normative quality differences in news articles. We compared the ratings of all quality criteria for participants who read the high-quality version to the ratings by those who read the low-quality version. This means we only focus on the quality criteria analysed in the respective experiment. Table 2 illustrates the results, including overall ratings of the six quality dimensions as mean indexes of the single items.

The first remarkable result is that participants ranked all high-quality versions higher with regard to the relevant quality dimensions than the corresponding low-quality versions. On the item-level, 12 out of 18 group differences were significant. The same applies to *all* six overall ratings (index variables) which means that the audience seems to recognize all normative quality dimensions in a similar fashion. This is true at least if there are significant quality differentials, as was the case in all six experiments.

When taking a closer look at particular quality criteria we can find some notable differences between them. Participants are quick to identify instances when the causes of or claims resulting from an event are not reported. They also notice when there is no

TABLE 2
Quality dimensions and recipients' quality evaluations

Item	Low quality	High quality	Difference
Diversity	(N = 154)	(N = 206)	
Many opinions were considered.	2.7	3.2	+0.42***
Many actors were considered.	3.0	3.3	+0.30**
Overall diversity rating	2.9	3.2	+0.35***
Relevance	(N = 193)	(N = 177)	
It becomes clear who says/did what when and where with regard to the event.	3.3	3.7	+0.40***
Causes of the event are named.	2.7	3.9	+1.24***
Claims resulting from the event are named.	2.6	3.3	+0.76***
The article is up-to-date.	3.5	3.5	+0.02
Overall relevance rating	3.2	3.6	+0.38***
Accuracy	(N = 192)	(N = 172)	
The article does not contain erroneous facts or contradictions.	2.4	2.6	+0.20
All mentioned persons or institutions could be clearly identified.	3.4	3.5	+0.09
The circumstances under which the persons or institutions made their statements became clear.	3.1	3.2	+0.13
The author of the article can be recognized.	2.9	3.6	+0.77***
The article contains sufficiently precise amounts, dates and numbers.	3.2	3.5	+0.32**
Overall accuracy rating	3.3	3.5	+0.28***
Comprehensibility	(N = 141)	(N = 160)	
For me personally, the article is comprehensible.	3.4	3.7	+0.34**
Overall comprehensibility rating	3.4	3.7	+0.34**
Impartiality	(N = 179)	(N = 169)	
Different opinions are covered in equal depth.	3.1	3.5	+0.37**
Everybody who has something to say on the events is covered in equal depth.	2.9	3.2	+0.29*
The article is neutrally written, meaning the journalist does not give his own valuations of the event.	3.5	3.8	+0.24
Overall impartiality rating	3.2	3.5	+0.31**
Ethics	(N = 165)	(N = 149)	
The article does not discriminate people because of their cultural, religious, social or national background.	2.9	3.2	+0.28*
Overall ethics rating	2.9	3.2	+0.28*

Means are on a scale from 1 = "do not agree at all" to 5 = "agree entirely"; overall ratings of the six quality dimensions represent mean indexes of the items above.
Significant differences (*t*-test): *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

information about who wrote the article. It is easy to recognize the absence of both these pieces of information: they are easily identifiable facts in a news article. So a recipient more or less only has to tick the absence or presence of these criteria when he/she is asked to evaluate them.

By contrast, participants were less likely to recognize problems with other quality criteria. They did not spot erroneous facts or contradictions and low transparency of sources in the accuracy-experiment and the topicality of an article in the relevance-experiment, as well as the variation of neutrality in the impartiality-experiment. There are three possible reasons for that. Firstly, the evaluation of these quality criteria requires at least some basic knowledge about the topic of the article. For example, to be able to recognize erroneous facts or contradictions in our article, recipients need background knowledge about the political system in Germany (in the low-quality article, the first name of a well-known German politician was incorrect). Second, most of the concerning criteria are not simple facts, that do appear in the article or not. They instead ask for a considerably more complex and sometimes intuitive or emotional evaluation of the whole text. For example, when a recipient has to evaluate the neutrality of an article he/she has to look for explicit and implicit evaluations stated by the author throughout the whole text and weigh up the seriousness of those evaluations with regard to a neutral coverage. That requires a totally different kind of competence than just looking for the presence or absence of certain information. Third, these results might also be explained by a general poor attentiveness of participants while reading the articles. Since, for example, erroneous facts were placed somewhere in the middle of the article and many participants only read the article quickly, so they might just have missed the mistakes.

During the analysis we also performed basic checks on individual differences in quality evaluation competence. We used binary logistic regression analysis to investigate the extent to which gender, age and education influenced whether participants recognized quality differences in the articles or not.[5] Results show hardly any influence from these variables. Only two of six models showed a significant increase in the prediction of recipients' ability to recognize quality differences when the three variables were entered. The first was observed for the quality dimension diversity (Nagelkerke r^2 = 0.08; χ^2 = 11.54; $p < 0.05$). Here, people with a university degree recognized quality differences better than people without a university degree (Wald = 4.74; $p < 0.05$; Exp(B) = 2.33). The second significant impact was observed for the quality dimension comprehensibility (Nagelkerke r^2 = 0.08; χ^2 = 9.89; $p < 0.05$). Participants between 30 and 49 recognized quality differences better than participants between 18 and 29 (Wald = 6.68; $p < 0.01$; Exp(B) = 3.02). However, the small Nagelkerke's r^2 values of both regression models illustrate the rather small impact of those variables. So, neither gender nor formal education and life experience significantly enhance recipients' quality evaluation abilities.

We also wanted to find out how far the ratings of the different quality criteria influence the overall quality evaluation of the articles. This is why we conducted a multiple regression analysis across all experiments with the overall quality evaluation as criterion and the individual quality ratings from Table 2 as predictors. Table 3 shows that recipients' overall quality evaluation depends to a considerable extent on their perceptions of relevance, accuracy, comprehensibility and impartiality (adjusted r^2 = 0.35). Solely diversity and ethics perceptions do not matter for recipients' overall quality judgement of a news item.

TABLE 3
Impact of quality ratings on overall quality evaluation

Predictors of overall quality evaluation	Standard coefficient (β)
Relevance	
It becomes clear who says/did what when and where with regard to the event.	0.09
The article is up-to-date.	0.10
Accuracy	
The article does not contain erroneous facts or contradictions.	0.08
The article contains sufficiently precise amounts, dates and numbers.	0.08
Comprehensibility	
For me personally, the article is comprehensible.	0.17
Impartiality	
Everybody who has something to say on the events is covered in equal depth.	0.09
The article is neutrally written, meaning the journalist does not give his own valuations of the event.	0.11

Multiple regression (enter). Only significant coefficients on the 5% level are shown. $N = 1120$.

RQ2 referred to the relationship between media brand image and judgements of article quality appearing in this brand. As already mentioned, image was measured with a 14-item battery. In a first step, we examined the internal consistency of the item-battery with the help of Cronbach's alpha. The items produce an alpha of 0.96, illustrating a very good reliability. So the 14 items seem to measure media brand image appropriately. Therefore we calculated an overall media brand image rating as mean index of the 14 items.

In a second step, we used one multiple regression analysis for each quality dimension to investigate how participants' quality evaluations are affected by the actual article quality, on the one hand, and the media brand image, on the other. To examine possible interactions between actual quality and attitudes towards the media brand, two-way interaction terms were also entered into the regression.

Table 4 illustrates that attitudes towards the media brand actually influence participants' quality evaluations of the article. The brand image has a significant and positive impact in all experiments. In five of these experiments it shows a main effect on quality evaluations. In the last experiment regarding ethics, it develops impact in interaction with the actual quality of the article. So H1 is confirmed by the data. The effect of the media brand image on quality evaluations is moderate throughout all experiments.

In addition, Table 4 illustrates different levels of influence for media brand image depending on the quality dimension under investigation. As already seen in Table 2, relevance is the dimension for which participants recognized quality differences most easily, because relevance is relatively easy to judge by checking the absence or presence of certain facts. And, in line with our deliberations, the actual quality of the article influenced participants' evaluation of relevance the most. Media brand image showed a significant but slightly weaker impact.

Comparable results can be found for the quality dimension impartiality. The judgement of balance of viewpoint and sources in an article asks for similar evaluation-competences as relevance criteria. Therefore, a significant impact of actual quality on the quality evaluation of recipients in the impartiality-experiment is plausible. Besides those

TABLE 4

Impact of actual quality and attitudes towards the media brand on recipients' evaluation of quality dimensions (multiple regressions; beta values)

	Diversity	Relevance	Accuracy	Comprehensibility	Impartiality	Ethics
N	180	189	182	176	158	157
Main effects						
Article quality (low–high)	0.15*	0.31***	0.07	0.12	0.25**	0.09
Media brand image	0.23**	0.27***	0.35***	0.23**	0.35***	0.08
Two-way interaction						
Quality × Image	0.09	0.00	−0.10	0.04	−0.06	−0.26**
Correlation r^2	0.07**	0.15***	0.14***	0.06***	0.18***	0.08**

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

two criteria, impartiality furthermore includes the neutrality criterion. As we have explained above, it is rather difficult for recipients to evaluate this criterion. So it is easier for them to use their perceived general neutrality of a brand as heuristic in the evaluation process. Thus, when it comes to the overall evaluation of impartiality, the actual quality and the media brand image could be important for recipients. This is precisely what is found in Table 4. Both factors have a significant impact on the quality evaluation. However, media brand image is the more important factor here, since the actual quality of the article is altogether harder to identify than in the relevance-experiment.

A similar pattern can be found in the diversity-experiment. Recipients find it hard to evaluate the diversity of opinions and actors in a news article, as they do not always know which viewpoints and which actors should be there.

However, it is possible for them to form a first impression on whether the text contains only a few or a broad range of actors. This impression is then supplemented by the general image of the brands' quality. So both actual quality and media brand image influence the diversity-judgement of recipients, but brand image is more important here.

For the quality dimensions of accuracy and comprehensibility, the actual article quality has small, yet non-significant effects on participants' quality evaluation. In line with H2, a significant and (compared to the impact of actual quality) strong impact of the media brand image can be observed. On the one hand, it is difficult for recipients to evaluate articles for accuracy because they need background knowledge on the topic to formulate adequate judgements. On the other hand, the evaluation of comprehensibility is quite subjective. There are no universal accepted criteria recipients use when judging the comprehensibility. So in both cases the actual quality of the article is less important for recipients' quality evaluations than the media brand image.

Thus, overall Table 4 supports H2. A decrease in the ability to evaluate certain quality dimensions comes along with an increase of the influence of media brand image when a recipient is asked to judge the quality of a news item. The quality of the news item then reflects the general picture recipients have of the general competence and normative quality of the medium this news item appeared in.

Finally, we examine the ethics-experiment. It was the only experiment where the results yielded no direct conclusions. Neither the quality nor the media brand image

showed main effects in the regression analysis. However, there is an interaction effect between the actual quality and the media brand image. We used Aiken and West's ([1991]) simple slopes test to interpret the interaction. The test examines how the actual quality of the article impacts on ethical evaluations across different media brand images. We tested the influence of actual quality for recipients with a media brand image one standard deviation below and above the mean value of media brand image. Results indicate that recipients with a negative media brand image pay more attention towards the actual quality of an article. In this group the actual quality of the article has a significant impact on the ethical evaluation ($B = 0.84$; $\beta = 0.38$; $p < 0.01$). So the high-quality article is on average rated 0.84 points higher than the low-quality article. Recipients with a positive media brand image are not influenced by the actual quality of the article when forming their ethics judgement ($B = -0.35$; $\beta = -0.16$; $p = 0.12$). This group primarily assumes that a news item from a high-quality medium meets ethical standards, independent of the actual quality of the news item. So what we observe here is desensitization towards ethical topics in the coverage, if recipients have a positive picture of the media brand behind this coverage.

Discussion

In this paper we wanted to assess how well readers can assess the quality of a single news item. Results indicate that recipients can spot differences in quality in most normative quality dimensions. However, there were significant variations in the articles and recipients only picked up on small differences.

Next to the actual quality, recipients' quality ratings are also influenced by recipients' perceived media brand image. This influence is especially strong if it is difficult for recipients to recognize quality differences. In this case, the perceived competence and quality of a medium in general function as heuristics to determine the quality of news items from this medium.

However, these relations have to be examined in more detail. The data suggest that the impact of attitudes towards the media brand varies according to how interested a recipient is in a news item, and the resulting time recipients spend with reading this item. The longer the reception time, the weaker the impact of attitudes towards the media brand. This observation supports our consideration from Note 2 that the influence of attitudes towards a media brand in the quality evaluation process is not only influenced by the ability to form such evaluations, but by the motivation to do so as well.

Furthermore, it should be noticed that neither the actual quality of the news item nor the attitudes towards the media brand had a strong impact on recipients' ratings of the different quality dimensions (adjusted r^2 from 6 to 18 per cent in Table 3). There are two possible explanations for this. First, it seems possible that important factors influencing recipients' quality evaluations were not taken into account here. For example, Rager ([1993]) and Jungnickel ([2011]) could show that recipients base their quality evaluation of a news item on their interest in the news topic. Second, quality evaluations might mostly be random outcomes since recipients do not have proper strategies to evaluate the quality of certain news items. Both arguments could only be tested by systematically integrating all possible factors in one analysis. Because of limited space, this is outside the scope of this paper.

Finally, it must be recognized that all data in this experiment result from a rigorous forced-exposure experimental design. So we could not determine how much more

attentively participants may have read the articles precisely because they knew they would have to answer questions about its quality. The small indicators for recipients' ability to judge the quality of news items might therefore disappear during usual reception situations.

By varying one quality dimension per experiment we were able to analyse recipients' evaluation competence for each of the six quality dimensions independently. However, this may adversely affect the external validity of the data. We are unable to show interconnections between different quality dimensions when it comes to the overall quality judgement.

Furthermore, we were only able to collect data on the evaluation of the article but not on recipients' actual handling of information from it. Hence, we could confirm that recipients' perceptions of normative quality criteria do influence their overall evaluation of a news item. But, questions concerning the influence of normative quality on recipients' decision to read an article or to search for further information after reading it cannot be answered in this study. Based on previous findings (e.g. Wolling 2002), we can only assume that normative quality perceptions are related to the selection of single news items as well.

NOTES

1. Following the tripartite model, attitudes consist of three dimensions: the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimension (e.g. Olson and Kendrick 2008). However, the model is often criticized for obscuring the relation between attitude and behaviour (Chaiken and Stangor 1987, 577–578.). This is why we are going to exclude the behavioural dimension from the following deliberations and regard attitudes as a two-dimensional construct.
2. The role of motivation/willingness to evaluate news items systematically and carefully could not be analysed in this paper because of space limits. However, in line with the mentioned theories we would assume a stronger impact of attitudes towards a media brand in the evaluation process when a recipient is not willing to study a news item carefully.
3. Basic information on the image of both media can be found in YouGov (2009). The participants' attitudes towards both brands were measured by a 14-piece semantic differential (see Procedure). *t*-Tests revealed that *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* as a brand achieved more positive ratings than *Bild-Zeitung* in all dimensions ($p < 0.05$).
4. In this second wave, additional variables were measured, but they are outside the scope of this paper.
5. A correct quality judgement was coded when participants' overall quality dimension rating for the high-quality article was 3.51–5.00, or 1.00–2.49 for the low-quality article. An incorrect quality judgement was coded when participants' overall quality

dimension rating for the high-quality article was 1.00–2.49, or 3.51–5.00 for the low-quality article.

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