

Trust in the author: Identity, expertise and reputation

Tereza Pavlíčková¹

Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic

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Summary: *The diverse character of sources available online requires media users to employ strategies of interpretation to establish whether the particular source is trustworthy or not. Yet this might be rather problematic in the case of user-generated content, where readers may have no previous experience of authors who are unknown to the reader, and moreover, the author might be hidden behind an online identity. Building on Luhmann's theoretical concept of familiarity as a necessary pre-condition of trust, the study draws on qualitative interviews with young professionals on their cross-media consumption; the analysis reveals that the respondents, as media users, establish an imagined author as part of the process of interpretation. The concept of the imagined author is developed theoretically using Genette's concept of paratext. It is thus the reader's realisation of the author that belongs to the text as a paratextual feature, and is clearly formed of three qualities perceived by the audience: the author's identity, expertise and reputation. The ability to establish these qualities in the author helps the users to place the imagined author within a broader context of previous experiences, establish familiarity with the text and therefore decide whether they will place trust in the text or not.*

Keywords: *audiences, author, media use, new media, trust*

Introduction

In the current media environment, an increasing amount of information is produced and available to media audiences, and so is the diversity of sources and authors that produce or/and distribute the media content. Traditional and established media outlets are contested by alternative, independent and com-

¹ tereez@gmail.com

munity media (Carpentier, 2005) as well as individual media users who contribute to media production themselves by creating original texts or adapting, altering and twisting existing ones (e.g. Jenkins, 2013; Bruns, 2008). Audience research primarily conceptualises audiences' contributions to media production as a form of media use and is primarily concerned with the question of how various platforms are used by media users to challenge political decisions (e.g. Bakardjieva, 2011), the motivations audiences have to produce particular media content – for example Markman (2012) focusing on independent radio podcasters – how various media platforms are used and how the roles of producer and consumer are negotiated within that space (e.g. Burgess and Green, 2009). Thus, audience research either deals with audiences' reception of text and then neglects the author, or is concerned with audiences' use of media in the form of production, and discusses the authorial power of audiences. However, there is a lack of research that questions audiences' reception of texts produced by other audience members in order to access information and knowledge about the social world.

Despite information being variously linked together as a sort of explicit intertextuality, the connections and links between different texts (media contents) are rather arbitrary, lacking any structure or hierarchy (Dreyfus, 2001); the text seen by one user may never be seen by another. It is up to audiences to navigate through the landscape of texts and information in their media use; they need to make sense of them, interpret them and, moreover, decide whether to place trust in them.

Audiences' decisions about their media use depend on a constellation of multiple factors at play at the given moment – e.g. availability of information, its relevance, whether and by whom it is recommended, whether it conveys the reader's existing opinions, and the reputation of the author. These are not objective factors but are rather perceived by media audiences (Hertzum et al., 2002). The decision to (dis)trust is a relationship established by the reader with respect to a text and is thus present in all of the factors determining the use of media. In this article, I argue that the author – and more specifically his or her intertextual presence – is important for audiences' decisions to trust in media and hence their media use.

From the audiences' perspective, establishing trust in an online text might be rather problematic. The internet is a platform where circulating content is produced by very diverse types of sources, such as the one-off contribution of an anonymous person, an established author publishing under an online pseu-

donym, or the media brand that is familiar to audiences from other platforms. In order to access and gain information, media audiences have to be willing to place trust in the mediator of the information, the source and the author who is presenting the content to them. Therefore, much can be questioned by the user: the identity of the source, his or her expertise and knowledge, the accuracy of the information and even the perceived authenticity of the account. All of these have a bearing on whether trust is established or not. These questions are not unique to the online context; however, the assumed systems of accountability that are familiar in the context of traditional media are lacking in the online environment with its diverse sources. Moreover, there may be a perceived illusion of proximity and/or even intimacy with the producer of online content, especially in case of social media, that would otherwise be typical of interpersonal communication, even though the communication within social media does not offer the 'depth' of social information that people encounter in offline interpersonal communication, as explored further by Quandt (2012).

Consequently, I argue that by exploring the characteristics and qualities of online authorial presence that are acknowledged and perceived by media users and are subsequently used by them to establish trust in the source, we can better understand the conditions that lead to audiences' decisions to place trust in media. In this paper, I ask how users' perceptions of the authors of factual content influence their decisions to trust, focusing in particular on the authors of user-generated content. Drawing on the analysis of qualitative interviews with twelve media users in their mid-twenties, I identify three key perceived qualities of the author that are used by respondents when deciding whether to place trust in the author or not: these are identity, expertise and reputation. These qualities form what I call an *imagined author*, which is used by audiences to establish familiarity with the text in order for these decisions to be made. Firstly, however, the broader context and conceptualisation of trust is discussed and the role of the author in audiences' interpretations is explored within the conceptual repertoires of audience research, before the results of the analysis are elaborated further.

Trust derived from perceptions of the familiar

Trust is commonly defined as a relationship, an acceptance of vulnerability to the actions of others with expectations of a particular outcome (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). This paper builds on the substantial literature within sociology relating to the theoretical conceptualisation of trust (Giddens,

1990; Luhmann, 1979, 1988; Seligman, 1997; Sztompka, 1999), identifying and exploring the importance of trust for society. Seeing trust as a condition of social relations, Giddens (1990) distinguishes between personal trust, i.e. that between two persons, and abstract trust, which is also referred to as confidence in institutions (Seligman, 1997). Luhmann (1988) makes a similar distinction between trust – defined as a willingness to risk – and confidence, whereby one does not consider alternatives. For Luhmann, familiarity is the essential condition for achieving trust and confidence.

The question of trust is not new to media and communication research, and attention has been paid to the credibility of news media (e.g. Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2000; Flanagin & Metzger, 2000) and the trustworthiness of news media, understood as a trust in selectivity rather than objectivity (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Within the online environment and in relation to user-generated content, the research focuses on how trust is established in the online environment and among members of virtual communities (e.g. Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Blanchard et al., 2011), in computer-mediated communication (Tseng & Fogg, 1999) and towards virtual agents (Hertzum et al., 2002), or focuses on media users' trust in user-generated content – in this instance amateur news photographs (Puustinen & Seppänen, 2011). And despite studies dealing with people's use of digital and social media for their own expression, promotion and identity building (e.g. Papacharissi, 2011; Dwyer et al., 2007; boyd & Heer, 2006), they rarely focus on recipients' perception of information and the way in which these perceptions are used to decide whether to trust the information.

In their study of audiences' trust in amateur news photographs, Puustinen and Seppänen (2011) build on Luhmann and distinguish between types of trust that derive from the way in which one trusts – the degree or intensity of willingness and acknowledgement of the risk that is being taken. They distinguish between silent trust and measured trust (in Luhmann's terminology, confidence and trust respectively); they develop the distinction further with two additional categories: contextual trust, which is strongly linked to media literacy, whereby media users consider and evaluate various elements of the text (in this case amateur news photographs); and doubt, an expression of hesitation in granting trust.

Luhmann's conceptualisation is also further developed theoretically by Sztompka (1999), who sees trust as a reflected trustworthiness of others defined by the conditions and information that lead to establishing trust between the giver and the receiver of the trust. This is a very useful conceptualisation when

looking at the reader-author trust relationship, as he argues that one needs to know, acquire or perceive certain knowledge in order to place trust in the potential receiver (Sztompka, 1999). In the Luhmannian sense, this is undoubtedly easier in a familiar environment. Sztompka (1999) distinguishes between primary trustworthiness, which is determined by reputation (past actions), performance (present conduct) and appearance (ascribed status), and derived trustworthiness (the context and situational factors), which is determined by accountability and pre-commitment.

Henderson and Gilding (2004), in their qualitative study of trust relations within online communities, employ this theoretical model and show that reputation is indeed a source of online trust; hence it is anonymous identity that leads to the greatest suspicion. However, as Hertzum et al. point out in their study of people's trust in virtual agents, it is not the objective assessment of these qualities but rather the perception of them that is important when "establishing to what extent the person is willing to place trust in the source" (2002: 12).

Luhmann's claim that familiarity is the precondition of trust and Sztompka's conceptualisation that this can be established by a combination of previous (reputation), experienced (performance) and presumed (appearance) knowledge gathered about the potential trust receiver creates a broader theoretical framework for this paper. One can therefore argue that trust in the author is important for interpretation because in order to be able to 'read' a text, people need to establish not only the relevance of the content, but also the reliability of the source (context). Despite the absence of the author in the text-media encounter, the author is part of the text's context, and perceptions of that author allow the user to establish familiarity with the text. The reader, in our case, thus constructs an image of an author by perceiving his or her various qualities via the encounter with the text and its intertextuality; it is through these qualities that the decision to trust the author can be made.

The *imagined author* as a paratextual feature

This article argues that authorial presence co-determines the interpretation and the meaning of the text, yet it builds on the tradition of audience and reception research that has established over the past few decades that meaning results from the text-reader encounter, contextualised and independent of authorial intention. The author has been left out of this core text-reader metaphor. Only recently we have seen the return of the author to the audience research

vocabulary, however, only in the context of audiences acting as authors, in relation to audiences' creative use of media with the aim of participating in various areas of social life (e.g. Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Bruns, 2008; Bakardjieva, 2011; Carpentier, 2011). Yet, media production in these cases is primarily researched and studied as a sort of media use, and thus audience research is – perhaps paradoxically – focused on the aspect of production rather than of reception.

The notion of author is absent from the debate about how people access and interpret media texts, but when consuming media, people attribute qualities to the media texts that are derived from their context – including their source – and establish a relationship of (dis)trust towards the source as well. The text-reader metaphor stays central to the conceptualisation of the author here. Rather than being an originator of meaning, the author is understood here as a context of the text. Genette (1997) argues that every text is accompanied by paratexts – features that among others include the author's name, title, preface and comments, framing the main text and situating it within its historical and cultural context. The reader's knowledge of the presence or absence of these various features thus determines the reading and interpretation of the main text.

To establish the theoretical framework for researching audiences' trust in an author, I have introduced the concept of *an imagined author* that results from the text-reader encounter, with the text bringing an author in the form of a paratextual feature (Genette 1997), and the reader bringing their previous knowledge and expectations of how this feature should be read. The imagined author is therefore instrumental; it is a perception and an understanding performed and realised by the reader through the process of interpretation, simultaneously determining the reader's interpretation of the text. The reader thus establishes familiarity with the imagined author of a text through perceived qualities acknowledged in the actual text or gathered by the reader through other text-reader encounters; the imagined author is a place of the reader's realised intertextuality which results from the texts and paratexts available to the reader at hand. The concept of the imagined author as the basis for establishing familiarity and trust has enabled its various perceived qualities to be drawn from the data analysis, and below I have used illustrative examples from a qualitative study to explore these qualities further and to discuss their role in establishing audiences' trust in media authors.

Methodology

This study is a part of a larger research project in which I carried out semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour in length, with 12 young

professionals (seven women and five men), to explore how media users navigate through the media content available to them (Pavlíčková, 2012), and the strategies they employ to establish the relevance and reliability of the texts. All of the participants were in their late twenties, with differing careers, personal circumstances and stages of relationships, but all childless. They all had university education. They all use media – in particular the internet – on a daily basis as one of the main sources of information in their everyday life, for work, for pursuing their interests and hobbies and to learn about the world. They were recruited using random sampling, using the researcher's own network of friends and acquaintances and their contacts. The research participants were asked about their daily media use in semi-structured interviews, and all participants were asked questions about the same topics – their daily media use and how they make selections and prioritise the content they consume. The particular structure of each interview was influenced by the particular responses of each interviewee. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and then analysed first using an open code from which the notion of trust – as well as the notion of respondents' acknowledgement of authorial presence – was identified by explicitly mentioning or implicitly suggesting an authorial presence, a source behind the text by the respondents. After identifying these instances in the transcript where authors or a source of some sort and/or trust was mentioned, they were grouped into thematic clusters and the relationship between these two concepts was analysed. This led to identifying that respondents perceived three qualities in order to make the author of the text familiar: the source's *identity*, *expertise* and *reputation*.

Returning to the earlier theoretical debate, the results of the analysis strongly invoke Luhmann's concept of familiarity as a necessary condition for trusting, and the perceived qualities sought in the imagined author resonate with Sztompka's (1999) model, distinguishing three bases on which trustworthiness is established: reputation, performance and appearance. While in his theoretical model he refers to factors through which knowledge about the potential trust receiver is divined, the three categories distinguished in this research refer more to qualities that audiences need to perceive in the imagined author (a potential trust receiver).

In order for respondents to trust a media text, they first need to establish familiarity with it and identify features that they recognise and can be related to previous or similar experiences so that they may evaluate the quality of the information. In order to decide whether an author and the text is trustworthy,

respondents also create an image of the author that is defined by three perceived qualities – identity, expertise and reputation – when interpreting the text. The imagined author is then used to perceive familiarity in the text. The qualities refer to the respondent's perception of who the author is, how he or she presents the information and what others say about him or her. The reader's assessment of these perceived qualities determines whether trust is placed in the author or not. In the following sections, these three categories are elaborated and explained further using illustrative excerpts from the interviews.

Identity – who the author is

This quality of the author refers to the respondents' identification of the author's name and characteristics such as image, background and appearance. Here, identity is not descriptive; instead it is a perceived quality – the perception of the imagined author starts with the reader's evaluation of the author's identity. The perception of authorial presence (or absence) in the text is established primarily through demonstration and recognition of the author's name and subsequently the author's performed identity. These expectations evolve through the respondents' subsequent encounters with the name.

Based on the interviews, this category, of all the three categories, is the most taken for granted by the respondents. From their point of view, there is no need to mention it directly or to consciously acknowledge their perception of the identity of the author. However, this category is similar to the appreciation and perception of the visual features (e.g. look, gender, age and fashion) of the other person in a face-to-face encounter. Here, the respondents are looking for various identifiers as well as formal and informal features that help them to establish the imagined author's identity. For 25-year-old Jakub from Prague, the name chosen by certain types of source or author shows that they are not a trusted authority and they are thus ignored:

When you get Google search results, they are sorted based on some factors such as occurrence, frequency and priority, but I am looking at what the source is and what the address is. If it is some diary-like blog, then I skip it, and if it is, so to say, a serious medium, an authority, a significant source (Jakub).

Jakub employs what could be called a first look identification. He says "I am looking at what the source is and what the address is". The source's choice of name talks to him, and he makes a judgement about the source due to that.

He presumes and perceives various characteristics from the name already: from the address of the web page he can establish that it is a *diary-like blog*, which for him means that it has particular presumed qualities that lead to a decision to *skip it*. All the interviews showed that respondents are well aware of the origin of the source, whether it is user-generated content, the official page of a band or organisation, or a well-known media brand. The analysis showed that the decision to place trust is not directly related to a particular type of source but is rather derived from the perceived qualities associated with that source by the respondent. We can see this in the comparison between the claim made by Lucie, a 26-year-old singer from Prague, and David, a 27-year-old social researcher from London.

If you want to find information about somebody, you look at their official web page. And all that's there is bullshit. Stuff like 'the best singer of all time'. It is an advert. They do not give you space to make your own opinion – they tell you what to think (Lucie).

You go to the Myspace website or whatever the other website is, and you actually think, well, probably the official site is not authoritative, but at least it is gonna tell you something that you know how to interpret because they try to sell you something (David).

Both Lucie and David see information published on official music websites more as the promotion of an artist rather than a genuine or authentic account. Interestingly, the same identity or the descriptive characteristic of the source – an official website – in these two cases leads to a different perception of the source as trustworthy. Lucie dismisses it as a source that cannot be trusted, because "they do not give you space to make your own opinion – they tell you what to think". While David, by identifying the source as an official web page of an artist, perceives a bigger freedom in the interpretation: "it is going to tell you something that you know how to interpret because they try to sell you something" – he presumes he knows who the source is and thus how to interpret it, and how to work with the information further. While for Lucie, the established familiarity with the source through its identification leads to the decision to distrust, David's attitude is more complex and the established familiarity allows him to work with the content less hesitantly.

The author's choice of name and the way he or she presents and identifies him/herself, are interpreted by the reader to establish the perceived quality of the source as well as the quality of likely content indicated by that name.

Respondents formed the identity of the imagined author based on their expectations and anticipations. When accessing a previously unknown source, these formal features play a key role in establishing familiarity with the text. An author's name – whether a real or a handle name – allows readers to identify and group together various content defined by that particular name. The notion of the handle name usually crosses more than one medium or media platform. The name contributes to the image of the author and leads to the notion of continuity, persistence and therefore familiarity and subsequently expectations, by tying together various texts and media content.

Expertise – how the author talks

The quality that we can call the imagined author's expertise is also important when respondents decide to trust the source or not. Expertise is the perceived quality of the knowledge (whether general or specialised) of the imagined author. When establishing expertise, respondents are preoccupied by the author's performance: the way he or she talks and behaves; his or her register and language; his or her opinions; and how the author relates to the outside world. The quality of expertise is perceived not only through the particular text (perceived quality of the content) but within a broader intertextual context (comparison with other sources).

Tom, a 26-year-old Londoner who has just finished his master's degree in Human Rights and is planning to leave for South America soon, sees the account by a professional journalist “who has been there” to be more authentic than other users' testimonies about a particular experience. For Tom, the journalist is an expert – somebody who knows the problem at hand and can put it into a broader context for the reader.

I tend not to really look at personal blogs – maybe I should. I tend to stay away from personal opinions, really, if I can. Mostly the blogs I read are through the BBC website. They are blogs, but most of them are written by journalists. I'd rather read about what a journalist thinks – someone who has been there. He knows what he is talking about (Tom).

Expertise refers to knowledge and quality of the information and content; it is independent of the professional/amateur status of the author and can be established with respect to user-generated content as well. Expertise as a quality of the imagined author is established through readers' perceptions of the way in which the author speaks – how the information is presented and discussed.

This is often achieved through the means of expression, using a particular style of language or presentation of evidence and reasoning that is acceptable or perceived to denote authorial quality, as illustrated in the two quotes from the interview with David.

I don't usually read discussions – it's particular people. I do not know who they are. You only start to make distinctions between them based on how it is written or what evidence they use (David).

You look for how things are presented the way that is [...] familiar to you. I am sorting out stuff for a music festival and at their Facebook page you have all the resources about camping. You know, other people are in the same situation and you can guarantee that there will be someone who knows what to do and tell you to buy your stuff like this and do it like that (David).

In the first excerpt from the interviews with David he refers to the style in which comments in a newspaper discussion are written, saying “how it is written or what evidence they use”; we can see that he perceives the quality of the author and thus of the text through the way it is presented. In the next quote he does not refer to the actual style but more the circumstances determining the nature of the information provided, saying that “other people are in the same situation and you can guarantee that there will be someone who knows what to do”. David trusts the source and thus the information because it is from somebody ‘like him’ who is in the same situation, dealing with the same problem as him: the circumstances create familiarity, helping David to partly identify with the imagined author and to evaluate the information as trustworthy or not.

Steve, a 25-year-old married professional from London, describes whose recommendations he follows when buying a new Nintendo Wii game. He pays attention to how the recommendation is written and how the author demonstrates his or her knowledge.

It needs to be from the right source and the right age group. I look at what people have reviewed in the past. You read up on it and don't have to agree with it, but basically if they think the same way as I think, I'll take them on board. It is about whether they look at the game the same way as I would think about the game (Steve).

Steve is purposefully seeking content from other audience members. Subsequently, to make the recommendations reliable for him, he employs a system

of values and hierarchies in order to identify characteristics of the reviewers, e.g. age, opinion and what the reviewer chose to mention in his or her review. He establishes familiarity and compares these aspects with his own expectations and reference system. In particular, the statement “you don’t have to agree with it, but basically if they think the same way as I think, I’ll take them on board” shows that Steve is not looking for recommendations from a person who has necessarily the same opinion, but rather an author who shares the same perspective and the same reference points. Even though no particular author is being sought, the perception of authorial expertise associated with the text leads to his trusting in an author whose identity is otherwise hidden.

Readers choose sources that they can (partially) identify with and convey their taste, opinions and viewpoint. In this case, the expertise of the imagined author is perceived as coming from someone ‘like me’, or when the author presents his or her arguments in a convincing way using ‘good evidence’.

Reputation – what others say about the author

The reputation of the author differs from the two previous qualities, as it is established through other texts. The analysis reveals that there are two main means through which readers perceive the reputation of the imagined author: their own previous experience of other texts from the same author; and recommendations based on the previous experience of others. However, recommendations need to be trusted as well, and therefore the qualities of identity, expertise and reputation need to be perceived once again. For these reasons, respondents tended to rely on recommendations from known sources with a high level of perceived expertise or recommendations derived from experiences shared by many.

Reputation is an important quality of the imagined author that is used by the reader, because previous experiences can lower respondents’ perceived risk of placing trust in a source, as Tom says:

If I am looking for specific information, then I would look for trusted websites I know have provided correct information in the past, rather than just going for new ones that look weird and that I have never seen before (Tom).

The other strategy for establishing reputation is to rely on recommendations from already trusted, well-known sources, often known to the respondent from the offline world, or a person they have already perceived as a trustworthy

expert. This is illustrated in Rebecca's quote. The 30-year-old English language teacher living in London is referring to her friend's blog and recommendations to other bloggers and blogs she finds there.

My friend writes and has blog as well. Her blog is linked to other people's and young writers' blogs and it is just nice to explore (Rebecca).

Some of the respondents establish the reputation of the unknown source through other users' perceptions of its expertise, relying on the multiplicity of these voices. Therefore, various media platforms presenting and distributing content generated by users themselves have diverse mechanisms in place that make the user-generated content, as well as their authors, available for evaluation by other users. This ranking and evaluating is encouraged by the particular media outlet, and serves as an overview of authors' past performances to other media users (e.g. Amazon's Top Reviewer Ranking where users vote on how helpful the particular review/reviewer is), as the next excerpt shows.

This interview with Helena, a 30-year-old professional from Prague, shows how reputation can be perceived through the volume of recommendations. She is a frequent user of the biggest Czech user-generated website on film (www.csfd.cz, Czechoslovak film database), where descriptions, comments and reviews on the latest and classic films – both national and international – are published.

The reviewers are also listed in an order based on the most appreciated and the most relevant [in the database]. By reading them you already give them some points. If you find the review interesting, you can have a look at what other films the person liked. [...] On the CSFD [website], it is normal people who write it and most of the time it is more objective. Maybe a thousand people saw the film and five hundred of them write their comment there or give the film evaluation stars (Helena).

Helena tries to gather recommendations from other users of the website whom she perceives as experts and whose opinion she values, but if this is impossible, the volume of voices and the repetition of their judgement is significant for her and serves as a guarantee to her. She pays attention to stars given to a film by the users and the number of people who saw the film.

Discussion

The analysis of the data presented here shows that people acknowledge authorial presence in their media use and perceive the image of the author with particular qualities that are established through the process of interpretation, and also simultaneously serve readers in establishing trust in the text. That is to say, trust in the author cannot be discussed without discussing the text, yet trust in the text is co-determined by the perception of the author. Analysis of the respondents' explicit as well as implicit references to the author reveal that the image of the author is composed of three qualities – identity, expertise and reputation – placing the imagined author within the reader's social, cultural and historical context. Furthermore, these qualities are subjective and are perceived by the user rather than being objectively established. The perception derives from and builds on users' previous experiences, pre-existing knowledge and value systems that contextualise these qualities, relates them to users' own contexts and helps them to place trust in the imagined author and hence in the text. If the respondent is unable to establish one of these qualities, the perception of the other two can fill this absence; however, the lack of all three prevents the reader from establishing familiarity and thus trust. The results of the analysis therefore contribute to revealing how people trust in media as well as contributing to wider current debates in audience research.

Firstly, by conceptualising the role of the author in audiences' interpretations, our understanding of the text-reader metaphor that is central to audience research is enhanced. The author is seen as 'another text': a paratextual feature (Genette, 1997) that the reader interprets in order to establish textual context and thus actualise his or her interpretation of the text itself; the imagined author is the reader's conception – a perceived interpretation aid rather than its owner. This idea also allows us to expand further the current research on the use of user-generated content (e.g. Burgess & Green, 2009; Carpentier, 2011). The notion of the author has been widely discussed in recent audience research, primarily in the context of the blurred distinction between users and producers, focusing on people's creative use of media for the purposes of media production (e.g. Deuze et al., 2007; Bruns, 2008). This research often deals with the professional/amateur divide. For example Meyers (2012) focuses on the applicability of this divide in the current environment where more and more media users often make their living by producing content, yet they are still perceived as users generating content rather than professional writers. Wall (2005) and Park (2009) then show how bloggers (in this case, reporting war) purposefully dis-

tinguish themselves from professional journalists. To sum up, audience research either deals with audiences' reception of text and then neglects the author, or is concerned with audiences' use of media in the form of production, and discusses the authorial power of audiences. This article has offered an insight into audiences' perception of authors and the qualities acknowledged by their presence in the text, and how this is further used in the interpretation of the text.

Secondly, the data analysis identified three qualities of the imagined author through which media users establish trust in the author and in the text, i.e. identity, expertise and reputation, which are sought in the imagined author to establish familiarity and subsequently to decide whether trust can be placed in the author. As mentioned earlier, this triad resonates with Sztompka's (1999) model of trustworthiness. Importantly, the analysis showed that the readers interpret the author just as much as the text.

As Coleman argues: "Trust is not a universal relationship, but a socially differentiated, experientially variable response" (2012: 38). Not everybody trusts the same things for the same reasons. The interviews showed that people who attempt to establish the same quality with respect to the author – e.g. his or her expertise – might be relying on different authorial features and ways of self presentation. For example, one of the informants, Tom, asks for authenticity, while another, Helena, seeks objectivity. The results open many other questions relating to the conditions that lead to people's decisions to trust in media – especially in relation to user-generated context – that might result from exploring particular characteristics of the author and their perception, and how these various characteristics are reflected in establishing these key qualities. Furthermore, the characteristics of the imagined author are often perceived in many diverse ways in relation to different types of author (e.g. professional/amateur, individual/collective). To build on this analysis, future research might query the consequences of familiarity as a pre-condition for trust, as stressed by Luhmann: as shown by the data, relying on familiarity might lead to a subsequent lack of alertness, whereby certain questions may not be asked and possible alternatives may no longer be imaginable.

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