

Learning from...

FUKUSHIMA



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1. Report

March 11th, 2011: earthquake, tsunami, nuclear meltdown. The triple disaster in Japan shocked the world community, particularly Germany. It was detected via real-time Internet and prompted the disturbing question: can an advanced G8 country actually be forced to its knees? A short time later paradigm shifts in Germany's (nuclear) policy were initiated. In Japan itself a critical public started to emerge, trying to influence politicians to reconsider public policy. Against this backdrop the conference "Learning from Fukushima" asked the following questions:

How does a critical public emerge in times of crisis? How can citizens participate in this process? Which role does the Internet play? At the conference experts from Atlanta, Berlin, Compiègne, Los Angeles, Munich, New York, Prague, Tokyo and Vienna were looking for answers. They provided best-practice examples, thereby establishing a rich base for discussions.

"All humans are sensors."

Someone in the audience said: "All humans are sensors. They absorb data - whether it concerns the supply situation in a conflict zone or radiation levels." The Internet can help to organize such data. The mechanisms for this are still immature. People still need to learn many things. A major crisis may accelerate this process. Tomomi Sasaki elaborated upon this in her presentation. As a speaker in the conference slot "State of Emergency in Japan – also in the Field of Media?" Sasaki observed that her country completed a "crash course in social media" after the triple catastrophe from 11th March 2011. Like other speakers, she addressed the question: What are the offline-consequences of this process?

Thorsten Schilling had already touched upon this issue in his welcoming speech. The director of the Multimedia Department at the Federal Agency for Civic Education stressed that a long breath is necessary if a social movement is to emerge from an eventful experience of community like after march 11th. A really long breath, because various processes of questioning the foundations of society emerge on so many different levels simultaneously.

While similar processes are on the way in other regions of the industrialized world as well, in Japan the ruptures are manifest in a particularly strong way due to the consequences of the triple disaster. The following questions pop up almost everywhere: "How sustainable is our economic system? What is our stance on the environment? How do we want to supply us with energy? Do our media function sufficiently?"

Hardly any of those questions can be answered individually. Everything is connected. But what does this mean in practice? The radiation mappers Andreas Schneider (IIDJ) and Sean Bonner (Safecast.rog) dwelled upon this issue. "In Los Angeles, the radiation is higher than in Tokyo," Bonner said. "Radioactivity is part of everyday life," Schneider confirmed. While quite accurate radiation data can be acquired, the risks are usually relative. So the Post-Fukushima radiation in the metropolis of Tokyo cannot be understood out of context. Its risk can only be assessed in a dialogue conducted by society as a whole.

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"The First Online Contact with Readers was a Shock."

Japan's society is weakened by the triple disaster and its aftermath. The transformation taking place on parallel planes leads to a perceived paralysis. At the same time there is a desire for the "old normal". Therefore, things change very slowly and almost imperceptibly. The more important it is to make these changes visible as a whole. Only a critical public can fulfill this important task. The means of traditional mass media to go about this are limited because they are part of the change itself - and in many ways at odds with the inherent challenges.

Frank Patalong made an interesting point in this context. As a speaker of the conference slot "The Online-Disaster – Business as Usual?" he looked back at the first decade of online journalism. In the late 1990s Patalong began to build the department "Netzwelt" (Network World) at Spiegel Online and was its director for ten years. At the conference, he remembered the first direct online contact with readers: "It was a shock. A positive shock that is."

For an veterane onliner like Patalong the positive aspect of this experience with the "sensors" seems natural by now. For many other journalists it isn't. So many in this industry have not overcome the shock to this day. Or they have not even made the experience at all. Symptomatic of this: The major media companies in Germany are afraid to supply the masses with collaborative news platforms. They still lag behind developments that have become part of the media everyday in countries like Great Britain, South Korea and the US.

The speakers of the conference slot "Scenarios of Audience Participation – what is seminal?" illuminated the potencial of collaborative platforms. Lila King presented iReport. People who traditionally have been allocated to the audience are reporters here. The digital platform gives them the opportunity to contribute text, audio and video. This is how they can become part of the global news of CNN.



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New Cultures of Collaboration

King leads a small editorial team (less than ten people), which takes care of nearly one million "iReporters" from around the world. Good organization, ambitious staff and the courage to experiment are the prerequisites, King explained during the audience talk. Jaroslav Valuch shares many of those experiences.



The Ushahidi field representative in Port-au-Prince coordinated the crisis response after the last major earthquake in Haiti. Valuch's team consisted of a handful of Internet activists organizing SMS messages sent by people affected in the disaster area as well as numerous volunteers from around the world, who helped translating and filtering the data making it available on a crisis map that also made possible the humanitarian mission of the United Nations.

After this spontaneous action the activists around Valuch have become a tightly organized band of volunteers. Working under the name The Standby Task Force, they demonstrate that citizens in a heavy crisis do not have to limit themselves to the role of victims. One can influence the crisis management actively – using the Internet as a tool. The motto being: You have to engage upon new alliances and you have to collaborate with people with whom you previously have not been working together.

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Looking ahead

"Learning from Fukushima" has tried to reflect critically this new culture of collaboration. However the conference also tried to practice it. Interpreting the overwhelmingly positive reactions of the audience, it can be said, that this ambitious goal has been achieved to a certain degree. About 200 participants were on site throughout the day, about 50 in the Internet via live stream and Twitter. A lively exchange that will continue – in discussions and projects.

In the noise of the here and now it is not easy to get an idea for sustainable values. In times of crisis this is even more difficult. In "Learning from Fukushima" the participants gained such a notion - at least with respect to the new culture of collaboration. This expansion of consciousness does not help only in crisis management on our own doorstep - whether facing the civil uprisings in London or in Athens. It can also be transported to Japan.

A translation of this report about "Learning from Fukushima" is planned into Japanese with the intention to circulate it – not only in citizen media but also in the realms of official government publications.



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2. Further Info on the Internet

- * The conference in the press
- * Photos of the conference
- * Video-Interviews (70% English)
- * Report in German

URL: <http://berlinergazette.de/learning-from-fukushima>

- * Live-Video-Recording (80% English)

<http://vimeo.com/album/1736345>

- * Archive of Twitter-Postings (#LFF2910)

URL: <http://twitter.com/#!/search/%23LFF2910>

- * English programme

URL: <https://plus.google.com/107214655315602744984/posts/hoS1TXxTGgA>



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3. Credits

The all-day symposium „Learning from Fukushima“ was a project of the Berlin Gazette (berlinergazette.de) and was supported by the Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung/bpb). The cooperation partners were: Institute for Information Design Japan, Institute of Communication in Social Media, Youth Press Germany, iq consult, Sapporo City University, TAB ticket broker and General Public.

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