

## FULL PAPER

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des Journalismus erhalten?**

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nutzergenerierten Inhalten wahrnehmen

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### **Can transparency preserve journalism's trustworthiness?** Recipients' views on transparency about source origin and verification regarding user-generated content in the news

#### **Kann Transparenz die Vertrauenswürdigkeit des Journalismus erhalten?**

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**Abstract:** In a digital world, journalists increasingly integrate user-generated content (UGC) in their coverage. Journalists use coping strategies to dispel the audience's supposed concerns about the reliability of this new type of sources and to maintain the audience's confidence in such coverage. Transparency, in particular, is often considered as a means to preserve journalism from accusations of being biased and untrustworthy. We focus on the audience's perception and evaluation of two transparency strategies: transparency about the origin of UGC and transparency about verification attempts. Based on semi-structured interviews with German users ( $N = 26$ ), this study analyzes recipients' perceptions of transparency strategies journalists use when integrating UGC. Most of the respondents rarely perceive transparency about source origin or verification in their everyday media use. Even when noticed, transparency efforts barely seem to increase journalistic trustworthiness.

**Keywords:** Journalistic sources, trust; transparency, UGC, verification.

**Zusammenfassung:** In einer digitalen Welt integrieren JournalistInnen zunehmend nutzergenerierte Inhalte (UGC) in ihre Berichterstattung. Um angenommene Bedenken des Publikums in Bezug auf die Zuverlässigkeit dieser neuen Art von Quellen zu zerstreuen und das Vertrauen des Publikums in die Berichterstattung zu erhalten, wenden JournalistInnen Bewältigungsstrategien an. Besonders Transparenz wird oft als Mittel angesehen, um den Journalismus vor dem Vorwurf der Verzerrung und Misstrauenswürdigkeit zu bewahren. Wir konzentrieren uns auf die Publikumswahrnehmung und -bewertung von zwei Transparenzstrategien: Transparenz über die Herkunft von UGC und Transparenz über Verifizierungsversuche. Basierend auf semi-strukturierten Interviews mit deutschen NutzerInnen ( $N = 26$ ) analysiert diese Studie die Publikumswahrnehmung journalistischer Transparenzstrategien bei der Verwendung von UGC. Die meisten Befragten nehmen selten Transparenz über die

Herkunft oder Verifizierung der Quelle wahr. Selbst wenn sie bemerkt werden, scheinen Transparenzbemühungen die journalistische Vertrauenswürdigkeit kaum zu erhöhen.

**Schlagwörter:** Journalistische Quellen, Vertrauen, Transparenz, nutzergenerierte Inhalte, Verifikation.

## 1. Introduction

Whether as entertaining tweets by regular citizens commenting on an ongoing game or as user footage on the war in Syria – user-generated content (UGC) is often implemented in professional news coverage. Especially in crisis reporting, newsrooms already rely heavily on this kind of sources (Rauchfleisch, Artho, Metag, Post, & Schäfer, 2017; von Nordheim, Boczek, & Koppers, 2018). In journalism research, the integration of the audience into the news process has long been proclaimed as a way of potentially regaining the audience's trust by allowing more voices and more diverse perspectives to be included in news coverage (Heinrich, 2011; Lewis & Molyneux, 2018). UGC is seen as a complement to elite sources (Hellmueller & Li, 2015), allowing journalists to include pictures and videos, eyewitness accounts and personal narratives of ordinary citizens – taken from social media or sent in by the users themselves – in their coverage.

Despite an increasing implementation of UGC in the form of, for example, tweets in the news (Broersma & Graham, 2013) and positive expectations regarding UGC's influence on journalistic trustworthiness, the reality in journalistic newsrooms has led to serious doubts regarding the fulfillment of these expectations. Scholars and practitioners alike question the adequacy of social media as a source for journalism (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018), journalists struggle with the authenticity and impact of UGC (Murrell, 2018) and recipients are skeptical about including the audience in the process (Karlsson, Clerwall, & Nord, 2018). This might be the reason why UGC does not seem to directly increase journalistic trustworthiness (Grosser, Hase, & Wintterlin, 2019; Halfmann, Dech, Riemann, Schlenker, & Wessler, 2018).

Although they are skeptical, journalists still use UGC as a news source, especially in situations of crisis where no other material is available. To cope with the dilemma of being skeptical about the authenticity of UGC on the one hand and the perceived need to include this kind of material in the coverage on the other, journalists have developed strategies to adequately implement such material (Brandtzaeg, Følstad, Ángeles, & Domínguez, 2018; Heravi & Harrower, 2016; Johnston, 2016). Transparency in particular has emerged as a professional strategy to claim objectivity and the truthfulness of the information displayed (Hellmueller, Vos, & Poepsel, 2013). In the context of UGC, this includes transparency about source origin, i.e. naming audience members as sources and thus the origin of the information in order to make recipients aware of potential issues with the source's interests and background. It also includes transparency about verification, i.e. clarifying how well the source's information could be verified in order to make recipients aware of potential issues with the legitimacy of the information presented.

However, how the audience evaluates these efforts of being transparent regarding UGC is unclear. We do not know whether these transparency strategies are even perceived by recipients: Do transparency strategies have any impact on journalism's trustworthiness concerning UGC or is the "oft-suggested antidote to the decline in credibility" (Curry & Stroud, 2019, p. 2) overrated – and journalists should look for other strategies to deal with UGC as a news source?

Our study examines how recipients perceive and evaluate transparency strategies used to implement UGC, specifically concerning the strategies' impact on journalistic trustworthiness. We conducted semi-structured interviews with German news recipients ( $N = 26$ ) who differ in age, gender and the main source from which they regularly obtain news. By using a qualitative approach and including the perspective of the audience, we thereby expand current studies that mainly deal with journalistic views and their use of coping strategies when implementing UGC. While we know that these coping strategies are often implemented by journalists when using UGC (Johnston, 2016), our results reveal whether the audience actually perceives and values them during its news use. For journalistic practice, the results therefore provide valuable insights as to whether the two transparency strategies in focus are helpful tools to integrate UGC in a trustworthy way.

## **2. Theoretical background: The connection between UGC, trustworthiness and transparency**

### **2.1 UGC as a news source**

The emergence of users as new sources poses a major challenge to journalism because UGC differs from established sources in terms of available cues for the evaluation of their trustworthiness (Volkmer & Firdaus, 2013). The literature subsumes various forms of audience participation under the term UGC. A recent systematic review of communication research on UGC found that half of all examined studies focus on weblogs, discussion forums, Usenet, newsgroups, and mailings lists (Naab & Sehl, 2017). However, UGC specifically understood as a source in the form of personal narratives, eyewitness accounts, pictures and videos, which journalists in turn use to supplement their professional content (Hän-ska-Ahy & Shapour, 2013; Hellmueller & Li, 2015; Hermida & Thurman, 2008), appears to have garnered less attention. Journalists began to use this kind of UGC during and after events such as the Arab Spring in 2010, the London bombings in 2005, the tsunami in Southeast Asia in 2004 and the terror attacks 2001 in New York and near Washington. Nowadays, it has developed into a regularly used source, especially in the coverage of crises (Winterlin, 2019) and breaking news (Bruno, 2011; Vis, 2013). This form of UGC is especially interesting because of its proximity to and integration with professional news content. Additionally, experimental research shows that vox pop tweets, for example, can influence how users perceive public opinion (Ross & Dumitrescu, 2019), which makes them an important part of news coverage.

As illustrated by the examples above, UGC is especially prevalent in political topics such as terror attacks, war, conflicts and political upheavals (Sacco & Boss-

io, 2015; Hellmueller & Li, 2015; Mortensen, 2015; Leuven, Heinrich, & Deprez, 2015): Journalists draw upon these new news sources in such situations because they are not present themselves or because UGC allows them to circumvent military or government restrictions on their reporting. However, research has also shown that UGC is often solicited for human interest news (Domingo, 2008; Hellmueller & Li, 2015) “rather than information about matters of greater public significance, [which is] coupled with concerns about biased and insufficiently credible material from users [on the part of the journalists]” (Singer, 2014, p. 59).

From the perspective of the audience, as well, UGC is a source which differs from established sources because the actors are usually not known and the integrated material, such as pictures or videos, sometimes does not meet journalistic standards (Wintterlin, 2019). This might increase the uncertainty about the reliability of facts displayed and therefore have an impact on how the audience views news coverage. For journalism research and journalistic practitioners alike, the question therefore arises as to whether the use of UGC in news coverage influences the perceived trustworthiness of journalism.

## 2.2 UGC and journalism’s trustworthiness

Following functional approaches to trust in systems, recipients’ trust in journalism refers to journalism’s function of selecting and communicating current information, thereby enabling follow-up action and communication on the part of the recipients (Blöbaum, 2014). The perceived trustworthiness of journalism is therefore determined by the extent to which recipients perceive their expectations regarding the correct functioning to be fulfilled (Giddens, 1990; Luhmann, 1979, for different conceptualizations of these expectations see e.g. Blöbaum, 2014; Grosser, 2016; Kohring, 2004).

So far, research on how the use of UGC as a source in journalistic coverage influences the fulfillment of these audience expectations, which determine the perceived trustworthiness, is scarce. Drawing on previous, mostly journalist-centric literature, the following mixed picture emerges (for more details see Grosser et al., 2019): On the one hand, the integration of UGC can positively influence the recipients’ perceived diversity and currency of information. It does so by providing alternative voices to a story, bringing new stories to journalists’ attention, and by enabling journalists to report on developing stories without being in the vicinity themselves (Hellmueller & Li, 2015; Kleemans, Schaap, & Hermans, 2015; McNair, 2013). Also, perceptions of authenticity and presence increase due to the integration of eyewitness videos (Halfmann et al., 2018). On the other hand, UGC can have a detrimental effect on the audience’s perception of correctness and verifiability of information as well as of the reliability of sources. This is due to the fact that the real time and area of origin as well as possible agendas of UGC-providers are often hard to determine (Hermida, 2015; Sacco & Bossio, 2015; Singer, 2010). Mirroring potential audience concerns, journalists themselves show little trust in social media as a source despite frequently using it (Heravi & Harrower, 2016). Accordingly, they have started to develop strategies to preserve trustworthiness regarding the integration of UGC in online journalism.

### 2.3 Journalistic strategies to preserve trustworthiness

In the pre-digital age, journalists were already aware of uncertainty regarding their sources and developed strategies to cope with this. As early as 1972, Tuchman describes so-called “strategic rituals” aimed at securing objectivity when presenting information, e.g. the comparison of a source’s information to other, possibly conflicting information or the presentation of supporting evidence. These should enable journalists to claim objectivity related to their news pieces. In a digital world, the development of strategies to deal with new sources such as UGC turned out to be a major challenge for journalism (Lecheler & Kruike-meier, 2016).

There are various strategies journalists can adopt to deal with the rise and implementation of UGC, such as the establishment of external fact-checking institutions to verify claims made online (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018). However, strategies which manifest in regular news content, where UGC is implemented, are especially relevant for the recipients’ everyday media use. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel’s (2007) elaborations on elements of journalism, what distinguishes journalists from other content producers is their openness and honesty about methods and practices used to obtain information. Transparency serves as a central normative aspect of journalism because it fosters public accountability (Singer, 2007). Other authors also argue that journalism is shifting from objectivity to transparency as a guiding norm of the profession (Hellmueller et al., 2013). Following this reasoning, transparency serves as a means to maintain professional autonomy (Allen, 2008; Curry & Stroud, 2019) and preserves the trustworthiness of the journalistic profession.

Karlsson (2010) differentiates between participatory transparency, namely establishing openness by including the audience in the news process, and disclosure transparency. As a form of self-transparency about journalistic processes and products (Meier & Reimer, 2011), disclosure transparency enables journalists to be open about the way they select sources and to give background information about them. In the specific context of UGC, this paper concentrates on two strategies from the realm of disclosure strategies that deal with source transparency. First, we analyze the influence of transparency about the origin of UGC sources, specifically how detailed journalists name the source of such UGC. Second, we deal with transparency regarding the journalistic process of verifying information provided by sources, meaning that journalists tell the audience whether they tried to verify information obtained by the audience and if they were successful in doing so.

The first strategy in the realm of source transparency is transparency about the origin of the source. This form of disclosure transparency not only includes naming sources but also giving details about their interests (Meier & Reimer, 2011). Concerning UGC, this might entail specifying if material has been sent in by a recipient in contrast to pictures or videos made by journalists and to possibly give background information about this recipient, the context in which the information was obtained (such as the specific social media platform) and the manner in which the information was sent in or solicited.

The second strategy in the realm of source transparency analyzed here is transparency about verification attempts, e.g. the use of a disclaimer stating that information could not yet be verified as a “workaround method” (Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggins, & Følstad, 2015, p. 332) to deal with information not yet deemed reliable. Verification of sources – meaning, more specifically: verification of the information provided by the source – is especially important concerning UGC, as “the amount of potentially false or manipulated user-generated content makes it harder to filter and assess the accuracy of the different content and sources” (Brandtzaeg et al., 2015, p. 234, see also Murrell, 2017). Although they agree on the need for verification, journalists verify information and check facts less than they would like to due to time constraints (Machill & Beiler, 2009; Shapiro, Brin, Bédard-Brûlé, & Mychajlowycz, 2013). According to Broersma and Graham (2013), tabloids in particular seem to take information obtained from Twitter at face value with little indication of verification in a, as Bruno (2011) states, “tweet first, verify later” approach. Due to this ongoing trouble of correctly verifying sources and information, Duffy and Si (2017) conclude that non-elite information in social media has not yet had the large impact one might have expected.

It is unclear to what extent recipients actually perceive such transparency efforts and how they evaluate them. Generally, the audience values transparency as shown in several experiments and surveys (Koliska, 2017; Newman & Fletcher, 2017; van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014a; van der Wurff & Schönbach, 2014b) to an extent that journalists seem to underestimate (Heise, Loosen, Reimer, & Schmidt, 2014). However, a survey by Brown (2015) surprisingly indicates that recipients do not care about transparency about source origin when it comes to UGC. They even perceive labelling such content as UGC as an insult to their intelligence, as recipients feel they can tell by its quality that it is UGC, not content generated by journalists. Verification of information is important to recipients as well but they are quite unaware of what constitutes the journalistic process leading to verification (Brown, 2015) and do not always correctly perceive when journalists display whether a source could be verified or not (Grosser et al., 2019). If journalists use strategies regarding disclosure transparency in order to counteract the negative impact UGC might have on trustworthiness, but the audience seldom processes their implementation, the question arises as to whether the strategies even have any influence on recipients’ evaluations of journalism’s trustworthiness. Such questions have mainly been examined in quantitative settings. Experimental studies show little or no effect of transparency on trustworthiness (Curry & Stroud, 2019; Karlsson, Clerwall, & Nord, 2014; Koliska, 2017; Meier & Reimer, 2011). In this line of research, studies illustrate that visually displaying whether a source could be verified or not is only partly connected to journalistic trustworthiness (Kruikemeier & Lecheler, 2018). Also, the audience is especially skeptical when journalists are *not* able to verify a source with absolute certainty and demands that such information should not be published (Brown, 2015). Finally, the effect of transparent verification on trustworthiness differs by news topic, with a recent experimental study showing that an article with non-verified UGC is less trustworthy than an article with verified UGC for a political topic,

while no effects were found for an article with a human interest topic (Grosser et al., 2019).

Hence, there seems to be a gap between the declared importance of transparency from the audience's point of view and whether and how the audience actually perceives related strategies (Koliska, 2017). So far, studies have neglected the nature of this link as the influence of journalistic strategies has mostly been measured quantitatively in experimental settings – without capturing to what extent recipients are actually aware of such efforts and what they value or criticize about them. In contrast, this study provides an in-depth examination of how the recipients evaluate source transparency, specifically concerning the origin of sources and verification of the information provided by the source in the context of UGC as a new source.

Based on the literature review above, we therefore pose two research questions:

*RQ1: Do recipients perceive journalistic transparency about the origin of UGC sources and how do they evaluate it, especially concerning journalistic trustworthiness?*

*RQ2: Do recipients perceive journalistic transparency about UGC verification and how do they evaluate it, especially concerning journalistic trustworthiness?*

### **3. Method: Qualitative semi-structured interviews with German media users**

In order to answer these research questions, we conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with German users ( $N = 26$ ) of different journalistic offline and online media. To do so, we developed a topic guide based on common guidelines (e.g. Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; McCracken, 1998). The interviews were part of a larger project on participatory journalism. The topic guide and the interviews therefore also included questions on the use and perception of user comments (Engelke, 2020) and on media trust in general (Engelke, Hase, & Wintterlin, 2019), which are not discussed further in this paper. After obtaining the interviewees' informed consent, the interview started by asking recipients about their personal media usage in order to give them the opportunity to reflect on their media behavior and also about their general trust in journalism.

We then followed up with questions on our main area of interest, namely UGC and how it is perceived by the respondents in their everyday media usage. Most previous studies are rather abstract and do not work with real-life examples of UGC (for an exception see Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013). As we wanted the users to experience the situation as realistically as possible in order to gain an in-depth instead of merely abstract insights into their views, we introduced real-life examples of UGC in the context of both offline and online news. We included the examples to ensure that respondents would think of the kind of sources we understand to be UGC when answering our questions. Furthermore, we hoped the examples would allow respondents to more easily remember examples of UGC from their own media usage. The articles and videos are not a representative sam-

ple of media coverage but rather examples taken from prominent and well-known German media outlets. Nonetheless, to make respondents think of different types of media, we included examples from three different contexts (magazine, website, television) to mirror the different types of media usage on the part of the participants. Since our participants stemmed from all over Germany, including a regional or local newspaper example would have meant that many participants would not have known the specific regional outlet from their own media usage, while including an example from a national newspaper – which have comparably low usage (Newman et al., 2016) – would have meant that even more participants would not have known the outlet from their own media usage. The choice of “Der Spiegel,” “Spiegel Online” and “Tagesschau” was therefore made because they are the three top brands in quality weekly magazines, websites and television as measured by percent of weekly usage in Germany in 2016 (Newman et al., 2016). Thus, we can assume that most participants have personally used these sources at one time or another and that the examples drawn from them can thus be considered real-life examples for our interviewees.

First, the recipients were shown a political report on asylum politics by “Der Spiegel” that used a non-professional picture – the source of which is named simply as Facebook – illustrating the reported incidents of mass sexual assaults on women on New Year’s Eve 2015/6 in Cologne. A second, more humorous article from “Spiegel Online” illustrated the “bromance” between former U.S. President Barack Obama and former Vice President Joe Biden with users’ tweets, indicating not only the platform Twitter as a source but also explicitly showing the users’ names. Finally, a broadcasting piece by the television news program “Tagesschau” (length of 2 minutes), which is published by the public broadcasting station ARD, reported on the ongoing conflict in Syria whilst integrating video clips by eyewitnesses on the ground. The third piece explicitly mentioned the difficulty of verifying such material three times whilst the others did not mention verification. It also displayed the origin of this video to be the “Internet” without further specifications of either platform or specific user. We thus included a variety of forms of UGC which covered both strategies of naming sources and transparency about verification attempts (see Table 1). Furthermore, these specific articles were chosen to mirror more political news topics on the one hand (asylum politics, conflict in Syria) and more human interest news topics (“bromance” between Barack Obama and Joe Biden) on the other hand, since research has shown that the effect of verification differs by topic (Grosser et al., 2019) and UGC is regularly used in both crisis coverage and human interest news.

**Table 1. Real-life examples of the integration of UGC**

News piece	Transparency about source origin	Transparency about verification
Report on asylum politics	Medium	None
“Bromance” between Obama and Biden	High	None
Conflict in Syria	Low	High

In the context of these examples, we asked the recipients whether they had ever perceived such content in the news, whether they had ever contributed such content themselves and how the use of UGC as a source influenced their perceived trustworthiness of journalistic pieces. Then, independent of whether respondents had already mentioned the difficulty of verification or the lack of transparency about the source, we asked whether they had perceived transparency about source origin and verification attempts in the examples. We also asked them what they generally thought about the necessity of making sources transparent or indicating verification issues as well as whether the taken measures were adequate. After the open questions, the interviewer used a short standardized survey to obtain socio-demographic data as well as awareness and usage of social media, which might be connected to attitudes regarding UGC.

The interviews were conducted by three researchers in November and December 2016 and mostly took place at the homes of the interviewees or via telephone. The interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes ( $M = 32$  minutes). We initially recruited the participants, who were all German citizens, from amongst our social networks around the country and identified further participants via snowball sampling. Our sample ( $N = 26$ , see Appendix) was purposively chosen based on age (under 40 years/40 years and older), gender (male/female) and news media usage (predominantly online/predominantly offline) in order to include a broad range of users. We specifically checked for balance regarding the use of offline and online outlets for information, as the experience with UGC might differ based on media usage. The youngest participant was 18 and the oldest 75 years old ( $M = 39.3$ ,  $SD = 16.0$ ), with those aged under 40 years and those aged 40 years and older represented equally. Finally, we interviewed equal numbers of women and men. Recipients had a diverse repertoire of media outlets with some using only the press and TV, others relying exclusively on the Internet for information and, lastly, users reporting a mixture of both information behaviors. Most of the interviewees knew different forms of social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat) and occasionally used some of them, with a focus on Facebook for everyday usage. Also, they reported a relatively high level of trust in the media – a point that we will return to later. Finally, while this was not part of the sampling criteria, the participants displayed a variety of educational backgrounds, although they were overall more educated than the public.

The interviews were transcribed without any paraphrasing and numbers were assigned to all interviewees instead of their names to guarantee anonymity. The analysis of the transcripts followed an abductive logic (Timmermans & Tavory,

2012), which combines insights from previous studies to develop overarching categories and uses qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2010) to identify sub-categories and manifestations on the textual level. The broad categories included the perception of naming sources and transparency about verification in everyday media usage, evaluations of different levels of transparency and influences on the perceived trustworthiness of the journalistic piece. In a forward and backward process, the quotes sorted into these categories were then again compared with the transcriptions by another author and, lastly, discussed repeatedly within the group of authors.

Although such a flexible design allows researchers to follow up interesting responses in a way that self-administered questionnaires cannot (Robson, 2002), it is also at risk of the interviewer putting thoughts into the interviewee's mind (Karlsson et al., 2018). In the specific context of this study, some respondents did not know UGC at all or were not aware of verification and transparency attempts, which is why some interviewees struggled with whether they even had an opinion on such journalistic content and strategies. Although the interviews were semi-structured and we did follow up on questions for clarity, it was therefore specifically important for the interviewer to refrain from interrupting or proceeding with the next question if the interviewee was still trying to remember past experiences with such content or making up his mind about a question he had never contemplated before.

#### **4. Results: Source and verification transparency have little impact on perceived trustworthiness**

##### **4.1 Transparency about the origin of UGC sources**

The first research question targets different levels of transparency about the origin of UGC sources. In the presented stimuli, the origin of the UGC was made clear to different extents. Stimulus 1 and 3 only mentioned "Facebook" or "Internet" as sources. The second piece included the original tweets with users' names. We asked the respondents if they perceived the information on the origin of the sources in our examples and in their everyday media usage and how they evaluated these transparency efforts.

##### **4.1.1 Recipients' perceptions of source origin transparency**

Of the 26 respondents, five respondents did not recall information on the origin of the sources after they were shown real-life examples during the interview. "I don't think I would have read that at all, if it is written like that, then you have your eyes on what is happening and, uh, you don't notice it at all. I didn't notice it." (75, f, offline) Although the other 21 respondents perceived transparency about source origin in the very explicit examples in the interviews when asked for it, in general, they were skeptical about whether they would have perceived the information in their everyday media usage. When the source identification was pointed out by the interviewer, one respondent for example said: "I would have probably

not even read that if it is displayed like that. You know, you just watch what is going on and don't even perceive that" (75, f, offline).

#### 4.1.2 Recipients' evaluations of source origin transparency

Regarding evaluations of transparency about source origin, we asked (1) whether the respondents think it is important to give information and (2) how this information affects their perception of the journalistic article.

First, asked about the importance of transparency efforts, 19 of all 26 respondents explicitly said that journalistic transparency should include transparency of sources because it helps the audience to evaluate the journalistic piece and enhances the authenticity of the article. Especially when confronted with the global statement "Source: Internet" as an indication of the origin of the "Tagesschau"-video, the respondents reacted negatively. "They could say more about which website this is from. Source: Internet – I don't know, that's so big, where in the Internet am I supposed to check where the pictures are from?" (34, m, mixed) Or, as another respondent said, "Source: Internet – that is just like saying 'source: via somewhere in the universe'" (28, m, offline). Seven respondents and therefore a smaller number of recipients said that naming sources is just not important when it comes to their daily media usage. Regarding the examples, they stated that "Internet" is sufficient as an indication of a source. "Yeah, because the name of the person who recorded the video means nothing to me anyway." (62, f, mixed)

Second, with regard to the impact of transparency about the origin of UGC on their evaluation of an article, 18 of the respondents perceive transparency efforts to increase journalistic trustworthiness. "When I see how the journalist works, where he gets his sources from, and when I agree with them, [...] then this would have a trust-increasing effect." (28, m, offline) Source transparency is perceived as a sign of quality. "I think that speaks for professional journalism, that it wasn't sold as pictures taken by the "Tagesschau" journalists or reporters, but they also made use of what was circulating on the Internet and pointed it out to the consumer and the television viewer." (55, m, offline) Only one respondent said that transparency about the origin of sources lowers the trustworthiness of an article. In general, this respondent was very skeptical about user-generated content as a source for journalistic coverage, leading to a rejection of all ways to integrate such sources. "When I see that it's not dpa or Reuters or what do I know, then I usually don't take such sources so seriously." (21, m, online) Seven other respondents were unsure about or had no opinion on how transparency about sources affects the perceived trustworthiness.

To summarize, most recipients were in agreement regarding their evaluation of transparency about the origin of sources when they are confronted with examples. In their everyday usage, most of them do not really notice from where or how journalists get their information or simply expect such information to be reliable. When users were specifically asked about transparency in the interviews, most said that they liked it when journalists reported the origin of the sources and that this also increases trustworthiness.

## 4.2 Transparency about the verification of UGC sources

Apart from transparency about source origin, journalists can also indicate the trustworthiness of sources by being transparent about verification attempts.

### 4.2.1 Recipients' perceptions of verification transparency

Confronted with the journalistic piece on the conflict in Syria, in which the verification process of the author is indicated very clearly, only three of the respondents did not recognize transparency about verification in this very concrete example. Another four of the respondents who recognized the information on verification said that they did not process it actively. Asked about the verification information in the "Tagesschau"-video, one respondent said: "Yes, he has talked in the subjunctive every now and then, but at the same time I thought: you're only busy with these pictures at first, and then you practically don't catch the word anymore. You do hear him, but in the end, you don't understand him." (54, f, mixed) Many respondents were unsure if they would have noticed mentions of verification in their everyday media usage. "That [authors' note: noticing the verification of information] surprised me, because usually I notice something like that less [...]. In your example, it was stated twice and in all clarity that the video can't be verified." (27, f, offline) The result that, even in the very explicit example in the interviews, three respondents did not notice any claims about verification and four more just vaguely remembered statements regarding the verification of information raises doubts as to whether transparency about verification is perceived in everyday media usage.

### 4.2.2 Recipients' evaluations of verification transparency

Afterwards, we again asked (1) whether the respondents think it is important to give information about verification and (2) how this information affects their perception of the journalistic article.

In the interviews, 23 of the 26 respondents said that it is important that journalists are transparent about the verification process if they are not completely sure about the authenticity of their sources. Hence, recipients think that transparency about verification is important. However, the picture turns if we look at the evaluation of how verification transparency affects the trustworthiness of a journalistic article. Only 14 of the 26 respondents said that being transparent about how UGC sources were verified makes them trust an article more. For them, verification transparency shows a professional attitude or signals high quality journalism and proves the reliability of the information presented. "Because it doesn't just flow in, but because attention is drawn to the fact that [...] they cannot guarantee that what is shown here is correct, and whether the information is correct, and that's exactly what quality is for me." (27, f, offline) These recipients are in favor of verification transparency: "If he can't verify it and if it is very, very likely that it's real, then he should show it, but at least point out the problem repeatedly." (24, f, offline) In contrast, three respondents were unsure about the influence

of verification transparency and nine respondents evaluated it negatively because it indicates and triggers uncertainty. “On the one hand, they’re somehow shooting themselves in the foot and saying: ‘Okay, we couldn’t verify that, but we’re showing it to you now.’ [...] Well, it comes across as a bit uncertain.” (21, m, online) In part, this may be due to the fact that the respondents show high levels of media trust and usually rely on the heuristic that facts displayed in the media are true. “Doubts only arise when you hear something like that, like, yeah, they don’t know exactly where the videos come from now.” (43, f, online) Also, if displayed information turns out to be wrong, it does not matter if journalists were transparent about verification attempts before – rather, transparency causes a negative evaluation in hindsight. “If it turns out, for example, that the source was wrong or that a two-week old video or five-, six-year-old pictures were used, then of course my trust dwindles a bit.” (21, m, online) Five respondents of the nine respondents who evaluated verification transparency negatively therefore said that unverifiable UGC should not be integrated in article at all. “If they can’t verify it? [...] Well, then they should just leave it.” (54, f, mixed)

In conclusion, when recipients are asked to think about transparency regarding verification attempts in journalistic pieces, a majority think that transparency about verification is, in theory, positive. However, many recipients indicated that they do not process verification actively in their daily media usage when verification information is less prominent. Furthermore, the transparent use of unverified UGC – the unverifiability of which is explicitly pointed out – is perceived ambivalently because it might lead to uncertainty regarding the reliability of the information displayed, in particular if this information turns out to be wrong. Hence, it is unlikely that displaying verification efforts will increase journalistic trustworthiness for the entirety of the audience.

### 4.3 User typology

In a second part of the analysis, we grouped the recipients into types based on whether their evaluations of verification and source origin transparency were positive, negative or either neutral or not present. We looked for patterns of media usage, age, and general evaluations of UGC as a journalistic source. Overall, four types of users emerged.

We named the first group the “Sceptics” ( $n = 5$ ). They were the second oldest group ( $M = 48.6$ ,  $SD = 19.5$ ) and mainly used online media for news. In general, they are skeptical about UGC, as this quote shows: “If I found out that the information came from the journalist who wrote something about it, who informed himself, that’s ok. But if it came from outside, you can’t believe everything.” (43, f, online) The sceptics are the most critical about both transparency strategies: They evaluated verification transparency negatively, especially when journalists cannot verify their information, which they think is a deal-breaker for implementing UGC, and were negative about or had no opinion on source origin transparency because they are not interested in the journalistic practices and trust the journalists to do their job. “So, I actually had a lot of trust in the news, that [au-

thors' note: transparency about source origin] is really only now coming to my attention." (75, f, offline)

The second group, the "Conservatives," ( $n = 6$ ) was 37.0 years old on average ( $SD = 14.9$ ) and mainly used offline media. They are quite similar to the "Sceptics": They also evaluated the use of UGC as a source negatively because they are concerned about possible manipulations. While the "Conservatives" are not as negative about transparency strategies as the "Sceptics" – all of them evaluated source origin transparency positively because it contributes to a better understanding of how journalists get their information –, verification transparency is still predominately evaluated negatively due to the danger of triggering uncertainty about journalistic authority and trust in sources.

The third group, the "Undecided," ( $n = 3$ ) was 54.3 years old on average ( $SD = 10.3$ ) and thus the oldest group. The "Undecided" are mainly unaware of UGC as a news source as well as of transparency strategies related to it. They evaluated UGC as a news source negatively or did not really think about it. Their attitude towards source origin and verification transparency was not very pronounced. Overall, they reflect their own media use the least.

The fourth group, which we named the "Confidants," was the biggest ( $n = 12$ ) and youngest group ( $M = 32.9$ ,  $SD = 13.3$ ). This group holds more positive attitudes towards UGC as a news source because it delivers more facts and the journalistic article is therefore perceived as more authentic. Source origin transparency is valued because the more transparent the source origin is "the more certain I can be about evaluating it correctly and knowing, well, how probable it is that the information is correct" (18, m, online). Verification transparency is evaluated positively because they expect journalists to communicate uncertainty. They see it as an indicator for quality and honesty. One respondent said: "He [the journalist] constantly points out: I give you the information, but I can't confirm it one hundred percent myself. You are a mature recipient, you can partly classify it yourself. I think that's quite well done." (40, male, offline)

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Transparency is often proclaimed to be a professional strategy to cope with uncertainty about the reliability of sources in the process of news production (Tuchman, 1972). As a new norm in journalism, at least according to journalists (Hellmueller et al., 2013; Singer, 2007), it might help with new challenges, for example the increasing use but challenging implementation of online sources (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016). This study complements previous studies on journalistic views by analyzing recipients' views on transparency strategies in the context of UGC using in-depth interviews.

In general, results indicate that journalists' and recipients' views might differ less than one might expect: Recipients themselves, similar to journalists, are still in the process of figuring out what UGC entails and how it should be implemented (see also Metzger, Flanagin, Markov, Grossman, & Bulger, 2015; Wright, Shemberger, & Price, 2016). When asked about two different transparency strategies in the realm of source transparency – transparency about source origin and

transparency about verification attempts –, most recipients say they do not perceive transparency in their daily media usage, a result mirrored by experimental studies (Grosser et al., 2019). However, when explicitly asked about it, recipients think transparency is important, which is also in line with previous studies (van der Wurff & Schönbach, 2014b; Newman & Flechter, 2017; but see Brown, 2015). Specifically, transparency about verification attempts is slightly more important to the audience than transparency about source origin. However, the fact that journalistic transparency is perceived as important does not mean that it automatically increases journalistic trustworthiness. While transparency about source origin influences trustworthiness positively in the eyes of most recipients, transparency about verification attempts, in turn, is met with more mixed reactions by the audience: While some recipients find that transparency about verification attempts signals professional journalism, others think displaying it might trigger uncertainty, especially when material could not be verified, thus ultimately decreasing journalistic trustworthiness. Overall, the influence of transparency strategies on trustworthiness should, as underlined by experimental studies (e.g. Kruikemeier & Lecheler, 2018) and surveys (Manninen, 2020), therefore be questioned. This is in line with other studies showing little or no effects of such strategies to increase trustworthiness on the audience's existing attitudes regarding news media (Curry & Stroud, 2019; Karlsson, Clerwall, & Nord, 2017; Karlsson et al., 2018).

To give a more general overview of views on transparency strategies, we tried to identify overarching attitudes towards transparency strategies in the form of a user typology. Obviously, this typology is based on only 26 interviews and should be interpreted with caution: We can neither claim to grasp all potential types of attitudes nor make general statements about how prevalent they are in the population. According to the analysis, negative evaluations of transparency strategies might have different reasons. Media users in our sample had high trust in journalism. This could be one reason why many do not even think about or do not need additional information from journalists on how they, for example, evaluate the sources they decided to use for their coverage. Recipients simply expect journalists to only include reliable information. Therefore, they are either not interested in or not aware of transparency strategies related to UGC (the “Undecided”) or think that UGC as source itself and specifically transparency related to it might trigger uncertainty, for example when displaying unclear sources as the origin of information or being transparent about not being able to verify information (the “Sceptics,” the “Conservatives”). Only the “Confidants,” including the youngest recipients in our sample, evaluated both strategies positively. This might indicate that younger recipients are more used to different forms of sources, such as UGC, and are more aware of possible manipulations online with the consequence that they want to be informed on such. In sum, we find around half of all recipients to be advocates of both transparency strategies when implementing it, while the other half either have no specific opinion on these issues or see danger in at least one of these forms of transparency, mostly in verification attempts.

Our study leads to implications for journalistic practice: Transparency attempts have to be made very explicit for recipients to perceive and process them.

However, since the user typology indicates that there is no one-fits-all-strategy on how to implement UGC transparently, journalists should not set their hopes on transparency in order to regain recipients' trust. To meet the expectations of those who are interested in the sources of an article and not bother those who do not value transparency about source origin, journalists could provide additional information on the sources in a separate section. Non-verifiable information should, in general, be used with caution and accompanied not only by transparency on the non-verifiability, but also by explanations as to why UGC was nevertheless included in order to counterbalance uncertainty. Thus, the expectations of various user types – both those who are not interested and tentatively feel bothered by transparency efforts (the “Sceptics,” the “Conservatives,” the “Undecided”) and those who welcome and value them (the “Confidents”) – can be met.

There are several limitations to this study which readers should bear in mind. On the one hand, our transparent verification example was quite explicit, as verification attempts were repeatedly stated and connected to a context to which recipients tend to relate this debate – here, manipulation through propaganda material. An unverified video showing acts of war in Syria is certainly different from an unverified tweet from a social media user or video footage illustrating natural disasters. Thus, in other contexts, both the perception of transparent verification attempts and conclusions regarding its influence on trustworthiness might have differed. On the other hand, we are also drawing from a limited purposive sample with mostly well-educated Western media users in Germany that have medium to high trust in journalism and rather low social media efficacy. Hence, our results do not offer insights for a representative part of the German population but provide first indications on how users might perceive transparency with regard to UGC, why transparency might be less promising than hoped, and which user types emerge regarding UGC and transparency efforts. Our typology of attitudes towards transparency only offers a starting point for future research but should not be perceived as fixed or generalizable. Future studies should include media users with diverging levels of trust, less education, other cultural backgrounds or a higher social media efficacy as, for example, education is partially associated with media trust (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) and recipients with higher media trust tend to be more open to journalistic transparency efforts (Karlsson et al., 2017). Additionally, due to the examples used in the interviews, recipients mainly talked about quality media. Findings might differ for tabloid media because they are perceived as less credible (e.g. Schultz et al. 2017) and the sourcing of UGC differs from quality media (Broersma & Graham, 2013).

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## Appendix

**Table A1. Characteristics of the respondents**

Respondent	Age	Gender	Main news source
1	18	Male	Online
2	27	Male	Online
3	55	Male	Offline
4	75	Female	Offline
5	43	Female	Online
6	43	Male	Online
7	26	Female	Offline
8	28	Male	Offline
9	40	Male	Offline
10	34	Male	Mixed
11	29	Male	Offline
12	58	Female	Offline
13	54	Female	Mixed
14	62	Female	Mixed
15	42	Female	Offline
16	31	Female	Online
17	24	Female	Offline
18	26	Male	Offline
19	27	Female	Offline
20	21	Male	Online
21	21	Male	Online
22	50	Female	Online
23	49	Male	Online
24	20	Female	Online
25	63	Male	Offline
26	57	Female	Online

*Notes.* The interviews were part of a larger project on participatory journalism (see Method section). This table is therefore equivalent to the first four columns regarding the respondents' characteristics which were previously presented in Table A1 in Engelke (2020).