


Eighty years after its inaugural issue, the world-famous *Newsweek* magazine temporarily discontinued its print edition, and the *Washington Post* was sold. In Germany too, many print media face an uncertain future. One thing is clear, however: the next generation of readers will be less likely to leaf through newspapers. Kai Diekmann, the editor-in-chief of Europe's largest paper, has long been thinking digitally. Diekmann and his editors recently visited California in search of ideas on how his *Bild-Zeitung* can attract and maintain the interest of young target groups online.



**Kai Diekmann (50), editor-in-chief and publisher of the *Bild-Zeitung*, in his Berlin office. This is where Europe's largest daily newspaper is produced.**

Kai Diekmann



# THINK DI GI TAL

 HEINER VON DER LADEN     CHRISTOPH BAUER

**K**ai Diekmann started working at Europe's largest tabloid newspaper, the *Bild-Zeitung*, nearly thirty years ago. "The 1980s were an era of very large circulations, a record-setting time for print media," he recalls. That now is history. Digitization is leading the press into a new online world. Very young readers, in particular, ask why they should purchase newspapers or magazines when the entire spectrum of news services is accessible much more rapidly and conveniently on their smartphone. Articles, photos, and videos are available everywhere and at all times. →

Diekmann, now 50, remained associated with the *Bild-Zeitung* and became its editor-in-chief in 2001. He is in charge of charting the course for this paper that was founded back in 1952. And he is convinced that 15 years from now, the print edition will still be available. “Our brand is strong enough for that,” he says. But he is also clear about the fact that “the corner kiosk is no longer the main place to exchange news. That has been replaced by online platforms and social networks.” Traditional rituals of acquiring information will seem veritably antiquated to tomorrow’s adults.

The editor-in-chief has a plan: “We want to continue to grow and be successful in the future,” he says. “So we also have to use the interfaces that will attract our readers. The next generation is at home in a virtual world; in fact, that is already its reality today. That’s where young people meet their friends and find the content that interests them.” His view is backed by impressive figures. A study released in August 2014 showed that 97 percent of 10- to 13-year-olds in Germany surf the Internet. One in four of them already possesses a smartphone.

“As a journalist I have to address this development,” says Diekmann. He sees digitization not as a threat but rather as a golden opportunity for innovation, and is delighted about the nearly unlimited range of possibilities. “Journalists can express themselves in even more varied ways online,” he observes. “They can give their stories a 360-degree perspective, and link to videos and soundtracks. And they can update them around the clock.” In addition, whereas traditional editorial teams could only infer what would interest readers, users’ reading preferences can now be tracked online, and with great precision. Journalists can learn a lot from this.

The *Bild-Zeitung* has a website—[bild.de](http://bild.de)—which gets around 17 million hits a month. With a cir-

ulation of around 2.4 million copies, the print edition reaches more than 11 million readers. There are major economic benefits to digital media. Diekmann, who is also the publisher, compares them as follows: “Paper has very limited surface space. If you want to expand the content, that necessarily means higher printing costs.” More content on the Internet, however, incurs only marginally higher costs of this type.

This influential paper is undergoing a cultural transformation. Diekmann’s tough reporters were once famed for being the first—and ideally, the only ones—to present the spectacular news of the day the next morning. But clocks tick differently these days, or for that matter, not at all. Stories now come out immediately, in “real time.” And the typical question of an editor-in-chief—“Is this an exclusive scoop?”—is now of secondary interest to Diekmann. “Exclusive no longer means that you have something that you can keep for yourself. It now means telling a story with a certain stance and in a special way.”

In fact, the digital world makes it easier for the *Bild-Zeitung* to keep its core brand promise of telling stories in pictures. Diekmann enjoys demonstrating himself how that works. In February 2014 when the protests on the *maidan* in Kiev were at their height, he flew to the Ukrainian capital for 36 hours, joined the crowds on its Independence Square, and uploaded photos from his own smartphone onto the Web. He added an interview with opposition leader and boxing champion Vitali Klitschko.

Where do we go from here? “I’m absolutely convinced that a lot of technical developments will be appearing in more accelerated and radical ways than we can imagine today,” he ventures. To get a feel for this, in 2012 he took a break from his position as editor-in chief and—accompanied by two colleagues—set off for nearly a year in California’s Silicon Valley: →





**Kai Diekmann went to California to gather innovative ideas about digital media. The year he spent in Silicon Valley changed him—both inside and out. On the wall: the distinctive pop art with the logo is from the “good old days.” Berlin-based artist Jens Lorenzen created the artwork—news sheets on canvas—in 2001. A forgotten, rusty billboard served as his inspiration.**

the place made famous as the birthplace of the Internet. “What we’ll be seeing in Germany in two or three years is already reality there.”

Diekmann is fascinated by the pioneering spirit and daring in North America. “They’re developing products extremely quickly and putting them out onto the streets in semi-finished form, just to see what will happen. Flops disappear. That type of thing would be considered a failure here in Germany, and damage one’s image. But in the USA that’s just part of the culture of experimentation.”

Diekmann came up with a plan to benefit from this culture. Groups of five members of the editorial team have the opportunity to work in Los Angeles for periods of five months at a time. Working together in a large house that also serves as their living quarters, they start editing the online edition of the *Bild-Zeitung* at half an hour past noon. That corresponds to 9:30 p.m. in central Europe, so they work through what would be the night in Germany. This unusual “late-night” program, “Bild.live@NIGHT,” not only spares their colleagues in Berlin from having to work the unpopular night shift; it is

also attracting completely new readers. The editor-in-chief is pleased about a completely different type of benefit as well. “Even journalists who have had relatively little online experience come back from California completely digitized,” he remarks. Which can only serve this newspaperman’s plans for innovation. ←



Kai Diekmann at the “ring.” This is what the editors call the oval table in the production room in Berlin where the printed pages of the *Bild-Zeitung* are laid out.



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