

Journalism and audiences: concerns about the contents generated by users

Periodismo y audiencias: inquietudes sobre los contenidos generados por los usuarios

DR. KOLDOBIKA MESO AYERDI, Universidad del País Vasco (koldo.meso@ehu.es)

ABSTRACT

During recent years we have witnessed an increase in the spaces for content elaborated by audiences in the news media, and a growing integration of such content in spaces that had until now been reserved for news professionals. The latter has aroused the interest of researchers, and there are abundant studies on – among other factors – the presence of participatory mechanisms in the online media, the attitude of journalists towards participation, the quality of audience participation and its contribution to the development of a more enriching public sphere. The principal aim of this paper is to offer the state of the art of research in participatory journalism. This work focuses on the main features of this field. A review of literature reveals the evolution of approaches used in the last fifteen years.

Keywords: participatory journalism, interactivity, active audiences, user generated content.

RESUMEN

Durante los últimos años, hemos sido testigos de un incremento en los espacios destinados a los contenidos elaborados por las audiencias en los medios de comunicación y de una creciente integración de estos contenidos en espacios que habían sido hasta ahora reservados a los profesionales. Ello ha despertado el interés de los investigadores, y hoy en día son abundantes, entre otros, los estudios sobre la presencia de mecanismos de participación en los medios de comunicación en línea, la actitud de los periodistas hacia la participación de los usuarios, el análisis de la calidad de la participación de la audiencia y su contribución al desarrollo de una esfera pública más enriquecedora. El objetivo principal de este trabajo es realizar una revisión del estado del arte de la investigación en periodismo participativo. El estudio se centra en el análisis de las principales aproximaciones producidas en esta área. La revisión de la literatura permite observar la evolución en los enfoques utilizados en las investigaciones a lo largo de los últimos quince años.

Palabras clave: periodismo participativo, interactividad, audiencias activas, contenido generado por los usuarios.

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INTRODUCTION

New digital technologies, particularly the Internet, have meant a real revolution in the field of communication (Dahlgren, 1996; Heinonen, 1999; Pavlik, 2001). Today, the “possibilities of relating are greater than before, thanks to the development of numerous applications in the Internet that facilitate communication between people and the establishment of various links” (Alexandre & Ferrer, 2010, p. 217). In this context, some authors (Dahlgren, 2009) say that journalism is in the middle of an era of transformation as transcendental as the invention of the telegraph or television.

In the mid-1990s, the media, mainly newspapers, made the leap to the Web, and even though in many cases they have shown trends and strategies dependent on economic and business variables (Díaz Noci, 2010), they have also presented qualities of their own. Interactivity is one of the main characteristics which defines the digital speech, one of the key words of the journalism on the Internet (Masip, Díaz Noci, Domingo, Micó & Salaverría, 2010) and some authors give it a central role in digital media (Dibeau & Garrison, 2001).

As it is known, consumption on the Internet is governed by guidelines other than those that prevail in the traditional market, which has forced the media to adapt to a context in which citizens have a voice. Communicative structures on the Internet not only have increased the power of the users about the information dissemination, they have boosted other forms of communicative action mediated by technology and based on greater social interaction. We are witnessing a profound transformation in the way in which people communicate and share information.

In the early days, the fear of loss of control over the message, a growing sovereignty of the media by readers and the fear of losing credibility by offering content of dubious quality (Palomo & Meso, 2009) unleashed the alarm of editors, but over time—and because of the awakening of the audiences—online newspapers began to include in their offer different tools for transferring various reviews and chronicles on highlighted facts. This use is understood as an opportunity to cover spaces neglected by the mainstream media and increase the appeal of media and digital editions, by then too similar to the paper edition (Lowrey, 2006; Domingo & Heinonen, 2008).

Many of these cibermedia opted for opening thematic blogs in which the journalists specialized in those areas treated information in a different way as usual, without forgetting that blogs constitute one part of the informative offer of the media, conceived as a dialogue to stimulate the participation of the users; a mixed formulation of professional and participatory journalism (Palomo & Meso, 2009).

Standard journalistic practices have reinvented necessarily to respond to a more complex scenario, marked by constant updating, information abundance, the greater presence of audiences in the communicative process and innovation in formats, genres and consumption devices (Marjoribanks, 2000; Downie & Schudson, 2009). In this context of advancement and acquisition of new practices, journalists have become more and more managers of information and of the dialogue with audiences. Moreover, the role of the *mediator* is reinforced with the concept of *interactive journalist* (Lasica, 2009).

Access to information is greater than it has ever been and the interactive features of the web make this an ideal media for the intercommunication, the exchange of information and, in general, for the construction of a more committed society. Without a doubt, the information and communication determine the debate and decision-making of the citizens, their participation, which itself is *sine qua non* for democracy (Larrondo, 2005b). Additionally, audiences are becoming more fragmented and seek stimuli and immediate satisfactions (Livingston, 1999). The information constitutes a material in constant evolution that is corrected, modified or enriched, which does not imply that readers are no longer claiming their right to reliable and quality information (Quandt & Singer, 2009).

The relationship between the media and audiences should serve to strengthen the traditional democratic value of mediated communication, as well as to promote improvements in the quality of the offered contents.

New technologies have increased the power of decision and participation of audiences, which leads to a recovery in their ability to act (López García, 2005). We are witnessing a new type of journalism, with an audience increasingly involved. Users are no longer passive beings who are limited to receiving information that others make, but also want to produce content, what increasingly blurs the borders between

information professionals and users, and allows the existence of initiatives that combine professional journalism and the audience-written content, as CNN (I report), Fox news (U report), OhMyNews or Rue89.

Users assume new facets of communicators, creators of content. Thanks to their level of training and new computer tools, they acquire core competencies, until now solely in the hands of professional journalists. And their contributions have been taken as an essential part of the production process.

The development of new formats and supports gives the desired opportunity for the incorporation of the concerns of the citizens in the “dominant discourse of the media through their direct participation in the news production” (García de Madariaga, 2006, p. 206). The direct participation of citizens in the information production has led even to replace the traditional media and reference as primary sources of information (Bardoel, 1996; Deuze, 1999; Bowman & Willis, 2003). This collective content creation (Kerckhove, 1997, 1999; Ramonet, 2011) is directly associated with the tradition of the so-called *citizen or participatory journalism* (Paulussen, Heinonen, Domingo & Quandt, 2007; Jones, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009; Singer et al., 2011) which makes it possible to discuss if we are at the end of journalism or just before the end of what until now was known as journalism.

DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

There are various and very interesting journalistic experiences that bet from the beginning by applying the maxim of Dan Gillmor (2004) –one of the main advocates of participatory journalism–, of different formulas that aspired to incorporate the contributions of users through the use of new technological resources in the conventional media. Some of these experiences were raised as alternatives to the unidirectional and vertical model that prevailed in the conventional media. It is the case of Indymedia, which sought permanent and collective construction of the news, a form of communication as less mediated as possible and as far away from the conventional model of communicating known so far.

In recent years, we are witnessing a more sudden manifestation of experiences of participatory journalism. Barely ten years have passed since in 1999 appeared

Jane’s Intelligence Review, an initiative that opened what Javier Villate called “open source journalism” (García de Madariaga, 2006, p. 212). Several types of sites of news in which a large network of citizen correspondents fed news content and opinion pages were subsequently launched. All this work was peer-reviewed, edited, and finally completed by professional editors. These are the cases of OhMyNews in South Korea; or JanJan, in Japan; or GetLocalNews, in the United States. In some cases, these newspapers made by citizens have come to become reference media.

Such was the success of some of these experiences that some mainstream media began to show interest in reserving spaces to display content produced by their audiences together with information developed by professionals. Often, those contents and the others do not share the same prominence, and those produced by the users are neglected into spaces of less informative relevance.

However, all these experiences constituted not only a good example of collaboration between professionals and the audience in the preparation of the information, but also an example that something was changing in journalism.

SPACES FOR PARTICIPATION: THE LAST BIG TREND

The implementation of spaces for participation thus marks the last big trend in the evolution of digital journalism (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008). Cibermedia bet on new applications that promote various forms of openness and participation (Tomaiuolo, 2009), away from the traditional tools from the dawn of online journalism (Schultz, 1999; Deuze, 2001).

However, the participation of audiences in the field of journalism is not something of the past years. Suffice it to remember the letters to the director. What is news is the increase of spaces for the contributions of the users in the media and the increasing integration of these contents in spaces reserved until now for information professionals (Guallar, 2007; García de Torres, 2010).

The newspaper industry has taken advantage of the wide range of opportunities opening up as a result of technological innovations and the possibilities for expression that the Web offers to any citizen so that it can report directly, without going through the filter of the media (Hermida &

Thurman, 2008). It is a phenomenon associated with the tradition of civic journalism (García de Madariaga, 2006; Paulussen et al., 2007), an idea not shared by all the authors (Pellegrini, 2010). Some authors, however, see it as an opportunity to reinvent the profession, leading it to overcome its credibility crisis (Gillmor, 2004); or, even, as new competition that undermines the social influence of the newspaper industry (Holton et al., 2013) and endangers its business model.

Web 2.0 applications, with an increasingly common presence in cibermedia, make possible the opportunity to express and communicate without requiring advanced technological skills, and transform the way of searching, selecting, accessing and distributing information. An increase can be seen in the new possibilities for dialogue (Hermida, 2011).

Some talk about a new revolution (Deuze, 2003) and there are those who link all this with the future of the media (Schmitz & De Macedo, 2009). And there are also those who take advantage of the situation to pose new challenges that must be faced by media companies (García de Torres et al., 2011):

- Quality and administration of contents created by users.
- Use of messages in a conversation scenario to create traffic.
- Coexistence of professional and amateur journalism.
- Emergence of professional self-communicators in the environment of journalistic organizations.
- Infringement, in practice, of rooted journalistic principles.

Now, thanks to the existence of free easy-to-use editing platforms (we talk about Blogger, Wordpress...), readers are publishers of content and define how to view the information, and form communities in the process. Social networks, and also blogs –most direct predecessors of social networks (Bernal, 2010)–, along with mobile devices, contribute to broaden the channels of the content generated by the audience (Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2011) and are, even bookmarks for more information. “They acquire significance as ways to use the technology to improve or add value to the information” (García, 2012, p. 77). And people use these tools to filter, assess, and show willingness to information (Tejedor Calvo, 2010).

The growth of mobile connectivity using smartphones or tablets is notable, which means that many of the people who constitute the audience of a media can account for any event in real time.

It is a proven fact that anyone can play roles so far attributed to media (Domingo et al., 2008). In the new networks society, each individual is a potential “journalist”, a peculiarity that media are trying to encourage. They are asked to send photos or videos of any matter which they had witnessed or to make comments on the published news. The question is to know if all those contributions of audiences can be called “journalism” and what contributions would fit under that term (Rost, 2010).

The reasons that explain the fact that the media encourage their users to generate content are varied (Vujnovic et al., 2010); among others: retaining audiences, increasing traffic, improving the brand imaging, creating a community of users, promoting content, achieving greater attention and a source for news and references (Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger, 2007; Reich, 2008; Lewis, Kaufhold & Lasorsa, 2010; Stassen, 2010; García de Torres et al., 2011; Murthy, 2011).

There are many and very valuable advantages of incorporating citizens into the journalistic production (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Thurman, 2008; Domingo et al., 2008; Kelly, 2009). However, there are also many questions that arise in relation to the identity of journalism, the quality of information and even the identity of the professionals themselves. Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton (2011) point to the rupture of the traditional principles.

NEW UNCERTAINTIES REGARDING PARTICIPATION

The picture briefly described above has led a large number of scholars to put the emphasis on the interactive dimensions of the phenomenon of the Internet, even to warn about a paradigm shift. New dilemmas, ultimately, derived both from the evolution of communication products, as from the effects of increased participation in a society increasingly more (inter)connected. The advance of Web 2.0 in the last few years has been extraordinary and, it is not strange that therefore, mainstream media around the world

is commanded by joining 2.0 trends and consolidate all kinds of interactive practices to promote the participation of citizens.

Spaces for active participation of the users are possible thanks to the highest level among users of digital media. We could also understand that these interventions become particularly relevant when it comes to opine on specific topics, especially considering the existence of previous studies that deal with the influence of interpersonal communication when it comes to moderate the influence of media in civic mobilization and participation in political life (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005). Thanks to these conversations, the citizens give a greater meaning to the information given by the media.

Traditional journalism, as we have known it until recently, begins to disintegrate (Larrondo, 2005a). At the same time, we are witnessing a greater democratization of information (Harrison and Barthel, 2009). Users have more and a greater number of resources enabling them to share texts, images and sounds; exchange information or redistribute it; participate, comment, and spreading the news. The 21st century journalism takes place in a much more complicated environment than the one of just ten years ago, a context in which the passive citizens are transformed into potential producers of information (García de Madariaga, 2006; Noguera, 2010). They are recent and gradual changes that do not even relate to all media, but they are part of an evolution with different degrees and paths (Rost & Bergero, 2012:33).

THE WEAKNESS OF THE CONTENT GENERATED BY USERS

As we noted previously, one of the main arguments that are generated are given around what kind of contributions generated by users can be called “journalism” and what are the minimum quality parameters which can and should be demanded.

There is no doubt that the number of tools available to audiences to participate in the production of content is increasing, while participation options are higher around the content developed by media professionals (Domingo et al., 2008; García de Torres et al., 2009). However, in either direction, various studies have highlighted the weakness of the content generated

by users (García & Capón, 2004; Reich, 2008; Lacy, Duffy, Riffe, Thorson & Fleming, 2010). There are even those who conclude that it hardly contributes to public debate (Rost, Pagni & Apesteguia, 2008; Díaz Noci, Domingo, Massip, Micó & Ruiz, 2010). In any sense, in the center of the discussion are the concerns about the difficulty to control quality, and sometimes the credibility of such content.

Many media professionals and communication theorists (Gabilondo, 2011; Pulitzer, 2011) seem to agree that all this new context contributes to clarify what is journalism, which are the features that define it: the need to filter; the importance of a solvent work, with names and surnames, away from any information or opinions expressed by users, who often hide behind anonymity and who have finished by discrediting the information democracy that we talked about before. The reception of the material generated by individuals in the role of accidental journalists loses credibility. And not because there are no valid elements among those materials, but because it is necessary to apply the filter of solvency: who sends it, which interests move him to send it, in what context they appear, how to distinguish a “real” image of a manipulated one...

RESEARCH ON PARTICIPATION

Such as several authors announced that the Internet would revolutionize the operating model of the media as a result of its main expressive characteristics (hypertextuality, multimedia, interactivity, etc.), many authors have found empirically that media did not take advantage of all the possibilities that Internet offers (Singer, 1997; Deuze, 2001; Paulussen, 2004; O’Sullivan, 2005).

The evolution of digital journalism assists in recent years to one last big trend: the implementation of spaces for participation. It is a phenomenon associated with technological innovations, which possess the ability to generate innovative ways to produce, manage and consume media content. While this phenomenon has aroused the interest of the academic community, it is the one less studied in a systematic way.

More recent investigations have settled in the attitudes of professional journalists before the proliferation of spaces for participation (Chung, 2007; Bakker & Pantti, 2009; Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010;

Williams, Wardle & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2010). On the contrary, very little is known about the routines of work of citizens that have become journalists (Reich, 2008).

First investigations focused on detailing the tools that digital media cared to implement and the circumstances which led to their adoption (Boczkowski, 2004). Some of those early studies concluded that the development of these spaces of participation would be a revolution in journalism and responded to economic interests, aside from its impact on the processes of information production (Paulussen et al., 2007; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Vujnovic et al., 2010).

However, these first investigations had serious limitations, since they barely stopped to analyze how audiences and media professionals used the interactive tools (Shultz, 1999). The phenomenon of citizen journalism, when the audience produces news or informative material of interest is the one less studied in a systematic way (Masip et al., 2010).

Some more is known about the impact of the contents produced by the audiences in business models, the legal derivations and the motivations of the audiences to participate. Thus, little by little, there are authors who begin to investigate the quality of those contents (Gunter, Campbell, Touri & Gibson, 2009; Chung, 2009; Muthukumaraswamy, 2010; Ruiz, Massip, Micó, Díaz Noci & Domingo, 2010; Robinson, 2010; Berger & Milkman, 2010; Costera, 2012) and the implications of the participation from an ethical perspective (Singer & Ashman, 2009). Now, it seems necessary to delve more into the quality of the content provided by users to better understand what the journalism of the future will be like (García de Torres, 2010).

After more than ten years since the first studies about interactivity in media appeared, we observe, therefore, an uneven journey and significant deficiencies in some aspects. It opens, undoubtedly interesting lines of research for the future.

CONCLUSIONS

For 2021, the citizens will produce collaboratively 50% percent of the news (Bowman & Willis, 2003). There is no doubt that the audience increasingly has a greater role and a greater presence in the communication process. It has managed to enter the world of information (Puente & Grassau, 2011). It does not comply with the traditional way used to inform; it is not limited to receiving information that others

produce. Instead, it reclaims opening a space where it can narrate, bring new perspectives and points of view about what it thinks is news. And some media have begun to reserve these spaces to display content produced by their audiences. They even facilitate them instruments to do so, while they encourage users to generate content, governed by the ethical demands of traditional journalism (Ure & Parselis, 2010).

The audience wants to participate with the content, it does not resign to mere contemplation, which blurs more and more the separation between information professionals and users. The audience seeks powers hitherto exclusively in the hands of professionals.

From the literature review we observe that, despite the relative youth of the research on participatory journalism and the analysis of the tools that enable the participation of the audience, user-generated contents have acquired production levels outstanding and of high quality.

From the analysis, there are two issues that underlie clearly. On the one hand, the idea that the communicative process is now horizontal, away from the unidirectional and hierarchical model of the conventional media. And on the other hand, that in this new model of journalism, the talks occur so that everyone can hear them. Anyone can have something to communicate and their effort should be aimed to communicate it to others. Many approaches warn that the Internet allows that audiences see increased their capacity for participation, which entails an increase in their capacity to intervene in the communicative process.

At the same time, several investigations have assumed the challenge of describing the most important characteristics of this new trend. Some of the new features of this new form of journalism refer to the decentralization of the news process, the emergence of new journalistic genres or the emergence of new communication practices through which participatory journalism is taking form.

Many are also the advantages that participatory journalism entails and that different authors are responsible for listing. But there are also many unknowns that arise in relation to the nature of participatory journalism, the quality of the information generated by the audiences and even the identity of the professionals faced with this new situation, which opens, undoubtedly, interesting lines of future research on the study of participatory journalism, still in the consolidation phase.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Koldobika Meso Ayerdi holds a Ph.D. in information Sciences from the Universidad del País Vasco. He also is Professor of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Communication at the same University, where he teaches the subjects of Online Journalism Writing and Introduction to Journalism on the Internet. His field of research is online journalism, since he began to publish articles and chapters of books on the subject. He has also participated in numerous research projects focusing on online journalism and is currently investigating the participation of audiences in online media. He has taken part in various conferences, both national and international, and has taught in summer courses and postgraduate courses.

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