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From Participatory Culture to Participatory Fatigue: The Problem With the Public

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Abstract

The Web has changed newsworld dramatically. After the turn of the Millennium, the Web 2.0 was welcomed as a unique medium of participation, interaction, and democratization. Due to the increased interactivity of many websites, and the growing prominence of social networking sites such as Facebook that invited the creation and publication of user contributions, many journalism scholars promulgated the potentials of the Web to trigger participation, a new interactivity and, eventually, more transparency, accountability, and responsiveness. In this article, I show how I was equally full of hope that the participatory potential of the Web would become widespread among news organizations. However, recent findings show that most established newsrooms still do not practice what they preach. Even more so, many newsrooms show a participation fatigue, closing user comment sections due to participation inequality or challenging phenomena such as trolls, incivility, or hate-speech. Hence, I do not believe that the majority of legacy news media will further implement accountability practices and strengthen their responsiveness toward their publics. But I still have hope, and this hope comes from entrepreneurial journalism.

Keywords

journalism, media accountability, participatory culture, responsiveness, transparency

One thing is clear: The Web has changed newsworld dramatically. Before the Web and until the end of the 1990s, journalism was essentially a one-way communication with the public playing the role of a passive receiver of news stories. Still the powerful gatekeepers, journalists adopted an ethical stance that looked very much like “trust me, I’m a journalist.” This often resulted in a clear tension between the emerging participatory tools and the established norms and routines in the journalistic profession.

Especially after the turn of the Millennium, the Web 2.0 was welcomed as a unique medium of participation, interaction, and democratization. Due to the increased interactivity of many websites, and the growing prominence of social networking sites such as Facebook that invited the creation and publication of user contributions, many journalism and media scholars promulgated the potentials of the Web to trigger participation in the creation, publication, and the dissemination of media content. Henry Jenkins, one of the most renowned scholars with regard to the concept of participatory culture and central to its uptake within the scientific community, as well as in popular discourses, defines this phenomenon at the time as one that “is emerging as the

culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2006, p. 8). Participatory culture, in this sense, allows consumers, enabled by the Web, to “take media in their own hands, reworking its content to serve their personal and collective interests” (Jenkins, 2008).

Scholarly reflection on participatory culture developed hand in hand with the vanishing distinction between users and producers. Jenkins (2006) himself argued that, in the context of convergence culture, the traditional distinction between producers and consumers would be blurred. Shortly thereafter, Bruns (2008) proposed his concept of producer: A consumer now turned into a producer. These reflections were not limited to media—or fans—in general, but were applied

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to news media and journalism as well. Bowman and Willis' (2003) notion of participatory journalism, where citizens are "playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" sets the stage for further considerations around the participation of the audience in journalism (p. 9). These reflections were followed by Gillmor's (2006) concept of grassroots journalism "by the people, for the people," and later on by Jarvis' (2006) idea of network journalism. They all emphasized a more collaborative, conversational, and bottom-up vision of journalism. Rosen (2006) subsumed these concepts under the well-known saying of "the people formerly known as the audience." Without a doubt, the Web has changed the role of journalists in terms of news production, as they have to deal with contributions coming from users (Singer et al., 2011). However, journalists still had to come to terms with the increased participatory potential that the Internet has offered the public (Deuze & Marjoribanks, 2009).

These reflections about a journalism that embraces a new interactivity and participation (Bardoel & Deuze, 2001) was supposed to result in an increased diversity (Benkler, 2006) and was expected to lead, eventually, to more transparency, accountability, and responsiveness as well. As journalists can now link to sources and experts, allowing users to access original material and raw data, the "mystery surrounding the occupation and its knowledge base should diminish" (Lowrey & Anderson, 2005), making it easier for the public to hold the news media accountable for the quality of their performances. In addition, this open and participatory media environment was also seen as an opportunity for professional journalists to strengthen their professional norms: As Jane Singer wrote back in 2007, "as traditional distinctions between professional and popular communicators become less clear [. . .], 'professional' journalists will not be distinguished by the products they produce nor the processes through which they do so." If journalists want to be perceived as being different from bloggers, they have to strengthen, enact, and live up to the standards they will be held accountable for. But still, no groundbreaking changes in the news industry.

With these expectations in mind, more than 10 years ago, I started to work on my doctoral dissertation. Still a PhD student, I was invited to collaborate on a huge comparative research project financed by the European Commission called MediaACT—"Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe." The project analyzed both established (press councils, codes of ethics) and innovative (media blogs, criticism on social media) media accountability practices in several European and two Arab countries. Our main goal was to investigate, within a specifically normative framework, the quality and the impact of accountability practices in many different journalism cultures since we viewed them as prerequisites for pluralistic debates about media independence.¹

Bearing in mind the many opportunities that the Web offers in terms of transparency and responsiveness, I was full

of hope that participatory practices of media accountability in digital media surroundings would convince professional journalists and media executives of legacy news media to adopt a more open, accountable, transparent, and responsive stance. I was convinced that instruments such as user comments, error buttons, editorial blogs, or crowdsourcing would become widespread among news organizations. Even more so, as we produced online training tools and specific workshops for media managers on how to enhance media accountability. In addition, I also thought that the 2011 News of the World phone hacking scandal would convince news media to invest in media accountability, particularly as the subsequent Leveson Inquiry triggered "a dialogue on the culture, practices, and ethics of the British press and, by extension, the roles and responsibilities it is expected to bear" (Thomas & Finneman, 2014, p. 172). Even in the British press, where journalists have demonstrated an incredible rigidity in relation to discussing issues of accountability, questions of responsibility, transparency, and how journalists can be held to account were now being discussed and brought into the public sphere. This controversy in particular further convinced me of the necessity of such practices. My belief grew even stronger as social media such as Facebook and Twitter allowed for much closer interactive relationships between journalists and audiences.

However, the findings of the project were clear: Although journalists often attribute a lot of value to aspects such as transparency, ethics, and audience interaction, there is a considerable discrepancy between the practitioners' assessment of these norms and the practices that are actually implemented in the newsrooms to endorse these principles. In other words, "newsrooms do not seem to practice what they preach in terms of transparency and audience interaction" (Groenhart & Evers, 2014, p. 120; see also Fengler, Eberwein, Mazzoleni, Russ-Mohl, & Porlezza, 2014). This is in line with findings from other studies showing that newsrooms tend to implement practices and instruments that do not challenge journalists' norms and authority, preserving their gatekeeping role (Karlsson, 2011). This lack of interest in a collaborative news production that goes beyond the collection of newsworthy bits and pieces offered by the audience, together with the lack of attention toward issues of responsiveness was disheartening. In the meantime, many newsrooms have even decided to further limit the possibilities of holding the media to account by shutting down user comments or closing newsroom blogs due to participation inequality or challenging phenomena such as trolls, incivility, or hate-speech. Therefore, many newsrooms show a participatory *fatigue* rather than a participatory culture.

However, it is not just the journalists to blame, it is also about the users' reluctance to take advantage of the opportunities to hold the journalists to account. A considerable amount of scholarly attention has been devoted to manifestations of participation, and journalism studies make no

exception. However, as Barnes (2016) correctly writes, we have to take into account a *silent majority*, which is not involved in participatory activities. Pro-active and creative users are (still) a minority, which is why we have to be aware of participatory inequalities. Grounded on the findings of our research project, which are consistent with the results of other studies, I do not believe that the majority of legacy news media will further implement accountability practices and strengthen the responsiveness toward their publics in the near future. In addition, the fact that we only found a weak “public service media effect” in our MediaACT-study demonstrates that the resistance pervades different groups of journalists.

Nevertheless, I would like to end on a positive note. I still have hope, not so much with regard to legacy news media, but with regard to journalism start-ups such as, for instance, *De Correspondent* in the Netherlands. *De Correspondent* was launched in 2013 with a crowdfunding campaign that generated more than €1 million in just 8 days from more than 19,000 backers: Such entrepreneurial news outlets are strongly grounded on audience communities (Malmelin & Villi, 2016), and these community members are often “closely involved and often become reporters too” (Ruotsalainen & Villi, 2018, p. 85). The goal of the digital and ad-free news website was to abandon the breaking news cycle and to focus more strongly on in-depth reporting about specific topics such as technology, privacy, or surveillance. *De Correspondent*’s founding editor summarized their journalistic role conception as “unbreaking news” (Wijnberg, 2018), which entails not only a challenge to traditional journalistic norms such as objectivity but also the inclusion of their readers as active contributors and a “potential source of expertise.” In addition, the founders declared that both transparency and accountability were among the key features of the news platform—and they use it to differentiate themselves from established news outlets (Porlezza & Splendore, 2016). *De Correspondent* publishes therefore detailed financial and editorial reports where they explain the distribution of expenses and revenues between journalistic productions and other activities such as marketing or book publishing, but also how they understand journalism. The success of the Dutch start-up inspired similar projects such as *Krautreporter* in Germany, or the recently launched *Republik* in Switzerland, which were all launched through crowdfunding campaigns. Similar to *De Correspondent*, they all rely on their respective communities and on being as transparent as possible about their editorial and financial activities.

To conclude, the innovative approach of new actors and online news start-ups—pioneers in the field (Loosen & Hepp, 2019)—to different practices and principles such as accountability and participation underlines the issues of legacy news media regarding a cultural change in line with the current transformations in the media landscape. Even if some of the journalists working in start-ups still adhere to

traditional professional norms and practices (Wagemans, Witschge, & Deuze, 2016), my hope is that these innovative news start-ups and their reporters, who are eager to adopt new, open, inclusive, and reciprocal approaches regarding the relation between journalists and audiences, might as well help to rethink journalism.

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Note

1. For further information see <http://www.mediaact.eu/project.html>

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