Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes

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Impediments to Participation: UGC and Professional Culture

Tobias Olsson & Dino Viscovi

1. A PARTICIPATORY MEDIA WORLD?

Over the past five years, two specific notions have been re-occurring in researchers' efforts to capture the essence of the contemporary, digitalized media world. In 2005 the notion of *"web 2.0"* (O'Reilly, 2005) entered the academic vocabulary, and since then it has managed to retain a firm foothold within research discourses. The concept points towards the basic idea that internet development in the early 21st century has improved technology to the point at which it is becoming increasingly interactive and more user-friendly. A few years later, notably by the time Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook started to grow into a worldwide platform for everyday use, the wry concept of 'social media' became part of both research and popular debates (Russo et al., 2009; Fuchs et al., 2011). This conceptualization points, above all, to the improved web's growing ability to enable various forms of social networking between users.

The two conceptualizations – 'web 2.0' and 'social media' – are obviously related to one another, as both of them try to encapsulate recent web transformations. The former is more concerned with its technological developments (from web 1.0 to 2.0), whereas the latter pays greater interest to the social and cultural outcomes of users' appropriation of the new, improved web (as it becomes more 'social'). What the two conceptualizations share, however, is an overarching interest in the fact that the updated web is also interactive and – in connection with this – offers more opportunities for various forms of user 'participation'.

What appear to be new, participatory opportunities for users – offered by web 2.0 or social media – have attracted a great deal of research attention. It is, for instance, famously a fundamental part of Henry Jenkins' notion of "*convergence culture*" (2006), in which he identifies a new, mutual rela-

tionship between producers and users as a consequence of these technologically driven, participatory opportunities. In this context, Jenkins also draws on and develops a complementary concept, "*participatory culture*", which stresses the need to understand that cultures emerging around digital technologies are cultures in which all users – at various times and to varying degrees – become both users and producers (see also Bruns, 2008).

Jenkins' view of the cultural changes that follow from the increasingly interactive web has inspired a great deal of research (cf. Dena, 2008; Burgess and Green, 2009; Beer, 2009; Langlois, 2012). But this has by no means been the only frame of reference for analyses focusing on the participatory potential of 'web 2.0', or 'social media'. Another path into such analyses has instead followed the trajectory established by research on media and citizenship (cf. Dahlgren, 2009), and above all the specific sub-field concerned with civic participation (Olsson and Dahlgren, 2010; Kaun, 2012; Banaji and Buckingham, 2012). In this context, the internet per se, as well as its later developments, has been interpreted as an offer of new opportunities for users to engage with and participate in both politics (however it may be defined) and civil society. These analyses have typically been preoccupied with ascertaining how and to what extent various versions of the web (1.0 or 2.0) function as resources for engagement and participation. The objects of study have varied, from studies of the internet as a resource for people who are already engaged (Olsson, 2008; Askanius, 2012) to analyses of how the internet might inspire participation among disengaged users. A particularly interesting strand in these analyses has also been concerned with analysing how the very application of interactive media might contribute to redefine the very notions of engagement and participation (Bakardjieva, 2010; Carpentier, 2011).

2. PARTICIPATORY MEDIA AND THE ESTABLISHED MEDIA BUSINESS

Drawing on one of these research paths – or sometimes various variations between the two – a growing volume of analytical effort has been targeted at ascertaining what these participatory opportunities might mean to the world of established media (newspapers, television, radio). To start with, within the media business the evolution of the internet into its web 2.0 version, or a platform for social media, has very often been worrying. What will the development of the participatory web do to our incomes? Will advertisers keep paying us for visibility, and are users still interested in paying for the content we have on offer? For instance, within the Swedish newspaper business, and wider Swedish journalism, the question of

"Who wants to pay for quality journalism?" has recently been a recurring theme. This debate has also been accompanied by journalists being made redundant by major media companies as those companies run into economic problems. The economic problems are related to the fact that the business model of established media companies has not been very well adapted to the emerging media environment.

Economic challenges aside, the participatory media environment also offers new opportunities to established media institutions. In many ways, of course, it is a challenge, but also an opportunity, for established media companies nowadays to have access to a bundle of different publishing channels. For instance, established TV companies can work with drama productions that combine traditional broadcasting with participatory features on the web and mobile phone platforms (Rydin and Sjöberg, 2013), and, via internet publishing, newspapers today are better able than they used to be to keep up with broadcast media in terms of publishing speed.

A particularly salient strand of analyses regarding new participatory opportunities within established media institutions has been concerned with the opportunities for users to become involved in content production. Such opportunities have most often been discussed under the umbrella term 'user-generated content' (UGC): more specifically, mobile phone photographs, video clips, blogs – and comment on news articles.

For nearly a decade now, media users have had the opportunity to comment on news articles on the Internet. This has also – naturally – become a practice that has attracted researchers' interest. Annika Bergström (2008), for instance, has looked into attitudes to these comments, and she has also analysed how many people (and who) are actually willing to contribute in these contexts, and Henrik Örnebring (2008), among others, has examined the content of comments. But what has especially caught the attention of researchers is how media organisations and journalists relate to UGC and readers' comments (Domingo, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2007, 2008; Nygren, 2008a; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Witschge, 2012).

3. Professional appropriation of participating users

The extent to which media companies, in this case newspapers, can actually make use of and manage to include UGC in their everyday production is not only a matter of stimulating users to make an actual contribution. One additional challenge is an internal one, namely to make the media or-

ganisation learn how to deal with content-producing users, and research suggests this task is anything but straightforward.

In the context of a cultural view of the journalistic profession, the ways in which journalists – as professionals – make sense of and deal with UGC is becoming a matter of active 'appropriation' (cf. Silverstone, 1994; Berker et al., 2008). From this analytical point of departure, content offered to media organisations by participating users becomes subject to 'negotiations' involving values, norms and practices of professional culture. Among other things, this means that the way that UGC is dealt with, as well as the role it is allowed to play within newspapers, relies heavily on what role journalists (with their norms, standards and established practices) allow it to play.

Studies of journalists' professional culture, or ideology, usually identify values like independence, impartiality, factuality and accuracy as essential (Deuze, 2005). Despite major changes in news organisations and journalism, journalists still hold on to them. The audience is mainly perceived as a group of 'citizens', and the primary mission of journalism is to provide the audience with correct and unbiased information – so that the citizens can take a stand on issues of common concern (Nygren, 2008b).

In this light, readers' comments should be a desirable contribution to journalism, and, as a matter of fact, journalists see possibilities in UGC, both democratic and commercial, but, in practice, however, users' contributions are scarcely appreciated by news journalists (cf Nygren, 2008b; Gustafsson and Viscovi, 2013; Witschge, 2012). The comments are considered to have low news values; fact-checking and ethics are poor. Journalists also think that the language within them is bad, in terms of spelling and style. They also claim that xenophobic and racist attitudes are very common (Domingo 2008; Hermida and Thurman 2007, 2008; Gustafsson and Viscovi, 2013; Nygren, 2008a; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Thurman, 2008; Witschge, 2012).

These latter studies are mainly oriented towards qualitative methods, but in this chapter this knowledge will be complemented by some data from a recent survey among Swedish professional journalists. Drawing on insights offered by a cultural view of the journalistic profession, these data look into the core dimensions of journalistic values and opinions in order to make sense of the ways in which journalists appropriate UGC. These dimensions centrally include: attitudes to various tasks, prefer-

ences regarding working tasks and their view of UGC.

The data presented are derived from a digital survey conducted in the spring of 2012 (the J-Survey 2012). The survey was answered by 601 Swedish news journalists, working in online publishing for newspapers, radio and television. The response rate was 41 percent, which is not entirely satisfactory, but the data are consistent with previous Swedish journalist surveys (Asp, 2007) when compared with variables such as age, gender, education and media organisation, which means that we believe that the sample can be considered to be representative.

4. Journalistic values and opinions: data and analysis

In order to grasp and comprehend the view of UGC within the journalistic profession, it is of vital importance to look into the ways in which the professional culture values various work tasks. In a recent, qualitative study of a Swedish local newspaper, Gustafsson and Viscovi (2013) show that journalists – like most professionals – are seeking labour- and knowledge-intensive tasks, where large parts of the professional toolbox can be used. In other words, this means that journalists generally prefer longer rather than shorter jobs, extensive rather than limited texts. They also prefer free and creative tasks to controlled and routine tasks. It may be important to stress that journalists rarely have idealised beliefs about their profession. They are well aware of the industrial nature of journalism, but, within its frames, they strive for labour- and knowledge-intensive tasks. Thus, the survey initially asked questions about freedom and creativity at work (Table 1).

Table 1: Attitudes to work. Proportion of respondents that "agree" or "strongly agree"

In my work it is important to be able to ...	**% of respondents**	**N of people who responded to the question**
… be creative	98	600
… implement my own ideas	96	589
… vary my subjects	87	592
… do longer jobs	70	593
… work outside the newsroom	63	590

Practically everyone finds it important to be able to be creative at work and to have opportunities to put ideas into practice. Being able to vary the topics is also considered to be of importance. A substantial majority, but not all, 70 percent, prefer to work with temporally extended projects. And finally, nearly two-thirds appreciate the opportunity to work outside the newsroom itself. Overall, the results can be interpreted as an indication of the fact that journalists strive for a work situation that allows some individual freedom and initiative; time and space factors are also important, but not as important in comparison.

Questions about the type of tasks that are considered to be more or less stimulating produce a similar pattern (Table 2). It is evident that, in professional terms, more demanding and creative tasks, like news stories and investigative jobs, are highly valued and desirable, while routine work is considered less stimulating – this includes even web editing, although editing can be regarded as both qualified and important work.

As expected, making phone calls, editing readers' comments, rewriting and editing press releases end up at the very bottom of the table. The results are hardly surprising, but must not be viewed only as a matter of routine or non-routine work. The results can also be interpreted with reference to status. Gustafsson and Viscovi (2013), drawing on Abbott's analyses of intra-professional status (Abbott, 1981), suggest that, like other professions, journalism is characterised by the quest for status and professional purity.

Table 2: Hierarchy of work tasks. Proportion of respondents that find the work task "stimulating" or "very stimulating"

Rate the work tasks below according to your personal preferences	**%**	**N of people who responded to the question**
News stories	94	588
News articles/reports	86	589
Investigative jobs	77	586
Portraits	77	591
Web editing	24	582
Telephone beat (e.g. the police)	15	590
Editing readers' comments	10	585
Rewriting published news	6	590
Editing press releases	3	584

Abbott (1981) offers examples from the field of justice. Engaging in corporate law usually has higher intra-professional status than dealing with divorces, not only because the former tends to pay better, but also because, in Mary Douglas's sense of the concept (Douglas, 1966), it is considered a "*purer*" law. Corporate law is not mixed up or contaminated with quarrels and emotional outbursts, in other words, real people of flesh and blood. In a similar way, say Gustafsson and Viscovi (2013), in journalism, working with original ideas and detailed investigations is considered to be cleaner than editing press releases. Press releases are initiatives from the sources, and in that respect biased *per se* and therefore impure. Press releases are not homologous to values like independence and impartiality. Even though the editing process can be regarded as a way of 'washing' the texts, it is never as pure as muck-raking.

It is in this context that we must also place readers' comments and understand the conditions for audience participation. For journalists, readers' comments simply mean more routine work, a work which, furthermore, is ascribed low status (Table 3). However, the opinions about readers' comments are not entirely negative. Some 44 percent believe that they often or quite often enrich public debate. Nearly a third think that comments can correct errors, and thus contribute to a more authoritative journalism. A fifth report that comments could help with new facts, and 15 percent say that readers' comments give rise to new ideas.

Table 3: Opinions about readers' comments. Proportion of respondents who believe the feature occurs "often" or "quite often"

The opportunity for the audience to comment on news articles is now available in most online journals. What are your experiences of these comments?	**%**	**N of people who responded to the question**
Characterised by linguistic errors	96	589
Questionable ethics	76	588
Express extreme views	76	588
Are part of political campaigns	70	585
Enrich public debate	44	587
Correct errors (in journalism)	29	587
Have an objective tone	23	588
Add new facts	21	588
Provide new ideas	15	585

Comments are at least partly perceived as something positive, but that does not overshadow the fact that they are generally attributed negative characteristics. The comments are considered to contain linguistic errors, have questionable ethical standards, often express extreme views, are part of political campaigns and are partial. In other words, the qualities of readers' comments are more or less the opposite of journalists' ideas about their own profession and its core values –independence, impartiality, factuality and accuracy. Readers' comments become, in essence, a symbolic inversion of journalists' view of their own professional work.

5. DISCUSSION

Thought of in strictly technological terms, it is obvious that the participatory potential of the Swedish web is very high. Sweden has a well-developed infrastructure for high-speed internet connections, almost nationwide. Further, the level of access to high-speed internet connections is among the highest in the world. As a consequence, Sweden is quite often ranked very high – sometimes as high as number one – in various worldwide internet comparisons, most recently in the World Wide Web Foundations' Webindex (2012).

The pre-requisites are also at least fairly good when it comes to people's overall interest in participation. Of course, as in the rest of the world, in their everyday lives most Swedes only to a very limited extent pay attention to and ponder online news participation (Bergström, 2008). Still, at least among young, educated people, there is a certain interest in various forms of participatory online news practices, such as commenting on articles. Even though it would be false to suggest that extant research reports a huge interest in such participatory practices – it does not – the interest appears to be at least large enough to be taken seriously by established news organisations.

Thus, the prerequisites are good and promising. The news organisations have made it technologically possible to participate. The audience has the technology as well as the skills to use it. And a significant proportion use the opportunity not only to partake of the public sphere, but also to play an active part. In principle, this development is welcomed by journalists; it fits well with the profession's ambitions to support and vitalize democracy.

Nevertheless, there are impediments to participation. In Sweden there

has been an extensive debate about readers' comments, in which the expression "web hatred" has figured prominently; news organisations have been very unhappy with the "raw tone" and "extreme opinions", many have limited or completely removed the opportunity to write comments.

There are various explanations for this: structural, organisational and cultural. We have emphasised the latter. News organisations – or more specifically the journalistic professionals populating these organisations – are not particularly open to contributions from lay users. Nor do they attach very much value to such contributions to their journalistic products. The way in which journalists make sense of and interpret their own profession, including their views of the citizens they serve (and the citizens' potential content contributions – in this case comments on news articles) is not really helpful as they 'appropriate' a more participatory media world. The data presented in this chapter, as well as in similar studies, make this very obvious. From the point of view of the journalistic profession, traditional divisions of labour also very much remain within the era of web 2.0 and social media; we create, and you all read-listen-watch.

Thus, if user participation is to be considered to be a real, important value to contemporary news media – which at least rhetorically it tends to be – then the professional journalistic culture must change. Drawing on the data presented in this chapter, such a change must include a re-evaluation of journalistic practices – what are the valuable tasks on which journalists should be spending their time? It must also, necessarily, involve a 're-negotiation' of the professional view of journalists' relationships with users. At this point in time, however, the journalistic culture still does not seem to be doing too much to help fertilise the soil of participatory media offered by web 2.0 and so-called social media.

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