Overcoming the Normative Frustrations of Audience Participation Research
Introduction

Laura Calabrese

Professor
Université libre de Bruxelles
ReSIC
Laura.Calabrese@ulb.ac.be

David Domingo

Professor
Université libre de Bruxelles
LaPIJ
David.Domingo@ulb.ac.be

Fabio Pereira

Professor
Universidade de Brasília
fabiop@gmail.com

esearch on online media audiences has multiplied rapidly in the last decade. Borger et al. (2013) traced the first studies focusing on audience participation back to the 1990s, and detected a boom of research on the topic after 2008. In a qualitative study of articles published in the seven most relevant Brazilian communications journals from 2005 to 2011, Sousa and Castro (2013) found that 90% of the articles that had digital journalism as the main subject addressed the question of audiences, 27% of which referred specifically to the public and the news media. The reason for this interest might be the normative conviction that "*participatory journalism potentially offers new democratic opportunities*" (Borger et al., 2013: 125). This pervasive normative discourse suffused academic and professional environments that welcomed the "*digital activism*" (Sundet and Ytreverg, 2009) of audiences and the need for news media to adapt to this "*age of participation*" (*The Economist*, 2006). But the "*moral enthusiasm*" (Borger et al., 2013: 130) mostly met with disappointment as empirical studies showed that newsrooms adopted an attitude of control over participation strategies and that only a minority of the audience was actually interested in contributing. Wall concedes that participatory journalism in liberal democracies has often been commodified, but points out that findings from countries

with authoritarian regimes suggest that *"dismissing the 'citizen' from ordinary peoples' content production is an act of pessimism"* (2015: 12) that scholars should not accept.

This special issue gathers research that explores, from a diversity of perspectives, the relationship between those who produce news items and those who consume them. The contributions try to overcome the frustrations that usually derive from the normative expectations of our field regarding audience participation. Most of the papers stem from a conference[1] organized by the *Université libre de Bruxelles* (ULB) in December 2014. Authors propose theoretical and methodological approaches that emphasize change in both newsrooms and audiences, leading to a constructive understanding of the significance of participation in journalism. We propose to structure these analyses around two main questions – the two sides of the same coin: 1) How does participatory journalism transform media discourse and the way it is produced? And 2) How does participatory journalism transform audiences?

The Transformation of Journalism

The first question dates back to the beginning of academic research on digital journalism. Scholars first observed the transformation of the newsrooms (Paterson and Domingo, 2008; Frazão and Brasil, 2013). An interest in how new digital technologies redefined the relationship with the audience soon became central (Canavilhas and Moraes, 2013), evolving into three main areas of research: interactivity practices, journalistic identity and the nature of audience contributions.

Does Interaction between News Producers and Audiences Really Exist?

At first, technoptimists were confident that audiences would be able to bend gatekeeping practices as new technical devices allowed readers to be in touch with news producers (Matheson 2004). Gradually, it became clear that the impact the digital environment had on the relations between journalists and their publics was moderate at best, and that the presence of journalists on social media tended to replicate the unidirectional production model of mass media, as the study of **Pérez-Soler and Micó** suggests. Most studies point out that public participation in news production found some resistance among news producers (Aubert, 2009; Robinson, 2010; Singer et al., 2011). Even when audiences were asked to participate, they had to adapt their content to journalistic conventions (Moraes, 2014; Pereira and Freitas, 2012; Castro, 2011). From the newsroom standpoint, the public does not share the same commitment to the truth or to public interest as professional journalists do.

Of course, the relationship between news producers and their public is not exclusive to digital media, as highlighted by **Bousquet, Smyrnaios and Marty** in their paper about the local media in Toulouse and Marseille, France. Historically, local newspapers were based on geographical proximity with regard to their audiences. The arrival of local online native news websites – also based on sociological proximity – provoked minor changes in that relationship. New media actors seek, at different levels, to create local debates, animate public spaces and create mixed models to improve their interaction with local communities.

On the other hand, digital journalism has had an impact in promoting horizontal interaction among readers (as shown in Paskin, 2010), as the comments sections of online newspapers, and their Facebook or Twitter modules, have become a sort of readers' forum and an exceptional observatory of social discourses (Palácios, 2012). It might then be convincingly argued that while journalists remain imaginary figures for most readers, audiences have become more tangible through their contributions. But this may be evolving as well: while news producers hardly intervene in the comment boards of online newspapers, some do increasingly react to audience questions on social media, public chats and live blogs during the live coverage of events, as demonstrated in **Cheynel and Sebbah**'s article.

How Readers' Participation Crafted a New Journalistic Identity

Nevertheless, readers' participation (along with other changes caused by the move from analog to digital journalism) has started changing the way journalists' view themselves and their work, or at least the way they talk about it. If we look closely at the metadiscourse produced in the last years, evidence indicates a shift in news producers' identity, as suggested by the responses of journalists of Burkina Fasso in **Marie-Soleil Frère**'s contribution: among other reflections, they acknowledge the scrutiny of the audience through news comments. In a way, even though they are reluctant to interact with their readers, the empowerment of audiences has obliged them to produce a discourse about audiences, whether it is in the ombudsman column (*médiateur* in the French field), in blogs embedded in the newspaper or in live chat sessions. Two quotes from different editors of the French newspaper *Le Figaro* illustrate the shift. If in 2010 an editor would say:

"It's true that for now on Figaro.fr, we don't exploit comments enough (….) But then again, there's 180 years of tradition at Le Figaro. The seriousness of the newspaper shouldn't be hindered by unbridled comments" (Reich, 2011: 103).

In 2013, *Le Figaro*'s social media editor stated that:

"Some things that are forbidden in other site can be said in ours. We are open to lively debates, we acknowledge the worth of angry comments"[2].

This evolution in news producers' discourse reveals to what extent audience participation has lead the former to change their attitude towards the latter. Craft, Vos & Wolfgang (2015), in an analysis of ombudsmen blogs, underline that *"the very fact that […] The New York Times would ask for readers' collaboration in clarifying the roles and tasks of journalists would likely have never happened in an earlier age, when journalistic autonomy meant journalists rarely listened to audience input"* (2015: 2).

As **Christin** points out, audiences are now part of the cognitive landscape of news producers, who have become click-dependent and fully aware of the potential of social networks, especially Twitter, as well as of the tyranny of the crowd. In her article, she addresses the issue of web metrics in online newsrooms (see also Jouët, 2004; Anderson, 2011; Demers, 2012; Sire, 2013). This *"quantified audience"* is now reachable thanks to analytics software that provides data about users' behaviour (number of visits, likes on Facebook, retweets, comments; see Ouakrat, 2012).

It is then clear that readers' participation in online media has become a substantial part of the information ecosystem, whether it is seen as an asset or a necessary evil, as *Le Monde*'s social media editor puts it in a post entitled "On the (Sometimes Annoying) Usefulness of Users' Comments": *"The constant background noise of readers' comments in social networks calls into question our work methods, forcing us to rethink all the time the way we analyze and present current events to our readers"*[3].

Audience Participation or Digital Labour?

Public participation raises another important issue; that of easily available user generated content (UGC) as newsworthy material. Journalists use readers' input in very different ways to produce media discourse and add value to their stories. Of course, UGC is not ready-made, it is checked before being broadcasted or published as testimony. In broadcast media, it is used when information is scarce (conflict, war), or as a stopgap before news agency material arrives (Wardle, Dubberley, Brown, 2014: 33).

The concept of digital labour underlies these trends and can be seen as *"the activation of our behaviour on the social web as monetizable labor"* (Scholtz ed., 2013). Within the framework of citizen journalism, enthusiastically welcomed by many scholars, UGC is rarely seen as unwaged labour, mostly because audience participation is a celebrated feature of social media, even though research on citizen photojournalism websites shows how the most consistent contributors serve as underpaid freelancers for the news media industry (Aubert and Nicey, 2015).

In this context, another problem raised by audience participation is that of intellectual property. **Javier Díaz Noci** analyzes the challenges that legal frameworks in different countries pose with respect to the authorship of citizen contributions. Despite legal liabilities and the imperative of fact checking, the exploitation of UGC seems to be here to stay, especially since there is no evidence that unpaid content by citizen journalists will replace professional reporting (Compton & Benedetti, 2010).

The Transformation of Audiences

This topic has been addressed from very different perspectives by a great number of scholars, especially since the creation of discussion forums in online newspapers. According to Tenenboim & Cohen (2013), there are three main sets of research. The first tackles the issue using the concept of participatory journalism. Another trend focuses on the evolution and uses of sociotechnical devices, while a third group uses the comment board as a platform to observe social discourse. The contributions to this special issue cut across these themes, focusing on new discursive practices by audiences and the new social roles stemming from them.

New Reading and Writing Practices

Research shows that though the audience visibility has not provoked a genuine shift in communication protocols between audiences and news producers, it has caused a significant shift in reading and writing practices, opening up the possibility of creating and finding other voices more akin to one's own, as is the case with tourists and travel blogs analyzed by **Bryan Pirolli**. In online newspapers' comment spaces, the possibility to participate opens new ways

to recreate the public sphere: if daily conversation can be considered as an ancestor of the comment as a discursive genre, the written word transforms the characteristics of the interaction, as readers can focus on linguistic features as much as on arguments, viewpoints, or ideological stances (Calabrese, 2014).

New reading and writing practices among audiences encompass correcting, amending and completing journalists' discourses, giving one's opinion and reading what fellow commenters write. In addition, and unlike what happened in early years of online journalism (see Reich, 2011: 96), reading comments has become an important part of the reading of the news, as **Frère**'s article highlights in the case of Burkina Faso. A survey conducted in 2011 by Opinion Way for Netino, a French-based moderation company, finds that 86% of online readers were interested in reading others' comments. Moreover, 66% tend to come back to the article to see how the discussion evolves[4].

The presence of online newspapers on social networks increased this trend, and readers tend to read others' comments more than the article itself, as if they were part of the news item. Readers of *Le Monde* usually state in the comment board that user contributions are sometimes more relevant than the articles themselves. Looking back, this was not always the case, as we can see it in this quote from 2010 by an editor from *The Guardian*: "*Most people don't want to comment. And actually, most people don't want to read other people's comments*" (Reich, 2011). Recent research suggests that reading contributions posted by other audience members changes our perception of news, as "*people infer the general opinion climate from a limited sample of audience reactions*" (Lee & Jang, 2010: 828), and therefore, analyzing comments is an important element to understand news reception.

The Role of Audiences in the Online News Ecosystem

Besides the production of UGC, participatory journalism has helped develop a new perception of the audience as a powerful actor in the news sphere. Hermida (2011) locates the transformation of readers' consumption practices in their role as "*active recipients*" that can hold journalists to account for the quality of their reporting. This can also be seen on a discursive level, in the way readers address journalists as if they were part of the same enunciation scene, engaging in an imaginary dialogue that most of the time does not materialize. The study conducted by **Cajazeiras and Azevedo** on the interactions on Brazilian and Portuguese TV newscast Facebook fan pages provides an intriguing illustration of this

phenomenon. In a way, it can be said that the representation of news producers in readers' minds, but more specifically Internet users, changed visibly when they realized they could adopt the role of "vigilantes" of the informational ecosystem. As a consequence, there is a hybridization of vernacular and expert discourse, which can be seen in everyday comments in online news or in the interactions around information diffused by journalists through social networks, as pointed out by **Teixeira** in her article.

From a sociological standpoint, these changes impact public collaboration with journalistic practice. Traditionally, media and journalism set their sights on the relationship between journalists and their sources to describe a unidirectional flow of communication wherein the role of the audiences was merely to receive and interact with the content. This situation changes within what Ruellan (2006) calls the *generalized interaction* model in which the public often assumes the role of an information source in a reversal of the flow of communication: i.e., from public to journalist. The very need for journalists as intermediaries may be brought into question with a *demediatized* relationship where information circulates from public/source to other segments of the public.

* * *

All this evidence reveals that citizens *use* online media not only to get informed about current events (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2014). When consuming news in an online environment, audiences perform many different actions: they amend or criticize pieces, interact with other readers, build their social (digital) identity, monitor media discourse or delegitimize pundits. They also (un)wittingly leave traces of their choices that can be analyzed through web metrics (clicking, sharing, liking or retweeting news items), which are valuable for journalists to define their coverage. By doing so, the affordances of the technological devices that make this participation possible are expanded by both users and journalists – they bend their original functionalities, give them new meaning and produce innovative practices. Originally, journalists and media companies had limited goals in mind when allowing readers to participate in the digital sphere, and it was impossible to foresee the kinds of practices that were about to be developed by readers, as well as their consequences. All things considered, it appears that readers' participation (whether constructive or not) might not only have challenged journalistic routines, but might also be playing a substantial role in the way citizens perceive this particular socio-professional category. It is thus important to stress that so-

ciotechnical devices foster change not only in social practices but also, and most importantly (because it is less visible), in social representations. This is why research on audience practices will always be fruitful. As an ever-changing concept, interactivity will never cease to evolve and its study will always be relevant, whether it focuses on journalists' routines or on the ways readers consume and participate in the production of news.

NOTES

[1] International Conference "*Online Journalism and Its Publics*", Brussels, 4-6 December 2013. Program: http://publics2013.ulb.ac.be/?page_id=208

[2] http://www.lemonde.fr/actualite-medias/article/2013/11/07/racisme-sur-les-sites-d-info-aujourd-hui-les-gens-se-lachent-plus_3509545_3236.html

[3] http://rezonances.blog.lemonde.fr/2011/10/06/de-lutilite-parfois-penible-des-commentaires-dinternautes/

[4] http://socialmediaclub.fr/2011/10/mais-qui-donc-lit-les-commentaires-darticles-de-presse/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=mais-qui-donc-lit-les-commentaires-darticles-de-presse

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, C. W., 2011, "Deliberative, Agonistic, and Algorithmic Audiences: Journalism's Vision of Its Public in an Age of Audience Transparency," *International Journal of Communication,* vol. 5, pp. 529-547.

Aubert, A., 2009, "Le paradoxe du journalisme participatif", *Terrains & travaux,* nº15, pp. 171-190.

Aubert, A., Nicey, J., 2015, "Citizen Photojournalists and their Logics. The Case of Contributors to the Citizenside Agency," *Digital Journalism,* vol. 3, nº4, pp. 552-570.

Boczkowski, P. J., Mitchelstein, E., 2012, "How Users Take Advantage of Different Forms of Interactivity on Online News Sites: Clicking, E-Mailing, and Commenting," *Human Communication Research,* vol. 38, nº1, pp. 1-22.

Borger, M., Van Hoof, A., Meijer, I. C., Sanders, J., 2013, "Constructing Participatory Journalism as a Scholarly Object: A Genealogical Analysis," *Digital Journalism,* vol. 1, nº1, pp. 117-34.

Calabrese, L., 2014, "Paroles de lecteurs: un objet de recherche hybride en sciences du langage", *in* Nowakowska, A., Perea, F. (Eds.), Revue *Studii de lingvistic,* Écritures et genres numériques, pp. 13-27.

Canavilhas, J., Moraes, F. M., 2013, "Práticas participativas: estudo de caso sobre ações discursivas no Projeto Generosidade (Globo)", *Intexto,* nº29, pp. 51-70.

Castro, P. C., 2011, "Jornalismo participativo e midiatização da recepção: a domesticação dos leitores na seção 'Eu-repórter' do Globo Online", IX Encontro Nacional de Pesquisadores em Jornalismo – SBPJor, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, URL: http://sbpjor.kamotini.kinghost.net/sbpjor/admjor/arquivos/9encontro/CC_05.pdf.

Compton, J., Benedetti, P., 2010, "Labour, New Media and the Institutional Restructring of Journalism," *Journalism Studies,* The Future of Journalism, vol. 11, nº4, pp. 487-499.

Demers, F., 2012, "Le défi de la construction d'un public pour le journalisme au temps de Google Analytics", *tic & société,* vol. 6, nº1.

Frazão, S. M., Brasil, A., 2013, "Television Newscast News Production: The Transformation of the News Process and Professional Routines," *Brazilian Journalism Research,* vol. 9, nº2, pp. 110-127.

Hermida, A., 2011, "Fluid Spaces, Fluid Journalism: The Role of the 'Active Recipient' in Participatory Journalism," *in* Singer, J. et al. (Eds.), *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers,* New York, Wiley-Blackwell.

Jouët, J., 2004, "Les dispositifs de construction de l'internaute par les mesures d'audience", *Le Temps des médias,* nº3, pp. 160-174.

Lee, E., Jang, Y., 2010, "What Do Others' Reactions to News on Internet Portal Sites Tell Us? Effects of Presentation Format and Readers' Need for Cognition on Reality Perception," *Communication Research,* vol. 37, nº6, pp. 825-846.

Matheson, D., 2004, "Weblogs and the epistemology of the news," *New Media & Society,* vol. 6, nº4, pp. 443-68.

Meijer, I. C., Groot Kormelink, T., 2014, "Checking, Sharing, Clicking and Linking: Changing Patterns of News Use between 2004 and 2014," *Digital Journalism,* (ahead-of-print), pp. 1-16.

Moraes, F. M., 2014, '*Sua História' na mídia: aproximações e diferenças discursivas em tempos de convergência – O caso Projeto Generosidade da Editora Globo,* PhD dissertation, Brasília, Universidade de Brasília.

Ouakrat, A., 2012, "Le ciblage comportemental, une perte de contrôle des éditeurs sur les données de l'audience", *tic & société,* vol. 6, nº1.

Palacios, M., 2012, "Marginal Notes, Zeitgeist and Memory of the Present Time: Readers' Comments in Cyberjournalism," *Brazilian Journalism Research,* vol. 8, nº1, pp. 128-143.

Paskin, D., 2010, "Say What?" *Journal of International Communication,* vol. 16, nº2, pp. 67-83.

Paterson, C., Domingo, D., 2008, *Making Online News,* vol. 1, New York, Peter Lang.

Pereira, F. H., Freitas, A. F., 2012, "Les innovations technologiques et la reconfiguration des rapports entre journalistes et public dans le journal télévisé local: une étude de l'émission brésilienne DF-TV", *Sciences de la Société,* vol. 84-85, pp. 213-230.

Reich, Z., 2011, "User Comments. The Transformation of Participatory Space," *in* Singer et al. (Eds.), 2011, *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers,* New York, Wiley-Blackwell.

Robinson, S., 2010, "Traditionalists vs. Convergers: Textual Privilege, Boundary Work, and the Journalist-Audience Relationship in the Commenting Policies of Online News Sites," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies,* vol. 16, pp. 125-143.

Ruellan, D., 2006, "Corte e costura do jornalismo", *Líbero,* nº18, pp. 31-40.

Scholtz, T. (dir.) 2013, *Digital Labor. The Internet as Playground and Factory,* New York, Routledge.

Singer, J., Hermida, A., Domingo, D., Heinionen, A., Paulussen, S., Quandt, T., Reich, Z., Vujnovic, M. (Eds.), 2011, *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers,* New York, Wiley-Blackwell.

Sire, G., 2013, "Google et les éditeurs de presse en ligne. Une configuration négociée et négociable", *Sur le journalisme About journalism Sobre jornalismo,* vol. 2, nº1, pp. 88-101.

Sousa, J., Castro, D., 2013, "The Paths of Reception: An Analysis of the Brazilian Scientific Production," *Brazilian Journalism Research,* vol. 9, nº2, pp. 238-253.

Sundet, V. S., Ystreberg, E., 2009, "Working Notions of Active Audiences: Further Research on the Active Participant in Convergent Media Industries," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies,* vol. 15, pp. 383-390.

Tenenboim, O., Cohen, A., 2013, "What Prompts Users to Click and Comment: A Longitudinal Study of Online

News," *Journalism*, URL: http://jou.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/12/27/1464884913513996.

The Economist, 2006, "Among the Audience. A Survey of New Media," *The Economist*, April 22nd, URL: http://www.economist.com/node/6794156.

Wall, M., 2015, "Citizen Journalism: A Retrospective on What We Know, an Agenda for What We Don't," *Digital Journalism,* doi: 10.1080/21670811.2014.1002513.

Wardle, C., Dubberley, S., Brown, P., 2014, "Amateur Footage: A Global Study of User-Generated Content in TV and Online-News Output," Phase 1 Report, April 2014, Tow Center for Digital Journalism, A Tow/Knight Report, URL: http://towcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/80458_Tow-Center-Report-WEB.pdf.