

Audience Participation in the Production of Online News

Towards a Typology

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Abstract

The potential of audience participation constitutes a most important characteristic of digital journalism. This article presents an inductive study of audience participation in the production of online news in a Danish context, analysing how audiences participate, and what relationships between journalists and audiences accompany this participation. The article discusses the concept of participation, arguing on the basis of sociological theory that it should be understood as those instances where the audience influences the content of the news through their intentional actions. Applying this definition, it proposes four ideal types of audience participation in the production of online news, namely sharing of *information*, *collaboration*, *conversation* and *meta-communication*.

Keywords: Denmark, digital journalism, online news, participation

Introduction

Among journalism researchers and practitioners alike, widespread agreement exists that audience participation is one of the most important developments with digital journalism (see, e.g. Bruns 2005; Deuze 2003; Domingo 2005; Hall 2001; Kammer 2013a, c; Russell 2011; Singer et al. 2011; Steensen 2011). However, while the international research literature on this subject is extensive and highly heterogeneous, the research into the role played by audiences in the production of online news remains limited in a Danish context (see, however, Hartley 2012; Jacobsen 2010). Accordingly, knowledge about how Danish news workers actualize what Finnemann (2005) calls the “interactive potential” is still sparse.

In order to take one step towards filling this gap in Scandinavian journalism studies, this article explores how audiences participate in the production of the online news published by established news organizations in Denmark. What roles do audiences play in the production of news online, and which relationships between journalists and audiences accompany these roles? Answering these questions, the article tentatively proposes that audience participation in the production of online news falls into four different ideal types, namely sharing of *information*, *collaboration*, *conversation* and *meta-communication*.

The Concept of Participation

Audience participation in news websites comes in various shapes and forms. Just as user involvement in the use and creation of the content of interactive media can be graduated into different degrees (Sandvik 2011), Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams and Wardle (2010), focusing on the field of news and journalism, distinguish between *audience comment* and *audience content*; that is, between audience contributions based on, respectively, opinions and facts. These researchers also establish how producers and audiences alike appreciate substantial, fact-based audience participation while they discard opinionated contributions. This study focuses on ‘audience content’ (i.e. the audiences’ contributions to and participation in the very production of news) on news websites, even though it acknowledges that a dynamic interaction between news organizations, newsrooms and audiences also takes place in, for example, social media.

Even though audience participation in news production is not a new phenomenon, it is a far more prominent feature online than in traditional news media. With digital, interactive media, the flow of communication has moved beyond the classic transition model of content passing only from senders to receivers. Rather, digital media have enabled multi-directional communication flows (Finnemann 2005; Jensen 2010) where “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen 2006) have increased opportunities to more directly influence and participate in the production of media content.

The implication is that the common understanding of news as something produced by actors with a certain professional background within certain institutions and organizations has changed, as news production now also takes place beyond the news organizations. Bruns (2008) has, for example, introduced the relevant concept of the *produser*, which amalgamates ‘producer’ and ‘user’ and captures how the role of the audience now also comprises a potential element of creation.

Concurrent with this development towards audiences having more to say, the role of journalists has developed as well. A prominent way of describing these transformations is proposed by Bruns (2005) who builds upon journalism research’s classic metaphor of the gatekeeper – a central entity that on its own selects what news to advance and pass along (White 1950) – by introducing the concept of gatewatchers. Gatewatchers are a broader range of actors who “observe what material is available and interesting, and identify useful new information with a view to channeling this material into structured and up-to-date news reports” (Bruns 2005: 18). So, a most important point in Bruns’ conceptualization of gatewatching is that it is not limited to the news dissemination of the established media organizations; it also comprises the sharing of news and information that takes place on blogs and through social media. Therefore, the selection of newsworthy pieces of information to process and circulate, the argument goes, is no longer reserved for journalists, but is also managed by the audiences who might thereby also be understood as gatewatchers.

However, the audiences’ actual opportunities for assuming such a selecting and editing role is most often highly constrained when it takes place within the framework of established news websites. Here, audience participation is primarily possible in the shape of audience comments and similar interpretational categories where ordinary people react to the news that has already been produced (Domingo et al. 2008; Hermida 2011; Kammer 2013b). As news websites are, after all, edited by actors within the organizations (albeit with more or less input from the audiences), one can question to what extent

such a shift from gatekeeping to gatewatching has actually occurred within journalism. Empirical studies (Domingo et al. 2008; Hartley 2012; Hermida 2011; Kammer 2013b) suggest that this is only the case to a limited degree.

This kind of news production is linked to several different yet related concepts such as collaborative, networked and participatory journalism (see Bruns 2005; Russell 2011; Singer et al. 2011, respectively) which all share an understanding of audiences being resources or collaborators for journalists in news production. Of these three concepts, the last one seems the most appropriate in this connection as it “captures the idea of collaborative and collective – not simply parallel – action” (Singer et al. 2011: 2). Bowman and Willis (2003: 9) define participatory journalism as “The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information”.

However, there is also criticism of this approach to the concept. For example, Carpentier (2011: 14) asserts that participation is used in so many different ways that it is conceptually empty: “participation is still used to mean everything and nothing, remains structurally under-theorized and its intrinsically political nature [...] remains unacknowledged”. As numerous phenomena have been referenced with that one concept, it has lost its meaning.

Aiming at demarcating the concept of participation, thereby re-establishing its usability in an analytical context, Carpentier takes his point of departure in political theory and defines participation as the activities where actors take part in the formal process of decision-making and the exercise of power. According to Carpentier, one does *not* take part in the decision-making of news production by attending to the tasks which, for example, Bowman and Willis (2003) list. His argument is that even when audiences have the opportunity of authoring comments and contributing to the journalistic process in other ways, the publication of these inputs typically relies on approval or moderation from news workers and can be withdrawn later. For this reason, Carpentier would argue that this type of audience activity falls within his category of *interaction*; that is, it is audience activity where the audience does not have any actual power to exercise over the content in the final part of the mediated communication.

However, Carpentier’s conceptual effort entails the risk of narrowing the concept of participation to such an extent that it finds only limited analytical usability within the field of media and communication research. His delimitation of the concept draws upon ideals of participation in the political realm and centres around formal, political decision-making, whereas media production and journalistic communication have less to do with the formalized, procedural exercise of power and more to do with the production and public circulation of knowledge about current events. Here, the right to make the final decisions is not necessarily what is most important, and so Carpentier’s concept of participation appears analytically constraining. There is indeed a difference between instances where audiences can write anything on a news website and instances where news workers conduct some sort of editorial task – but to claim that the audiences are just interacting with news makers and do not take part in the news production might be taking it too far. Rather than having formal decision-making competencies as the cardinal point in relation to the concept of participation, this article makes the argument that within the field of media and communication research, action could be the focus of attention instead. The point of departure then shifts from who decides to who acts; who, concretely, *does* something in connection with news production?

A broader concept of participation – one that acknowledges Carpentier’s focus on the exercise of power while simultaneously expanding its scope – can come from Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration and a specification of its conceptualization of action. Giddens’ understanding of action makes it possible to conceptualize participation in more inclusive terms than Carpentier does.

A central aspect of the theory of structuration is the mutually influencing relationship between, on the one hand, the material and cognitive structures that constitute the setting of and enable individual action and, on the other hand, the knowledgeable, reflexive actors whose actions influence, shape and transform those structures (Giddens 1979, 1984). Within this duality of structure, power is the actors’ possibilities of agency and subsequent influence on the structures within which they act. Power, accordingly, consists of the “transformative capacity” that is embedded in agency and the influence that is thereby exercised (Giddens 1984: 15). Within Giddens’ terminology, action – that is, the instances where the transformative capacity is exercised – should not be understood as a number of separate activities, but rather as the continuous flow of action that constitutes the everyday activity of social actors: “‘Action’ or agency, as I use it, thus does not refer to a series of discrete acts combined together, but to a *continuous flow of conduct*” (Giddens 1979: 55, emphasis in original).

So, given that audience participation is considered a type of action, linking it to the Giddensian understanding of action and power broadens the concept of participation so that it is not strictly tied to instances of formal decision-making (as with Carpentier 2011), but rather encompasses all types of influence from audiences on the content of the news media.

While Carpentier can be critiqued for conceiving of participation too narrowly, Giddens’ concept of action can, on the contrary, be critiqued for being so broad that it can only be applied with difficulty in a concrete, analytical context. In order to make the conceptualization of participation outlined here analytically viable in connection with questions regarding news production, it can therefore be rewarding to distinguish between different forms of participation.

Such a useful distinction can be inspired by interactivity research. In her extensive literature review, McMillan (2002) identifies three prominent perspectives on interactivity, namely user-to-user, user-to-system and user-to-document interactivity. While the former two relate to, respectively, interaction mediated through digital media and human-computer-interaction, user-to-document interactivity focuses on the possibilities users have of influencing the very content of the mediated communication. It is through this last lens particularly that the concept of participation becomes useful in relation to the production of news.

From this perspective, audience participation in the production of news can be understood as *those actions conducted by audiences that directly and intentionally influence the content of the news websites*.¹ In practice, this understanding lies close to the definition provided by, for example, Bowman and Willis (2003) above. However, it has a more solid theoretical foundation, and it separates out forms of audience influence that should not be considered audience participation because they are not grounded in intentionality (e.g. the kinds of ‘invisible’ influence exerted through online traffic and readership metrics, cf. Anderson 2011; Hartley 2012).

Methodology

Building upon a 'subtle realist' framework (Hammersley 1992), the empirical dimension of this study consists of an inductive and explorative analysis of two of the most noteworthy examples within recent years of Danish news production with a central aspect of audience participation. The two cases have both achieved prestigious national journalism awards and can, accordingly, be considered indicative of a 'best practice' in a Danish context.

Though certainly not the only examples of Danish journalism with audience participation, they are selected because they constitute particularly interesting critical cases; that is, they are the type of information rich cases where manifestations of a phenomenon (here, audience participation) are most likely to occur and to have the highest degree of diversity (Kuzel 1999; Neergaard 2001). This specific strategy for case selection is appropriate in studies that aim at a level of analytical generalizability (even if it is tentative as in this article), since the underlying assumption is that if a certain manifestation of a phenomenon is not represented in the critical cases, it is probably because it does not exist in the first place (Flyvbjerg 2006; Halkier 2011). As such, the two cases are appropriate as a foundation for tentatively typologizing audience participation in news production for Danish news websites.

The first case is 'Forbrydelsen' ['The Crime'], which is Berlingske Tidende's combined digital and printed coverage of the consequences of the 2006-2007 structural reform of the Danish police. A pivotal point in the extensive amount of coverage and the dedicated website² was contributions from audiences about their experiences with police failings. As the basis for getting case stories and getting in contact with a wide variety of sources, the journalists responsible for the entire series of articles had initially asked the public one simple question: did the police show up when you called them? The numerous responses to this question constituted extensive raw material for the news workers, who had, this way, thought of including the audience already at the early stages of planning.

Forbrydelsen consists of an elaborate website and even more articles in the printed paper. Limiting the empirical material, however, this study analyses only that one particular part where audience participation is most prominent, namely a geographical map of Denmark with the geographical location and exact wording of each individual audience contribution plotted in. In this way, the analysis focuses only on the actual instances of audience participation, not on the entire coverage.

The second case is ekstrabladet.dk's live coverage of the demonstrations in connection with the COP15 climate summit in Copenhagen in December 2009. This coverage was a combination of streaming live-video and short, textual updates embedded in a CoveritLive feed (presented on the same webpage, enabling interplay between video and text). The comment function in the textual feed had been turned on, allowing audiences to write short messages that could enter the published feed if they were accepted by the moderator.

The COP15 summit and the coverage of the demonstrations in connection with it lasted from 7 December through to 18 December, 2009. In order to make the analysis approachable, the analysis concentrates on the live coverage on Wednesday 16 December, 2009. This was the day that demonstrators announced that they would attempt to force entry into the summit venue. Not surprisingly, this ambition resulted in violent

confrontations between police and demonstrators. This confrontation, in turn, resulted in far more audience comments than on any other day of the COP15 demonstrations.

As the COP15 case represents a far richer empirical material in relation to this study, it takes up more space than Forbrydelsen in the analysis section.

This selection of two cases that draw heavily on audience participation and constitute critical cases adds to the validity of the study as it ensures an empirical material in which a great variety of audience participation is present. Validity is, furthermore, obtained through the application of an inductive, qualitative approach to analysis which is, on the one hand, rigorous in its implementation yet, on the other hand, sensitive to what categories might appear from iterative readings of the empirical material.

The analytical approach falls within qualitative or ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1987), which, in contrast to its quantitative counterpart (e.g. Krippendorff 2004), applies less stringent categories and is more open to continuously developing its framework throughout the analytical process. So, the individual instances of audience participation in the two cases were subjected to coding. Attention was given to the function of the audience participation and to the relationship between journalists and audiences in it: what did the audiences do in their participation? How did this participation contribute to the production of news? How was the participation structured? What characterized the relation between journalists and audiences in the instances of participation, and who formally controlled the participation? This way, and in line with the paradigmatic assumptions of the different types of content analyses, the analysis focuses on latent rather than manifest properties of the communication (cf. Riffe, Lacy and Fico 2005).

In order for the empirical observations to lead to theory-building, the next stage of the analysis, inspired by the grounded-theory approach (Charmaz 1983), was to structure and coalesce the observations from the coding into a smaller number of types or categories. Here, the purpose was to research whether different types of audience participation could be identified across the empirical material. Hence, the codings were exploratively and iteratively clustered according to functions and relationships until a saturation point was reached and a number of different types of audience participation eventually crystallized. These different types represent the boiled-down types of functions of audience participation, each of which corresponds with different journalist-audience relationships.

It should be stressed that the types of audience participation, which are presented below, are ideal types; that is, they are abstractions, deducted from the empirical material, which propose types and categories in order to illustrate differences and variations (Weber 2003). For this reason, the lines of divisions between concrete instances of the different types of audience participation will often be less clear than they are presented below. After all, the real world is usually messier and more heterogeneous than the ideal types used to describe it.

Four Types of Audience Participation

Through the iterative coding, four different types of audience participation in the production of online news have emerged, namely sharing of information, collaboration, conversation and meta-communication.

Information

The first type of audience participation is most prevalent in Berlingske Tidende's Forbrydelsen where audiences responded to the journalists' call for concrete examples of police failings. Here, the audiences participate in a relatively traditional role as sources; that is, as "The people [...] that supply journalists with ideas and general information (and often quotes)" (Hamer 2005: 248).

According to both Harrison (2010) and Hermida (2011), this type of audience participation is among the ones most commonly used on news websites – probably because it simultaneously draws upon the resources of the audiences and allows the journalists to retain control over the news production. Other studies also show how this type of audience participation is particularly useful for news organizations when audiences supply journalists with images or videos from places or events where no journalists are present. For example, Allan (2006: 146-147) notes that the BBC received more than 1,000 images and 20 short videos from their audiences within the first couple of hours after the terrorist attack in London on 7 July, 2005.

This type of audience participation is often difficult for researchers as well as other audiences to identify and map, because it usually takes place behind the scenes. This is not to say that it involves foul play, only that it will usually not be obvious from the news or the news website whether and how audiences have made information available.

In the case of Forbrydelsen, the map with the marked stories about police failings provided raw data in an open database. This was publicly available through the website, which made the audience participation visible. However, that does not change the fact that this is a type of audience participation that does not challenge or transform the institutionalized role of the journalist as the one who selects from and edits the information at hand, thereby taking up the traditional role of the gatekeeper. For this reason, a hierarchical relationship between the news workers and the audiences remains.

Collaboration

This hierarchy is more levelled in the second type of audience participation – collaboration. Here, audiences participate more actively in the actual news production and undertake journalistic tasks, so that the news production process becomes a collaborative one. In ekstrabladet.dk's live coverage of the COP15 demonstrations, for example, there were several instances of audiences who assumed the role of a journalist or *producer* (Bruns 2008) and of journalists who, on their part, assumed the role of a gatewatcher who allows or denies audiences' contributions to pass through the metaphorical gate (Bruns 2005).

This type of audience participation is most clearly exemplified in an episode that took place on ekstrabladet.dk a couple of hours before the big demonstration on 16 December, 2009, reached the summit venue. Here, disturbances suddenly arose near a large shopping mall (called Fields) far from the planned demonstration, and that caught the journalists off guard and off location. The journalists did mention this development, but what is more interesting is the way in which audiences contributed with their knowledge about the situation. Two members of the audience, for example, wrote "80 arrested by Fields"³ (comment from Poul at 09:58) and "Batons are drawn and dogs are used by the police by Ørestaden" (comment from Martin, 09:58).

Through this kind of comments, audiences who happen to be in the right place at the right time transcend their role as eye witnesses and become some kind of amateur journalists who participate in blurring the distinction between audiences and journalists. The same blurring is even more apparent in this exchange of comments:

The parking by Fields is sealed off ... are there demonstrators inside Fields?
(comment from Guest, 10:30)

Not that we know of – but the police have done a lot to sweep the area for demonstrators so they are only on the road/ in fresh air... (COP15 Jourhavende, 10:30)
[...]

There are no demonstrators inside Fields. Have just talked to employees in there.
(comment from jakob, 10:31)

In this last comment, the collaborative aspect of audience participation and the blurring of the audience/journalist distinction become particularly apparent. The comment shows that a member of the audience had actually researched the case himself and had subsequently redistributed his information to the news medium as well as its other audiences. By interviewing sources (people employed at Fields), jakob, a member of the audience, assumes part of the role that journalists normally manage. So, he enters a brief and highly informal collaboration with *ekstrabladet.dk* about reporting the event. Despite this collaboration, the media organization remained formally in control of the news production as its editors or journalists had to approve the comment for it to be published on the website.

An additional nuance to collaborative news production through audience participation exists in a long line of examples of audiences correcting wrong information, which either journalists or other members of the audience have supplied. For example, shortly after the clash between police and demonstrators, this exchange appears:

#cop15 (demo) David's eyes are all red and he can hardly see. He has also been hit with a baton when he was part of a [human] chain in front of the activists' plat
(ebcop15_1, 12:16)

#cop15 (demo) ...platform truck" (ebcop15_1, 12:17)

That's the whole point of pepper spray! He needs to have his eyes rinsed with lukewarm water! Then it'll be a couple of minutes then he can see again all right..
(Henrik, 12:18)

[...]

Pepper spray doesn't go away with lukewarm water... [I] have tried several times under controlled circumstances... tried 20 different things... there's only one thing to do.. relax and wait 30 min. (Lasse, 12:20)

In this way, the audiences sometimes also help improve the quality of the information that circulates in the news – even if it primarily happens in connection with concrete, factual issues such as the result of getting one's eyes pepper-sprayed.

Conversation

The third type of audience participation is conversation of a more sociable nature. Sociability is a prominent characteristic of a large proportion of the conversations that take place on digital media. As such, Hjarvard, for example, writes that “very often, the communication is the end in itself. Or to put it another way: it has the purpose of creating gatherings between people and making it pleasant, comfortable, entertaining – in short, sociable” (2005: 15, author’s translation). However, this pleasant sociability does not necessarily entail that what the subjects talked about cannot be serious; sociability constitutes itself through the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’ of the conversation. As Simmel (1971) points out in a classic essay on sociability, what matters is not so much the subject of a conversation, as the absence of problem-solving as its purpose. The purpose of the sociable conversation is the very social interaction:

“Not that the content of sociable conversation is a matter of indifference; it must be interesting, gripping, even significant – only it is not the purpose of the conversation that these qualities should square with objective results, which stand by definition outside the conversation. [...] It therefore inheres in the nature of sociable conversation that its object matter can change lightly and quickly” (Simmel 1971: 136-137).

This form of conversational participation finds its expression in comments such as the ones in this humorous exchange:

Who are the ones dressed in white? (comment from nick, 09: 22)

It’s a small teasing demo[nstration] within the demo...but also made by the demonstrators themselves (COP15 Jourhavende, 09: 22)

[...]

The white ones are small environmental angels hahhahhah (comment from peterikast, 09:23)

This type of live news coverage with a twist of sociable conversation is by no means unique to ekstrabladet.dk’s COP15 coverage. Steensen (2011), for example, has shown how the use of the CoveritLive application in connection with soccer matches entails a form of cosy journalism on the news website of the Norwegian newspaper *Verdens Gang*; here, journalists and audiences meet at eye level and apply humour and irony throughout their interaction.

One could question whether conversation should, in the first place, be considered part of the news or rather a variation of ‘audience comments’ (cf. Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams and Wardle 2010). From the perspective of this study, however, it constitutes ‘audience content’ as long as the conversation is about the event covered or the aspects of it that were part of, for example, the streamed live video (which nick’s question above refers to). For as the quote from Simmel indicates, sociability is more about the character of the conversation than its content – and in exchanges such as the one above, new or more detailed information about the event is actually presented through the sociable conversation. For this reason, this type of audience participation should also be counted as part of the news production.

Meta-communication

Finally, the fourth type of audience participation is meta-communication; that is, communication about the very communication which the news constituted. Jensen (2010: 94) describes meta-communication as the communication that takes place “above and beyond the exchange of literal information”. That is what goes on here: through exchanges about the very coverage, the premises and processes behind the news production are made visible, so that audiences can both follow the covered event and gain insight into a level ‘above and beyond’ the coverage of the event.

In this way, meta-communication helps make the news more transparent for the audiences. It refers explicitly to the mediated character of the news, and that is in contrast to the normal ‘invisible’ type of mediation that journalists normally aim at.

With this type of participation, audiences’ attention moves to the news itself. That is obvious in exchanges such as this one, which addresses ekstrabladet.dk’s technical solution for streaming live video from the scene of the demonstrations:

Thanks for a super live coverage. How much equipment do you have in the field and how do you transmit it? Your camera man appears to be very mobile. It is super cool. (Tue, 13:25)

We have a team of two men: a photographer and one to control the technics. Among other things, the latter regulates bit-rates and secures the camera man along the way... (COP15 Jourhavende, 13:26)

[...]

Then you can ‘only’ use it in Cph? (Mads, 13:31)

We can use our live TV all over the world... (COP15 Jourhavende, 13:31)

Here, the news workers operate, on the one hand, as gatewatchers who allow the interesting questions to pass and, on the other hand, as a form of sources for the audiences, providing the audiences with the information they ask for. The relation between audiences and journalists is, in this way, reversed in comparison to the traditional communicative situation in news dissemination as it is now the audiences who set the agenda. The exchange above and questions such as “Can’t you move the camera man to where the autonomous demonstrators are so we can see more? :)” (comment from Dennis, 09:32) deals with the very coverage rather than the event. As such, the audiences take a reflexive position to news production, because they address the practices and processes that constitute the framework of the coverage as well as the coverage itself.

Conclusion

When it comes to the news websites, the two critical cases analysed in this study suggest that audiences can participate in the production of news in a number of different ways. They participate by acting as sources and making information available for the professional journalists; by collaborating with the journalists on the production of news; by engaging in conversation with each other and with the news workers; and by using the journalists as sources for creating more transparency in the news production process. Together, these four types represent a step towards typologizing the practices through which audiences participate in the production of online news.

These four ideal types of audience participation not only differ with regard to what roles the audiences assume – they are also different in connection with the roles journalists must assume and, accordingly, to the relation that exists between audience and journalist. When it comes to the sharing of *information*, the relationship between audiences and journalist is traditional in the sense that the journalist is the one who produces the news, while the audiences constitute a resource for the journalist. However, this relationship is different and more hierarchically levelled in connection with *collaboration*, where the audiences can function as journalistic producers who participate in the production of news. Accordingly, the role of the journalist is transformed from being a gatekeeper who controls the content of the news medium to being, rather, a gatewatcher who selects and distributes interesting and relevant contributions from the participating audience. The gatewatching role of the journalist is also present in both the *conversation* and *meta-communication* types of audience participation. However, here it is combined with the role of, respectively, a conversation partner and an information-providing source for the audiences in connection with communication about the news.

Even so, it should be remembered that the journalists on news websites will most often assume an editing or moderating role in the sense that the audiences' contributions must, at a minimum, be approved before they enter the news. For this reason, the role of gatewatcher is present in the last three types of audience participation. Table 1 summarizes the different roles and audience/journalist relationships.

Table 1. *Types of Audience Participation in the Production of Online News*

	Role of the audiences	Role of the journalist
Information	Source; resource for the journalist	Gatekeeper
Collaboration	Journalistic producer	Gatewatcher; journalist
Conversation	Conversation partner	Gatewatcher; conversation partner
Meta-communication	Reflexive audience	Gatewatcher; source for the audience

In this way, the agency that audiences have takes different forms, suggesting that increasingly complex power relations exist in the relationship between audiences and news workers in the digital environment. For even within the kind of contributions that Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams and Wardle (2010) label audience content, there are different types of participation at play, and these types entail different levels of decision-making on the part of journalists as well as audiences. The different types of audience participation and the diverse relationships between audiences and journalists also reconnect the empirical findings of this study to Carpentier's point of departure, namely an emphasis on questions of power as the power distribution differs between the four types. While the power to make decisions about content is exclusively in the hands of the journalists within the first type of audience participation (the sharing of information), the power is more broadly distributed when participation falls within one of the latter three types, even if, in the end, organizational actors still have the possibility of editing and moderating.

In addition to answering the opening question of this article, this typology asks new questions, not least as regards the empirical foundation of the different ideal types in the typology. Future studies can benefit from researching the spread of the different types of audience participation, also in an international context, thereby clarifying to what extent the four ideal types appear in and correspond with the instances of audience participation on other news websites, in other journalistic cultures, and in connection with other concrete cases. Such studies would help validate and advance the typology. Future research could also investigate audience participation in less spectacular cases than Forbrydelsen and the live coverage of the COP15 demonstrations. For as this article only represents explorative scrutiny of one particular type of case within an empirical field, it only constitutes a first step towards a typology of audience participation in the production of online news.

That audiences can contribute to the content of news media is not something new (see Hermida 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen 2002). However, audience participation in the production of online news is different in at least two regards. First, the audiences have the opportunity of simultaneously conducting several different types of participation when it takes place on news websites. Second, it is more transparent what role audiences assume in the news production with this news medium. Even though numerous processes obviously still take place without being visible to the public, examples such as the ones from Berlingske Tidende and ekstrabladet.dk are more transparent than offline news production with regards to the role played by audiences and its implications for the news.

In this way, the gates to the traditionally closed newsrooms are opened in more than one way: in terms of both the potential opportunity for audiences to participate and the increased transparency.

Notes

1. The term 'intentional' is used here in its sociological meaning, namely that audiences have the intention of contributing to the content and actively do something to participate, not necessarily of dragging the content in a certain (political) direction.
2. <http://www.berlingske.dk/forbrydelsen>. Later, in connection with a general rebranding of Berlingske in 2011, the site has been re-structured and has lost some of its multimodal content (e.g. the map analyzed in this study) in the process.
3. All quotes of audience participation are translated by the author.

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