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EXPLORING THE POLITICAL-ECONOMIC FACTORS OF PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM Views of online journalists in ten countries

© Marina Vujnovic, Jane B. Singer, Steve Paulussen, Ari Heinonen, Zvi Reich, Thorsten Quandt, Alfred Hermida and David Domingo

This comparative study of user-generated content (UGC) in ten Western democracies examines the political economic aspects of citizen participation in online media, as seen by journalists who work with this content. Drawing on interviews with more than 60 journalists, we explore their perceived economic motivations for an ongoing redefinition of traditional journalistic roles, as UGC becomes an increasingly dominant feature of news websites,

KEYWORDS citizen participation; corporate profit; international; newspapers; news production; online media; participatory journalism; political economy; user-generated content

Introduction

It is an obvious statement that the media, including newspapers, are an intrinsic part of the economics of knowledge. Recent changes in the media industry, heightened by technological evolution, underscore the need to monetize evanescent information and information exchange, both of which have economic significance (Babe, 1995).

This article explores journalists' reactions to the ongoing migration of readers to web-based news sites and online newspapers, focusing on their perceived economic motivations for engaging with the participatory journalism phenomenon. Interviews for this study were conducted with journalists, including key editors, at the market-leading online newspapers in seven European countries, along with Israel, Canada and the United States. The analysis is tied to the neoclassical–neoliberal understanding of economics,

markets and technology, as well as to globalization processes. Information technology has an extraordinary capacity to alter our sense of time and space (Lash and Urry, 1994; Deibert, 1997) and to create a sense of displacement in the ongoing processes of virtual exchange. We seek to contribute to an understanding of the economic motives behind participatory journalism practices and their effects on the self-perceptions of journalists in a rapidly changing media environment.

Political economy of the media

Economics, markets and technology are what Babe (1995) labels hegemonic doctrines, and political economy calls for integration with moral philosophy. Journalism is a particularly relevant enterprise in this context, as its core premises include a desire to democratize communication, widen information exchange and narrow the gap in civic participation. Journalism by this idealistic definition has true democratic value only if it is seen as serving the public's need to be informed promptly and accurately.

Media industries have been consolidating since at least the early 1980s.. In the context of neoliberal capitalism, this ownership convergence means the industry currently functions much as any other profit-making sector. But as digital networks have grown, media organizations have found it difficult to find an economic model to sustain their own growth. The main difficulty is in the inadequacy of the old economic model, based on traditional factors of labor, capital and production (Babe, 1995). Once unlimited information joins the mix, production processes are transformed and outcomes inevitably become unpredictable.

In the logic of late capitalism, in which everyone in everyday life is potentially engaged with creating and distributing information (Jameson, 1991), the concept of citizen as informational laborer (Castells, 2001) seems to have considerable appeal for media industries. They might have been expected to dive into the opportunity to benefit from what is in essence a democratic notion of participation in a globalized, networked society (Castells, 2001). But recent trends suggest it would be premature to declare any profit-making expedition in online journalism a success. Faced with the ubiquitous nature of information technology but largely failing to capitalize on its transformational power, the media industry is instead discovering the weakness of the traditional economic model with which it remains most comfortable. For the most part, media owners have demonstrated mainly the "bandwagon" mentality characteristic of disorganized capitalism.

Before we engage with a deeper understanding of participatory journalism in political economic terms, we would like to emphasize that user-generated content appears to be part of the commodification of work under the capitalist system. Lash and Urry (1994) argue that in the new capitalism guided by information economies, time has been divided between work and leisure, and hence between production and consumption. Yet UGC blurs the distinction between work and leisure – the work that users do in creating content is largely seen as a leisure activity. Moreover, users both produce and consume information almost simultaneously.

The political economy of participation in online news production and consumption thus merits further exploration and continuous reconceptualization. In the next section, we outline the theoretical premises on which our interview data analysis is based.

Participatory journalism: concepts and practice

A number of scholars have attempted to define and explore contributions to online news media from people who are not professional journalists. Deuze (2001) refers to the phenomena as open-source journalism; others connect it to public journalism (Black, 1997;

Paulussen et al., 2007). The term “user generated content” (UGC) has become widely accepted. However, Bowman and Willis’s (2003) term “participatory journalism” seems more apt to us because the phrase places the phenomenon in the larger context of participatory culture, or what Jenkins (2006) calls “convergence culture.” In this context, media industry efforts to distribute their products across multiple platforms end up empowering the users to appropriate, reshape and redistribute those products.

Jenkins reminds us that two mid-1980s phenomena – the growth of digital technologies and the spread of cross-media ownership -- enable the current convergence of digital media: For Jenkins, convergence culture is a result of the industry’s economic desire to distribute content across multiple platforms. “Digitization set the conditions for convergence [while] corporate conglomerates created its imperative,” he argues (2006, p. 11).

As the journalists in our study suggest, participatory media channels created in online newsrooms do not stem solely from democratic goals related to fostering participatory culture and empowering the public. Rather, as Jenkins argues, “convergence culture is a paradigm shift – a move from the medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels ...driven by the economic calculations” of the media industry. The industry, he says, embraced convergence to create a platform for shaping consumer behavior and devising “multiple ways of selling content to consumers”; media executives also hoped to cement consumer loyalty at a time when market fragmentation and the rise of file sharing threatened old ways of doing business (2006, p. 254). Even though market logic is evident behind participatory or convergence culture, the process itself is rather new; it leaves gaps through which the public can assert its bottom-up power to change the rules of participation and exert its own rules and needs.

Dean’s (2008) notion of communicative capitalism, defined as “a form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communication technologies” (p. 104), also is useful here. Participation in this sense is no longer a simple expression of democratic actions by citizens but rather the result of the market value of participation, as well as the expression of commodity culture and information consumption.

Journalism is a result of historical and social development; informed by new media technology, it is taking a new form to meet current social circumstance. Some communication functions previously institutionalized by the news media can now be performed by individuals and non-journalistic organizations, as we previously argued in proposing a model to explore how participatory journalism works at various stages of news production (Domingo et al., 2008).

This paradigmatic shift involves both technological development and economic logic. As our data will show, it works in large part by building consumer loyalty or brand sustainability. It also can be driven by a management desire to cut the cost of information gathering by engaging audiences to perform a journalistic function previously performed by paid professionals.

Method and data gathering

This study builds on our preliminary study of participatory features on the websites of 16 leading quality newspapers in eight European countries (Belgium, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom) and the United States (Domingo et al., 2008). We have added four newspapers from two new countries, Canada and Israel. Slovenia has been dropped from the list, but we added another newspaper from Croatia, which provides insights from the only European nation outside the dominant European Union (see Table 1). Following our preliminary study in 2007, we interviewed journalists at each online newspaper in 2008, particularly seeking insights from an

executive in charge of newsroom strategies, an editor overseeing the news production process, and a journalist directly dealing with audience participation. A total of 65 journalists and news executives were interviewed in all. We developed a code sheet for qualitative coding based on the preliminary results of the 2007 study. Most researchers used qualitative data analysis software such as Atlas TI or Max QDA; otherwise, interviews were coded manually. Because qualitative coding is polysemic in nature, an “other” option also was available in each coding category to accommodate statements that did not fit one of the pre-determined options.

This paper draws on data from our “Motives for Participatory Journalism” coding category to identify rationales behind the pursuit of participatory journalism initiatives. Options included journalistic, technological, economic and political/ideological motives, along with a view that the phenomenon was “inevitable” and unstoppable, necessitating media involvement. Although our focus in this article is on economic motives, interviewees often referenced overlapping motives within an economic context, as described below.

Because of the large amount of data, we have chosen to identify themes across different countries and newspapers. Although media cultures and traditions vary, we found that the similarities greatly surpassed the differences, and a thematic analysis best served our purposes. Questions that guided our thematic analysis were:

- What economic discourses and motivations for participatory journalism are identified by journalists at the websites of leading national newspapers?
- How do these journalists talk about economic motivations behind participatory journalism?

Results and discussion

Our analysis identified three primary themes:

1. Branding, particularly as a means of generating newspaper consumer loyalty.
2. Building traffic, involving strategies to boost the usage numbers that “still scream profit,” as one journalist said.
3. Keeping up with or beating the competition, a bandwagon effect.

Journalists in smaller markets also discussed cost-cutting rationales, as described below.

Branding: Building Consumer Loyalty

This was the most dominant theme across the interviews analyzed in this study, appearing in every country. The fragmentation of both media and audiences seems to be prompting a move away from traditional mass media marketing strategies and toward journalism as strategic communication, both to address needs of newspaper consumers and to shape their behaviors. Editors and news managers are of course more likely than others in the newsroom to take a marketing perspective on participatory journalism, while those lower in the management hierarchy can be expected to emphasize journalistic motives. Even so, strategic communication methods seem to be gaining visibility for journalists at all levels: In a fragmented market, newspapers are seen as brands through which community is built and consumer loyalty created. “You must never ignore the community that you’ve got at the moment because you do that at your peril,” as the chief information officer of *Telegraph Media Group* (UK) put it.

Moreover, this loyalty helps build an economically sustainable brand, creating a competitive edge and spurring further technological development. For example, the community manager at *Het Belan van Limburg* and *Gazet van Antwerpen* in Belgium felt that open communication between the newsroom and the marketing department is key to a successful newspaper industry. Hence marketing and strategic communication become prerogatives for creating communities, interest groups or even stakeholders:

We want to create a platform where local football clubs can have their own page. We are trying to implement a lot of social network features in this platform, so that we got a lot of interaction between clubs and their fans. The idea is that such a platform should not focus on news only, but it must rather stimulate the whole social network around and between these football clubs....So for instance if [the marketing department] wants to set up something for a certain target group, I will try to think of possible ways to do that.

Brand recognition also seems to be driving the perceived need to integrate social networking features and traditionally non-journalistic forms such as blogging -- or an excuse for engaging in non-journalistic forms at the potential expense of reporting and news production. User blogs, for example, can encourage user loyalty by, among other things, providing a value to users that other sites cannot deliver. The communities editor of telegraph.co.uk said:

We're not giving people a blog. We are giving people an audience....You can go and start a blog on Blogger today, but nobody is going to read it apart from your mum...and it would take you months to build an audience. You can start a blog with the *Telegraph* today, and I can deliver tens of thousands of people straight to your blog from Day One.

In Israel, where economic motives were commonly coupled with motives of inevitability, the NRG editor commented, "We are a part of the global market, and we have to keep up with it by adding new features...and constantly checking needs and demands." Maintaining and increasing audiences was seen as important, and wooing potential customers was a primary strategic goal. If used well, editors of Israeli newspapers believed, participatory journalism can strengthen the website "product".. One *Ha'aretz* editor remarked:

People's attention threshold today is a lot lower, and they want more and more...The web surfer moves rapidly from sites, to the radio, to the TV...I want to make him stay here as long as possible. How do I achieve this goal? I engage him and motivate him to stay with me. He can add his own contents, see them and arrange the web page to his preference.

In the United States, managing editors combined journalistic and economic motivation, but participatory journalism was seen as a necessary tool to boost brand loyalty by drawing and retaining audiences.. The need to attract more audience members as stakeholders also was reflected in a move to create niche communities, for instance around topics such as cruises. An editor at *USA Today* said:

As web content becomes increasingly distributed, as it becomes more and more difficult to maintain that walled-garden destination, you have to pose the question, "How do I maintain my brand?"

Similarly in Canada, *National Post* editors discussed both journalistic and economic motivations but pointed out that newspaper readers are not attracted solely by information delivery. They recognized that marketing builds brands and strengthens relationships between readers and newspapers. One editor said:

I think the role of a newspaper, the role of any media organization, is to inform the public. At the same time, you want to feel that connection with your reader...Without readers, there's no need for newspapers. Your job is to attract as many people as you can...[but] to be very cynical, from an advertising perspective, that is what you're delivering – the readers. So, yes you have to keep them occupied, keep them interested.

Journalistic motivations were especially prominent for British, Finnish, French, Israeli and Spanish interviewees, who highlighted a national tradition of journalism based on public service. Some journalists rejected economic discourses or repeatedly provided connections between journalistic and economic motivations. Some saw economic or marketing motives as negative and as something that “others” do, while journalists “protect the function of media in the public sphere.” The editor-in-chief of the Spanish *20 Minutos* explained:

I think that the mere fact that they thought it [UGC] a good marketing action is a victory and a recognition that other types of journalism are possible. Because they are implicitly acknowledging that the official classical discourse that we were taught in college is no longer valid....Today the receiver is a producer as well, and they may be much wiser than us all [the journalists]....That is wonderful, and in any case the changes are happening, and we just can be attentive to adapt to them and foster them.

Boosting Traffic: “Numbers Still Scream Profit”

Increasing website traffic was another commonly identified strategic goal. In Croatia, for example, it was clear that the pressure for more usage was applied top-down, from management to the newsroom. Journalists said their role was to develop participation channels that would attract new visitors and make existing users stay longer on the site. Growth in usage was often coupled with a desire to strengthen brand loyalty, especially in regards to experimentation with social networking and community building.

In Croatian as well as in Spanish and U.S. organizations, this trend was seen as a strategy for the industry to survive rather than a way to promote public debate, fulfill a democratic role or endeavor to close the participatory gap. In Britain, the *Guardian's* network editor remarked that the point is not so much to grab new consumers as to offer a variety of features to encourage them to stay longer on the site. The head of editorial development at the same newspaper talked about “a crude kind of metric,” where only numbers matter: “In cold commercial terms, it's [about] page impressions.” However, he immediately added, “it does improve journalism. You can see why that kind of debate and discussion is an interesting proposition.”

The *Telegraph's* communities' editor expressed strong links between branding and increasing traffic. The *My Telegraph* section of the newspaper website, which provides a space for users to create their own blogs and post other content, was designed specifically to attract consumers and encourage them to stay, building a community that will generate traffic: :

I really think once we get My Telegraph to a significant size, once we can make My Telegraph the central arena for all the community stuff we do, we're suddenly going to see UGC representing a huge chunk of traffic.

Because it is easily quantified and resonates with managers and investors, website traffic is a popular way to demonstrate market value. Unlike in print, the number of "hits" any item receives can be tracked, an appealing way of arguing for the relevance of online news. The online news manager of the Belgium *Het Belang van Limburg* and *Gazet van Antwerpen* illustrates this point well:

A nice example concerned a caravan fire on a camping site in Dilsen-Stokkem, a small town in Flanders. For the paper edition of our newspaper, the story wasn't relevant enough, because there was nobody injured and almost no damage. But for the community there, the people living on or nearby the camping, it was of course the talk of the town. Coincidentally we had one of our citizen journalists who made a piece about the fire, and we placed that story on the website. Well, the story generated quite a lot of website traffic. I won't say that the number of visitors was tremendous, but the good thing about it is that all these people read the story on our website and not somewhere else on the Internet.

The marketing director for the website of France's *Le Figaro* said participatory journalism is an extremely valuable tool for drawing traffic, in part because user content boosts visibility on search engines indices. In Croatia and Israel, editors and journalists were sometimes unable to articulate why or how they decided to develop participatory journalism offerings, but user participation was often described as a method to entice readers to stay longer on the site, as well as to attract new visitors who might become loyal customers.

The high traffic volume on U.S. media websites was highlighted by journalists in other countries, notably the U.K., Germany, and Croatia. At the *Washington Post* and *USA Today*, managing editors understood traffic to define the success of the online news site. They saw increasing traffic as contributing to the larger goal of building loyalty, not only among the public in general but also among smaller groups with whom they can engage on a deeper level. The desire, they suggested, is to lure readers who will keep coming back. . One U.S. editor said:

The extent to which we can involve them and let them involve themselves in our news report, our journalism, is the way that we will become more a part of their lives and ultimately will help guarantee our success in the future.

Canadian interviewees also stressed the twin needs to maintain and increase page views. Online news sites were seen as a way to show the bright future of journalism. For example, the idea of building communities was expressed in strategic terms rather than as a desire to facilitate the exchange of information and news. "You build a community because you are a business and you don't want to lose readers," explained a *Globe and Mail* editor. "The more people you can persuade to look at your pages, the more money you can make." At the Canadian *National Post*, many of the UGC strategies were seen as ways of getting people to the site and persuading them to stay there. As one editor said:

The bottom line is to improve the traffic...Why don't newspapers just use YouTube? I'll tell you the answer right now. It is because from a business perspective, we need to keep people on our site.

Another *National Post* editor expressed the true value of numbers:

There is a real business case here to be made. You know what, people are spending five, six, seven minutes in our website, engaging with the material...That becomes a business thing. It becomes a very tangible number that you can go back to the core business of the web and go to advertisers and say, "You can actually capitalize on that."

The Bandwagon Effect: Meeting and Beating the Competition

The *National Post* editor's quote also highlights the importance of media competition, the third theme that recurred throughout our interviews. Journalists described competition both with other strong newspapers and with sites that aggregate news rather than producing it. The second kind of competitiveness seemed to especially irk interviewees, who expressed concern about which type of business would win the war for consumers. The impact of news aggregation sites that "tap into our market," as one Croatian editor put it, was a concern expressed across the countries we studied. Journalists saw the future of online newspapers as depending on the success of the news aggregation sites as well as search engines such as *Google* or *Yahoo!*, which use indexing to draw attention to some websites and away from others.

The bandwagon effect often seemed to have been part of the rationale for initiating participatory journalism options. The head of editorial development of *guardian.co.uk* described it this way:

Speaking generally about the newspaper industry in Britain, there's been a big thing with "Me Too." There's been no [thought] in this country why are we doing it...Some of our efforts, and many of our competition's efforts have been about "Me-Tooism." What are we doing? Why are we doing this? Why do we have that?...Why should it exist?...There's been a great deal of fear about missing out, There's a scramble to get this stuff up and running.

The desire to build communities among users as "principal stakeholders" was connected to competition across media outlets. In Belgium, for example, a dominant theme was that of "experimenting" with participatory journalism because it is a general trend everywhere. But facilitating user-generated content also was seen as enabling newspapers to compete with social networking sites such as *Facebook*. An editor of the Finnish newspaper *Kaleva* said:

Newspapers are searching [for a] means to be part of their readers' everyday life and doings. They see that people use social media anyway, and in a worst case, we just stay put and observe. Often these materials would work also with us. Is the newspaper able to offer this, in a way, 'social media platform'? Is it in our brand, can we renew like this?

In Germany, the issue of competition was addressed in conjunction with the need to find a business model for online newspapers and the need to maintain quality journalism – in order to compete with media that have little or nothing to do with traditional journalism. WE NEED THE IDENTITY OF THE SPEAKER HERE:

These are completely new media, communities that have nothing to do with news journalism. ... There is no business model of news journalism. The business model is to obtain a certain reach or circulation, to play out some banners, to reach

some type of community. There is no reason why we should be the only ones that profit here and not some other aggregators of reach. I think that this is the ongoing, non-trivial transformation.

“Inevitability,” one of our motivation options, also was stressed in connection with competition. Israeli interviewees, for example, emphasized competition with other in-country media outlets; they saw fostering user participation as a way of remaining competitive and improving quality. In Croatia and Belgium, editors said the small size of the market made competition for readers especially important. In Croatia, *24Hours* and *Vecernji list* compete with two other daily newspapers for a market of little more than 4 million; UGC and other participation strategies were seen as offering competitive advantages by making the websites more attractive.

One other theme emerged in interviews in two smaller countries, Croatia and Belgium, but not elsewhere: UGC as a cost-saving strategy, at least in management’s eyes. Although some journalists said media executives saw participatory journalism as cost-saving strategy for the industry, they expressed skepticism about that approach. In Belgium, the general editor-in-chief of *De Standaard* and *Net Hieuwasblad* remarked:

In the eyes of our management committee, UGC is considered something fantastic. They hope that they will be able to provide more content with less journalists...I still try to convince the management to invest in UGC gathering and get rid of the idea that UGC is cost-saving. We need to invest in it.

Similarly, in Croatia, editors of both newspapers said they personally saw UGC in terms of saving time rather than money. But, they said, management saw it as a money-saving opportunity – one that already had resulted in layoffs in traditional newsrooms, as well as workforce outsourcing from traditional to online newsrooms.

The fact that this cost-saving theme was not widely articulated by journalists in larger countries may indicate particular pressures in the smaller national markets, but it does not necessarily mean this strategy is not employed by media managers elsewhere. Other themes, such as increasing traffic or creating competitive advantages – in other words, the role of participatory journalism in saving the newspaper industry – simply may have been more dominant at the time the interviews were conducted. With eight researchers involved in this project, it also is possible that different interviewers focused on different issues.

Conclusion

Although this study left many unanswered questions about the economic motivations behind UGC, the results were intriguing. Similarities in how journalists in different countries understood and talked about UGC were striking. Economic discourses were often coupled with other motivations, such as technological, political and ideological ones, as well as the idea that the phenomenon was inevitable. However, we have sought here to highlight the economic discourses in order to probe those concepts more deeply. We identified three universal themes: branding strategies designed to build loyalty, strategies for increasing website traffic as a route to profitability and a bandwagon effect driven by a desire to remain competitive. Journalists in smaller countries, notably Belgium and Croatia, also said their managers viewed UGC as a cost-saving strategy – a view our interviewees tended not to share.

However, they did view participation at least partly in terms of its market value, part of the commodity culture to which the media contribute (Dean, 2008). Our findings also tap into what Jenkins (2006) identified as convergence culture. We identified considerable

support for his proposition that convergence is driven by a need to develop consumer loyalty amid market fragmentation that threatens old ways of doing business. In fact, one German editor stressed exactly that incapability of the classic business model to function successfully in the new media environment.

Journalists in Europe, Israel, Canada and United States all seem to be grappling with a vision for the future of the media that employ them. They see participatory journalism as valuable, but at the same time most admit a lack of clear vision about why and how to adopt it, either for democratic or economic purposes. As one *Guardian* editor remarked, "(E)very month, it is another fight to see how far we can push our traffic and see how far we can go beyond our competitors." This quote and others provided above suggest a strong market logic behind participatory journalism. But it is also true that few journalists were willing to submit completely to an economic discourse. "Our audiences and our customers and our users who enjoyed consuming our content also wanted a place to be heard," the *Telegraph* communities editor said. The editor of *USA Today* argued for the centrality of fostering democratic rights to debate and discuss: "Beginning to create that social network around the news was a very *USA Today* thing to do – the nation's newspaper with the nation's conversation." Such statements suggest that journalists haven't given up on the contributions of traditional journalism to democratic discourse despite pressures created by technological and economic change.

Finally, the participation discourses analyzed here suggest the inevitability of constant compromise with the industry's existing economic models. In Dean's (2008) understanding of communicative capitalism, it is possible in a networked society to provide a sense of participation -- a sense of engagement, democratic activity and contribution -- without real democratic action. Interviewee statements such as "people feel more involved" or "you can hit submit, see your comment there...you feel you've engaged," support the premise that true participation may be an illusion. Even so, professional journalists seem eager to hold on to the traditional value of journalism by helping develop participation opportunities that move beyond counting hits to creation of a more meaningful dialogic exchange.

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Marina Vujnovic is assistant professor at Monmouth University. Her primary fields of research are participatory journalism and new media studies, media history and gender, critical political economy and cultural studies. Her research interests focus on online journalism, international communication and global flow of information, journalism studies; explorations of the historical, political-economic and cultural impact on media; gender, ethnicity, and media. Vujnovic has a PhD from the University of Iowa.

Table 1. Countries, online newspapers and number of interviewees included in this study

Country	Newspaper Online	Web address	Interviewees
Belgium	De Standaard	standaard.be	3
	Gazet van Antwerpen	gva.be	3
Canada	The Globe and Mail	theglobeandmail.com	3
	National Post	nationalpost.com	3
Croatia	<i>24 Sata</i>	24sata.hr	3
	Vecernji list	vecernji.hr	3
Finland	Iltalehti	iltalehti.fi	3
	Helsingin Sanomat	Hs.fi	3
France	Le Monde	lemonde.fr	3
	Le Figaro	lefigaro.fr	3
Germany	Spiegel	spiegel.de	3
	Frankfurter Allgemeine	Faz.net	3
Spain	20 Minutos	20minutos.es	3
	El País	elpais.com	4
Israel	Ynet	ynet.co.il	3
	NRG	nrg.co.il	3
	Ha'aretz	haaretz.com	3
United Kingdom	Guardian	guardian.co.uk	2
	Telegraph	telegraph.co.uk	5
United States	Washington Post	washingtonpost.com	3
	USAToday	usatoday.com	3