Doing It Together: Citizen Participation In The Professional News Making Process

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Abstract

This paper looks at how mainstream media are currently reacting to the trend of citizen media. In order to look beyond the hype and high expectations about user generated content, we first try to put the debate on citizen and participatory journalism in context. We argue that the revived interest in participatory journalism is the result of both external developments in society and internal evolutions in journalism. Next, we analyze these developments in four European countries – Belgium, Finland, Germany and Spain – in order to identify similarities and differences that hint at the (professional, organizational, socio-cultural and economic) factors influencing the evolution of participatory journalism. Data collected suggests that despite of the differences in context, media in any of the four countries tend to develop very limited opportunities for audience participation. The professional culture of journalists is suggested as the main factor preventing the development of participatory projects, while marketing and business strategies somehow push for the exploration of such proposals.

Introduction

Back in the late nineties it was widely discussed that professional journalism was to encounter a serious challenge from rapidly spreading forms of online communication. Global publishing became an option for masses that had so far been relegated to the role of passive receivers in the communication scene dominated by professional news providers. This happened at the same time as especially newspapers' circulation was in a steady decline and the trust in the 'old' mass media was eroding.

While ten years later we can see that the established media still dominate communication flows, the challenge remains, and to a certain extent the debate has revitalised in the past few years. Changing media consumption patterns – especially the increased use of interactive media among young people – and the continuing diffusion of the Internet and weblogs in particular fuelled optimistic accounts on democratic participation and active citizenship. Authors like Bowman & Willis (2003) and Dan Gillmor (2004) describe how, on the Internet, the people themselves become the media. In contrast to traditional media, blogs and other community-driven media are characterised by a fundamental convergence of the roles of content

producers and consumers, as every user has the opportunity to both consume and create content. Axel Bruns (2005) has coined the term 'produsage' to refer to this blurring line, while Gillmor (2004: 136) speaks of the "former audience" to stress that the public should no longer be regarded as a passive group of receivers.

So far, the literature on online participatory media has primarily focused on the weblog phenomenon (see e.g. Lasica, 2003; Matheson, 2004), and collaborative online news sites, including Indymedia, OhmyNews, Slashdot, Wikinews, Kuro5hin and Plastic (see e.g. Bruns, 2005; Platon & Deuze, 2003; Atton & Meikle, 2006). While all these examples were born outside or in the margins of the existing media sphere and emerged 'from the bottom up', the established media business seems to be increasingly affected by the trend (or hype) of collaborative citizen media. Traditional media, and newspapers in particular, are currently experimenting with participative forms of content production in the hope to connect more effectively with changing usage patterns and the 'real' needs and preferences of their public. The World Association of Newspapers, for instance, regards citizen journalism as one of the major challenges to professional newsrooms in 2006 (WAN, 2006).

In this paper, we will analyse how mainstream media are currently reacting to this trend of citizen media. In order to look beyond the hype and high expectations about user-generated content, we first try to put the debate on citizen and participatory journalism in context. We argue that the revived interest in participatory journalism is the result of both external developments in society and internal evolutions in journalism. Finally, we will analyze and compare these developments in various European countries in order to identify similarities and differences that hint at the factors influencing the evolution of participatory journalism.

1. External context: Journalism in a participatory culture

Citizen media are not a new phenomenon. In fact, throughout the second half of the 20th century, various 'new' media have been welcomed for their presumed emancipatory and democratic potential. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, local talk radio stations, pirate radios, video artists and other forms of community-driven media started to challenge the dominance of established commercial mass media. Participation and interaction were central elements in the logic of these 'alternative media', which mostly had an activist nature and a clear commitment towards their community. In 1983 Denis McQuail introduced the theoretical concept of 'democratic-participant' to capture the ideas of the *"alternative, grass-roots media that expressed and looked after the needs of citizens"* (McQuail, 2000: 160).

To a certain extent, it is clear that much of the early excitement about the democratic potential of the

Internet in the 1990s echoes 'old' ideas about the emancipatory power of new media. However, for the first time in history, the Internet enabled *every* user – not only the ones capable to afford and use an expensive printing press, video camera or radio equipment – to become a producer of content and distribute it globally. *"While "independent", "alternative", and "DIY" media have long existed in many forms (...), one key to the Internet's unique significance is that it provides the infrastructure necessary to facilitate the distribution of all forms of self-produced media to a potentially far-flung audience. Linked together via the Internet, scattered individuals and small groups with common interests can add up to a sizeable audience for self-produced media."* (Croteau, 2006: 341).

While public's digital media literacy has steadily increased, and while so called new media has matured and become part of everyday life in developed Western societies, the weblog phenomenon has represented a leap in network communication. Blogging software, that made it even more simple to publish content on the web, marked the beginning of a rapid growth of user-generated content, that is now at the heart of many of the most popular web services on the Internet, such as YouTube, Flickr, Wikipedia, myspace, and so on. Contrary to the early (offline) citizen media, we note that most of these online services do not have activism intentions. By this we mean that their main '*raison d'être*' is not, or not only, to challenge the dominance of traditional media as such, but rather to provide users with the platforms and tools needed to create social networks online. Enabling interactivity is the key element; enhancing democratic participation and active citizenship, in the political sense of the word, can be a positive 'effect', although overly optimistic accounts on the relationship between the Internet and democracy have already been countered several times (see e.g. Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003). Still, many authors are convinced that blogs and the web services mentioned above herald a new digital era in which control shifts from the institutions to the users. One of the buzzwords to refer to this trend is 'Web2.0'. Tim O'Reilly (2005) coined the term Web

2.0 to refer to a new generation of web-based services that put emphasis on social networking, collaboration and participation. All these are key concepts to understand the real impact of today's "participatory media culture". In the definition of Henry Jenkins (2006: 3), the term 'participatory culture' *"contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands."*

Participation in this context goes beyond a purely political meaning of democratic participation, and has to be understood in a broader cultural sense. In this respect, some authors argue that understanding the participatory nature of the emerging digital culture requires a broader definition of the concept of 'citizenship'. Joke Hermes (2006), for instance, underlines the cultural dimension of citizenship, suggesting that people use popular media, including interactive media, to construct their citizenship in many ways that

extend far beyond the notion of 'being informed'. Hermes' main argument, then, is that the Internet does not necessarily produce 'new' citizens, but it does provide for new citizen practices. These citizen practices are focused more on social rather than political participation, they may be rather incidental than structural, and they express the need for community, for sharing, bonding, connectedness and interaction. Mark Deuze (2006a: 68) acknowledges that participation, as it is expressed on the Internet, is to some extent *"voluntarist, incoherent, and perhaps solely fueled by private interests"*, but it nevertheless defines what people expect from the media and how they use them to inform each other. If we accept that today's digital media culture is participatory in principle, Deuze (2006a) continues, mainstream media will have to adapt to this change. More specific, they will have to reconsider their role along the lines of the ideas expressed by authors like Dan Gillmor (2004) and Axel Bruns (2005), who herald *"new roles for journalists as bottom-up facilitators and moderators of community-level conversations among citizens rather than functioning as top-down storytellers for an increasingly disinterested public"* (Deuze, 2006b: 275).

2. Internal context: Participation in journalism

The revived interest in participatory journalism also relates to ongoing debates *inside* the profession about the journalists' relationship towards the audience. In the history of journalism, different views and conceptions have emerged of what journalism is and/or what it ought to be. Yet, there does not exist one universally accepted normative framework that defines the role of journalism in democracy.

Michael Schudson (1998) sees at least three main 'models of journalism': the Trustee Model, the Market Model and the Advocacy Model. As Schudson (1998: 135) argues that in the United States the Advocacy Model has become *"essentially extinct in general circulation press"*, the same observation can be made in Europe. Due to tendencies of depoliticization, secularization and liberalization, also in Europe the party press and other forms of advocacy journalism have mostly disappeared or migrated to the periphery of alternative media and community or minority publications. This means that in mainstream journalism, two main – though to a large extent conflicting – models of journalism exist. In the Trustee Model, journalists are seen as professionals who decide what news citizens should know to act as informed participants in democracy. Although the Trustee Model is being criticized because of its elitist, top-down and paternalistic character, it is fair to say that it still dominates professional and scholarly literature on journalism, and defines the conventional framework of journalism education (Dahlgren, 1992; Zelizer, 2004). At the same time, the Trustee Model is increasingly losing influence in favour of the Market Model, which stipulates that *"journalists should please audiences or at least those audiences that advertisers find attractive (...) Consumer demand is the ultimate arbiter of the news product."* (Schudson, 1998: 135). Since the nineties,

the Market Model has received increased attention in scholarly literature (e.g. McManus, 1994; Dahlgren & Sparks, 1992).

Both dominant models of journalism have come under fire, however, for failing to fulfil its democratic role and re-establish public's trust in the media. Especially in the US in the mid-nineties, several authors argued that it was high time for the mainstream press to reconnect with the public, not only for the future of journalism as such, but for the sake of democracy in general. Basically speaking, the critique was that the Market Model treated people merely as customers instead of citizens, by giving them what they want instead of what they need, whereas the Trustee Model was too much detached, too elitist and alienated from daily public life as it is perceived by the people. Authors like Rosen (1999) therefore put their hope in the emergence of the 'civic' or 'public journalism' movement. This movement originated from within the profession in the early-nineties, when some regional newspapers in the US started to experiment with involving the audience in the news process. In the following years, the idea(l)s of public journalism rapidly spread and the concept became widely discussed in both scholarly and professional literature, first in the US, but later on also in Europe and other parts of the world.

Yet, there appears to be a discrepancy between the theoretical attention paid in literature to civic/public journalism and the real impact it has (had) on journalistic practice. After a review of 47 evaluative studies on public journalism in the US, Massey & Haas (2002) concluded that public journalism has had only a modest, if any, influence on journalists' routines and attitudes. According to the authors, the most important contribution of public journalism does not lie in the enhancement of citizen participation, but rather in the fact that it ignited the discussion on the role of journalism in democracy and its commitment to the public. It is fair to say, though, that the overall impact of public journalism on mainstream journalistic practice should not be overestimated, neither in the US nor elsewhere in the world.

Denis McQuail (2000: 160) notes that the movement "*seems to have found not much of a following in Europe*". According to McQuail, part of the explanation may lie in the fact that in European countries attention has focused more on the need to strengthen existing public service media and on the potential for harnessing new media to enhance democratic participation. Other authors relate the 'impact' of the public journalism movement to the degree of media competition and economic reasons. Axel Bruns (2004: n.p.), for instance, explains the low adoption of public journalism in the Australian mainstream press by saying that, compared to the US, media in Australia feel less *"competitive pressure to adopt public journalism approaches in order to distinguish one's operation from other players."*

Several observers have criticized public journalism for its reluctance to grant the public greater authority in the news process. Michael Schudson (1998: 137-138) calls public journalism conservative, as it still views journalists as the central agents who decide what news is and what people need to know to act as

informed citizens in democracy. Public journalism "*does not remove control over the news from journalists*" (p. 137), and therefore "*stops short of offering a fourth model, one in which authority is vested not in the market, not in a party, and not in the journalist, but in the public*" (p. 138). Platon & Deuze (2003: 340) agree by saying that *"(t)he notion of 'us and them' is still used to describe the difference between journalists and citizens. The 'us' are professional journalists while the 'them' are the concerned citizens telling their stories to these reporters and editors. The public journalist is, in other words, still the gate-keeper."* They add that a next step in moving journalism further in the direction of participation and interaction is most likely to be found on the Internet, where new forms of online journalism seem to emerge. As an example, they mention 'open-source journalism', that refers to a kind of journalism in which the control over the different stages of the news production process is shared with users. In an earlier account, Deuze (2001: n.p.) already referred to 'open-source journalism' as an "advanced form" of public journalism, because it involves the audience more actively in the news process, and thus balances the control between journalists and citizens.

The idea that public journalism seems to have entered a second phase, especially under influence of recent trends in online journalism, finds support in recent publications (e.g. Haas, 2004; Nip, 2006). In a review on the relationship between weblogs and mainstream media, Haas (2004) suggests that weblogs could foster a fourth model of journalism, one that he would label "public's journalism" and that could be understood as a form of journalism 'by and for' the public.

Joyce Nip (2006) does not add a new term to the debate, but reviews some of the concepts that have been used in recent literature on participatory forms of journalism. She uses the degree and form of audience participation in the news process as a criterion to distinguish four models:

- Public journalism (as described above);
- Interactive journalism: this model refers to practices in online journalism, that use the Web as a platform for interactivity and discussion. Nip (2006: 217) notes that "*(a)s the involvement of the news users takes place after the news is published, the professional journalists are responsible for producing the news content for publication.*" In other words, interactive journalism is still produced only by professionals, but user feedback is facilitated from the moment on that the news is published.
- Participatory journalism: In this model, Nip (2006: 217) explains, *"(u)ser contribution is solicited within a frame designed by the professionals."* Citizens are invited, in other words, to contribute actively in the processes of news gathering, selection, publication, commentary and public discussion, and all this is accomplished in collaboration and in interaction with professional journalists. Closely related variants of this model of participatory journalism are thought of in

terms such as "open-source journalism" (cf. Deuze, 2001) and "networked journalism" (Jarvis, 2006).

- ▪ Citizen journalism: this term has become widely accepted to refer to the *"act of citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information"* (Bowman & Willis, 2003: 9). A synonym is "grassroots journalism" (Gillmor, 2004), and also Haas' (2004) understanding of the term "public's journalism" can be posed under this heading. The main difference to 'participatory journalism' is that in citizen journalism the news making process is completely pulled out of the hands of journalists and left over to the people, who have become both producers and users of the news.

In spite of the sometimes confusing discourses and inconsistent use of the different terms, the rationale behind all these participatory models of journalism is that professional journalism is in need of a redefinition of its democratic role in a changing society. In their critiques on the top-down approach of the professional 'journalistic gatekeeper', the adepts of these 'new journalisms' argue that journalism should try to enhance citizens' engagement with both the making and the use of news. Contrary to the models of public journalism and interactive journalism, however, the key argument in the latter two models is that it is no longer the journalist who should be considered as the central authority in the news making process, but rather the citizens themselves. Journalists should not only open up the news process, turn journalism from a lecture into a conversation with citizens and encourage citizens to participate in the different stages of the editorial news-making process. Above all, they should learn to acknowledge that they can no longer claim control over the gatekeeping process, but have to share this control with the public.

3. Participatory journalism in four European countries

In this section of the paper, we look at how participatory journalism is developing in four European countries: Belgium, Finland, Germany and Spain. In order to gain a better insight in the factors influencing the adoption of participatory elements in mainstream journalism in each of these countries, we try to reflect on the current media market structure; previous experiences with public journalism and interactive journalism (internal context); and the ways in which mainstream media are currently reacting on the trends of user generated content and citizen journalism (external context).

3.1. Belgium

Roughly analogous to the Belgian federal state structure, the media market is divided in the French-speaking community and the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders. Both regions have a distinct media market

with its own specific structure, policy and culture. The newspaper market in Flanders is controlled by three media groups: Corelio, Concentra and De Persgroep Publishing, whereas the main players in the French-speaking community are Rossel, IPM and Mediabel. The magazine sector is dominated by Roularta, De Persgroep Publishing and the Finnish Sanoma company. Like many other European countries, Belgium has a strongly developed public service broadcasting system, with both RTBF (French-speaking community) and VRT (Flemish community) being the major players in their respective radio and television market (De Bens, 2006).

In this environment, dominated by public broadcasters and a handful of newspaper and magazine publishers, media companies are generally following international trends rather than take the lead in it. Moreover, innovations in newspaper publishing tend to be much more focused on technological innovation rather than on newsroom experiments with new forms of journalism (Paulussen, 2005, 2006). Consequently, public journalism has not received much attention from mainstream media. In fact, the concept and the ideas behind it have been hardly discussed in Belgium in academic or professional literature. The fact that most of what has been written about public/civic journalism in Dutch comes from The Netherlands (e.g. Drok & Jansen, 2001), illustrates that the movement did not find many adepts in Belgium. In 2002, there was a project funded by the King Baudouin Foundation, in which 22 media outlets, both online and print titles, experimented with participatory enhancing practices in journalism. Although both the researchers and the journalists that were involved in this project were quite positive about the outcome of these 'civic journalism' experiments (see Grevisse & Carpentier, 2004), the project did not receive much of a following in the next years. On special occasions, for instance in the approach of elections, newspapers sometimes take initiatives that can be labelled as 'public journalism' (e.g. organizing a political debate, moderating discussion forums, giving users the opportunity to 'chat' for one hour with an important politician, etc.), but in general, the ideas of public journalism have not had much of an impact on the logic of the mainstream press in Belgium.

Like in most countries, the Belgian online media market is dominated by traditional media players. Consequently, online journalism in Belgium did mainly develop within the newsrooms – and thus within the logics – of traditional media. Although the findings of surveys among Dutch and Flemish online journalists in 2000-2001 provided some indications as if online journalists might be more open towards ideas of interactivity (Deuze & Paulussen, 2002), reality has proven that in practice online journalists tend to uphold similar norms and professional values as their print colleagues (De Bens et al., 2003; Paulussen, 2004). If we want to consider whether mainstream media are likely to adopt participatory elements in the news making process, we must not only look at journalists' self-perceptions about their role and commitment towards the public, but we should consider organizational aspects as well. Like in other countries, studies in

Belgium have pointed at small-sized newsrooms and lack of resources as major explaining factors for the low or non-adoption of interactivity in online journalism (Paulussen, 2004; Beyers, 2005).

In recent years, in the context of the Web 2.0 hype, mainstream media in Belgium are showing an increased interest in user generated content and citizen participation. A leading role is played by the public broadcaster VRT, which set up a platform called *16+*, where people can upload their self-produced video material. VRT is also quite actively experimenting with other forms of online community-building through weblogs and social sites such as myspace. Important to note, however, is that these initiatives try to increase public's loyalty towards the broadcaster station rather than to involve citizens in the *news* process. Most of VRT's experiments with user generated content are, in other words, situated outside journalism.

The media company that is putting the most effort in opening up the news process for user contribution, is Concentra. In 2006, this media company, that focuses its activities mainly on the province of Limburg, launched a platform for citizen-generated news content called HasseltLokaal. The platform is maintained by an editorial team of 15 citizen reporters, who work as volunteers covering local news from around the city of Hasselt. While one year after its launch, *HasseltLokaal* is considered as a successful participatory journalism experiment, one can still wonder to what extent media can find a sufficient number of dedicated and motivated citizen journalists, who are not only prepared but also trained and equipped to contribute to the news production. It is already apparent that the maintenance of platforms like *HasseltLokaal* requires more than just the provision of the technology and tools. It also requires moderation, coordination and even training of amateur journalists (Vranken, 2007).

A final note should be made on the small scale of the country's media market. Internet usage in Belgium, a country of about 10.5 million people, has risen to 58% in 2005 (Statistics Belgium, 2006). Not all of these people, of course, are online news consumers (Beyers, 2005). Furthermore, although exact figures are not available, it is clear that the blogosphere is only a small fraction of the total online media ecology. Research is needed to investigate the structure and significance of the Belgian blogosphere and other citizen-generated news media, but it is safe to say that its impact in terms of gatekeeping and agendasetting is still limited.

3.2. Finland

Two features in the media landscape of Finland are particularly noteworthy when contextualizing participatory journalism. One is the press structure that is characterized by strong regional newspapers. The country of about 5.2 million people has about 100 newspapers (about half of them dailies), but excluding two tabloid-ish afternoon papers and to some extent the biggest newspaper, the Helsinki-based Helsingin Sanomat, about all general newspapers have either regional or even local basis for their

circulation and advertising. More importantly, newspapers have manifestly attached themselves to their respective constituencies by proclaiming to be part of those communities, but adhering to the principles of professional journalism. On top of that, many of newspapers, although operated as businesses, had political affiliations (mostly with center or right-wing parties) till 1970s and even later. Thus, Finnish newspapers have a tradition of being "committed to a cause" with regards to civic society instead of being mere information mediators (Lehto 2006).

The other substantive feature is the strong tradition of public broadcasting in Finland. Although the Finnish Broadcasting Corporation (Yleisradio, YLE) has met severe competition by private companies in both television and radio fields, it still is most important single operator in broadcasting, and the values of public service are largely shared in the country. For instance, the two national tv-companies (WSOY-Sanoma owned Nelonen, and Swedish Bonnier owned MTV3) make their point of investing in high-quality news and current affairs programmes.

Consequently, there was somewhat fertile ground to which the ideas of public journalism were introduced in 1990's. It was the academics who in Finland first paid attention to this movement, but the media soon became interested. One of the factors was that at that time the media, especially newspapers, suffered simultaneously from declining circulations and assumed threat of the Internet. (Heinonen 1999) Several research and development experiments on practical implementation of public or civic journalism have been carried out since 1990s with aims to enhance public's participation in setting the news agenda of the media. One can say that the idea of allowing "ordinary citizen" to have more say in journalism beside the established elite sources has strengthened, but in practical terms this often means positioning the citizen merely as an incidental commentator of issues decided somewhere above. On the other hand, in some newsrooms the role allowed for citizens has become more prominent in shaping journalistic content. (Ahva 2003, Högmander 2005) However, one should note that along public journalism experiments, the media has made use of more business-oriented strategies, such as consumer studies, for becoming better aware of needs of its audiences. The risen status of the reader is a result of both of these strategies.

With regards to online journalism, the Finnish media encountered the Internet in 1990s much the same way as other Western media. On the one hand, there was the fear of losing the audience to the Net, and on the other hand, there were hopes of gaining new possibilities by going online. (Heinonen 1999, Mäkinen 2004) Interactivity was one of the key-words, but in practice the two-way communication possibilities were scarce in the Finnish online media for a long time. Partly this was due to technological incompetence and unclear legislation (issues of responsibility of contents), but also the prevailing journalistic culture affected to this. In fact, in the early days of the Internet Finnish journalists considered readers' e-mails more a nuisance disturbing "real" work, although in principle the possibility to foster relationships with the audience

was appreciated (Heinonen 1999, Heinonen & Kinnunen 2005). The situation has changed, but slowly. In early 2000s among Finnish newspapers, for instance, many made hardly any use of the interactive features of the Net, although a number of them maintained regular and even extensive readers' discussion forums, invited readers to comment, and send in news tips and even news pictures from readers' camera phones. (Kivessilta 2005) Nowadays it is not irregular to find extracts of newspapers' online forums' discussions taken to the printed versions, and there has been even a couple of cases of readers' news pictures making to the front-page of a newspaper. On tv, the SMS and e-mail input from viewers during talk-shows is also a quite regular feature.

The weblog phenomenon has had a siginificant effect on Finnish online media mostly in that blogs have appeared as a new journalistic genre in the news media. A number of journalists have established a media blog, i.e. a blog that is perhaps a more personal in style but nevertheless a regular part of the contents of a medium following its journalistic line. It is telling that not all of these media bloggers allow direct or even any commenting, but those that do have rejoiced for discovering such contacts with their readers. However, the suspicion or even ignorance towards the free, non-media, blogosphere is still a prevailing attitude of established media and professional journalists. For instance, during the Tsunami catastrophe at the turn of years 2004-2005, the Finnish media largely failed to use citizen blogs as their sources – although a Finnish citizen blog beat both media and official sources in delivering news of the incident (Itkonen 2007).

The rather slow acceptance of the interactivity of digital media by the Finnish news media is interesting when considering the quite high digital media literacy of Finns. The Internet penetration is high: In 2006, three of four Finns used the Net, and in the group under 40 years old, almost all uses it. (Statistics Finland, 2006) In addition, since 1990s both national and local Information Society policies have encouraged and facilitated projects which aim at active users of new media. As a result, there are a number of citizen online media, from rural media sites through neighborhood amateur reporters' publications to media criticism and expert blogs in the country. (Sirkkunen & Kotilainen 2004) Thus, there is basic digital competence on behalf of the public to become more active participant in the journalistic discourse when and if the media chooses to move to that direction.

3.3. Germany

Germany's media market is one of the biggest in the world, with a varied structure of news media offering content for an 80 million people audience. Due to the country's history, there is a strong public service broadcasting system (basically installed by the Allies after WW II), private broadcasting, and several hundred newspapers, most of them serving a local and regional market. However, just a few handful of

large companies own most of these newspapers and broadcasters, so these large publishing houses and media companies (like Bertelsmann/Gruner & Jahr, Springer, Burda, the waz group, and in the broadcasting sector RTL, ProSiebenSat.1 etc.) strongly influence and push the media market development.

In this environment, public service journalism did not develop very well, though. As Lünenborg writes in a recent piece on the topic, *"the huge discussion on public journalism in the US virtually had no effect on Germany"* (Lünenborg 2005, 155; translated from the German original). There are many possible reasons – some of them might be directly attributed to the market structure itself:

- As said above, there are many local newspapers that already serve a community function, so there was probably not an urgent need for a reorientation in many of these smaller units. Weischenberg, Malik and Scholl note in their latest representative "Journalism in Germany" study that local journalists in Germany *"do have a less elitist occupational culture than other beats"* (2006: 110, translated from the German original), and *"try to integrate the audience and strengthen its importance"*. While this might not be true civic journalism, this strong local tradition might have softened the urgency of implementing new forms of user oriented journalism.

- Furthermore, the big publishing houses seemed to be quite reluctant to experiment, after they spent a lot of money on videotex and online media, which did not prove (economically) successful in most cases. Actually, many of the bigger media companies did heavily cut down their online staff in the years after the new economy crash and during a phase of severe economic problems with high unemployment (which indirectly lead to shrinking newspaper sales and media spendings).

- Other reasons might lie in the mentality and culture of Germany (stronger reliance on state organization, less belief in privately organized activities), with a different community structure than the US (high density of population, living mainly in small or medium sized cities, many spare time activities organized in club structures etc.).

That said, there are some experiments with public journalism in Germany, for example the so called 'open channels' – TV stations that are open for any user to participate, supported by the state on the basis of a specific media legislation. However, they are not very successful in attracting anything but a very small audience.

In such a media environment, it does not come as a surprise that user participation in online media was not happily greeted by the mainstream media companies - they did not adopt this trend until fairly recently. Obviously, they were already struggling with converging newsrooms and cross media concepts (cf. Brüggemann 2002, Meyer 2005).

In the mean time, however, buzz words like 'weblogs' and 'web 2.0' have finally reached the German online

market, too, and recently, media managers and chief editors seem to be more interested in the integration of communities – some people already talk about a new internet hype. User generated content instead of content produced by professional editors – that's a recipe tested by some mainstream media companies now, however not so much in their 'flagship media', but in separate publications. Examples include *jetzt.de* (an offspring of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*), *Sensation!* (*Tagesspiegel*), *Opinio* (*Rheinische Post*) and *Reader's Edition* (developed by the *Netzeitung*, but sold in the meantime).

Still, there are some doubts about the true reasons for the adoption of user generated content in mainstream online media. It is not unlikely that the developments are labeled by the managements as 'democratic', 'pluralistic' and 'trendy', while they are primarily trying to lower the costs for professional editors by using 'free' content happily provided by users. The resulting damaging effects on the journalistic profession have been discussed lately, also in an ethical context, triggered by *BILD*'s (Germany's largest tabloid) offer to buy (Paparazzi) pictures from 'reader reporters' for a minimal fee. Recent data on the development of the journalistic job market fueled the discussion: Weischenberg, Malik and Scholl's (2006) 'Journalism in Germany' study indicates a shrinking number of full time journalists. For online journalism, Quandt et al. (2006) could show that there are many part time or even semi-professional journalist working in online journalism – and not all of them do this out of a participatory interest, but to earn their rent and food, struggling with several jobs (with one of them being journalism).

A related question concerns the motivation of the users to contribute to mainstream media or write blogs. While there are some high profile bloggers and citizen journalists that do offer journalistic content via their website or contribute original content to user driven media, most of the blog content are of a more private nature. A recent survey on German webloggers supported a private – and sometimes narcistic – motivation of most bloggers (cf. Schmidt, Wilbers, Paetzolt 2006; for an overview of research on blogs in Germany, s. also Neuberger, Nuernbergk & Rischke 2007). There are some promintent exceptions, though – most notably the *BILDblog*, a website that discusses and analyzes the mistakes of *BILD*'s coverage. Its main authors are journalists themselves, thus offering a journalistic critique function of journalism through a blog – with a notable number of users (usually, *BILDblog* is noted as the top ranked blog in Germany) who are also contributing content themseves.

That said, such forms would not be existing without mainstream journalism. So some doubts remain whether blogs and user generated content will be a large scale success story in Germany (like in the US), and whether the developments have to be discussed in the context of a useful and pluralistic evolution of journalism (s. also Neuberger 2006 a, b) – or rather in the context of an economically motivated de-professionalization of journalism.

3.4. Spain

The recent history of Spain, with the transition to democracy in the 1970s after a long dictatorship, has shaped the evolution of the media market and the public sphere (Gunther, Montero and Wert, 2000). In a market of 40 million people and three regional languages besides Spanish, a three-layered structure formed, with the locus for direct participation of the citizens in the media restricted to local initiatives during the 1980s and 1990s:

- Nation-state level: The quality newspapers, with sharp political partisanship, seen as natural as society learned to openly engage in public debate (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). However, their readership has always been low –around 35% in the late 1990s – and it has declined lately following international trends and the competition of free newspapers created in the 2000s (AIMC, 2006). Television has been the top news source for citizens, and after the public broadcasting monopoly opened up big multimedia conglomerates formed with the newspapers as the center. These national media tend to be close to the political elites they report on, in a self-referential public sphere where the citizens are regarded as a passive audience that is just supposed to react to news and the influential op-ed articles of news editors (Borrat, 1989).

- Regional level: Especially in Catalonia, the Basque country, Galicia and Andalusia, regional media groups became leaders in their area of influence, with semiautonomous dynamics in these smaller public spheres (Gunther, Montero and Wert, 2000). The logic here was also the same as in the nation-state level.

- Local level: During the democratic transition, in some regions community media initiatives were developed at a municipal and county level (Rodriguez, 2001; Moragas, Domingo and López, 2002). Based on the principles of a long-awaited freedom of expression and direct democracy, content was developed by amateur volunteers reporting on daily events of their communities. Most of these projects evolved into more professional structures to ensure stability, but this ended up leaving content production in the hands of journalists and citizens contributions tended to disappear from the projects.

The concept of public journalism has been largely ignored in Spain, probably because of the youth of a professional and democratic journalism in the country, and even though the criticisms of public journalism to the US media are mostly applicable to the Spanish case. The fact is that current proponents of participatory online journalism in Spain use US public journalism as a referent when looking to root their statements to solid arguments (Madariaga, 2006; Varela, 2005).

In the early 2000s, the global trend of the (re)activation of citizen participation both inside and outside the media also arrived to Spain, as if the Internet had connected this Mediterranean market to the pace of the

Western world. Outside the media, anti-globalization and anti-war civic movements have used the Internet to organize and express their points of view (Atton, 2004). During the first phase of the war in Iraq, the self-organizing capabilities of civil society ended up influencing media coverage in becoming extremely critic to the war. Also, weblogs have rapidly developed as a self-publishing tool among Spanish netizens, and political debate is the main driving force. This is not to say that citizens have engaged into a dialogue on the policies of their governments, but rather a replication of the partisan dialectics of the national and regional media; building arguments to criticize the opponent are the main topic in the Spanish political blogosphere (Escolar, 2006).

Inside the media, data from a census of 58 Spanish media companies developing convergence projects (Domingo *et al.*, 2007) reported that only a third (22) were exploring some sort of audience participation. Most of the options framed audience as respondents to journalistic content: comments on news and on journalists' blogs were the prevalent developments. User-generated newsworthy materials (photos, stories, videos, blogs) were invited in some of the national newspaper websites, and only few of the regional and local websites had such features. The fact that national newspapers are now leading the development of audience involvement in the media in a country where in earlier decades this was circumscribed to local projects suggests that new factors need to be explored to understand current trends. Catalan online journalists in four case studies shared interactivity as one of the powerful online journalism utopias, even though they have mixed feelings about the benefits of audience participation (Domingo, 2007). Fierce competition among national Spanish news sites and the prevalent reference of US online media developments can explain why participatory journalism has been so quickly embraced at the national level.

ElPais.com (owned by Prisa, the editor of the main quality newspaper in Spain) has a section called "Yo Periodista", paralleling CNN's I Reporter. And the free daily *Qué!* hosts audience blogs on its website, promising that the best posts will be published in the print edition. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that these projects have redefined (for better) the work of the journalists in these media or fostered open discussion on public interest issues. ElPais.com representatives announced they have 12 editors solely devoted to filter user contributions in order to get rid of vandalistic and offensive submissions, even in news comments (Nafría, 2007). "There is a lack of participatory culture in Spain", Nafría argued.

A further cautious note has to be made when discussing online participation. In Spain only 40% of the population uses the Internet regularly, connecting weekly or more often (INE, 2006). While among people under 25 usage increases to 71%, the low penetration rate in elder generations has not been solved by the multiple initiatives of national and regional governments. Castells *et al.* (2004) hypothesized that the Mediterranean social habits could explain this lack of interest of a big part of the population in going online, as outdoor life and face-to-face relationships were essential. However, the authors also found that those

who where the most active Internet users were also those with bigger offline social networks and more engagement in public affairs and civic initiatives. Somehow, then, an elite of society seems to be the one taking advantage of the opportunities of online technologies, while the majority of citizens tend to be mere passive recipients of mainstream media political rallies.

4. Discussion: doing it together?

> *"'Networked journalism' takes into account the collaborative nature of journalism now: professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, perspectives. It recognizes the complex relationships that will make news. And it focuses on the process more than the product."* (Jarvis, 2006).

The country descriptions in this paper show that mainstream media in Europe are still far removed from this ideal-typical model of "networked" or participatory journalism. At the same time, however, trends in the four countries confirm that both external and internal developments in journalism have revived the debate on the role of the professionals and their publics in the digital era. From the outside, mainstream journalism is confronted with the emergence of a digital culture, in which users are more and more actively participating in the creation and publication of content. To some extent, these external developments have ignited the discussion inside the profession, also fuelled by the need to engage new audiences in an increasingly competitive environment.

Starting from these two observations from outside and inside the profession, this paper has looked at how participatory journalism is developing in four European countries: Belgium, Finland, Germany and Spain. The descriptions by the respective authors draw a somewhat sobering picture that stresses the sluggish adoption of interactivity in online journalism, on the one hand, and the moderate impact public journalism has had on existing models of journalism, on the other hand. In this respect, we could argue that the internal context in which participatory journalism is supposed to evolve seems to provide a lot of barriers for citizen participation in the news making process. In other words, the professional culture of mainstream journalism, which still favours a professional top-down approach, conflicts with the external context, that heralds some optimistic promises of an emerging participatory media culture.

First of all, studies in each of the countries have shown that professional journalists are rather sceptical about interactivity with their users, and that they still like to think about the role of journalism in terms of the top-down model of trustee journalism. Secondly, the country reports point at several organizational factors influencing the (non-)adoption of citizen participation in the (online) news making process (e.g. lack

of resources, deeply-rooted work routines, etc.). The paper also considered cultural aspects as explanatory factors influencing the spread of participatory journalism, suggesting, for instance, that the base on which the ideals of participatory journalism are being built is rather narrow as the large majority of citizens are still unlikely to play an active role in the news making process. Finally, critical remarks have been made about the market-driven rather than civic-oriented rationale behind mainstream media's experiments with user generated content and citizen participation.

Further research is needed to evaluate the nature and quality of audience participation in the cases when it is fostered. In "best practices" cases, an analysis of the structural changes in work organization, routines and professional values that have enabled relevant participation will be useful to assess to what extent participatory journalism can become a widespread practice in the media and what can be its consequences for the quality of journalism and the public sphere. Analytical models like the one proposed by Bruns (2005) under the label of *gatewatching* can be useful for such an approach, even though more operational categories are needed to describe the extent and locus of participation. Such a model should enable to locate the moments in the news production process that are being redefined, as well as those that remain intact, and trigger more specific hypotheses to explain the reasons for the apparent reluctancy of mainstream media in the development of participation spaces.

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