ARTICLES
ARTICULOS

ACTIVE AUDIENCES AND JOURNALISM:

Involved citizens or motivated consumers? [1, 2]

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ABSTRACT - Audience participation, in any of its forms and names (public journalism, citizen journalism, participatory journalism, UGC), appears to revitalise democracy, thanks to the opportunities for public debate opened up by information and communications technology. On the other hand, however, there are many authors who question whether interactive technologies really encourage democracy or the market, empower the citizen or strengthen the consumer. In this context, we still have little information on the motivations that drive citizens to actively participate through the mechanisms that the media make available to them on their own websites or through social networks. There is a similar lack of information on the role that users attribute to their involvement in the functioning of the media and whether it contributes to improving their democratic function. This article aims to shed some light on this subject.
Keywords: Participation. Journalist. Active audiences. Participatory journalism. Democracy.

AUDIÊNCIAS ATIVAS E JORNALISMO:
cidadãos engajados ou consumidores motivados?

RESUMO - A participação da audiência, em qualquer de suas formas e nomes (jornalismo público, jornalismo cidadão, jornalismo participativo, UGC), parece revitalizar a democracia, graças às oportunidades de debate público abertas pela tecnologia de informação e comunicações. Por outro lado, no entanto, há muitos autores que questionam se as tecnologias interativas realmente incentivam a democracia ou o mercado, empoderam o cidadão ou fortalecem o consumidor. Neste contexto, ainda temos pouca informação sobre as motivações que impulsionam os cidadãos a participarem ativamente por meio dos mecanismos que os meios de comunicação tornam disponíveis para eles em seus próprios sites ou redes sociais. Há uma falta semelhante de informações sobre o papel que os usuários atribuem ao seu envolvimento no funcionamento dos meios de comunicação e se contribui para melhorar a sua função democrática. Este artigo pretende lançar alguma luz sobre este assunto.
Palavras-chave: Participação. Jornalista. Públicos ativos. Jornalismo participativo. Democracia.

AUDIENCIAS ACTIVAS Y PERIODISMO¿
ciudadanos implicados o consumidores motivados?

RESUMEN - La participación de la audiencia, en cualquiera de sus formas y denominaciones (public journalism, periodismo ciudanano, periodismo su participativo, UGC), revitaliza, aparentemente, la democracia, gracias a las posibilidades que las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación ofrecen para el debate público. Frente a estas posiciones, sin embargo, no faltan las voces que se cuestionan si las tecnologías interactivas realmente fomentan la democracia o el mercado, potencian al ciudadano o fortalecen al consumidor. En este contexto, disponemos todavía de poca información sobre las motivaciones que impulsan a los ciudadanos a participar activamente a través de los mecanismos de participación que los medios de comunicación ponen a su disposición en sus propias webs o a través de las redes sociales. Así como del rol que los usuarios atribuyen a su implicación en el funcionamiento de los medios y si contribuye a mejorar la función democrática de los medios de comunicación. Este artículo pretende aportar algo de luz en este aspecto.
Palabras clave: Participación. Periodismo. Audiencias activas. Periodismo participativo. Democracia.

INTRODUCTION: MUTATING AUDIENCES

Journalism is legitimated through its democratic function in democracy and its defence of civil liberties in society. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2003) remind us, the purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and able to govern themselves. This role, however, has been questioned since the advent of Web 2.0, in which the media have lost the monopoly of symbolic power, the ability to get involved in events, to influence the actions of others and create real events (THOMPSON, 1998, p. 33-35). Audiences are starting to consume information from anywhere, in another way, and in other spaces. We are moving from a model based exclusively on supply to a model focused on demand. Users determine what to consume, how and where. Mobility and interactivity shape media consumption.

Despite this, in the internet era, television is still the most popular news medium for Spaniards, cited by 56.8% of the population, followed by the radio, 13.7%. Digital media are now more important than printed media, with 11.9 and 9% respectively (CIS, 2013). These figures, however, need more detailed analysis, since they

are a response to the question regarding the favourite medium for obtaining news, as if citizens only used one medium for this purpose. When more than one response is allowed, we can observe that, while television (national, local and regional channels) remains the most popular medium for news, the internet is increasingly close behind, confirming that news consumption is multi-channel and multimedia.

Likewise, we note there are different news sources online and offline. While offline, television is the most popular news source, the main online news sources are the digital versions of traditional newspapers (82.7%) and not the television websites (28.9%). Even the pure player media play a secondary role (18.3%).[3]

In the first decade and a half of the 21st century, audiences, in addition to changing their preferences and consumption habits, have also become active. Citizens are not satisfied with passively consuming news, and pursue greater participation, both outside and through the media. In some cases, this implies, at least potentially, becoming involved in all the phases of the production process. As was pointed out at the beginning, following Thompson (THOMPSON, 1988), audiences are breaking with the symbolic power of the media, which is now shifting to the active audience.

Of course, interaction between media and users is not new. There have been letters to the editor in the printed press for over 200 years (DA SILVA, 2012; RICHARDSON; FRANKLIN 2004; WAHL-JORGENSEN, 2002a; WAHL-JORGENSEN 2002b) and in the 1990s the first initiatives were taken to bring journalism closer to the public through public journalism. This movement arose from two concerns, the gulf between the media and the community and that between the American people and public life. People felt that the democratic function of the media had been discarded in favour of market logic. They advocated a change of role and a return to the idea of journalism as a profession of public interest, strongly rooted in citizenship and with a real commitment to the values and principles of the democratic system (PAULUSSEN, et al. 2007; NIP, 2006; BLACK, 1997; ROSEN, 1999).

The advent of the internet has brought substantial changes to the bases of public or citizen journalism, including a real-time direct relationship between the media and their readers, and between the citizens themselves. It is proclaimed that the days of journalism are numbered, as citizens can become producers of news and break the professional journalists' monopoly of imparting information. Scholars

have debated extensively on how to describe the phenomenon, from citizen journalism to participatory journalism (BOWMAN; WILLIS, 2003), collaborative journalism (BRUNS, 2005), or network journalism (HEINRICH, 2011). These terms are often employed interchangeably as genuine synonyms, although there are subtle differences between them. There is some consensus that participatory journalism refers to forms of citizen participation within the framework of the media, relegating citizen journalism to the activity performed outside the media (PAULUSSEN et al., 2007).

The economic crisis triggered many of the initiatives developed by the digital media aimed at seeking to boost revenue through, normally, gaining bigger audiences. Such initiatives were often based on trial and error. If in 2007 the media invested in video production, confident that the audiovisual content would attract a greater number of viewers (MASIP; MICÓ, 2008; GUALLAR, 2008), in recent years, and after experiencing the relative failure of video, participation has become the media's hope for capturing, retaining and monetising audiences.

The adoption of participatory mechanisms by online media is well established (DOMINGO, 2008; HERMIDA; THURMAN, 2008; SUAU; MASIP, 2014). The introduction of users' comments and ratings, as well as the option of sending in their own news materials, and other forms of interactivity, are now a feature of online media, which have incorporated participation as part of a broader strategy. The media allow various forms of reader participation, and major differences can be identified between the various participatory models (DEUZE, 2001; TAMAIUOLO, 2009; MASIP; SUAU 2014). The choice of participatory mechanisms and other issues such as moderation controls applied to contents provided by users are conscious decisions, which relate to the objectives and the personality of each medium, strongly influenced by their presence, or lack of presence, in the analogue world.

Research suggests that the main motivation for creating these opportunities for participation is financial rather than journalistic or relating to democratic culture (VUJNOVIC et. al., 2010; MASIP; MICÓ, 2010; ROSENSTIEL; MICHELL, 2011).

The attitude of professional journalists to the development of opportunities for participation in digital media has been the main focus of researchers' attention. The results have been very similar in different countries, including the US (CHUNG, 2007), the UK

(HERMIDA; THURMAN, 2008; WILLIAMS et al., 2010), the Netherlands (BAKKER; PANTTI, 2009), Germany (NEUBERGER; NUERNBERGK, 2010), and Catalonia (MASIP; MICÓ, 2010). Although audience participation is well established, journalists adopt a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards it. They usually accept comments (although they often seem irritated with the tone of some comments, especially if they relate to what they themselves have produced) and also encourage citizens to send in their material. However, they are concerned about preserving the prestige of the medium and show their unease at the prospect of a change to their role as gatekeeper or an alteration of their routines and pre-existing values. In short, they want to keep control over the production process and the results. They usually justify the change on journalistic grounds, that participation contributes to an improvement in the quality of journalism, and ignore the financial component (CHUNG, 2007; DOMINGO et al., 2008; SINGER, 2010; HARRISON, 2010; WARDLE; WILLIAMS, 2010).

The new active role of the audience favours the emergence of many voices questioning the role of the journalist and journalism, and the traditional role of the media as a mediator and facilitator of public debate is called into question. The possibilities of the internet for distributing all kinds of content leads a number of authors to regard it as the new public agora (BOWMAN; WILLIS, 2003; GILLMOR, 2004; NIP, 2006). New players appear, such as blogs, news portals not linked to professional media, and social networks. Some authors (BRUNS, 2005) have theorised about a paradigm shift, from the powerful gatekeeper of the traditional journalist to collective gatewatching, where the abundance of information and unlimited internet space make it only sensible to point to sources of relevant reflections and data, something that bloggers do continuously. Blogs have undoubtedly multiplied the number of voices forming today's journalism, covering areas often neglected by the mass media (LOWREY, 2006; DOMINGO; HEINONEN, 2008). However, research shows that they have not changed the essence of professional practice. Bloggers who are not journalists are reluctant to define themselves as agents of change in journalism or as competitors to journalists (MATHESON, 2004). When they seek to become established as authors online, they replicate the routines of the profession, rather than creating new ones (LOWREY; LATTA, 2008). For their part, journalist bloggers tend to reproduce the routines and traditional values of journalism (SINGER, 2005; ROBINSON, 2006).

In the Anglo-Saxon professional world. there is clear concern about these practices, which contrasts with the limited scientific research conducted in the area. Since 2008, the BBC has had a staff manual for use of social networks, which includes some limitations, for instance, it prohibits the use of Wikipedia. In this area of public authorship, freedom of expression sometimes becomes true acts of vandalism (SHACHAF; HARA, 2010) and murders have even been falsely attributed to famous journalists (ROSENZWEIG, 2006). Media such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* have also placed limits on the participatory culture, developing an editorial policy in this regard as part of their internal regulations, where non-compliance is punishable with dismissal. There is, therefore, a relationship of dependency and enmity between the media and some digital social platforms.

In this context, the media are perplexed and disoriented. They are wary of the potential of audience participation, but also see the interaction as an incomparable source of news.

1 MUTATING AUDIENCES... NEW PRACTICES, OLD HABITS

The relationship between journalists and audience was based on a pact of mutual trust, of shared expectations. Readers placed their trust in journalists, with the expectation that they would publish what ought to be published and what interested them, whereas journalists trusted that what they published was genuinely what the public expected to receive and met their expectations as citizens.

Interestingly, despite the importance of the audience, the media have traditionally had little information about them. They had daily television audience ratings and audience and circulation studies provided precise information on the most popular media, the best-selling newspapers or the most-viewed online media. However, none of these were the result of direct contact with the audience, which was historically relegated to letters to the editor.

Digital technology has changed this. Web metrics and analytics have entered the newsroom, enabling the media, for the first time, to have a better understanding of the audience. The data collected provides detailed information about what really interests their audience and how they access the media.

Having this information undoubtedly gives the media a big advantage. However, at the same time it puts them in a position of unstable equilibrium. On the one hand, they have the legitimate approach of trying to offer content that meets the expectations of readers based on their consumption habits, and on the other, the need to avoid falling into the iron dictatorship of the audience, a temptation which is hard to overcome in the current economic situation experienced by the media, particularly online media.

In other words, the media are facing a delicate balance between public interest and the public's interest, between journalistic logic and business logic. If the balance tips towards the latter, the democratic, public service function of journalism and with it one of its key pillars (RUIZ et al., 2011) will be swept away.

The results of some research lead us to believe that the gap between public interest and the public's interest is increasing (LEE; CHYI, 2013). In the line described by Pablo Boczkowsky and Eugenia Mitchelstein (2013) a growing gap has been observed between what journalists prioritise and what users prioritise. While the former focus on political or "hard" news, users read mainly "soft" news not related to public affairs. This disparity, however, should not be viewed in isolation in terms of what does and does not interest the user. Issues of public interest may not be the most frequently read, but they often receive the greatest number of comments and generate the greatest debate.

By way of illustration, we can cite the response of the main Spanish online media on learning of the decision of the Constitutional Court to bring to a halt the consultation on the independence of Catalonia organised by the Catalan government, and the reaction of their readers. All the media, without exception, provided detailed coverage of the news and the subsequent protests staged in the main cities of Catalonia after learning of the court decision (Figure 1). Based on the list of the most read news stories, it does not appear to have generated particular interest among the respective audiences (Figure 2). News items on the death of Miguel Boyer[4] or other "soft" topics dominated the news on all the lists, and it was only in ninth position that the first news item directly referring to the high court decision could be found.

Figure 1 - Front page of *Elpais.com*

Source: *Elpais.com* (30/09/14)

Figure 2 - Most read news stories in *Elpais.com* and *Elmundo.es*

Source: *Elpais.com* and *Elmundo.es* (30/09/14)

However, it is of note that the behaviour among the audience of the Catalan media was slightly different. Here, although the most read stories also included some low-intensity news, the articles covering the Constitutional Court decision and subsequent protests had a much higher profile than those observed in the media published in Madrid. This fits the behaviour described by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013), when they observed that in times of special political intensity

the audience tends to increase their interest in "public affairs" news.

Despite the relatively limited interest aroused by the decision of the Constitutional Court in terms of number of times the news was read, it generated a powerful reaction from the audience of the Spanish media in the form of comments. Within a few hours, the news stories connected with the independence of Catalonia received several hundred comments, and in some cases over a thousand. This is the case of the news story in *Elpais.com* regarding the protests staged by citizens after learning of the ban on the consultation. In just a few hours it produced over 4,000 comments and was shared over 2,300 times on Facebook and over 1,000 on Twitter (Figure 3).

Figure 3 - News story published on *Elpais.com* and audience participation

Source: *Elpais.com* and audience participation

At this point we note the first paradox: the journalist is no longer the sole gatekeeper. Even though initially it is journalists who decide what is and is not newsworthy, it is subsequently the users who decide on the interest of a piece of news and whether it is worth giving it visibility with a tweet, retweet, comment or "like".

Paradoxically, while reporters cling onto and exclusively assign themselves the role of gatekeepers, at the same time, and

mainly for financial reasons, they hand over that role to the users through the "like" or "tweet" buttons. Thus, in practice, the public become what Jane Singer (2013) calls secondary gatekeepers.

Despite the pessimism which sometimes pervades discussions on the future of journalism, encouraging trends can be drawn from our findings. In the era of web 2.0, participation and social networks, citizens continue to demand up-to-date news. People want news, they want to be informed, especially in matters of public interest, and they share the news they consider to be relevant or interesting.

What has changed is the means of accessing this news and the way of relating to it, which is no longer a unidirectional flow. Although the media still retain a central role, search engines and social networks are becoming increasingly important. The information reaches us, therefore, through multiple channels.

Although the most popular activity of Spaniards on social networks is interacting with friends (88.1%), the second most popular is accessing news, cited by 48.1% of respondents (Graph 1).

Graph 1 - Most popular activities on social networks
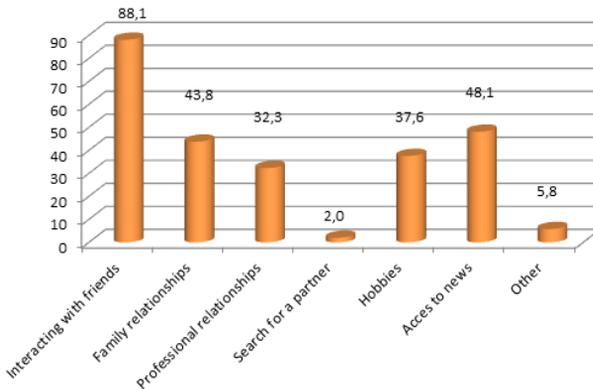
Source: MASIP; GUALLAR; PERALTA; RUIZ; SUAU, 2015

Users do not only demand news but, despite everything, continue to put their trust in journalists. We can see that 80% of news received through social networks comes from friends, who share the news produced by the media and professional journalists. Friends are the new gatekeepers of news.

This does not only not contradict but actually reinforces the growing confidence placed in the media and journalists. More

than half of Twitter and Facebook users follow at least one news medium and 30% follow journalists. In fact, citizens consider the news produced by professional journalists to be more reliable than that produced by non-professionals (Graph 2).

Graph 2 - To what extent do you think the news produced by professional journalists or by non-professional citizen journalists is reliable?
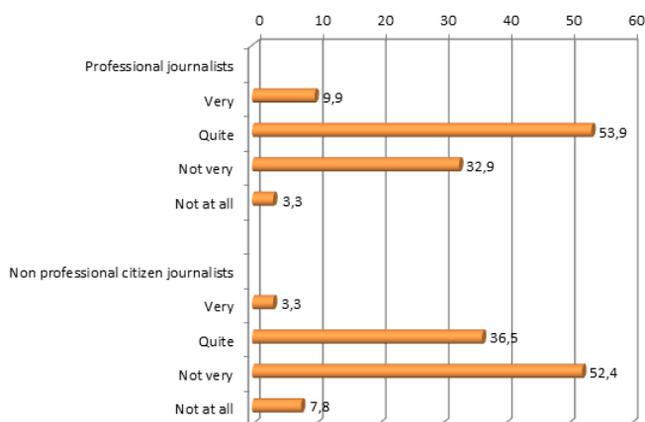
Source: MASIP; GUALLAR; PERALTA; RUIZ; SUAU, 2015

2 THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATION

We have seen that active audiences are taking over, at least partially, some of the classic phases of news production, such as selection and distribution. At the same time, however, they are not setting out to replace professional journalism. Rather, they are maintaining their confidence in the institution, despite the credibility issues it faces.

In this new relationship established between media and active audiences, participation plays an important role. Not only does it become the backbone of this new relationship, but also because of the value the audience itself places upon it. 83.1% of respondents agree that participation is important. And it is important despite the recognition that the opportunities offered by the media for interactivity are mainly an attempt to gain audience loyalty (34.1%), although the second objective pursued by the media in participation is the improvement of the news (24.7%). (Graph 3)

Graph 3 - The media's reasons for developing audience participation

Legend:
- For commerical purposes
- To empower readers
- To gain audience loyalty
- To improve de news
- To attract more visits and advertising
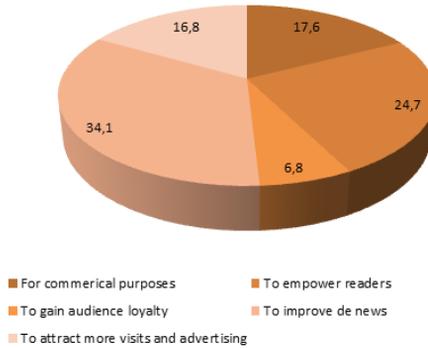
Source: MASIP; GUALLAR; PERALTA; RUIZ; SUAU, 2015

This finding leads to a new paradox. Despite the commercial motivations which govern participation strategies, citizens state that the main reason why they participate is to contribute to the improvement of news, although later recognising that participation, despite being important, does not affect the quality of news produced by the media (Graphs 4 and 5).

Graph 4 - The audience's reasons for participating

Legend:
- To improve the news
- For fun
- To defend my ideology
- To contest the wiew of others
- Have never participate
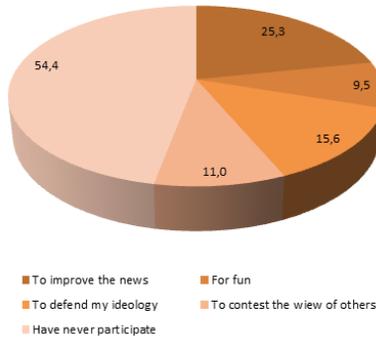
Source: MASIP; GUALLAR; PERALTA; RUIZ; SUAU, 2015

Graph 5 - Impact of participation on the quality of news
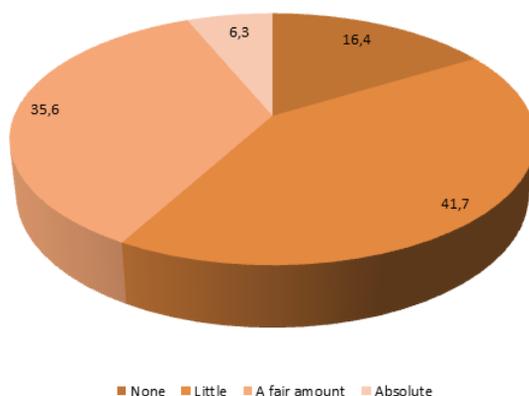
Source: MASIP; GUALLAR; PERALTA; RUIZ; SUAU, 2015

The consolidation of audience participation is seen as one of the main challenges of the media. As we have seen, the media have reacted to these opportunities with a mixture of fear and enthusiasm, attempting to integrate participation into their routines without the professional authority of the journalist being called into question.

Sociological studies confirm that a significant minority of users actively participate in the news reporting process, providing information to journalists, commenting on the news and redistributing it on social networks, for example, 37% of internet users in the US (PURCELL et al., 2010). However, the majority of users appear to be indifferent to the opportunities for participation and, where they participate, are more likely to respond to other people's contributions than contribute original ideas, according to a Swedish study (BERGSTRÖM, 2009). Despite the existence of this silent majority, who are still inactive or barely active, the proper management of participation may determine the future of citizen participation in the media. The evidence to date does not give cause for optimism. The media's endeavours to develop forms of user interaction have not been supported by the introduction of adequate mechanisms of control and moderation of participation (REICH, 2011). Consequently, participation has been discredited by spam comments, insults and organised campaigns, whereas there has been little debate and exchange of ideas (MANOSEVICH; WALKER, 2009; RUIZ et al, 2010; 2011; DIAKOPOULUS; NAAMAN, 2011; RICHARDSON; STANYER,

2011). None of this detracts from highlighting and recognising the contribution of citizen participation in the coverage of major news events, especially natural disasters, terrorist attacks and wars (ALLAN, 2014; LIU et al., 2008). In such cases, the common denominator is the role of privileged source acquired by the audience, which should not be confused with the role of a journalist.

As in other countries, in Spain participatory opportunities offered by the media, although highly valued, are used in moderation by users. Of the wide range of tools offered by the media for participation, the most successful forms of interaction are those of low intensity, such as recommending news, or medium intensity, such as commenting on the news.

Based on the classic concept of interactivity developed by authors such as Schultz (1999); Massey and Levy (1999); Jensen (1998), in previous work (SUAU; MASIP, 2014a; 2014b) we described three forms of interactivity based on the different levels of commitment and level of interactivity, namely selective interactivity, participatory interactivity and productive interactivity. The lowest level of participation and interactivity is provided by the tools and services grouped under the heading of "selective interactivity" (ROST, 2006). These are mechanisms enabling minimal interaction between the audience and the system (including journalists) and the adaptation of web content to user preferences: RSS, email alerts, the option of contacting the journalists or the medium, etc. A second group of tools fall under the heading of "participatory interactivity." This type of interactivity mainly takes place in a context of a user-medium relationship. Although this is a potentially horizontal relationship, which enables contact between users with journalists or other users, the relationship is developed within the parameters previously established by the medium. This group includes comments, ratings, "likes", etc., i.e. actions that do not involve any truly creative activity on the part of the users. Lastly, the third group encompassed under "productive interactivity" involves the actual creation of original content and includes tools such as blogs or the possibility of sending in photos, videos, texts, etc. Wunsh-Vincent and Vickery (2007) defined three essential characteristics that audience-generated content must include to be regarded as productive interactivity:

to be published by a medium, involve creative work and take place outside professional routines and practices.

In general, participatory forms of interactivity are the most common, but they only account for around 15% of weekly participation. However, the figure rises to 30% if we include users who use the tools on a monthly basis. Commenting on the news (22.7%, at least several times a week) or recommending news through Facebook (20.6%) are the most popular activities, followed some way behind by rating news or sharing news through Twitter.

The figures for forms of productive interactivity are much more modest, as these relate to the creation of original content that is published by a medium. As we have noted, these practices require a degree of creative effort, and take place outside professional routines and practices. Thus, only 2.5% of the audience contributes content on a weekly basis. Sending photographs (3.4%) or news (3%) are the most popular options.

CONCLUSION: (STILL) WAITING FOR ACTIVE AUDIENCES AND PARTICIPATORY MEDIA

Participation is presented as a mechanism that not only helps to win the battle for the audience, but also offers significant incentives to achieve greater profitability. Through the various forms of participation provided by the media, the latter can achieve a closer relationship with their audiences, strengthen the bonds of mutual trust and potentially create a sense of community or belonging. These are all factors that encourage loyalty.

In an ecosystem in which the audience is extremely volatile, in which the positioning in Google and recommendations from friends determine the news consumption of a growing segment of the population, and in which the audience demands a more prominent role, loyalty is perceived as one of the pillars to support the survival of the media. Loyalty is not achieved exclusively through the inclusion of forms of interactivity, but primarily by providing quality content, and also drawing the audience into a common news project. In other words, participation, but with direction, with a purpose from the point of view of democratic culture.

It is a significant challenge, but it is clear that users still want news, especially news preferably produced by professional journalists, whether or not it reaches them through the traditional channels. Not only that, users are taking up the opportunity of improving the news, and want to discuss it.

The online media are evolving towards the building of more intensive interaction models, which also seek to involve users in the production process or, in some cases, fostering their horizontal interaction though social networks.

Nevertheless, these efforts do not appear to meet the aspirations of the audience. Despite the initial discourses, up to now the media have failed to build real opportunities for debate in the form of a new 2.0 public sphere providing an environment in which citizens of different ideological positions can meet and exchange their perceptions and attitudes regarding public affairs. The existence of these forums for debate defines a real democracy and the lack of these is precisely one of the reasons why modern democracies are not working (BARBER, 2006).

Notes

1   This article takes as its starting point the opening lecture delivered by Pere Masip at the 12th *Encontro Nacional de Pesquisadores em Jornalismo (SBPJor),* held in Santa Cruz do Sul (Brazil) on 06/11/2014.

2   This article is part of the research project "Active audiences and journalism", funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (CSO2012-39518-C04-01).

3   The data used for this study are from a survey conducted for this research in co-operation with the Association for Media Research (AIMC). The AIMC is the institution of reference in Spain in the control and measurement of audiences, as it is a consortium participated by media companies and advertisers. This co-operation enabled us to carry out a survey on 591 individuals valid for the universe formed by the Spanish population over 14 years old with access to the internet, equivalent to approximately 26 million people. The fieldwork was conducted between December 2013 and February 2014.

4   Miguel Boyer was finance minister in the first government of Felipe

González (Spanish Socialist Party). He appeared on the front pages of the celebrity gossip magazines after he married Isabel Preysler, who was the first wife of Julio Iglesias, and regularly appeared in this type of magazine.

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