

Participation in Local Journalism

Assessing Two Approaches through Access, Dialogue and Deliberation

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Participatory journalism refers to a variety of discourses and practices implicating the active role of audiences and citizens in news production and dissemination processes (Borger *et al.*, 2103; Carpentier, 2015; Domingo *et al.*, 2008; Paulussen *et al.*, 2007; Wall, 2017). Participation is not a new concept (*e.g.*, Pateman, 1970) and a citizen participation tradition already existed within the mass media framework (Christians *et al.*, 2009: 25). Notions such as community journalism (Reader and Hatcher, 2012) and public journalism (Haas, 2007) can be seen as predecessors of digital participatory journalism. The notion has, however, gained more popularity as well as new layers of meaning over the past decade, especially due to possibilities offered by digitalization (Kreiss & Brennen, 2016).

The research community has been eager to study the democratizing possibilities that participatory journalism offers (Borger *et al.*, 2013). For example, recent social and political shifts have sparked intensified debates over how participation is connected to the issues of trust and credibility, and its potential positive effects on democracy (*e.g.*, Peters & Broersma, 2012). On the one hand, participatory journalism thus appears as a democratizing possibility. On the other, questions regarding the unprofessional, uncontrollable

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UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATION
IN THE LOCAL CONTEXT

and unruly nature of citizen participation seem to draw limits to this potential (e.g., Lewis 2012). In this regard, some scholars have indicated that participation, especially in the digital context, has become framed as an overly individualized project, as opposed to journalism's aim to represent and engage collectivities (Peters & Witschge, 2015; Kreiss & Brennen, 2016).

In this situation, the context of local communities appears as a fruitful ground for assessing participatory journalism and its democratic potential, both online and offline. At the local level, participation tends to be either linked to professional journalism where citizens are invited to engage with news institutions; or to grassroots projects, where citizens create initiatives or become part of one, allowing them to produce news themselves. Local traditional newspapers are often seen as being naturally close to citizens, allowing them to engage in geographically limited and thematically precise public issues and fostering community integration, and the emerging online hyperlocal news sites have been seen as potential saviors for the declining news industry and its loosened citizen engagement (Nielsen, 2015; Metzgar *et al.*, 2011).

However, studies also reveal that the local context with its strong community orientation is not a guarantee for far-reaching democratizing effects. For example, Ahva (2010) has shown how the offline public journalism approaches of local and regional newspapers remained limited due to their project-like or personified natures, and Williams *et al.* (2014) have indicated that even if the online hyperlocal sites have covered local politics and problems, sourcing has remained limited to local officials, much like in the traditional news outlets. Both approaches thus have their advantages and drawbacks. In this article, we will therefore summarize recent evidence from previous studies on the successes and shortcomings of local participation, but we also point out that empirical analyses often have little to say about the normative justification of participation. Hence, we try to elaborate this shortcoming by adding to empirical evidence of local participatory journalism, and clarifying the normative and conceptual basis for such journalism. In other words, we examine and assess, side by side, two very different approaches: a young online-first network of citizen hyperlocal sites in Brussels, Belgium (Dewey) and a ten-year-old public journalism style free newspaper in Stockholm, Sweden (*Södra Sidan*). We break down the notion of participation into elements of access, dialogue and deliberation to be able to analyze and assess – in the spirit of journalism criticism – the democratic potential of the two approaches.

Participation encompasses a variety of activities ranging from access to platforms, and from formulating opinions to producing content (Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2008: 12-15). It has generated a wide array of research stemming from different traditions within journalism studies. As noted, the local – and recently especially the hyperlocal – context has drawn plenty of attention from the research community. From this literature, we have identified four main perspectives from which participation in the local context has been examined.

First, we can identify studies that have analyzed the style of *coverage* that participatory approaches in local journalism have produced. A study on a Flemish regional newspaper, for instance, revealed that while hard news remained the realm of professional journalists, soft news had been appropriated by citizens, who used their personal interest and knowledge to create soft news content (Paulussen & D'Heer, 2013). Borger *et al.* (2016) confirmed this trend when analyzing a diversity of participatory initiatives in the Netherlands. Their content analysis showed that local participatory projects have a tendency towards soft news topics that rely on personal experience and first-hand witnessing (Borger *et al.*, 2016: 16). Another study from the same country indicated that a collaborative regional media project resulted in an increased number of community-related themes in the coverage, but not necessarily in radically different styles of coverage in terms of sourcing or positioning the local people (Hermans *et al.*, 2014).

Another perspective has focused on understanding the *producers and users* of local participatory journalism. Earlier on, the focus seemed to be on the attitudes of journalists (Lewis *et al.*, 2010), but it has become more typical to examine the motivations and roles that are provided for citizens in local journalism. For example, Canter (2013) identifies citizens' participatory positions in the context of a local newspaper in the UK as source, resource or collaborator. This concurs with what Peters and Witschge state: the intensity of citizens' participation may vary from minimal to maximal (2015). In France, so called "*pure players*"¹ have a certain "*participatory logic*", trying to spark and mediate public debates through comment chains and on social media. Participation of local audiences is influenced not only by geographical proximity but also by sociological similarities of audience members, such as their high cultural capital or their personal interests (Bousquet, Marty & Smyrniaios, 2015).

A third perspective focuses on the *sustainability* of participatory approaches in local journalism and examines whether it is possible to produce stability and economic success (Harte *et al.*, 2017). Hess and Waller (2017) summarize that not all local approaches have proven successful, but the local context holds promises because there are “*niche*” markets for authentically local news that is important for people but not widely available. However, they also argue that local platforms are not necessarily built to make big profits (2017: 200-201). However, hindrances encountered during participatory projects (and the end of many of them) highlight the difficulties of setting up lasting processes. In their study of 123 hyperlocal news websites, van Kerkhoven and Bakker conclude that “*hyperlocal news websites are both promising and vulnerable*” (2014: 12).

The fourth perspective widens the focus by studying *local news ecosystems*. Recent studies have emphasized how what ends up being *the news* is often the result of a collective process involving a variety of journalistic and non-journalistic actors (Anderson, 2013). Firmstone and Coleman focused on the ecosystem of news production in Leeds (2014; 2015) and noticed that even though a variety of actors (politicians, local media, citizen journalists, communities) interact within a dynamic ecosystem, the inertia of institutions (may they be political or journalistic) pushes citizen journalism to the margins (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). Furthermore, Domingo and Le Cam have demonstrated how actors negotiate the local news narrative by *playing with* and *inside* journalism, but mainstream media still acts as an obligatory point of passage for whoever wants to control the narrative (Domingo & Le Cam, 2015; Le Cam & Domingo, 2015).

These perspectives are insightful in providing knowledge about the content, actors, business models and the interaction between non-institutional and institutional players in local journalism. However, they do not provide much guidance in how to assess participation in normative terms. Kreiss and Brennen (2016) indicate that participation has become one of the main normative arguments in journalism studies in the digital age (along with deinstitutionalization, innovation and entrepreneurship), but scholars are not always explicit about their normative viewpoints. Normative concepts may thus be inspirational as they provide a language for critique, but the critique should not be done in a manner that is merely one-sidedly embracing the notions or leaving their normativity hidden (Kreiss and Brennen, 2016: 300-310). Here, we will aim to take on the challenge of combining empirical investigation with normative critique. To do this, we propose a theoretical framework that combines normativity with insights that

challenge the idea that participation in the journalistic context would always be about democracy.

ANALYTICAL MODEL OF ACCESS,
DIALOGUE AND DELIBERATION

While searching for non-journalistic vocabulary for journalism criticism, Heikkilä and Kunelius (1998) coined a three-step framework for evaluating the democratic potential of journalism through the notions of access, dialogue and deliberation. When their article was written in the 1990s, the notion of *participatory journalism* did not yet exist. At that moment, the authors were more interested in questioning “*the monopoly of journalists to define the vocabulary with which journalism can and should be evaluated*” (Heikkilä & Kunelius, 1998: 81). Their article was thus not intended as an analytical model of participatory journalism, but it did, however, point out to the then emerging notion of participation in its conclusion:

“The challenge for journalism is not only to think about, who can participate, but also about, what sort of situations are created for participation.” (Heikkilä & Kunelius, 1998: 82)

It is exactly this latter question that holds analytical potential. The situations that journalism creates for participation could be zoomed into by breaking down the concept of participation into the elements of access, dialogue and deliberation. This can help in identifying the participatory situations and assessing whether they are democracy-supporting or not. In a later piece by Ahva, Heikkilä and Kunelius (2015), the analytical power of the three elements was discussed in the context of digital journalism. It was concluded that even if the three concepts derive from the mass media era, they can still be used to analyze the democratic potential of journalism in the networked environment that may appear as *deceptively flat* and *open*.

To be able to critically examine the kinds of participatory situations that are created in local journalism, we will nuance the original trio of access, dialogue and deliberation with more recent models and findings (Carpentier 2015; Ahva 2017). This means that we will also consider, *what* people become part of when they participate in journalism (cf. Carpentier 2011; 2015). For example, Ahva (2017) identified five different domains to which citizens’ participation was oriented to in three different outlets. Their participatory activities were oriented to (1) public life or politics, but also (2) journalistic content produc-

tion, (3) communities that run the publications, (4) cultural side-projects and production such as film, literature and theatre and (5) career possibilities beyond the outlets they worked with. This means that when citizens were participating in journalism they became part of five domains: (1) the public sphere, (2) journalistic work process, (3) organizations or communities, (4) cultural field, as well as (5) working life. The three first ones were the most prevalent domains, and hence they are integrated below into the discussion of access, dialogue and deliberation.

Access. Heikkilä and Kunelius (1998) argue that access is a concept that fits well into the vocabulary of both professional journalists and theorists of democracy. In the academic accounts on participation and journalism, access also appears as the concept that is most agreed upon (cf. Domingo *et al.*, 2008; Carpentier, 2015). The idea is that participatory practices should first provide access for citizens *to get in*, to gain presence or visibility in journalism (Ahva *et al.*, 2015; Carpentier, 2015; Domingo *et al.*, 2008; Peters & Witschge, 2015). The question of access is about paying attention to and recognizing citizens as public actors. Hence, access can help in identifying *how* open the gates really are for citizens in journalism (Singer *et al.*, 2011).

The idea of gaining access can be further elaborated in terms of *where* is it exactly that journalism provides access to (see Table 1). Here we can separate the possibilities of access to the *community of practice* (Wenger, 1998) that coordinates publication, from gaining access into the *content production process*. The former refers to the idea of gaining a type of membership in a group, be it a project team, newsroom organization or a loose network. The latter, in turn, refers to gaining an entry into how stories are offered, selected and taken into production. Lastly, access to the *public sphere* refers to the idea that citizens do not merely get engaged because they are interested in becoming members of a community or producing stories, but because they have an interest in bringing forth (neglected/marginal) issues that should be reflected upon in the public sphere and hence seek recognition for them. In this type of access, citizens can become recognized as part of society through the opportunities that the media offers for public self-representation (Carpentier, 2011: 67).

Dialogue. After gaining access, possibilities of dialogue emerge. The process of dialogue can bring many benefits to democratic life: orientation toward constructive communication, dispelling of stereotypes, honesty in relaying ideas, and the intention to listen to and understand the other (McCoy & Scully, 2002: 117). We can ask how journalism is able to help in creating and sustaining the qualities listed

above by producing exchange (instead of merely providing information). In journalism, dialogue can be seen as a reciprocal method of representing social realities as well as including citizens in extensive consultation before or after the stories are made (Heikkilä & Kunelius, 1998; Ahva *et al.*, 2015; Peters & Witschge, 2015). Lewis *et al.* (2014) argue that reciprocity is a key component in the creation of trust, connectedness and social capital and that journalism, especially community journalism, should and could focus more on enabling forms of participation that mutually benefit all the involved actors. Carpentier (2015), too, refers to the role of media in producing socio-communicative relations, even if he uses the notion of *interaction* instead of dialogue². The role of journalism here is to act as a facilitator that helps different perspectives meet each other – instead of the perspectives evading or destructively confronting each other.

Again, we see it useful to recognize that this reciprocal exchange may happen in various domains (see Table 1). First, it is featured in the domain of *communities of practice* in which people act together thus creating a sense of shared purpose and belonging. Dialogue can also be present in journalistic *content production*, in reciprocal news-making practices that are based on both, speaking and listening (Ananny, 2014: 364-365) and thus facilitate possibilities for social interaction. Lastly, dialogue in the *public sphere* refers to public exchange of viewpoints as represented in the journalistic texts or featured in the comment sections related to the articles. This exchange can then result in (re)formulation of the issues that require public attention.

Deliberation. The concept of deliberation shifts our attention to efficacy and whether it is possible to make a difference with participation (McCoy & Scully, 2002: 118; Ahva *et al.*, 2015). A deliberative process allows participants to reflect upon their views, and in this reasoning process they might be able to produce something that they could not work out on their own (Barber, 1984; Heikkilä & Kunelius, 1998). In terms of journalism criticism this means that with this concept we can assess *whether* and *to what degree* journalism is acting as a catalyst not only for reflection and exchange, but also action and change, so that citizens are involved in the process and play a role in the formation of public opinion and decision-making (Heikkilä & Kunelius, 1998: 71). Carpentier (2015) refers to this third step with the notion of participation itself, but we suggest that participation is the *outcome* of the three steps. However, Carpentier's (2015: 9, 16) point about *co-deciding* as an integral part of participation, should be noted here: we see that deliberation that builds

on dialogue, is one possible way to co-decide and share power.

To be able to use deliberation as an analytical category, we need to consider, again, the various domains (Table 1). First, we can identify deliberation among people in the *communities of practice*: in this domain, participants can have an impact on how the communities are run. As a result, trust and sense of joint purpose may result (McCoy & Scully, 2002: 122). Second, the step of deliberation over *content production* is important in that it allows participants to influence what is ultimately considered as journalism or news. Lastly, deliberation can be assessed in relation to *public sphere*. Here we can ask, whether participatory journalism plays any role in how the detected issues are dealt with and solved in public.

In Table 1, we have summarized the discussion above. We propose the table as a matrix model of analyzing and assessing the democratic potential of participatory journalism. This combination also provides a methodological toolkit.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Through the notions of access, dialogue and deliberation we wish to know more about the participatory situations created in the two distinctive case studies, hence asking:

(RQ1) What are the specificities of participatory practices of two different local outlets regarding access, dialogue and deliberation?

By thinking through the results with the three domains in mind, we want to assess the entire breadth of participation in these approaches:

(RQ2) What do the two cases tell us about the potentials and limitations of the diverse forms that participation in local journalism adopts?

Two cases of local participatory journalism

The two case studies are (1) a citizen-based online initiative in Brussels, Belgium, the *Dewey* project³, and (2) a professionally-produced print publication in Stockholm, Sweden, *Södra Sidan*. They represent different approaches to participatory journalism in terms of their main publishing platforms (print vs. online), organization (professional vs. citizen) and funding basis (for-profit and advertising based vs. non-profit and volunteer based). However, they also feature similarities. Firstly, on top of print, *Södra Sidan* has a website and social media presence (even if not very active), and one of the journalists publishes an independent online neighborhood site as a side-project; and two online *Dewey* outlets also publish paper versions of their articles, one as quarterly magazines and other as leaflets shared in public venues. Secondly, both operate in urban, capital city areas and cover four different municipalities, making them hybrids between the regional, local and hyperlocal levels. Lastly, they share a philosophy of participation.

Dewey is a non-profit that was launched by a handful of citizen of the municipality of Schaerbeek in Brussels in 2014. The project focused at first on facilitating the production of citizen news for a website and a quarterly hyperlocal print publication⁴ in one municipality, but later on grew with demands from individuals from other districts of Brussels. Currently, *Dewey* is a network of four hyperlocal and participatory online news platforms: *Ezelstad*, *What for*, *Dazibao* and *Pixels*⁵. The four projects are of different size: the number of active contributors varies

Table 1: Matrix model of analyzing participatory journalism.

Participatory step Domain	Access (How to get in?)	Dialogue (How to produce exchange?)	Deliberation (How to make a difference?)
Community of practice	Getting entrance into the project or organization that runs the publication	Building of reciprocal relationships and a sense of belonging with community members	Making a difference in how the community or the project is run, finding joint goals
Content production process	Gaining an entry into offering, selecting and producing stories	Exercising news gathering and presentation practices that facilitate interaction	Influencing decisions over content and eventually also what is considered as news
Public sphere	Gaining recognition as an active agent and participant in public issues	Engaging in public exchange of views that results in issue formulation	Having an impact on how problems are solved via public reasoning and pressure

from 1 to 10 and over time in each hyperlocal, as some participants only contribute to the project occasionally. The rhythms and styles of the outlets also differ, as does the number of viewers (between a few dozen and a few hundred, and controversial items reaching up to 10 000 single users' views on rare occasions). The websites are, however, united through the discussions between the founders, through a common aesthetics for all the websites, and a common editorial policy. *Dewey* describes itself as producing local, plural and practical information in a manner of citizen, hyperlocal and constructive journalism. The participants are often involved in other local projects as well, and usually belong to at least one of the three categories: (1) they have close ties to journalism but are not full-time employees (photographers, free-lancers, researchers), (2) they are very active within the local communities (promoting local gardens, alternative means of transportation, or fighting against private housing projects), or (3) they have a high cultural capital (students, local artists, etc.). Having said this, it is clear that the four hyperlocal groups have yet to build wider community bases, including citizens from all walks of life.

Södra Sidan (The Southern Side)⁶ is a local free newspaper for the southern suburbs of Stockholm in Sweden. The paper comes out in print (and in pdf-form online) once a week and it has home delivery. The paper was established in 2006 as a counter-move to another local newspaper, which many felt ignored the possibilities for public debate and problem-solving (Beckman, 2011). The participatory ideals of the American-based public journalism movement (Haas, 2007) have been an integral part of *Södra Sidan's* philosophy from the start. This means that the paper wishes to engage its readers in its journalistic process with the aim to make the local public sphere more diverse and open for people to act as citizens. The newsroom, for example, organizes so called reader panels to invite people to discuss current events to base its coverage on these conversations. The southern suburbs in Stockholm have a relatively high number of residents with immigrant background and they have been regarded to suffer either from inattention or excessive negative attention by the mainstream media (Beckman, 2011: 33). Therefore, *Södra Sidan* aims to represent local neighborhood life and its diversity fairly in terms of ethnicity, gender and age. The paper is a fully advertisement-funded initiative and from 2011 onwards partly owned by a large newspaper chain. The editorial team consists of five to seven people and the team features full-timers, part-timers and freelancers. Citizen collaboration is carried out with various groups, but the newsroom appears to be especially well connected with local associations, sports clubs, youth and cultural centers as well as schools.

Materials and methods

The primary material for this research is composed of observations and interviews. At *Södra Sidan*, a seven day-long period allowed the observation of daily news work and interactions between journalists and citizens. A total of 11 in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 interviewees: five with journalists, one with the editor in chief and six with citizens that had participated in a reader panel of the newspaper. At *Dewey*, active participant-observation has been taking place for the last two years, with one of us actually launching one of the hyperlocals. Even though the observation period was longer, it was more sporadic and closely intertwined with active participation. A series of 11 interviews were conducted⁷: three with project leaders and eight with participants. Altogether, the material presents limitations in that it originally stems from two different research projects, and features two different languages (Swedish and French). Nonetheless, the material provides a diversified yet comparable material of 22 interviews in total, along with observation and the use of published content to verify and enrich data. All excerpts presented in the analysis have been translated by the authors from Swedish and French to English. The interviewees are anonymized but coded with numbers to separate them from one another (e.g. D1= interviewee 1 from *Dewey*, S2 = interviewee 2 from *Södra Sidan*).

The analysis of the data followed a theory-driven qualitative analysis. We created the matrix model for analysis of the data with nine specific categories (see Table 1, above). Interviews as well as notes were carefully read and coded into nine categories. For linguistic and practical reasons, each of us coded their own interviews, even if we met regularly during the analysis to specify the categories and to make sure they held the same meanings. Once all quotes from all interviewees and observations were placed in the matrix, we summarized our findings by searching for meaningful thickenings as well as contradictions in the data. Discussing and comparing results across the three steps, the three levels, and the two operations, allowed us to analyze the data in a systematic manner.

RESULTS

Access

Dewey. Our findings indicate that access is a key component of the *Dewey* project as it is in fact a key element of the project's editorial policy, jointly developed by the four hyperlocals. The homepages of the various websites⁸ state that *Dewey* aims at

building “plural information” which is not news “that emanates of only one group or one authority, but news that starts with locals and allows different social groups to communicate”. According to this philosophy, access to the project is open and facilitated by the leaders of each hyperlocal. As a central principle, all meetings are open. Citizens are invited to participate in the project through events (disseminated by mailing lists, paper leaflets and on social media), websites calls and informal conversations. However, this observation has to be counterbalanced with the fact that the four initiatives are still modest in terms of public recognition, therefore not all potential participants even know about the projects. Furthermore, as noted above, the project has so far mainly been able to attract the attention of certain kinds of actors (active citizens, often with high cultural capital or ties to professional journalism).

In terms of content production process, access is also made as easy as possible. The four hyperlocals use WordPress as a content management system and try to make the platform accessible by providing tutorials and advice. However, many users perceive difficulties and are often afraid to use the system. The obstacles are bypassed by sending texts directly via email or social media messaging to leaders who then edit and format the news pieces. This is also how participants who are less interested in writing themselves, can still send content to be formatted and published by others. The participants appreciate the way access into the production process is assisted:

“It is all very free and informal. At that moment [after a first face to face conversation] he [a project leader] added me to the mailing list of the writers’ group to discuss, to see how they handled the content tool [WordPress] and the codes to access the platform.” (D7)

Informal training thus plays a role in accessing the production process at Dewey. Access to content production processes is also guaranteed by organizing meetings and by collectively correcting and editing the articles, often on GoogleDocs. Dewey has also offered access into the projects through various other activities, mainly workshops and events, which allows members to step in. This resonates with the idea that participation can in some cases also occur beyond journalism and *spill out* to various side projects according to individual interests (Ahva, 2017). Therefore, building group cohesion and dividing tasks play a big role, as stated by a project leader:

“Personally, I take the lead [at deciding topics and starting articles] more at the moment, and the project always needs me to get things

going. However, [another participant of the project] is always there with me for the logistics and practicalities. And then [other participant] has a big talent to go and talk to people we don’t know: without her we would be lost during our investigations. And then [other participant] takes care of the drawings.” (D3)

Finally, participants of Dewey have taken an interest in public issues through the project. More than just for themselves, they try to be the voice of local individuals and groups. For example, one participant (D10), stated how a hyperlocal had helped in “relaying the voice of these people to a larger audience” in a case of citizen gardening project.

Södra Sidan. Gaining an entrance into *Södra Sidan* as a news-producing organization is more limited than at Dewey due to the fact that the professional team is not reliant on citizens on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, access to *Södra Sidan*’s community is sustained in a more symbolic vein, for example through the use of accessible language in the stories and the use of local people in photos so that readers feel included. Furthermore, “every time you interview people, you also tie them to the paper” expressed a journalist (S6).

However, more concrete means to get into the organization are sometimes opened, and here the main method consists of organizing reader panels. This refers to a practice in which the newspaper invites citizens – either directly via emails and phone calls, or openly via ads in the paper – to join a panel of 8–12 people to discuss various issues in the newsroom or in other local venues. It is very typical that panelists are sought from among individuals who have had previous engagement with the newspaper. The editor in chief noted how sensitive the recruitment process is for these panels and he experienced the pressure to be able to gather together a representative panel of “regular people” from the region.

Results at *Södra Sidan* differ from Dewey in terms of access to production processes, because the possibilities to produce citizen content are more limited. The paper does invite locals to write reader letters, blog posts or columns, but the interviewed panel members were not invited to contribute content, rather to offer the journalists themes they would want to see covered (youth, criminality and schools were mentioned, for example) and material for stories. However, not all topics were taken into account, showing how professional control acted as a gatekeeping force. In this case, access to the process was more restricted and structured. Nevertheless, gaining access into the panel had made it very concrete for one of the

participants how the newspaper sustains the local public sphere:

“When you actually get a chance to, how do I express this, to get in within the local newspaper, you actually understand how important their work is and that actually they are doing it for a purpose. – It actually, it is also a good, not marketing, but a good way to promote the community to actually develop.” (S11)

Access to the public sphere was also recognized by a female panel member who had spent the past years at home caring for two children as a possibility to “become part of society” (S9). And another member expressed how he felt that with his public appearance he could show readers that a “guy like me” (S10, student with immigrant background) can appear in the paper so that his peers might also feel represented.

Dialogue

Södra Sidan. Whereas access appears as the key dimension of the participatory process in *Dewey*, in *Södra Sidan* it is dialogue. Dialogue was vividly apparent in all the identified three domains. One of the journalists noted in an interview that “it is kind of impossible to do public journalism without talking with people.” (S4)

Dialogue in the news making process was closely interlinked with dialogue in the *Södra Sidan*’s extended community of practice, between journalists and citizens. However, for participants, citizen-to-citizen dialogue was the single most motivating and rewarding aspect in the reader panel experience. The talks were described as pleasant, surprising, diverse and lively, and facilitation was appreciated. The well-guided and dialogic panel conversations were valued even by one of the most critical panelists, who criticized access in that his topics were not taken up, but valued guided dialogue. Many mentioned that the meetings challenged their prejudices about other residents, and one expressed how the talks had made her “feel important” (S11). The panel debates showed the diversity of opinions and helped to find issue formulations, to get to the “ground problems” (S9).

On top of panels, other production practices at *Södra Sidan* can also be described as dialogic. Journalists underlined that much more than in other newsrooms they had worked for, at *Södra Sidan* they were expected to do reporting “out in the field” in order to meet people in person. For instance, a reporter described how his assignment was to interview a local Facebook group activist and he decid-

ed to meet him outdoors, at the local market place, which led to an unplanned, dialogic group interview of locals who joined in. In addition, in the newsroom, the editor often guided his staff to “listen carefully” to people to get to the bottom of their views.

Dialogue in the public domain was, nevertheless, strongly shaped by journalists’ actions, and not those of citizens, whose impact was limited to the early stages of the production processes. However, this approach allowed journalists to guide the public discussion “beyond primal reactions”, as summarized by the editor-in-chief, and create dialogue in the public domain. For example, in a story concerning the possible establishment of an asylum seekers’ reception center, the journalists positioned a variety of actors, such as the police, residents, asylum seekers, local politicians and officials, in a dialogic relationship.

Dewey. At *Dewey*, dialogue at the community of practice level happens at meetings and parties, public events and other random encounters, as well as online via Facebook and emails. These interactions allow participants to get to know each other but also discuss what the project should cover and how. Individuals can also find ideas for story topics and discuss each other’s work. This indicates that community dialogue feeds into the production process. This is especially clear in that the writing and editing process can be reciprocal:

“Every time someone writes an article he can submit it for revision. We have a Facebook page for “contributors”. If you have time to read, you can revise it. It depends on who as well, but [project leader] always submits his articles and you can comment it, directly on the website. Others use Google Docs and then [same project leader] puts in on the website.” (D9)

The *Dewey* project therefore fosters dialogue in content production process in that a lot of talk focuses on what the articles should look like. These interactions result in original pieces and styles of coverage, such as 20 pages long one-on-one interview, a gender-neutral interview, poems or interactive maps. Dialogue is thus good for internal group cohesion and creativity, but it can also slow down production processes to the point that some hyperlocals have very few published stories:

“I continuously try to have a high percentage of friendly moments and not to jump into “doing”, to have fun and spend a nice evening. I don’t care that we are going to spend 20 % of the time talking about [one of the hyperlo-

cals] and 80 % of the time doing something else, it is ok. I realize that it is even necessary.” (D3)

The main problem of this dialogical nature of community building and content creation is that a lot of energy and time is invested in discussions and reflections at the expense of action, which has even made some individuals leave *Dewey* – a paradoxical result, considering the access-focused aim of the project. Added to the youth of *Dewey* as a project and its lack of experience and resources, dialogue at the level of community and production process seems to prevent the project from generating active dialogue in the local public sphere, even if it is a goal of the project in itself.

Deliberation

Dewey. The dialogic nature of *Dewey* in the domains of community and content production feeds into how participants can have an impact over the project’s course of action. Hence deliberation is most present in these domains, too. Participants are able to influence the goals that are set as well as the types of stories that get published. This, in the end, opens up a way to have an impact on what is regarded as news. This is visible when individuals vote or give their consent over certain decisions in the meetings:

“We have organized a workshop at [a local café]. It was a workshop to reflect on the topics, it was very nice, it allowed us to see what everyone deemed important. We applied the principles of collective mediation to find topics that gathered consensus.” (D7)

However, sometimes leaders of the hyperlocals take decisions by themselves for practical and time-sensitive reasons, thus sidelining the more shared decision-making process. Furthermore, decision-making regarding content production often takes a rather inactive form of silent consent during meetings or on GoogleDocs platform when comments are merely accepted by the original writer without further reflection. This points out that beyond topic selection, *Dewey* is facing challenges in stimulating deliberation and thus sharing power over the news production process.

Hence *Dewey* also remains as a rather modest facilitator of local public deliberation. The published texts do give the participants as well “*real people*” (D6) featured in the stories a public voice in locally relevant public issues, and occasional reactions of local politicians and community leaders, mainly on social media, indicate a certain level of public recog-

niton. But otherwise, we found little evidence that the hyperlocals have a significant impact on local public deliberation.

Södra Sidan. At *Södra Sidan*, the newspaper is seen as an active agent in public deliberation and problem-solving. The description on the newspaper’s Facebook page states: “*It is important for us to be rooted in people’s stories, to facilitate meetings across different social barriers and to focus on solutions.*” The philosophy of public journalism (Haas, 2007) at *Södra Sidan* has been developed towards a solution-oriented direction. This means that the dialogic approach of positioning various voices in a reciprocal relationship is not considered enough – the ultimate aim is to reach, through deliberation, possible solutions to collectively recognized issues.

Journalists see that they “*constantly have a focus on solutions*” (S2). In addition, the willingness to find solutions to the community’s problems was given as a motivation by a couple of the panelists to attend the panel, and there were others who expressed an undefined idea to “*have an impact*” (S9). In other words, the deliberative and solution-seeking ethos in the domain of public sphere is strong in *Södra Sidan*’s approach, even if the actual impact of this approach is more difficult to evaluate. Some of the panelists expressed that their participation had an impact on how they engaged in online and offline discussions with their peers after the stories were published, but there were more mentions on how little, in the end, their participation affected their surroundings.

If you compare *Södra Sidan* to *Dewey*, citizens there do not have as direct an impact to influence the way how the organization is run. Nevertheless, the deliberative dimension of *Södra Sidan*’s organization becomes apparent through the willingness of the newsroom staff to take citizens’ suggestions seriously. Suggestions are very seldom ignored: a phone call from a citizen typically results either in a promise by a journalist to check the issue for a potential story, or in an invitation for the citizen to write a letter or a column on the topic.

In the domain of content production, deliberation is apparent at *Södra Sidan* in that citizens are taken along as public deliberators on the pages of the newspaper. This is especially the case in a story type called “*På torget*”⁹, which is described as a “*deliberative news feature*” (Beckman, 2011) and highlighted as the site in which local people get to do “*public reasoning*” (S2) as “*active creators of local community*” (S1). In the process of making “*På torget*”-stories, deliberation with sources may result in changing the story theme or viewpoint altogether.

er. However, the journalists also noted that as the newspaper has grown, professionalized and secured its place in the local news market, the deliberative news features (as well as reader panel stories) have given way to more traditional, day-to-day news coverage. The early years of the paper can, in some sense, be regarded as more deliberative than the later years.

DISCUSSION

It comes with no surprise that our analysis paints a different picture of participation in the two projects. While *Dewey* proposes a direct bottom-up approach to participation with citizens filling the structural holes of Brussels' complex news ecosystem, *Södra Sidan* has developed a more structured approach to participation in local journalism, where professional journalists facilitate citizen based public discussion in Stockholm.

In the analysis, we combined and operationalized three steps of participation (access, dialogue and deliberation) to three domains that are opened for participation (community of practice, content production and public sphere) for the study of local news practices. This enabled us to highlight the differences and similarities between the approaches (RQ1, see Table 2). Both of the initiatives have integrated elements of access, dialogue and deliberation in their participatory practices, but *Södra Sidan's* focus is more on the dialogic aspects of participation whereas access seems to be the strong suit of *Dewey*. Both of them have an ethos of deliberation,

but at *Dewey* the deliberative moments are unrulier and limited the domains of community and production process, whereas *Södra Sidan's* deliberation is focused on creating public discourse that is solution-oriented and constructive, but controlled.

This research also set out to critically assess the aforementioned participatory practices of both operations (RQ2). From this perspective, we can summarize that *Dewey* has been successful in building participatory steps especially in the domain of production. This approach consists of a collection of small but concrete news-making practices and co-deciding situations, and as a result, provides the possibility to have an impact on the content that is published. However, due to the fact that such a process is typically slow and the websites are still young and depend on volunteers, *Dewey's* impact on local public sphere remains limited. It seems that the participants' energy is directed at keeping the production process running – at the expense of public impact. *Södra Sidan*, in turn, is strong in providing participatory steps to local citizens into the public sphere: deliberative news practices and the philosophy of the approach are clear for journalists and embraced by citizens, which provides opportunities to impact local issue definition. Nevertheless, this approach also involves a risk that citizen participation takes symbolic rather than active forms and results in the publishing of traditional news with the occasional dash of public journalism.

Södra Sidan would benefit from increased transparency in terms of access: explicating why not all topic suggestions can be accepted or why certain

Table 2: Summary of the findings.

	<i>Dewey</i>	<i>Södra Sidan</i>
Access	Access is a key dimension and pertains to <i>all of the domains</i> , but it is strongest in the <i>production process</i> . A philosophy of openness frames the projects, and <i>Dewey</i> is proactively providing access to citizens.	Access at <i>Södra Sidan</i> is more structured, symbolic and restricted. Most apparent access is in terms of becoming part of the discussions in the local <i>public sphere</i> , which offers a sense of being acknowledged and represented.
Dialogue	Dialogic practices are featured especially in the editorial <i>communities</i> and during the <i>production process</i> (agenda setting, writing and editing), but this exchange slows down the pace of production and limits the role of <i>Dewey</i> as a facilitator of dialogue within the local <i>public sphere</i> .	Dialogue is featured in <i>all of the three domains</i> . Most clearly it is apparent in the reader panel meetings, where participants discuss and journalists act as facilitators and listeners. Dialogue is thus strongest at the early stages of the <i>production process</i> but controlled by journalists.
Deliberation	Deliberative methods are used in the decision-making regarding the <i>production process</i> (e.g. publishing decisions), but can sometimes take the form of silent consent, which gives a bigger role to project leaders. There are few indications of deliberation at the public sphere level.	The paper has a deliberative and solution-oriented philosophy of sustaining constructive discussions about local issues in the <i>public sphere</i> . This impacts production practices, such as deliberative story types, where citizens get to publicly propose solutions, but their possibilities to co-decide over organizational goals are limited.

(groups of) people are more actively invited along than others. There would also be possibilities to widen access through online channels that are there, but not utilized in full. Reader panel stories could then be followed by open but facilitated online dialogue and deliberation to complement face-to-face exchange and enhance public impact. This would require the newsroom to invest in online moderation, but as indicated by the reactions from the face-to-face meetings, facilitation is appreciated by citizens.

Dewey could clearly benefit from dialogue-based approaches in collecting local views and reaching out to a more diverse public than before. Moreover, even if Dewey has been able to initiate creative forms of coverage and presentation through open access and lively exchange, it could benefit from more systematized production practices allowing for more published content and sustainability. The case of *Södra Sidan* points out, however, that as participatory initiatives grow and stabilize, the time-consuming participatory methods are often taken over by more streamlined and traditional ones. Nevertheless, linking lively dialogues with efficient deliberative decision-making could prove to be time and energy-saving, since spare time and volunteers' energy are the two main fuels of Dewey.

One of the challenges of this research was to build a framework capable of analyzing two very different approaches to participation in a normative fashion. The analysis indicated how both of the publications have been able to embody components from access, dialogue and deliberation into their daily news work, to turn participatory ideals into practices through repetition. However, the analysis also

indicated that the three concepts continue to pose a challenge for participatory newsrooms: access, dialogue and deliberation are demanding notions and not easily attained. Hence, they remain relevant as critical check-points. Furthermore, identifying the different domains that citizens become part of when they participate in journalism, helped to acknowledge the pluralistic nature of participation in empirical terms. News outlets are often strong in eliciting participation in some of the domains, but seldom in all of them.

The diversity of participatory approaches should also encourage researchers to critically assess this plurality with concepts that are not only suitable for professional ideologies typical for legacy media, but would also resonate with the aspirations in which young ventures and very local endeavors embody citizen participation. In the same move, future research could also benefit from stepping into action itself; if researchers would assume active roles in society, and critically reflect on their own normativity as well as that of the journalists', there would be a possibility to overcome some of the frustrations that come with research on participation (Calabrese et al., 2015; Domingo & Wiard, 2016). This would allow journalists and researchers to truly *become a part of* and *able to write on*, the public and its problems.

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NOTES

¹The term "pure player" is used (in English) by French speakers to describe web-native news outlets.

²The differences may be connected to the fact that Carpentier draws from the agonistic framework of democracy and the public sphere (Mouffe, 2005) rather than the Habermasian framework of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 2006), which is an inspiration for Heikkilä and Kunelius. However, there are also clear points of connection between the authors, and that is why we have seen it fruitful to cross-examine the trios of Access-Interaction-Participation (Carpentier, 2015) and Access-Dialogue-Deliberation (Heikkilä & Kunelius, 1998). This has allowed us to construct the analytical matrix model based on our (Ahva, 2017) previous findings.

³The name of the project was given by its founders as a reference to John Dewey (1859–1952), the American philosopher,

educator and pragmatist examining the public. Technically, Dewey is registered as an ASBL ("Association Sans But Lucratif") one of Belgium's official non-profit legal status.

⁴Both are called "Ezelstad / La cité des ânes", literally "the city of donkeys" in French and Dutch.

⁵See respectively : <http://www.ezesltad.be>, <http://www.whatfor.be>, <http://www.dzb1060.be>, and <http://www.pixels1050.be>.

⁶http://www.direktpress.se/sodra_sidan.

⁷The authors wish to thank Mathieu Simonson for his help for the interviews at Dewey, especially for the interviews with individuals participating in the hyperlocal launched by one of the researchers. This allowed for more neutral interviews.

⁸E.g. <http://www.whatfor.be/a-propos/>.

⁹Literally "At the market place".

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Participation in Local Journalism

Assessing Two Approaches to Participatory Journalism through Access, Dialogue and Deliberation

Participation au journalisme local

Évaluation de deux approches du journalisme participatif à travers l'accès, le dialogue et la délibération

Participação no jornalismo local

Avaliação de duas abordagens do jornalismo participativo por meio do acesso, do diálogo e da deliberação

En. Within the ongoing discussion on the role of participation in journalism, this paper proposes to focus on participatory practices in the local context. Drawing from a journalism criticism perspective, it assesses the forms that citizen participation takes in two operations. The first is a non-profit network of citizen online hyperlocal news websites in Brussels (Belgium) called Dewey. The second is a professional weekly freesheet in Stockholm named Södra Sidan. To do so, the material comprises 22 semi-structured interviews as well as observation at both structures. Participation in the two projects is examined through a matrix model consisting of three levels, (1) the local community, (2) the production practices and (3) the local public sphere, as well as three steps, (1) access, (2) dialogue and (3) deliberation, to investigate how citizens are provided possibilities to engage with local news. Though participation is at the heart of both cases, results show that it is performed differently: Dewey is strong in providing access to the project itself as well as to news production in the hopes to empower individuals, whereas Södra Sidan's approach is more efficient in generating dialogue and deliberation among citizens, hence also influencing how issues are addressed in the local public sphere. This comparison highlights the plurality of forms and meanings that participation adopts in the local context.

Keywords: Local news, local journalism, participation, access, dialogue, deliberation

Fr. Dans le cadre de la discussion en cours sur le rôle de la participation dans le journalisme, cet article propose de mettre l'accent sur les pratiques participatives dans le contexte local. S'inspirant de la critique du journalisme, nous analysons les formes que prend la participation citoyenne dans deux projets particuliers. Le premier est un réseau associatif de sites Web d'informations hyperlocales en ligne à Bruxelles (Belgique), nommé Dewey ASBL. Le deuxième est un journal hebdomadaire gratuit et professionnel à Stockholm appelé Södra Sidan. Pour ce faire, le matériel comprend 22 entretiens semi-structurés ainsi que des périodes d'observations dans les deux structures. La participation aux deux projets est examinée à travers un modèle matriciel constitué de trois niveaux : (1) la communauté locale, (2) les pratiques de production et (3) la sphère publique locale, ainsi que trois étapes, (1) l'accès, (2) le dialogue et (3) la délibération, pour examiner comment les citoyens ont la possibilité de participer à l'actualité locale. Bien que la participation soit au cœur de l'ADN de ces deux projets, les résultats montrent qu'elle se déroule différemment dans l'un et dans l'autre : Dewey fournit un accès puissant au projet lui-même ainsi qu'à la production d'informations dans l'espoir de responsabiliser les individus et de leur donner des moyens de s'exprimer, alors que l'approche de Södra Sidan est plus efficace lors des étapes du dialogue et de la délibération, les citoyens influençant ainsi la manière dont les problèmes sont traités dans la sphère publique locale par les journalistes. Cette comparaison met en évidence la pluralité de formes et de significations que la participation adopte dans le contexte local.

Mots-clés : Information locale, journalisme local, participation, accès, dialogue, délibération

Pt. No âmbito da discussão atual sobre o papel da participação no jornalismo, este artigo propõe analisar as práticas participativas no contexto local. Inspirados na crítica do jornalismo, analisamos as formas de participação cidadã em dois projetos específicos. O primeiro consiste de uma rede associativa de sites de notícias hiperlocais em Bruxelas (Bélgica), chamada de Dewey ASBL. O segundo é um jornal semanal gratuito e profissional produzido em Estocolmo (Suécia), chamado de Södra Sidan. O estudo teve como base 22 entrevistas semiestruturadas, bem como períodos de observação nas duas estruturas. A participação, nos dois projetos, foi examinada por meio de um modelo matricial em três níveis: (1) a comunidade local, (2) as práticas de produção, e (3) a esfera pública local; e também por três etapas: (1) o acesso, (2) o diálogo, e (3) a deliberação. O objetivo foi examinar como os cidadãos consideraram a possibilidade de participar no noticiário local. Embora a participação esteja no âmago do DNA desses dois projetos, os resultados mostram que ela se realiza de forma distinta em cada um deles: o Dewey garante um acesso ao próprio projeto, bem como à produção de informações, tentando responsabilizar os indivíduos e também dar a eles meios de se exprimir; já a abordagem do Södra Sidan é mais eficaz no que diz respeito às etapas de diálogo e de deliberação e, assim, os cidadãos influenciam a maneira na qual os problemas são tratados na esfera pública local pelos jornalistas. Esta comparação evidencia a pluralidade de formas e de significações que a participação adota no contexto local.

Palavras-chave: Notícias locais, jornalismo local, participação, acesso, diálogo, deliberação

