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Five things we should learn from the messiness of participation

“Participation” has become a buzzword in the news industry as online tools have made audience participation a lot more accessible than before. People comment on news stories, send in their photos and story tips, or take part in crowdsourcing tasks. News organisations want to be open to the needs of their audiences and to let them get involved in the journalistic process, so that people who are not journalists can now more than ever influence how issues are covered. In this sense, participation is more than a buzzword; it is about sharing power (Pateman 1980).

However, we know surprisingly little about what drives non-journalists to use their time and energy for media participation. We do not know enough about what it is exactly that citizens want to become a part of when they participate in journalism, or in which way they want to use their participatory power. Individual life situations and backgrounds are so different that it is difficult to reach any comprehensive conclusions.

Studying “in-betweeners” of journalism

In the article that forms the basis of this essay, I took the bull by the horns and examined media participation through the eyes of its participants (Ahva 2017). Sometimes these people are referred to as “citizen journalists”, but in the article I call them “in-betweeners”. This is because they adopt various types of positions between the traditional roles of the journalist and the audience.

The term points out that some want to engage in maximal participation and become like journalists, and others are content with minimal forms of participation and are happier in an audience-like position (cf. Peter & Witschge 2015), and that there is a range of positions between these two stances. The spread of in-between positions was a surprising finding, because I studied participation in and around three organisations that rely heavily on citizen participation.

Participatory journalism at three media organisations

I studied *Voima*, an alternative print magazine in Finland that seeks to cover issues that do not often get attention elsewhere in Finnish media: human rights, critical economics, global inequality, or anarchism. I also examined *Södra Sidan*, a local newspaper in Sweden that involves residents from the southern suburbs of Stockholm in its news making to be able to offer a view of the area beyond crime and social problems. *Cafébabel*, in turn, is a multilingual online magazine with its headquarters in Paris and city teams all over Europe. It covers European issues from youthful and multilingual angles, not from the viewpoint of bureaucrats or politicians. I interviewed 69 citizen participants and observed these newsrooms for 3–7 days each.

These organisations practice full-on participatory journalism: they have a small, professionally led newsroom and a wide network of non-professional contributors or collaborators. The newsrooms basically have to make participation work effectively in order to produce the type of journalism they want. Mainstream newsrooms which seek to increase participation can therefore learn a lot from these examples.

My research results demonstrate that participation is a messy business. From the point of view of the newsroom staff, it can be difficult to control the work that is done outside the newsroom and often without compensation. Sometimes the newsrooms face difficulty in getting enough contributions, and sometimes they have to cool down the most eager writers. But from this messiness a pattern emerges: there are five things we should learn from participation if we look at it from viewpoint of the participants themselves.

1. Participation is political

For many “in-betweeners” I interviewed, their participation is political in a broad sense of the term. Participation offers an opportunity to bring forward neglected issues and draw public attention to them. This is a classic point often made in political science and democracy theory. In such a model, journalistic power is shared with citizens for the sake of more representative and diverse public discussion (Carpentier 2011, 67).

It is true that people participate for this reason. This became apparent in my study when activists writing for *Voima*, for example, wanted to get their issues, such as environmental questions or minority aspects, through to the public. Participants at *Södra Sidan* in Stockholm wanted to affect local decision making about traffic planning, education, and crime prevention through collaborating with the newspaper.

I propose in this article, along the lines of classic political theory, that through working together with the news media the “in-betweeners” become part of public life. However, by no means is this political dimension the only one that drives people.

2. Participation is about content

What drives many people to engage with the media is the opportunity to become part of the journalistic process. If the political dimension discussed above is a classic in political science, this one is classic in journalism research. In this model, participation is about content and style: people participate because they want to have an impact on how stories are framed, told, and discussed (e.g. Singer et al. 2011).

Here the various roles of the “in-betweeners” become explicit. Some people are similar to journalists in that they act closely together with them in editing and fine-tuning texts: these are collaborators. Others produce (raw) material for the publications: they act as resources for the news organisations. And still others participate more lightly by engaging in conversations with the staff or proposing story ideas, thus acting as sources (cf. Canter 2013).

It is important that there are different roles with different levels of effort available, simply because of the fact that if participation gets too stressful for citizens, it is likely to end. They need to be able to take on only the amount of stress they can handle. For example, even in the studied cases, which are fully participatory, there were surprisingly many sporadic contributors. These one-time contributors are crucial for outlets in that they provide enough raw material for their day to day functioning. But for participants, too, lighter ways to contribute may be welcome, since not

everyone is able to put a lot of energy and time into media participation. Therefore, newsrooms should take care to provide a wide spread of participatory opportunities to people, not just those with minimal or maximal engagement.

3. Participation is belonging

The two points above are already well known in research. Most often people participate in journalism (in producing material) in order to also participate through journalism (to get their causes attention). However, my study revealed additional dimensions of participation that need to be taken into account, and the first of them is participation with journalism. On top of engaging in public life and journalistic production, people also participate to be recognized in a community that is formed around media.

In my research, collaborating with the organisations was clearly a source of pride for many participants, especially for those who have formed a longer relationship with them. Participants want to identify with Cafébabel, for example, and the organisation furthers this desire by delivering branded t-shirts, bags, or mugs to the most active participants. However, material gifts are not central when the “in-betweeners” describe their participation: rather, they emphasize the feeling of being accepted or recognized as central motivational forces for participation.

Hence, participation is also about belonging. It has strong emotional and social elements. It is flattering to be recognized by a local journalist as a potential source and enjoyable to discuss with people that wouldn't normally be part of one's social circle, as is expressed by citizens who take part in Södra Sidan's reader panels. At Voima there is clearly a social dimension too, as some participants reported they have made new friends through their collaboration.

4. Participation is project work

Certain aspects of my research material perplexed me, especially when I realized that many of the practices I examined were not about journalism at all. There were plenty of examples of side projects: organizing societal debate, educational activities, and art competitions or exhibitions. In this type of participation, people engage with a media organisation to become part of a cultural life or social activities.

For example, some of the interviewees had taken part in non-fiction theatre projects organized by Voima. These theatre performances provided journalistic stories to the magazine, and vice versa. At Södra Sidan, many of the interviewed citizens were involved in social projects in their neighbourhoods, such as teaching IT skills to pensioners, coaching sports for children, or volunteering in religious organisations. In this case, the side projects were not organised by the newsroom, but were rather a typical route for becoming a participant: journalists had interviewed citizens about their projects and subsequently invited them to the reader panel.

What is significant here is that much of the participation happens around journalism, in neighbouring cultural and social fields. In such cases, for the participants, the areas around journalism may be more important than journalism itself. It becomes clear that “people do not

always participate for the same thing,” as a Cafébabel editor told me. And in fact, there is one more dimension.

5. Participation is career-oriented

This final dimension of participation is about gaining access to working life: participation for journalism. On many occasions in the research material, participation appeared to be about career goals. This means that people adopt their participatory position between journalists and audience members because they aspire towards journalism as a career. Participatory journalism offers them the possibility to learn and sometimes to earn something.

At Voima, contributors are paid, so that writing for the magazine is seen by some as just another way to earn extra money. Furthermore, Voima offers accessible opportunities for students and other aspiring journalists to expand their work portfolios.

The goals of learning new skills, earning university credits, or finding a job are also factors in why people work for free at Cafébabel. For the “Babelians” who already have a job, contributing to Cafébabel is considered legitimate side work because it provides opportunities to learn new aspects of journalistic work or work with their favourite issues.

Conclusion

My study points out that citizens’ media participation is not always about journalism at all. It is broader than that. All in all, participation provides opportunities to:

- (1) be able to get one’s ideas through to the public sphere;
- (2) take part in the news making process;
- (3) work and hang out with like-minded people in the community;
- (4) engage in activities that are loosely organised around media work and
- (5) do this for the sake of gaining better placement in the job market.

Individuals compile personal constellations of these five dimensions, which means that their participation is typically shaped by two or three factors.

This range of motivations needs to be recognised by all news organisations that call for citizen contributions. I hope my analysis helps newsrooms to think about the reciprocity of participation. It is important to map out what the organisations can (and cannot) offer in return for people who participate, especially if monetary compensation is not offered.

People do not necessarily send in their photos only because they want to become part of the journalistic process. Sending in a photo may also be motivating because it is a way to learn about photography. Hence, in exchange for their contribution, people might want to receive feedback. Or, if their motivation is more community oriented, they might be searching for a stronger sense of membership within the news organisation. Moreover, newsrooms need to acknowledge that citizens are political rather than neutral partners.

Overall, newsrooms wishing to develop participation should take care that they provide a wide spread of participatory opportunities to people, not only the minimal or the maximal. Otherwise, the full potential of the in-between position will not be realised.

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