

New Media and the Overlapping Roles of Content Providers and Content Consumers

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Abstract

In the new media and communications context audiences are more empowered than ever to make their voices heard. Audiences, consumers are actively influencing the production of media contents. The rise of digitally networked technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones is reshaping journalistic practice across the world. This change is technological with social media platforms enabling new forms of publishing, receiving, and discussing of stories. This article is a contribution to the debate on audience participation in online media with a twofold aim: making conceptual sense of the phenomenon of participatory journalism in the framework of journalism research, and determining the forms that it is taking in media organizations. This paper suggests that news organisations are interpreting online user participation mainly as an opportunity for their readers to debate current events, while other stages of the news production process are closed to citizen involvement or controlled by professional journalists when participation is allowed. However, different strategies exist among the studied sample, and contextual factors should be considered in further research.

Keywords: Audience Participation; New Media, Participatory Journalism; User-Generated Content

Introduction

The world has never been as informed as it is today, nor has there been such ready and easy access to the news. And communication in human society has come a very long way. From the primitive era, through the era of supremacy of the mainstream media to the emerging era of reign of the new media, communication has remained the live wire of the society. Odii (2013, p.160), observed that the apparatus and styles of communication keep changing. This generational dynamism in communication tools and systems has resulted in astounding evolution of a collaborative, participatory, and democratic and user-generated- content pattern of communication.

Massive technological changes over the past decade have created new opportunities for freedom of expression and information. Technological development has led the media to both expand and retract. Digital transmission has resulted in more and cheaper opportunities for broadcasters and greater choice for media consumers. Media organisations now disseminate information through a multitude of platforms in order to fulfill their audiences. The media has had to diversify how it delivers content, the speed of its delivery, and take account of information increasingly originating from non-media authors. Some media organisations have responded by owning large shares of the media landscape and such mergence in the sector can lead to concerns over diversity and plurality. With more opportunities comes more competition and media organisations quickly grow or fail. This new trend in the media and the overlapping roles in the content production and consumption, now blurs the distinctions that existed among traditional media, which now makes communication a 'many-to-many' transaction, instead of the 'one-to-many' model which the traditional media offer.

With the introduction and development of new media technologies, especially those revolving around the Internet and telecommunications, a significant change has occurred with the way in which audiences consume media. Jenkins (2006), observed in his studies of new media, "The roles between producers and consumers are shifting". Media consumers now have a more considerable and noteworthy relationship with media producers, having more choice and influence over which media they consume and how they consume it. Fans of particular media products can now interact and discuss their opinions and suggestions with people interested in or involved with that product from all over the world, via online forums, chat rooms, fan sites, mobile phone alerts and more. Furthermore, media producers are redefining the way in which they decide what content to release influenced more by quality of audience engagement rather than the quantity of viewers watching (Jenkins 2006b, 63).

However, content providers have become indistinguishable from content consumers, for instance on a social media, one can identify who said about what and who posted what. Knowing full well even those who are not your friends, can connect your content. And so, said message (post), you already know your readers. But the traditional media make the audience anonymous with only the sender having an identity. Therefore, the new media erases this anomaly and makes everyone potential content developer as well as consumer. This has led to the idea of citizen journalism. The new concept of 'citizen journalism' has developed to identify bloggers, social media users and other 'non-professional' information providers. Traditional media organisations no longer serve as gatekeepers and information has been democratised. With two billion people now online, the internet has become the public space of the 21st Century. We have all witnessed the power that this surge in connectivity can have in shaping society and holding governments accountable.

Until recently, the working routines and values of journalistic culture had remained highly stable for almost a century (Schudson, 2003; Tuchman, 2002), even after being declared in crisis (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1996; Dahlgren, 1996). Traditionally, journalism has been attached to the institution of the media, based on the production of news by dedicated paid labour, the journalists. The term ‘‘gatekeeper’’, used to describe a main task of journalists, indicates their claim to be the ones who decide what the public needs to know, as well as when and how such information should be provided. The gatekeeper role is maintained and enforced by professional routines and conventions that are said to guarantee the quality and neutrality of institutional journalism (Reese and Ballinger, 2001; Shoemaker, 1991).

Back when practicing journalism involved working for companies owning large and unwieldy printing presses or government broadcasting licenses; it was relatively easy to figure out who was a member of the media and who wasn't. The advent of online journalism in the mid-1990s has made that line far hazier. And the dizzying growth in the number of bloggers over the past five years may erase it completely. Are web loggers journalists? The question touches not just on legal arguments, such as how elastic shield laws are or should be, but also includes cultural and political overtones. If, for instance, a blogger seeks to claim the privileges of being a journalist, should we expect him to follow the same general rules -- including contacting all.

In the past decade, new communication technologies, particularly network communication, have made it possible for others also to publish content for a potentially global audience. Of course, the arena of public communication and especially news production still are dominated by the media, but in certain spheres, alternative agenda-setting actors do exist, and they are producing news themselves. Thus, institutional journalism has encountered for the first time a serious challenge to its social function, an activity parallel to its own. A new and relevant object of study is how journalists in the established, institutionalised media react in this situation (Chung, 2007; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Lowrey, 2006).

This article is an effort to explore the extent to which the current development of audience participation opportunities in various new media is redefining journalistic culture, values and practices. Also, examine online media to see when and how institutional journalism accommodates the public's capacity to participate in news communication as more than mere receivers. This is not a normative statement implying that media institutions and journalists in fact should abandon traditional core tasks in favour of participatory journalism, but a curiosity about whether institutional journalism empowers and engages citizens in public communication with newly available means.

Theoretical framework: technological determinism theory

The technological determinism theory is a technology led theory of social change; here technology is seen as the prime mover of history. In economics, this is known as a technology-push theory rather than a ‘demand-pull’ theory. This theory posits that particular technical developments, communications technologies, media or most broadly, technology in general are the sole or prime antecedent causes of changes in society and technology is seen as the fundamental condition underlying the pattern of social organizations. Ukou, Okoro & Agbo (2013) observed that the entire form of society is seen at every level, including institutions, social interaction and individuals.

At the least, a wide range of social interaction and cultural phenomena is seen as shaped by technology. Human factors and social arrangements are seen as secondary (Chandler, 1995). It is believed that the dominant media technology of any age largely defines the characteristics of that age. Some theorists have articulated the significant impacts of certain media technologies of various ages. Rogers (1986) for instance locates turning points at the invention of writing (500 BC-500 BC), the beginning of printing in the fifteenth century and mid-nineteenth century to the telecommunication era (1920), and the invention of the mainframe computer.

Writing introduced society to a tendency to institution building and concept development. According to McLuhan (cited in Wogu 2008), the typographic extension of man brought in nationalism, industrialism and mass markets, and universal literacy and education. Paper and printing led to storage attitude as well as a supply of interpretation and ideas. Before printing was invented, tribal people were primarily hearing-oriented communicators. They were emotionally and inter-personally close. However, printing press altered this trend and introduced a situation in which sight predominated.

Film, radio and TV reintroduced aural and oral communication. Radio, film and television had led to a decline ideology because of the shift (Goulner, 1976). TV came in McLuhan's time and he was quick to note, ‘we have entered a new age... electronic technology has brought back an aural predominance. The Gutenberg technology led to an explosion in society, separating and segmenting individuals from individuals; electronic age sparked an imposition in society bringing the world back together in a ‘global village’ (McLuhan, cited in Wogu, 2008).

Today, new media and media convergence have changed the fabric of society significantly and the social roles of the traditional media practitioners are not exempted from this. Neuman (1991), believes that the argument that media are converging and linking to comprise an all encompassing network has considerable force

and implications. Media convergence means more devolution of social power to the hitherto underprivileged. The new media have quickly become integral and powerful tool of democratic politics. Many people now have access to the new media and can voice their opinion without the hassle of stopping for checks at the gate of editors.

With the new media, there is a shift in the roles of the content providers and consumers, the later now take up the roles of the former by being part of the content generation and production rather than being just receiver or a consumer. Also the new media has contributed to immediate feedback and response between leaders and followers. However, as political campaigns go on line, the mass media is gradually losing their monopoly of social communication, and the only veritable link between leaders and followers.

Meaning of new media

New media refers to on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, and creative participation. Another aspect of new media is the real-time generation of new and unregulated content.

Most technologies described as "new media" are digital, often having characteristics of being manipulated, networkable, dense, compressible, and interactive. Some examples may be the Internet, websites, computer multimedia, video games, CD-ROMS, and DVDs. New media does not include television programs, feature films, magazines, books, or paper-based publications – unless they contain technologies that enable digital interactivity. Wikipedia, an online encyclopaedia is an example, combining Internet accessible digital text, images and video with web-links, creative participation of contributors, interactive feedback of users and formation of a participant community of editors and donors for the benefit of non-community readers. Facebook is an example of the social media model, in which most users are also participants (Schivinski & Dabrowski 2014).

Development of New Media

The new media represents a convergence of two separate historical concepts: computing and media technologies. Both began in the 1830s with Babbage's Analytical Engine and Daguerre's Daguerre type. In the 1960s, connections between computing and radical art began to grow stronger. It was not until the 1980s that Alan Kay and his co-workers at Xerox PARC began to give the computability of a personal computer to the individual, rather than have a big organization be in charge of this. "In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, we seem to witness a different kind of parallel relationship between social changes and computer design. Although causally unrelated, conceptually it makes sense that the Cold War and the design of the Web took place at exactly the same time." Manovich (2003).

Writers and philosophers such as Marshall McLuhan were instrumental in the development of media theory during this period. His now famous declaration in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) that "the medium is the message" drew attention to the too often ignored influence media and technology themselves, rather than their "content," have on humans' experience of the world and on society broadly.

Until the 1980s media relied primarily upon print and analog broadcast models, such as those of television and radio. The last twenty-five years have seen the rapid transformation into media which are predicated upon the use of digital technologies, such as the Internet and video games. However, these examples are only a small representation of new media. The use of digital computers has transformed the remaining 'old' media, as suggested by the advent of digital television and online publications. Even traditional media forms such as the printing press have been transformed through the application of technologies such as image manipulation software like Adobe Photoshop and desktop publishing tools.

Andrew L. Shapiro (1999) argued that the "emergence of new, digital technologies signals a potentially radical shift of who is in control of information, experience and resources" (Shapiro cited in Croteau and Hoynes 2003: 322). W. Russell Neuman (1991) suggested that whilst the "new media" have technical capabilities to pull in one direction, economic and social forces pull back in the opposite direction. According to Neuman, "We are witnessing the evolution of a universal interconnected network of audio, video, and electronic text communications that will blur the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication and between public and private communication" (Neuman cited in Croteau and Hoynes 2003: 322). Neuman argues that new media will:

- Alter the meaning of geographic distance.
- Allow for a huge increase in the volume of communication.
- Provide the possibility of increasing the speed of communication.
- Provide opportunities for interactive communication.
- Allow forms of communication that were previously separate to overlap and interconnect

Interactivity and new media

Interactivity has become a term for a number of new media use options evolving from the rapid dissemination of Internet access points, the digitalization of media, and media convergence. In 1984, Rice defined new media as communication technologies that enable or facilitate user-to-user interactivity and interactivity between user and information. Such a definition replaces the "one-to-many" model of traditional mass communication with the possibility of a "many-to-many" web of communication. Any individual with the appropriate technology can now produce his or her online media and include images, text, and sound about whatever he or she chooses. Thus the convergence of new methods of communication with new technologies shifts the model of mass communication, and radically reshapes the ways we interact and communicate with one another. In "What is new media?", Crosbie, V. (2002) described three different kinds of communication media. He saw Interpersonal media as "one to one", Mass media as "one- to- many", and finally New Media as Individuation Media or "many to many".

When we think of interactivity and its meaning, we assume that it is only prominent in the conversational dynamics of individuals who are face-to-face. This restriction of opinion does not allow us to see its existence in mediated communication forums. Interactivity is present in some programming work, such as video games. It's also viable in the operation of traditional media. In the mid 1990s, filmmakers started using inexpensive digital cameras to create films. It was also the time when moving image technology had developed, which was able to be viewed on computer desktops in full motion. This development of new media technology was a new method for artists to share their work and interact with the big world. Other settings of interactivity include radio and television talk shows, letters to the editor, listener participation in such programs, and computer and technological programming Rafaeli(1988). Interactive new media has become a true benefit to everyone because people can express and provide media content in more than one way with the technology that we have today and there is no longer a limit to what we can do with our creativity.

Interactivity can be considered a central concept in understanding new media, but different media forms possess different degrees of interactivity, Flew (2002) observes that some forms of digitized and converged media are not in fact interactive at all. Tony Feldman considers digital satellite television as an example of a new media technology that uses digital compression to dramatically increase the number of television channels that can be delivered, and which changes the nature of what can be offered through the service, but does not transform the experience of television from the user's point of view, and thus lacks a more fully interactive dimension. It remains the case that interactivity is not an inherent characteristic of all new media technologies, unlike digitization and convergence.

Flew (2005) argued that "the global interactive games industry is large and growing, and is at the forefront of many of the most significant innovations in new media". Interactivity is prominent in these online video games such as *World of Warcraft*, *The Sims Online* and *Second Life*. These games, which are developments of "new media," allow for users to establish relationships and experience a sense of belonging that transcends traditional temporal and spatial boundaries (such as when gamers logging in from different parts of the world interact). These games can be used as an escape or to act out a desired life. New Media changes continuously because it is constantly modified and redefined by the interaction between users, emerging technologies, cultural changes, etc.

Meaning of citizen journalism

The term 'citizen journalism' has risen to broad attention since the mid 2000's (Allan,2009, p. 18), albeit mostly in Western countries. In Africa, it is even more of a novel phenomenon. Along with its novelty comes an abundance of definitions, such that the boundaries of citizen journalism are hardly drawn yet. Often, the term is used to denote nonprofessional, amateur news publication; the reporters are "incidental journalists" who happen to witness and capture, then publicize events (p. 21). Allan therefore argues that citizen journalism plays a particularly salient role in crisis reporting. Indeed, much of the research on citizen journalism consists of case studies on political crises (in Kenya: Mäkinen & Kuira, 2008; Goldstein Rotich, 2008; Zuckerman, 2009; in Zimbabwe: Moyo, 2009).

The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional or formal training in journalism have an opportunity to use the tools of modern technology and the almost limitless reach of the Internet in order to create content that would otherwise not be revealed, as this kind of journalism goes far beyond the reach of professional journalism. Citizen journalism, or participatory journalism as it is alternately labeled, is the act of a citizen or group of citizens involved in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and other forms of information. The objective of this type of exercise is to provide independent, wide-ranging and relevant information that is crucial to democratic societies.

The New Media And Journalism: Blurring the Lines Between Professional and Citizen Journalism

The growth of new media has resulted in audiences and media producers no longer being separate entities. Many producers are themselves fans, participating actively in social media networks on the Internet (Banks 2002, 195).

This also works the other way, as many audience members and fans are now becoming producers, either of original content, or by editing and reproducing current media. Over the past few decades, emerging technologies such as home computers, video cameras and VCRs have “granted viewers control over media flows, enabled activists to reshape and recirculate media content, lowered the costs of production and paved the way for new grassroots networks” (Jenkins 2002, 167), the most common and simple example of this being the development of YouTube. Pierre Levy (cited in Jenkins 2002, 164) comments on the future of media, “The distinctions between authors and readers, producers and spectators, creators and interpretations will blend to form a reading-writing continuum”. Many producers support this idea, and by using fan sites they have identified audiences’ need to interact with, interpret and reproduce content.

Therefore, room for improvisation and participation is being incorporated into many new media franchises, and television producers are becoming extremely knowledgeable about their fan communities, often responding and expressing their support through networked computing (Jenkins 2002). In doing this, media producers have given audiences a degree of social control over media, allowing them the grounds to produce their own content. Thus the relationship between media producers and audiences has indeed changed, with the two entities meshing and overlapping responsibilities.

Regardless of the extent of power or influence audiences have over media producers, in the end those with the final say will be those with the money - the media producers. Unfortunately, as much as people may try and think otherwise, we are living in a material world and money tends to equal power. Even fans fear that the role of media producers is still too controlling. Jenkins (2006b) points out that *American Idol* fans “fear that their participation is marginal and that producers still play too active a role in shaping the outcome of the competition”. In terms of professional media productions, which ultimately aim to make money, producers will ensure that regardless of whether audiences are involved or not, the final product will be whatever they believe will be most successful... and make the most money. Product usage, user-generated content and new media have all provided audiences with much more power than they ever had traditionally, however it is believed that ultimately, the real power will always lie with media producers.

The future for journalism and new media

There are many proclamations about the future of journalism and the impact of new media. However the reality of the situation is that this is a new and exciting terrain, with much yet to be discovered. While the need to keep their audiences updated on an increasingly regular basis is proving to be a challenge for many journalists, the opportunities afforded by social media and the ability to reach a much wider readership far outweigh this irritation.

Overview of participatory features in this new terrain in journalism indicates that most of the options explored by citizen media sites had not been widely adopted by some online media. The most common features offered by these traditional media organizations enabled users to act upon journalistic content, such as by ranking or commenting on it. Features that let citizens produce content themselves are developed in relatively few websites; most popular are invitations to submit audio-visual materials (mainly photos) and story ideas, links to social networking sites and space for citizen blogs. However, some media organisations use tools that are regarded as efficient for community-building, something that citizen media initiatives have found to be a key aspect to engage participants and make them feel responsible for the quality of their

Contributions (Schaffer, 2007). Some countries like USA are exploring these options more thoroughly than the other cases, creating user profile pages as well as a system to recommend other users and their contributions and to report abuse.

However, this user centric management of comments is still minimal compared to all the other decision making processes that remained under the sole authority of journalists. Also, the core journalistic role of the “gatekeeper” who decides what makes news remain the monopoly of professionals even in the online media that had taken openness to other stages beyond interpretation. The audience is given opportunities to participate in the content provision and production in the following ways:

Access/observation

Some media organisations invite their users to participate in the access and observation stage. In most of the cases there is some way to contact the newsroom or specific

Journalists, but relatively few online media houses explicitly invite the audience to submit story or ideas. For instance The Finnish and Croatian online newspapers do, as well as GVA and USA Today, which has a blurb at the bottom of the homepage asking for “tips about government corruption, business rip offs, safety violations or other serious problems”. The journalists might decide to work on the story if it is deemed newsworthy.

Selection

In this section however, the newsroom is the sole entity responsible for choosing what stories that will be published. And so, this does not empower the citizens as managers or collaborators in the production and provision of media contents.

Processing/editing

Some online media organisations allow citizens to submit news stories. However Audience blogs and audio-visual materials are more common but are always clearly separated from professional content, with specific sections and labels. Blogs tend to be the most open form of participation, when they are available, as there typically is no moderation prior to publication. Furthermore, in most of the websites that enable citizen participation in producing news content, this option is limited to specific topics such as entertainment and travel, leaving hard news as a journalist-only venture. In some cases only the registered users can submit content, be it text, photos or audiovisual material. The user must agree to detailed terms of contract when registering: his or her personal data are genuine, the submitted content is original, the people shown in photos or videos agree to be in the story, and the stories do not affect the rights or dignity of other people. Selection and distribution stages related to the citizen news are controlled by journalists

Distribution

As mentioned before, the participation options at the distribution stage are very restricted. Most of the websites create user-driven story rankings based on automatic Counts of most-read or -emailed stories. Some websites let users vote on the news they like, but users cannot change journalistic decisions directly. Some online media additionally provide links to social networking and bookmarking sites.

Interpretation

Most of the online media organisations see audience participation as an opportunity for their readers to debate current events. There are two main strategies for user participation in the interpretation stage. Some websites allow user comments below each news story. Others prefer to keep participation separated from news and have forums or debate spaces, usually referenced from selected stories or other items that the newsroom feels suitable for discussion. For example, the Guardian has both talk boards and an extensive but distinct section of its site called 'Comment Is Free,' where user input is encouraged.

No single stage in any of the cases allowed for complete involvement of the citizens as managers, either on their own or in collaboration with journalists. Professionals reserved the last word in management of each stage of the production process; thus core journalistic culture had remained largely unchanged as citizens generally were limited to a role as contributors, if they were given a role at all. However, there is need for further study whether user generated content improves the overall quality of media contents, journalistic work and public sphere. What is clear is that journalists will have to embrace social media and online platforms if they intend to maintain relevance and engage with a wider audience in the future. However there are important and serious problems which need to be kept in mind when exploring online platforms and it is essential that journalists do not become complacent. If professionals and consumers alike can remain vigilant in their approach towards citizen journalism, and maintain a balanced approach, then rather than fear and trepidation, online media can be viewed with excitement. The lines between journalism and citizen journalism may be blurring, but there are still defining factors which provide clarity to the distinction between professionals and citizens. Just as legal definitions and legislation are being forced to recognise the importance of modern forms of media, perhaps the definition of journalism will morph in the future, and begin to account for bloggers and media activists. But for now, the separation remains and until a code of practice or effective regulation are introduced for online media platforms, rightly so. Online media are here to stay, but so is the practice of journalism, with the associated levels of professionalism, ethics and objectivity essential to transmitting the truth.

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