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# 6.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS



## 6.1 Introduction

In this dissertation, the phenomenon of participatory journalism has been examined in order to understand how participatory developments in the field of journalism impact on conventional understandings of what counts as journalism and who counts as a journalist. Participatory journalism was defined as ‘the participation of non-professionals in journalism, enabled through digital technologies.’ As set forth in the introductory chapter, by ‘professional’ is meant: what is considered professional from the perspective of the professional model. The term ‘professional model’ does not refer to the so-called ‘trait approach’ (Schudson and Anderson, 2009: 91) that aims to determine the extent to which professionalization in journalism has been achieved. Instead, the term refers to a particular construction of journalism through which the field of journalism has struggled to claim professional status (see Schudson and Anderson, 2009). Even if official professional status was never attained, over the course of the twentieth century, fueled by a specific combination of political, economic and socio-cultural conditions (Hallin, 1992, 2006), this model has become increasingly institutionalized through the establishment of professional institutions and codes of practices and the development of a professional ideology. As such, the so-called ‘professional model’ has set the parameters for what has widely been considered professional: e.g. operating according to specific norms and values, covering certain kind of topics, having a particular educational degree or having received specific training, working for an established news organization, and getting paid for one’s journalistic activities. By consequence, the professional model has also set the parameters for what has long been considered ‘non-professional’. By potentially transforming the audience from receivers to producers of news, participatory journalism would open up the field of journalism to non-professionals. As such, it has been ascribed the potential to radically change the kind of journalism we have known for decades.

Throughout this research, participatory journalism has been approached from the perspectives of several key actors in the debate on the phenomenon, these successively being the perspective of journalism scholars, the perspective of traditional producers, and from the perspective of those who traditionally belonged to the audience – the audience participants. Finally, participatory journalism was studied from the angle of the content that is produced. This last chapter will bring the results of the chapters 2 till 5 together. The aim is to track similarities and differences, and potential tensions and paradoxes between the various analyzed perspectives in order to formulate an answer to the main research question. This chapter starts with a summary of the main findings, which will then be rephrased to answer the research question into potentially shifting understandings of journalism and possibilities and constraints for innovation in and of journalism. The chapter ends with several suggestions for future research and some recommendations for the practice of journalism.

## 6.2 Summary of the results

### 6.2.1 Chapter 2 – Constructing Participatory Journalism as a Scholarly Object. A Genealogical Analysis

In the context of this research, four studies were conducted to examine participatory journalism. First, in Chapter 2, participatory journalism was studied from the perspective of journalism scholars. By systematically reviewing 119 scholarly articles on the phenomenon, published between 1995 and September 2011, this chapter, first of all, provided a comprehensive review of the literature on participatory journalism. At the same time, the literature review presented an analysis that is inspired by Foucault's principles of genealogical analysis. More specifically, the analysis outlined four *normative dimensions* that were identified in the literature. The term 'normative' does not suggest that the studied articles were heavily biased or opinionated. The normativity of the literature rather lay in the specific wording of, for example, research questions and findings. These were full of formulations like expectations 'that had *not yet* materialized' and observations that 'journalists are *still* X' or 'participants are *not yet* Y', with which scholars reconfirmed and maintained particular ideals regarding journalism. The first normative dimension was labeled 'enthusiasm about new democratic opportunities'. It can be summarized as the idea that participatory journalism harbors the potential to democratize both journalism and society at large. Participatory journalism would give ordinary people a voice in journalism and would improve 'the methods for conducting and reporting public discussion' (Dewey, 1927), thereby transforming journalism from a 'lecture' to a more egalitarian 'conversation' (Bowman and Willis, 2003). This dimension was present in 95 percent of the articles. The second dimension was labeled 'disappointment with professional journalism's obduracy'. Scholars observed that journalists and news organizations resist changing their traditional ways of practicing journalism toward more participatory ones, and expressed a sense of disappointment with this resistance to change, or 'obduracy'. This dimension was present in more than a third of the literature. The third dimension was labeled 'disappointment with economic motives to facilitate participatory journalism'. Scholars observed that journalists and news organization often engage in participatory journalism with strategic-economic motives instead of democratic ones, and expressed a sense of disappointment with this type of engagement. This dimension was present in more than a quarter of the articles. The fourth dimension was named 'disappointment with news users passivity'. Scholars observed that there is only moderate use of participatory opportunities, and that, if people participate in journalistic activities, they do so for entertainment reasons and not so much out of democratic considerations. What is more, scholars expressed a sense of disappointment with users behaving less active and civic than hoped for. This dimension was only marginally present (<2%) in the literature.

It was argued that these dimensions are not just themes in the literature that *reflect* what scholars have focused on and that help identify potential knowledge gaps, but that these emphases and gaps in the study of participatory journalism are inextricably linked with the

regularities and practices that govern the field of journalism studies and that actively *construct* their object of study. Three main regularities or ‘rules’ were deduced from Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch’s (2009) overview of history of journalism research: first, the dominance of normative theories about journalism’s democratic assignment; second, the dominance of sociological and anthropological studies of professional news production; third, the marginal presence of audiences in journalism studies. By revealing the normative dimensions present in the scholarly literature on participatory journalism, the analysis demonstrated how the field of journalism studies as a form of knowledge has ordered and formed participatory journalism as its object of study. This type of analysis made clear how the appropriation of participatory journalism by the field of journalism studies creates and constrains space for what is “*sayable and thinkable*” (Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 42): it is a particular type of democratic ideal underlying participatory journalism, rooted in ideals of rational discussion and critical rational debate (Habermas, 1989[1962]), which renders journalists as obdurate and the audience as ‘passive’ or ‘uninterested’; and it is the dominant sociology of news discourse that has resulted in a research focus on the production culture of professional journalism, leaving the study of the audience and its expectations and conditions regarding participation in journalism on the sideline.

### **6.2.2 Chapter 3 – “It Really is a Craft”. Repertoires in Journalistic Frontrunners’ Talk on Audience Participation.**

In Chapter 3, participatory journalism was studied from the perspective of a particular type of journalism practitioners. The chapter elaborated on previous studies of participatory journalism that have demonstrated that professional journalism can be resistant to change: on the one hand, journalists and news organizations wish to encourage audience contributions and digital innovation; on the other, they find it difficult to reconcile conventional journalistic values and practices with more participatory ones. This resistance to change was further investigated by interviewing 22 frontrunners in Dutch journalism who are pioneers in audience participation. Considering that most existing production studies focused on interviewing ‘regular’ editorial staff, the assumption in this research was that more innovative potential might be found among a different type of journalism practitioners that would be more comfortable with stretching the norm of what counts as journalism. Through an interpretative repertoire analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), it was investigated how frontrunners made sense of participatory journalism and what possibilities, constraints and dilemmas their discourse constructs.

The results show that frontrunners draw upon six interpretative repertoires: innovation, craftsmanship, marketing, being one’s own boss, education, and profitability. Each of these repertoires grants journalists and participants with different roles and rights. All frontrunners speak the innovation repertoire and at least one of the other repertoires, often in mutual contradiction. Taken together, the repertoires reveal that a notion of ‘control’ is pivotal: repertoires that put journalists in control over content and audience participants in a

subordinate position (for instance, as assistants, consumers or followers), were considered compatible with what counts as journalism; repertoires that grant participants with more control over content turn out to be problematic and difficult to think as journalism. This analysis demonstrates the current paradox of how journalism is criticized for its traditional and paternalistic culture of exclusion and at the same time valued and protected as a profession and craft. It was concluded that even innovative journalistic frontrunners are subject to this paradox, despite their willingness to realize participatory journalism. Conducting this specific type of analysis made it possible to demonstrate routine deployments of cultural understandings in journalistic linguistic practices and to reveal practical consequences in terms of possibilities and constraints for audience participation and innovation in journalism.

### **6.2.3 Chapter 4 – Expecting Reciprocity. Towards a Model of the Participants’ Perspective on Participatory Journalism.**

Chapter 4 presented an analysis of participatory journalism from the perspective of the audience participants. Through a series of in-depth interviews with 32 participants from two different participatory journalistic environments in the Netherlands set up by professional news organizations, it was investigated how participants view and evaluate their participation in journalism. The choice for the two projects was based on the repertoire analysis of frontrunners’ talk on participatory journalism in Chapter 2: departing from the key importance of professional ‘control’, two environments were selected that were opposites in terms of professional control (little control versus great control). By conducting an inductive, qualitative approach, based on the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), it was demonstrated how participants’ views progress through a series of four stages: anticipation, participation, evaluation and reconsideration. The analysis furthermore demonstrated that there is a breach between the stages of anticipation and evaluation, which threatens the viability of these participatory journalistic projects. Participants’ expectations and experiences diverged on two main points: the relationship with the professional journalists involved in the projects and the outcome of their participation. Participants from the project characterized by great editorial control emphasized that they wanted journalists to be much more responsive: they had expected to engage in an interactive and co-operative relationship with journalists, but felt overlooked, and sometimes even used, instead. Participants from the project characterized by little editorial control were satisfied about the relationship with the journalists involved, which they experienced as supportive and as providing the space to publish how and what they wanted, but they were worried about the outcome of their participation. They thought little of the overall quality of platform and doubted that it would attract an audience, and thus, wondered whether participating was worth the effort at all.

It was proposed that the breach between anticipation and evaluation stage could be interpreted in terms of a need and wish for reciprocity, but also a lack of it. Reciprocity plays a role here, first, on the level of ethics. In this regard, the findings elaborate on an idea of



‘reciprocal journalism’ (Lewis et al., 2014), which refers to a type of journalism that focuses on the development of patterns of mutually satisfying exchanges, in which the contributions of others are recognized (Lewis et al., 2014: 2). Second, reciprocity plays a role on the system level, building on the idea of journalism as a ‘social system’ (Loosen and Schmidt, 2012) that only functions well if there are stable and reciprocal expectations of what all actors involved will deliver and receive. The findings demonstrate that reciprocity on the ethical level had only partly been developed in one of the projects, and that reciprocity on the system level had not materialized in either one of the projects. This analysis complements previous studies in which patterns of moderate engagement by the audience in participatory journalistic activities were established (Bergström, 2008; Chung and Nah, 2009; Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004; Larsson, 2011) by providing an additional explanation for not, or no longer, participating: the viability of participatory projects could also be diminished by a need and wish for, but a lack of, reciprocity.

#### **6.2.4 Chapter 5 – Exploring Participatory Content. Objectivity and Diversity in Five Examples of Participatory Journalism.**

Chapter 5 offered an analysis of participatory content. It was investigated, first, how the contents of five very different examples of participatory journalism manifest themselves on two key notions that have traditionally been associated with journalistic quality, i.e. ‘objectivity’ and ‘diversity’. Second, considering the key role that a notion of professional ‘control’ plays in debates on participatory journalism, in this chapter it was examined whether these manifestations were associated with the degree to which professional journalists have control over the participatory content published on these platforms. Objectivity was conceptualized as 1). keeping personal views and values out by avoiding the use of subjective language; and 2). relying on external sources. Diversity was conceptualized as the variety in offer of topics covered, sources used and news criteria used underlying news selection. The analysis demonstrates that a notion of professional control indeed is a useful concept to interpret differences between participatory journalistic environments regarding traditional interpretations of objectivity and diversity. The findings show that reporting style is more subjective as professional control over content is weaker, and that topic diversity increases. Source diversity and news criteria diversity do not increase as professional control weakens, but participants do place different emphases regarding source use and news criteria when they have more room to maneuver: they are more likely to rely on personal experience or first-hand witnessing and to select news based on soft news criteria. These results demonstrate that, when given greater freedom in participatory journalistic environments, participants, at least partly, move away from conventional journalistic understandings of objectivity and diversity.

This suggests that participatory journalism can be considered a space of ‘boundary work’ (Gieryn, 1983) that invites both rethinking as well as reinforcement of the boundaries of conventional quality journalism. The tendency towards a more subjective reporting

style, soft topics, personal experience, and first-hand witnessing constitute a potential rethinking of journalism's boundaries, for they suggest that participants see value in news that shows emotionality and experience rather than rationality; that is based on proximity and involvement rather than detachment; and that covers the private sphere and everyday life rather than or in addition to merely the public sphere and politics (Costera Meijer, 2001). Results also showed that if participation takes place on a hyperlocal scale without professional control, participants indicate that what they publish is to be categorized as 'advertising' rather than 'journalism' (see Chapter 4), for they acknowledge that such publications do not serve public or community interests, but business goals. Participants thus sense that a red line is crossed between what counts as journalism and what does not, thereby reconfirming existing journalistic boundaries between journalism on the one side and marketing, advertising or 'PR' on the other.

### **6.3 Conclusions and research answers**

The results of the four studies make it possible to formulate an answer to the main research question: how do participatory developments in the field of journalism affect conventional understandings of who counts as a journalist and what counts as journalism, and what does this mean for the possibilities for innovation in journalism? In the remainder of this final section, first, the findings of the various chapters are confronted with each other, asking what kind of participatory journalisms have been formed by the various studied actors. Next, it is examined what the various perspectives on participatory journalism reveal about continuity and change in ideas of who counts as a journalist and what counts as journalism. The section ends with a reflection on opportunities and limitations for innovation in journalism.

#### **6.3.1 Various actors – various participatory journalisms**

The chapters 2 till 5 demonstrate that scholars, journalism practitioners and participants have all been concerned with promoting audience participation, but for different purposes, granting journalists and participants with distinctive roles and rights. Scholars, to start with, have constructed participatory journalism as a platform for community building and public conversation, in which journalists and participants take part on more or less equal footing, very much in line with the principles underlying the public journalism movement (Nip, 2006). In this construction, journalists are allocated the task of promoting civic engagement and participation; participants are positioned as active citizens, actively involved in societal and political processes. Next, professional journalists have constructed participatory journalism as a means to enhance professional journalistic practice, provided that it is professionally supervised. Participants can help journalists to be better watchdogs by providing information that would otherwise be difficult to attain. Finally, participants themselves have constructed participation in journalism as a means to generate attention for a good cause. Depending on the type of journalistic platform they are involved in, such a good cause can be to (better) represent a social or professional group or to raise, highlight or nuance certain issues.

However, a ‘good cause’ can also be generating publicity for a very concrete purpose in participants’ local surroundings.

The chapters in this dissertation, thus, reveal that scholars, professional journalists and participants have each constructed very different participatory journalisms. I can be argued that these are based on distinctive (democratic) ideals that translate into various ideas about what should be journalism’s function and various ideas on what constitutes good journalism (Strömback, 2005). With their focus on community building and public deliberation, scholars adhere to ideals of participatory and deliberative democracy (pp. 335-7). Journalists, in turn, operate according to ideals of competitive democracy, advocating for their role as critical watchdogs and the importance of focusing on political actors and those in power (pp. 334-5). Participants adopted a more ambiguous position, strongly depending on the type of platform they were engaged in: in some cases, their wish to generate attention for a good cause in practice meant that they were helping journalist to be better watchdogs, thereby following principles of competitive democracy; sometimes, e.g. when driven by the wish to give voice to a particular social group, they followed participatory or deliberative principles. However, when the wish to generate attention for a good cause implied promoting or announcing (commercial) activities in their local surroundings, participation often did not coincide with democratic ideals at all.

This research thus suggests that participatory journalism is not a homogenous phenomenon. It rather proposes that different participatory journalisms exist, each based on various ideas about how democracy should work, translating into distinctive ideas about what good journalism is. What counts as ‘good journalism’ in one version of participatory journalism, can be considered as not contributing to or even as potentially detrimental to democracy in the other. When reasoning from a participatory democratic perspective, a journalist that firmly holds on to a role as gatekeeper might not meet the requirements for bridging the supposed gap between citizens and political actors. When viewed from a competitive democratic standpoint, a journalist that abandons editorial control and opens the gate for, in theory, any citizen, makes himself irrelevant in the context of critical watchdog journalism that should focus on those that hold political power. When participatory activities fall outside aforementioned democratic frameworks, they are not acknowledged as ‘journalism’ at all, not even by the participants that engage in these activities themselves.

### **6.3.2 Reflections on continuity and change in understandings of journalism**

#### **6.3.2.1 Obdurate and enduring journalism: defending professional boundaries**

Notwithstanding the variety in participatory journalism that I encountered in this research, it was also observed that dominant and constant interpretations exist of what constitutes journalism. That is, not all participatory journalistic forms or constructions were widely considered as compatible with journalism. Elaborating on previous studies of how journalists and news organizations deal with the trend towards audience participation (e.g. Domingo et al., 2008; Harrison, 2010; Singer, 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2015; Williams et al., 2010), this

research reinforces that professional journalists, even if they consider themselves to be pioneers, tend to appropriate and ‘normalize’ (Singer, 2005; Karlsson, 2011) participation until it fits within existing professional frameworks. As such, participatory journalistic initiatives can be considered places of ‘boundary work’ (Gieryn, 1983), where the boundaries of the profession are successfully defended and defined (Lewis, 2012; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2015). Participants, in turn, were demonstrated to feel most comfortable with leaving ultimate responsibility over content with professional journalists, even if they appreciated the opportunity to freely publish their own content. Thereby, participants, too, were drawing on and reinforcing conventional ideas of what counts as (good) journalism and who counts as a journalist. To be more precise, they reinforced journalists in their role as “*producers of knowledge and truth*” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2015: 345) and their own subordinate position in relation to that.

Notwithstanding the many experiments with various forms of participatory journalism that have taken place over the past decade, this dissertation illustrates that there still is a dominant discourse, among journalism practitioners and participants, that holds that ‘real’ journalism is critical watchdog journalism. In this type of journalism, ‘real’ journalists are craftspeople who have accumulated their skills through education and experience at recognized journalistic media. Such journalists are appointed as the ones who create news, since they are generally considered as having the skills to decide what is ‘real’ news and to properly give shape to it. Participatory journalism’s right of existence in this construction is supporting and enhancing professional journalistic practices. In summary then, it was found that participatory journalism is often appropriated in such a way that it reinforces rather than ‘threatens’ (Bowman and Willis, 2003) the boundaries of conventional journalism, revealing journalism as an ‘obdurate’ (Hommels, 2005) construction.

### **6.3.2.2 Challenging conventional understandings: foregrounding ‘ordinary’ people and everyday life**

Despite the fact this research does not suggest a radical revolution in understandings of what counts as journalism, the findings of this study do suggest that porous spots in journalism’s obdurate construction exist. These porous spots can be associated with foregrounding ‘ordinary’ people and everyday life in journalism.

Recent decades have witnessed a wide proliferation of media practices and genres that are devoted to portraying everyday life. Talk shows, reality television, soap operas (Costera Meijer, 2001), but also examples of what is labeled as ‘intimate journalism’ (Harrington, 1997), have created various opportunities for people to present themselves and be represented in the media. Building on the findings from previous studies (Costera Meijer, 2013a; 2013b), this research suggests that digital technologies have contributed to an increased awareness among news organizations and journalists that the audience has a desire for a better representation in journalism of themselves, their communities, and their issues and

concerns; and they hold this desire even if they find journalists hesitant to engage in co-creation with participants, let alone transfer control over content to them.

The repertoire analysis in Chapter 3 demonstrated how, on a local level in particular, news organizations experiment with positioning citizens as producers of news, for instance by encouraging them to take up a camera in order to show their neighborhood and what is going on there. National and more established news media were found not so eager to grant participants the role of producer; in these contexts, ‘ordinary’ people were more likely to play a role as (expert) sources or eyewitnesses, which is especially true in the case of breaking news events (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013; Allan, 2013; Hermida, 2012). As mentioned before, this does not constitute a radical upheaval in conventional understandings of who ‘counts’ as a journalist (Deuze, 2005), but it does imply that journalism has changed compared to pre-digital times when news coverage featured mainly elite sources (Davis, 2009; Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979). These findings are corroborated in a study by DeKeyser and Raeymaeckers (2012) who explored the representation of citizens in newspaper coverage between 2001 and 2011, and established that citizens are visible more prominently in contemporary newspaper coverage compared to a decade ago (p. 832). This does not go so far as to suggest that citizens switch roles with journalists, but it does illustrate that citizens and their everyday lives have gained prominence in conventional journalism.

Elaborating on the audience’s desire for journalism that better represents them and their lives, porous spots furthermore exist regarding the type of content that is considered to be journalism, and the function of journalism in society. The content analysis of participatory platforms in Chapter 5 demonstrated that, when provided with autonomy over content, participants create content that is more likely to be characterized by a certain sense of emotionality and personal involvement, and as dealing with the private sphere - rather than to be characterized by rationality and detachment, and as dealing with the public sphere and politics (Costera Meijer, 2001). Note that as such, it potentially challenges and expands conventional journalistic functions as described by Strömback (2005), i.e. acting as watchdogs of political actors, promoting interest and engagement in rational debate, or fostering participation in political processes. All such conventional functions presuppose a key notion of a ‘public’ and a ‘public sphere’ (Habermas 1989 [1962]) organized around a common political subject (Schudson, 2003: 69). Precisely this *political* core is challenged, to a certain extent, in participants’ constructions of journalism.

Instead, the types of content that participants produce are more likely to construct a journalism that fulfills a role as mediator of communities, much in the way Benedict Anderson (1983) proposed. This theory on the role of news media in society is not rooted in “*journalism’s focus on democratic politics*”, as Schudson (2003: 212) explains, but in “*sustaining communities in the imagination that could not be experienced face-to-face*” (p. 212). Journalism, in the construction of such communal force, is not so much “*a process of transmitting information*” (p. 192), but rather revolves around producing “*collective meanings*” (p. 192) and constructing representative images of the self, the community, and

the world. As such, it expands Habermas' view of news as 'merely' the "*raw material*" for rational public discourse (p. 69).

An illustration of the role of journalism as a communal force is offered by a study by Costera Meijer (2013a) of *U in de Wijk*, a project also included in the participatory environments featuring in this dissertation.

*Residents from multi-ethnic, fast changing regions, expect good journalism to help them make sense of their world, to familiarize them with each other and their neighborhood. Briefly put, these people want to understand the world, but they also want to be understood by the world!* (Costera Meijer, 2013a: 7).

In a very similar fashion, participants in *NOSNet* – who were often part of social rather than geographical communities, sharing e.g. a certain ethnicity, a certain profession (teachers, nurses), or a particular experience (patient groups) – voiced a clear desire to contribute their expertise and experience. They thus participated as "*community advocates*" (Robinson, 2014: 118), enabling journalists to create coverage that was – in their view – more nuanced, complete, and realistic. Thus, comparable to the residents participating in *U in de Wijk*, participants in *NOSNet* too, expressed a clear wish for more representative coverage of the communities they are part of, allowing their issues, experiences and perspectives to be better understood.

The idea of journalists as community-builders has been fully embraced by advocates of what has come to be known as 'community journalism', such as Lowrey et al. (2008), Meadows et al. (2009), and Robinson (2014). Originally, community journalism was envisioned to emphasize the geographically local, but confronted with trends of globalization and digitization, it increasingly deals with communities in a virtual sense (Robinson, 2014). Exploring how traditional community journalism is affected by these trends, various scholars describe community journalism's core as not (only) revolving around the local, but rather as being devoted to fostering "*connectedness and embeddedness*" (Lewis, 2012: 232) and "*human connectivity*" (Robinson, 2014: 115). Considering the fact that today's societies are increasingly culturally diverse and the world increasingly global, it is not unlikely that the need for journalism that deepens people's understanding of and connectedness with the world's many physical and virtual communities will increase. This suggests that key notions and ways of working that have originally been developed in the context of community journalism might become relevant for journalism broadly, as Robinson (2014) argues:

*News organizations must advocate on behalf of citizens in all of their worlds — physical locale, virtual places, and other fountains of connection — to ensure the participation and engagement of these people within this new digital world* (p. 118).

In the next paragraph, key notions will be discussed that could be of service to journalism as a communal force, in particular the notions ‘attentive listening’ and ‘understanding’. Several barriers for innovating journalism along these lines will be identified, and concrete ways will be suggested to work on fostering attentive listening and understanding.

## 6.4 Discussion and implications

### 6.4.1 A call for attentive listening and understanding

Based on longitudinal audience research, Costera Meijer (2013a) concludes that media users experience greater value in journalism that produces, by personal content, a deeper understanding of themselves and each other, than in journalism that neatly follows the rules of conventional journalism, although they still strongly associate the latter with ‘quality journalism’. The obduracy of this ‘professional quality’ logic and genre, which was reconfirmed by the findings in this dissertation, is likely to be an obstacle for the aforementioned porous spots to further elaborate. That is, digital technologies might enable ‘ordinary’ people to speak up, but, as O’Donnell (2009) argues, these technologies do not *“naturally simplify and facilitate communicative processes of listening and being heard”* (p. 503); it requires a serious journalistic effort. The audience’s desire for better representation of their issues, concerns and perspectives draws attention to the importance of listening (O’Donnell, 2009) and understanding (Husband, 2009) as essential journalistic values and practices, both of which are currently *“amongst journalism’s most valuable if under-utilized assets”* (O’Donnell, 2009: 514).

The notion of listening as a journalism value and practice, originally a principle from civic or public journalism, has been a central dimension to community journalism (Lowrey et al., 2008: 283-4). O’Donnell describes listening as an act *“aimed at getting a proper hearing for new voices, breaking silences, and establishing meaningful intercultural dialogue with strangers”* (p. 514). It can thus be summarized as an attitude aimed at seeking, hearing, and interacting with diverse and marginalized voices and views. According to Husband (2009), for listening to result in more representative news, it needs to be accompanied by an orientation towards ‘understanding’:

*Listening, it seems to me, is an act of attention, a willingness to focus on the other, to heed both their presence and their communication. It is only a necessary precursor to understanding. [...] Understanding, on the other hand, is an act of empathetic comprehension, a willing searching after the other’s intention and message* (p. 441).

Both listening and understanding go beyond the conventional journalistic procedure of ‘hearing both sides’, and beyond routinely incorporating *vox populi* quotes from citizens in news items; nor are they automatically realized by Web 2.0-technologies such as ‘give a reaction’ or ‘upload your photograph’ buttons. Instead, listening and understanding require the development of a culture of *“adaptability and openness”* (Lewis, 2012: 851) that may

prove at odds with journalism's commitment to professional control over content. O'Donnell (2009) emphasizes that listening and understanding require "*effort and care*" (p. 513):

*[...] helping people to listen is more difficult and costly work than Gillmor (2006) and other researchers of citizen journalism seem prepared to acknowledge. Editorial vision, communicative expertise and financial resources, rather than technology, seem to be the decisive factors in enabling 'everyday people' to speak, listen and be heard in the media* (p. 513).

In summary, without a cultural re-orientation of conventional journalism, hard work, and the investments of time and money, misrepresentation, underrepresentation, or overrepresentation of people, issues and perspectives are likely to persist, even when 'ordinary' people have been foregrounded in news coverage.

However, mobilizing resources for listening and understanding is a challenge considering journalism's financially strenuous times. The scarce project investments in the participatory experiments should be redirected from projects-in-professional-context ('shop-in-shop') towards projects that experiment with structural commitment to listening to and understanding of participants – neither of which was observed in the projects featuring in this dissertation, which, as shown in Chapter 4, diminished the viability of the projects. Drawing on the findings from the research reported in this dissertation research and in previous studies by others, the following section will provide some suggestions for organizing listening and understanding in journalism.

#### **6.4.2 'Reciprocal journalism' as a framework for implementing listening and understanding**

The notion of 'reciprocal journalism', as developed by Lewis et al. (2014) and as threaded on in Chapter 4, provides a helpful starting point to think about concrete procedures for listening and understanding. Reciprocal journalism revolves around a journalist-audience relationship "*that has mutual benefit in mind, that is not merely fashioned to suit a news organization's interests but also takes citizens' concerns to heart*" (p. 236). As observed in the context of this research, as well as studies by others (Harrison, 2010; Singer, 2010; Wardle and Williams, 2010; Williams et al., 2010), news organizations and journalists tend to approach participatory journalism from their own perspective and to set rather self-serving conditions regarding participation. The concept of 'reciprocity' helps to start thinking about participatory journalism from the vantage point of the participant or the audience as well. That is, participatory journalism as rooted in reciprocity is not merely centered on what the audience can deliver, but also asks what the audience expects to receive from journalism and journalists (Lewis et al., 2014: 238). Lewis et al discern three forms of reciprocity – direct, indirect, and sustained – that help to further flesh out participants' expectations regarding the process and outcome of their participation in journalism, as outlined in Chapter 4.



### **1. Fostering direct reciprocity: establish patterns of responsiveness and mutual concern**

Direct reciprocity can be described as direct mutual exchanges between journalists and participants (Lewis et al., 2014: 4). As explained in Chapter 4, direct reciprocity can work either unilaterally (A gives to B or B to A, without knowing that something of value will be received in return) or bilaterally (A and B give to each other upon prior agreement). In support of Lewis et al. (2014), our data suggest that developing conventional patterns of journalistic responsiveness and mutual concern is essential.

**A) Develop patterns of responsiveness.** Responsiveness can generally be described as being open and receptive to participants' contributions as well as replying to participants when they contribute. The data in Chapter 4 suggest that participants had a strong need to be acknowledged for their presence in and contribution to the communication situation in which they got involved, but that this need was not always met. This seriously diminished participants' willingness to remain involved.

A first convention that is needed to increase the viability of participatory journalism, *is a pattern of responsiveness, following generally applicable rules of 'polite' interaction* (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Such rules would include for instance: express thanks for participants getting involved, listen actively (and not only select information that suits a pre-given idea of what a story should be), check understanding (summarize the information that is provided, and check if it is properly understood), provide feedback (ask for further information, or outline what is not clear yet), and invite the participant to respond again. These rules of polite interaction may seem self-evident, but the data suggest that, in fact, they are not always naturally implemented and acted on in participatory journalistic environments.

Secondly, a much needed convention is to *inform participants about what is being done with their input*. Many instances were noted where participants never knew what happened with the journalistic material they provided, even though their contributions had in fact been incorporated into news items. Also, if their contributions end up not being used, participants wish to be informed. They invest time and effort in contributing and have a need to know whether the journalistic contributions they provide are considered useful and if not, how they can improve them in terms of content or style.

**B) Develop a pattern of mutual concern – organize for representation and accuracy:** as threaded on before, journalists tend to embrace information that easily fits their stories, but are less inclined to openly ask and seek for what participants think is representative news coverage. However, it can be argued that a realistic representation of participants' issues and perspectives is in the interest of journalists too, if only because it fits their search for accuracy (Corlezza and Russ-Mohl, 2013). To organize participation in such a way that the mutual concern for representative and accurate news coverage can be met, news organizations and journalists could follow up on the following suggestions:

- *Set up a reporting network and let the world know.* News organizations could explicitly invite people to contribute as experts (by experience or knowledge) and to indicate what they consider to be their expertise. Various news organizations are working with such reporting networks, for instance *ProPublica* in the US, *De Correspondent* in The Netherlands, and to a certain extent also the Dutch *NOSNet*. However, in the case of *NOSNet*, some participants were not even aware that they were officially registered as part of the network. They had once sent in their credentials or some initial materials, received no feedback, consequently had no awareness of being part of the network, and thus never contributed again. Reporting networks, thus, require intensified interaction and need to be actively encouraged and maintained over time.

- *Actively search for fresh and diverse perspectives.* A reporting network should not be an inventory of 'usual suspects', but should instead engage participants that are not traditionally prominently visible in news coverage. An assembly of fresh, marginalized, and diverse perspectives could be achieved by advocating the reporting network among niche-audiences, e.g. on online, *Facebook*-pages or *Whatsapp*-groups where specific interest groups get together, or among associations of professionals.

- *Set up periodical meetings with the participants in your network,* either face-to-face or virtually. This, firstly, helps to maintain and encourage the network, by keeping it alive and dynamic. But most importantly, periodical get-togethers with a reporting network help to pro-actively sense what is important from the perspectives of the members of the network and to spot what is on their radar. It thereby avoids dealing with audience participation in a merely reactive and ad hoc manner. The idea of such periodical meetings between journalists and members of a community has initially been developed in the context of community journalism (see also Costera Meijer et al., 2011), but has now also been picked up in the context of investigative journalism, as for instance by the London-based *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*.

- *Use online survey tools to further test information gathered in periodical network meetings.* In this study, a main concern among professional journalists working with participant input was whether a participant's contribution reflected just this one, individual voice or story, or whether it represented a widely shared concern or perspective. Qualitative information gathered through 'actual' conversations with participants should be complemented by surveying the online 'crowd' to determine whether a signaled concern or perspective is more broadly shared. Examples of this approach can be found in Germany and the USA. The German journalistic network *Correctiv*<sup>7</sup> is using crowd sourced survey data to fill in 'qualitative' experiences in the context of their investigation on multi-drug resistant bacteria. US-based *Orb Media* is developing an online survey tool with financial support from the *Knight Foundation* to better assess how "*widely held and intense*" (Bingham, 2016) people's concerns are.

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7 <https://correctiv.org/>

## 2. *Fostering indirect reciprocity*: facilitate and encourage exchanges between participants

Indirect reciprocity is understood in terms of patterns of generalized reciprocity within larger networks (Lewis et al., 2014: 6). As set out in Chapter 4, an abstract representation pictures A who gives to B who gives to C; A receives something valuable in return eventually, but does not know from whom. Lewis et al. (2014) consider these generalized patterns of reciprocity as the basis of social networks. Patterns of generalized reciprocity were not observed in either of the participatory projects studied in the context of Chapter 4. Participants were engaged in journalistic activities as individuals, not as a collective in which members also interacted with each other. Listening and understanding amongst participants could promote and bring about a process of quality control within a group of people knowledgeable on a particular subject matter, thus facilitating and encouraging exchanges between participants. In more detail, the following journalistic procedures could materialize this indirect reciprocity.

**A. *Process audience input together with participants.*** Processing audience material does not need be a totally closed off process, and a ‘professionals only’ activity. Participants can be called upon to help check, verify and enrich material brought in by others. As such, mutual exchanges between participants can point to further relevant questions, issues and perspectives and help to improve the quality and representativeness of the material that is contributed, thereby also meeting journalists’ concern about quality.

**B. *Get involved in exchanges between participants.*** Participatory environments need not be treated as a space where participants can ‘talk amongst themselves’, still common policy in Dutch news media (Hille and Bakker, 2014: 570), while the ‘real’ journalism is produced elsewhere. Journalists could actively get involved in exchanges between participants: not so much for the purpose of being a moderator who reinforces journalistic norms of proper conduct, but rather as a party in the conversation, who asks further questions if elements remain unclear and who actively seeks to understand issues from the perspectives of the participants. An example of a participatory journalistic environment where both procedures A and B are implemented are *ProPublica’s Whatsapp* and *Facebook* groups. *ProPublica* uses these groups as a chat platform for mutual exchange between reporters and participants, and between participants themselves. Preliminary findings are discussed and checked against participants’ findings. Examples of successful collaborations are chat groups on dark money in the presidential elections in 2012 and on patient safety (ProPublica 2012a, 2012b).

**3. *Sustained reciprocity*,** finally, is established when forms of direct and indirect reciprocity are maintained and re-engaged over time (Lewis et al., 2014: 7). Thus, sustained reciprocity can only come into existence when participants, based on previous experiences, expect that future interaction and future exchanges of mutual benefit will re-occur. In the participatory environments studied, such sustained reciprocity had not (yet) developed. In fact, participants’ willingness to invest time and effort in making a contribution had decreased. In one case, this was mainly due to a lack of responsiveness from the side of the journalists involved; in another, participants assessed the output of commercial rather

than communal value and therefore doubted it would attract an audience. Improving levels of responsiveness is something that news organizations and journalists can work on within their span of control, while increasing an audience, of course, is not. However, increasing an audience is unlikely to happen if participants' desire for a more reciprocal, listening and understanding journalism fails to be met. Future experiments in the line suggested in this section should be studied to establish if and how this encourages participatory journalism in a more constructive way, and whether interactive listening procedures can help participants to really reconstruct journalism.

### **6.5 Suggestions for future research and concluding remarks**

The point of departure for this dissertation has been the idea that the advent of participatory journalism could fundamentally reconfigure the relationship between journalists and the audience, and, by doing so, reinvent our idea of journalism broadly. As outlined in the introductory chapter, our understanding of what counts as journalism has been dominated for decades by a so-called professional model – a construction of journalism that, as Hallin (1992) argued in his study of journalism's 'high modern moment', was based on particular social, economic, political conditions. As early as the 1990s, Hallin (1992) observed that these conditions supporting and producing the professional model were decreasing, thus challenging journalism's professional model. Since then, digital technologies changing practices of news consumption and eroding traditional business models have contributed to a further unsettling of professional journalism's economic basis (Pew Research Center 2006, 2010, 2013, 2015). At the same time, this dissertation has demonstrated that shared ideas about what counts as journalism and who counts as a journalist have remained fairly constant, even though clues for porous spots exist in the direction of listening and understanding. The latter have not (yet) been established as a dominant journalistic value and practice – at least, not in the same way that 'the hearing of both sides' as a procedure to ensure objectivity has been central to journalism. Summarizing the main findings of this research, it can be concluded that participatory journalism has not brought about a radical reinvention of journalism's construction.

A brief impression of the status quo of some of the studied platforms in this research may serve as an illustration: five years after its start, *NOSNet* is not an active network, but remains as a small subsection of the *NOS* website, labeled as 'Provide us with your tips', which implies that it mainly aims to support professional news production; over the course of this research project, *DeJaap* moved to an opinion-only section of the larger, more conventional news website *ThePostOnline*, inviting the audience to publish views about the news, but not to produce the news itself; and *Dichtbij.nl* has been terminated in most regions, because the websites where people could publish their own hyperlocal news were not profitable. These examples illustrate that a widely felt need and broadly based support, financially and otherwise, for replacing or even complementing conventional journalism with something considerably different on a large scale, has not yet come into existence. This suggests that,

as long as commitment to conventional understandings of journalism remains strong, innovation in journalism is likely to occur as temporary, subordinate and experimental projects within the boundaries of conventional understandings of who counts as a journalist and what counts as journalism.

Even though journalism's construction was observed to be obdurate, further research could examine if and how porous spots in the direction of listening, understanding further develop. Social media networks, which were outside the scope of this study, could be a fruitful site for future research in this regard for two reasons. First, as reciprocity can be considered the "*bedrock*" (Lewis et al., 2014: 6) of social media networks, these environments provide ground for further exploring and testing mechanisms to foster reciprocity. Second, studies suggest that process of sharing and recommending news on social media, which is increasingly characteristic for the way in which news is consumed (Pew Research Center, 2010) and important for the way in which journalism's output is made meaningful by users (Heikillä and Ahva, 2015), might be changing journalists' authority as gatekeeper. Hermida et al. (2011) found that news consumers were twice as likely to get links to news item from family, friends or acquaintances than from a news organization or a journalist. This leads Hermida (2012) to suggest that: "*Essentially a person's social circle is taking on the role of news editor, deciding whether a story, video, or other piece of content is important, interesting, or amusing enough to recommend*" (p. 318).

What stories are shared and recommended in these social networks and how they are reframed and flagged to other users could have an impact on how news gets selected and produced in the first place. This potentially triggers new practices of journalistic listening and potentially also new understandings of what counts as news – maybe more so than in the participatory environments that were investigated in the context of this research. More research social media news behavior is needed to deepen our understanding of how users in these environments are shaping what counts as news, both from a "*radical user perspective*" (Picone et al., 2015: 45), as well as from the vantage point of the interplay between journalists and news users.

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