

17 Citizen participation

On the way from the audience to the community in European news media

Mirco Saner and Maike Körner

Only a few media industry relevant innovations can be designated as genuinely journalistic in origin. Active engagement of the audience is one of them. The politically connotated term “citizen involvement” has long been known from political processes (OECD 2020) and then later from business and scientific research (Butkevičienė et al. 2021). Measures of how great the effective social influence of citizen participation in journalism is are ambiguous (Mutsvairo and Salgado 2022, 367), but a crucial act for journalistic media in the last decade was to pave the way from audience to community (Zeilinger 2020, 168). Strengthening audience loyalty through community spirit is seen as a central goal of innovations in journalism. The respondents of our online survey (see Chapter 2 on methodology), on a five-point Likert scale, assigned this goal an average value of 3.9. The allure of a journalistic product for the audience was rated, with an even slightly higher value, as a central quality feature of innovations. Citizen participation can play a supporting role in both aspects.

Though participatory practices have never been unconditionally appreciated by the audience (Carpentier 2009, 408), dialogical audience engagement has become a commonly accepted practice (Wall 2015, 807) and is seen as a key factor for journalism in the post-truth era, becoming increasingly crucial in the years ahead (Meier et al. 2018, 1060). This prediction has proven correct, and the gain in importance does not seem to be over yet, though citizen participation alone cannot be a cure for the manifold challenges the media industry faces (Deuze et al. 2007, 335; Mathisen and Morlandstø 2022, 1714). It is not just a matter of including user-generated content; rather, it is about getting in touch with the audience, getting feedback, and getting ideas and suggestions for future coverage to record the audiences’ interests and tie them to the brand. However, internationally, the degree of participation varies from passive to more active models, depending on strategy, topic, and channel, but mostly through social media and other online platforms (Buschow and Schneider 2015). Participation is generally low, although more of the elite or media-critical people holding formal positions associated with societal power are participating in online news channels (Fletcher and Park 2017, 1281; Spyridou 2019, 842; Mathisen and Morlandstø 2022, 1713).

A plethora of terms describe citizen participation in journalism,¹ none of which, despite each being well defined, has yet to gain the consensus of acceptance (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016; Bosshart 2017). Existing forms of citizen participation cannot be easily put as innovation in online news progression (Scott et al. 2015, 755). Cross-country comparative research of citizen participation is a necessity (Nielsen and Schröder 2014), as media systems and professional culture affect editorial boards' participation strategies. Our sample, which is about to be presented in the next section, mostly consisted of participatory journalism case studies; only the UK case study was an example of citizen journalism. Bosshart (2017, 129) explains that participatory journalism is understood as citizen participation institutionalized in the context of the professional editorial boards of corporate-owned legacy media, and thus, this user-generated content is subject to routines of professional journalism before publication. However, Bosshart (2017, 129) does assert citizen journalism includes independent online publication activity of lay people with a journalistic intention. This second type of participation involves recursive exchange relations with professional journalism in the form of follow-up communication or topic diffusion and is understood as an innovation coming from committed laypeople and thus as a civil society phenomenon (Bosshart 2017, 130). In the present sample, more passive and more active models can also be recognized.

Case studies

The Journalism Innovations in Democratic Societies (JoIn-DemoS) project survey identified citizen participation as one of the 20 most relevant innovations in journalism in four of the five countries (see Chapter 2 on methodology). Whereas in Switzerland and Germany, citizen participation has a high status, the United Kingdom and Austria deemed it to be less significant, and in Spain, where the innovation did not make it into the 20 most important of the last decade, as rather insignificant. Best practice projects were selected from each country for the case studies. The selection criteria were either or both their importance and pioneering role in the respective country for this innovation category. The case studies in Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom did not involve the audience in the active production of journalistic content but focused on audience information or opinion input. By contrast, in Austria, citizens have become part of the actual production of content.

- Austria: *RegionalMedien Austria (RMA)* is a legacy media company that produces free newspapers with local and regional content in all national districts and operates regional online portals. Since its founding in 2009, the direct, large-scale participation of readers has been considered in the project design. Following the societal spread of smartphones, contributions from readers have been included in almost every print or online issue.

Users can register to become “Regionauten”² and publish independently local or regional information and produce user-generated content for the website *meinbezirk.at*. Editorial boards at the regional level then select articles and publish from this pool. Meanwhile, ten regional content managers normally work on this project. The interviewee was Maria Jelenko-Benedikt, the editor in chief for all regional and local editions.

- Germany: One example of citizen participation in Germany’s journalism landscape is the *Westfalenpost*. The circulation area for this local newspaper is Westphalia, a region in northwestern Germany, where it distributes local editions. For many years, the *Westfalenpost* has made several attempts to involve the audience. Their aim is to get to know the users better and to find out about their current needs. The focus of the interviews was the innovative project “Heimatcheck” (Hometown check), an online survey for the audience concerning relevant topics in the region. Around 16,000 people responded to the questionnaire. Afterward, the results were analyzed and master themes identified. The interviewees were Annika Rinsche, head of online and in charge of “Heimatcheck,” and Jost Luebben, editor in chief of the *Westfalenpost*, who has, over the years, been involved in various citizen participation approaches.
- Switzerland: During the international innovation inventory, Swiss experts frequently mentioned the “news scouts” of legacy media *20 Minuten*, as the participation aspect is more pronounced here than in other news media. The *20 Minuten* is a free tabloid newspaper for commuters as well as one of the most frequented online portals in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. It belongs to the large media house *Tamedia (TX Group)*. Although citizen participation has existed since 1999, at *20 Minuten*, it has taken a new twist due to the use of social media and smartphones. The audience now sends in eyewitness reports via *WhatsApp*, *Telegram*, *Signal*, or *Threema*. At some point, the editorial board realized the important value the community has as an asset. All journalists working at *20 Minuten* check “news scout” content and use it for their articles. The interviewees were the head of the community department, who is responsible for moderating the comment columns of *20 Minuten* and supervising about 20 moderators, and a member of the editorial board who was familiar with the initiatives’ development.³
- United Kingdom: The *Bristol Cable* was launched in 2014 in response to widespread political apathy and the collapse of local journalism publications. This case was selected because it was considered particularly innovative by several experts during the inventory (see Chapter 2). The *Cable* provides local and investigative news, both online and in a printed version. To begin with, the *Bristol Cable* consisted of just two journalists who organized workshops and events but then brought together the first volunteer team, which started publishing the website. Later, they managed to get funding from US philanthropic organizations and continued to grow. As a result, they became increasingly important in the innovative and

journalistic sector. *Bristol Cable* uses membership models with monthly fees. It is 100% member owned, currently with about 3,000 shareholders. For audience involvement, discussion spaces are available for members who can then participate in identifying topics and shaping the editorial teams' work. However, members are not involved in producing or editing content, which is done exclusively by the editorial board. As the media company's members are shareholders, they must be consulted on in-house decision-making. The interviewee was *Bristol Cable's* founder, Adam Cantwell Corn.

Aims of the innovation

A lack of information availability at the regional and local level played a decisive role in *RegionalMedien Austria's* implementation of the Regionauten system. Maria Jelenko-Benedikt, the Austrian expert, said RMA's aspirations were to improve regional conditions, to connect with the audience, and to achieve a suitable representation of the community. The region should not only be provided with information but also be actively shaped. However, there was a lack of information about the region's inhabitants and the issues concerning them. Therefore, the goal was to narrow this gap with local and hyperlocal content coming directly from the residents. Around 2014, the ever-increasing functionality of smartphones and their high penetration in society gave this concept of democratizing journalism additional impetus, as everyone had the potential to be either or both a photographer and content deliverer.

Strengthening customer loyalty and community building was crucial for the "Heimatcheck" at *Westfalenpost* in Germany. Responsible editors were aware that the audience has a great interest in local issues and should feel they are taken seriously and involved. Following the success of the first online survey, the Heimatcheck was once again used during the COVID-19 pandemic to reach the local population and has since become a standard tool. "The social task of journalism is particularly meaningful at the local and regional level as democratic shaping takes place at municipal and city level," Luebben emphasized.

Audience loyalty and being close to the community through low-threshold access to the fourth estate are important goals for the Swiss case study, *20 Minuten*, as the interviewees saw multiple benefits from their "news scout" approach in that interactions with the audience opened up an inexhaustible source of information. The approach not only allowed the editorial team to stand out from competitors conceptually and to have a speed advantage over other media waiting for authorities' official media releases but also suited society's zeitgeist that everyone is also a producer. The reason for the outlet choosing "news scouts" for a German-language medium was due to the requirement for a gender-neutral term that nevertheless sounds appealing.

At *Bristol Cable* in the United Kingdom, Cantwell Corn said, “[W]e want to be the link between what is happening locally and what is happening nationally or even internationally.” He further explained local journalism needed to do more than produce good content, it needed to build active, loyal communities. *Bristol Cable* wanted to fight the assumption that local news lacked quality, depth, and explanatory power and did not hold powers to account. To achieve this, changes in the editorial approach to local journalism, the ownership model, and the interaction with communities and individuals were needed. Shareholders who wanted to actively participate could be involved in shaping conversations, editorial decisions, feeding into stories, or providing information, insights, and experiences.

Supportive and obstructive conditions

RegionalMedien Austria recognized technological development as a major support. On the one hand, the national penetration rate of smartphones enabled almost 82% of the population in 2023 to record and send audio and video as well as photographic material. On the other hand, web functions based on content management systems allowed user-friendly uploading of content. Due to *RMA*’s decentralized organizational set-up, the necessity to draw up cross-regional guidelines was a complicating factor for the innovative initiative. The guidelines needed to answer such crucial questions as, How did *Regionauten* write? What was the underlying code of conduct? How were certain issues dealt with? “Otherwise,” Jelenko-Benedikt explained, “it is like a bag of fleas.”

Westfalenpost deemed a constructive, trust-based error culture supported by several hierarchical levels was crucial. To this end, the “Future Lab” was launched, in which innovation ideas could be conceived. Having the freedom to try out new concepts, to fail, and to learn from them, staff became aware that ideas for further development were taken seriously. Open-minded editors in chief provide the basis for this. The innovative initiative was driven by an interdisciplinary, multigenerational working group, including a data analysis specialist. Moreover, exchanging with the personal environment also provides profitable insights into citizen participation projects. Employees from outside the region who have no connection to the area and do not have the same drive as employees who live in the region themselves inhibited the process at *Westfalenpost*.

At *20 Minuten*, the interviewees highlighted an imaginative boss and the working atmosphere in which anyone could come up with innovative ideas. An increasing variety of messengers made it easier for the editorial board to reach people and get information. At the same time, this diversity of sources also multiplied the news scouts’ amount of information that had to be processed before publication. Unlike information from the authorities, scout reports could not be trusted per se. As manipulation attempts had already occurred in the past, each content had to be checked. “Out of 100 scout

reports, there are one or two pearls,” one interviewee stated. The flood of information had made it necessary to introduce dedicated software to handle it. The expansion of the multichannel environment (Smartphones, Apps, Social Media) also posed new questions concerning data protection since data and user metadata were stored on foreign servers.

Bristol Cable did a lot of network and community building before they published any content. This was crucial for obtaining financial support. The founder, Cantwell Corn, saw the notion of initially thinking about whatever can be offered to the potential community, so they would reciprocate, as a long-standing tradition of organizing communities. *Bristol Cable* had to challenge the widely held belief that local journalism was boring and not an impactful form of information and was dominated by the economic and cultural problem of not wanting to pay for journalism. Thus, funding was difficult to unlock, for which reason *Bristol Cable* sought funding from the United States.

Societal impact

In Austria, the interviewees observed an increase in the audience’s identification with the medium due to the Regionauten contributions in each issue. “The fact that one recognizes an ordinary citizen who provides content reinforces the feeling of being represented and immediacy,” Jelenko-Benedikt emphasized.

The interviewees at the *Westfalenpost* amplified audience participation and said the creation of more “talk town” content was achieved and suggested the citizens might feel the outlet’s interest in them and their topics. Heimatcheck supported the opinion-forming process and strengthened the trust in media. “If people trust us, they have no reasons to drift off into social networks,” Luebben said. Through journalism supported by citizens, regional problems could be identified and compared to other regions before political decision-makers adopted and changed them.

For *20 Minuten*, news scouting led to a leveling between journalists and the audience, as it provided lower-threshold access to journalistic content. The interviewees, therefore, considered themselves as a social version of the venerable Swiss Army knife and supposed the notion of the audience being heard was relevant to democracy. Moreover, media literacy among the scouts was fostered when they understood what it meant to have their face, name, and story seen by several million people. Before a story is published, a briefing takes place with the scout. *20 Minuten*’s pioneering approach to the audience led various other media outlets to introduce reader reporters as well.

In the United Kingdom, there have been a few instances where the work of the *Bristol Cable* directly influenced court cases. Cantwell Corn was confident the media outlet had contributed to people’s engagement and participation in social issues. Moreover, the *Bristol Cable* had been an influence on the industry since other outlets wanted to have citizen journalism, so they asked *Bristol Cable* how to get started.

Conclusion

The sharing of citizen participation information has become more extensive and more widely applicable compared to its beginnings because technological developments facilitated the sending of images, audio, and video material, and, subsequently, the content reached the editorial teams on multiple channels. However, contemporary citizen participation simultaneously required additional editorial resources as long-known problems remained, like plausibility checks or the search for great stories within the wealth of information. Also, a need for new skills emerged, demanding a dedicated, interdisciplinary team.

The JoIn-DemoS project had several main findings: citizen participation initiatives were mainly implemented as a strategic tool for community building and increasing audience loyalty, and thus were primarily based on commercial considerations. Citizen participation is used to reinvigorate journalistic coverage, being dismantled at the local and hyperlocal level and implemented to strengthen the democratic purpose of local journalism. It keeps people informed, which is essential for a well-working democracy. Citizen participation also provided the opportunity to improve the current relationship between the public and journalism and had the potential to reduce social fragmentation, for example groups hostile to mass media, as people feel represented and involved. Furthermore, journalists and users were increasingly meeting on level terms, and the audience was increasingly involved in the journalistic working processes, from topic identification to research. However, the case studies indicated that in the past decade, citizen participation had primarily been used cautiously or conservatively by editorial teams – i.e., mostly limited to information input without enabling direct participation in the production process.

Future citizen participation initiatives should ensure that audience diversity is adequately represented (see Chapter 11). Not only because society is fragmenting but because participation favors specific population groups. One of the greatest opportunities and challenges of contemporary journalism is to stay true to its normative values while reaching out more to the audience.

Notes

- 1 Audience engagement, participatory journalism, conversational/networked journalism, citizen journalism, lay journalism, democratic journalism, street journalism, people/grassroot journalism, crowd-sourced journalism, produsage, or public/civic/communitarian journalism.
- 2 While Regionauten are defined as “reader reporters on the online platforms of the district newspapers of Regionalmedien Austria” (source Meinbezirk.at), their news is region-specific. The etymology of “naut(en)” is the ancient Greek ναύτης (nautes) for a traveler or specifically a sailor.
- 3 The Swiss experts were assured of anonymity.

References

- Bosshart, Stefan. 2017. "Bürgerjournalismus im Web. Kollaborative Nachrichtenproduktion am Beispiel von 'Wikinews'." Konstanz, Munich: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft.
- Buschow, Christopher, and Beate Schneider. 2015. "Social TV in Deutschland – Eine Einführung in Begrifflichkeiten und Forschungsbereiche." In *Social TV in Deutschland*, edited by Christopher Buschow and Beate Schneider, 10–35. Leipzig: Vistas Verlag.
- Butkevičienė, Eglė, Artemis Skarlatidou, Bálint Balázs, Barbora Duží, Luciano Massetti, Ioannis Tsampoulatis, and Loreta Tauginienė. 2021. "Citizen Science Case Studies and Their Impacts on Social Innovation." In *The Science of Citizen Science*, edited by Katrin Vohland, Anne Land-Zandstra, Luigi Ceccaroni, Rob Lemmens, Josep Perello, Marisa Ponti, Samson Roeland, and Katherin Wagenknecht, 309–330. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Carpentier, Nico. 2009. "Participation Is Not Enough: The Conditions of Possibility of Mediated Participatory Practices." *European Journal of Communication*, 24: 407–420. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323109345682>
- Cherubini, Federica, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. 2016. "Editorial Analytics: How News Media are Developing and Using Audience Data and Metrics." <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/research/files/Editorial%20analytics%20-%20how%20news%20media%20are%20developing%20and%20using%20audience%20data%20and%20metrics.pdf>
- Deuze, Mark, Axel Bruns, and Christoph Neuberger. 2007. "Preparing for an Age of Participatory News." *Journalism Practice*, 1(3): 322–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512780701504864>
- Fletcher, Richard, and Sora Park. 2017. "The Impact of Trust in the News Media on Online News Consumption and Participation." *Digital Journalism*, 5(10): 1281–1299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1279979>
- Meier, Klaus, Daniela Kraus, and Edith Michaeler. 2018. "Audience Engagement in a Post-Truth Age." *Digital Journalism*, 6(8): 1052–1063. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1498295>
- Mathisen, Birgit Røe, and Lisbeth Morlandstø. 2022. "Audience Participation in the Mediated Arctic Public Sphere." *Journalism*, 23(8): 1700–1716. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920973102>
- Mutsvairo, Bruce, and Susana Salgado. 2022. "Is Citizen Journalism Dead? An Examination of Recent Developments in the Field." *Journalism*, 23(2): 354–371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920968440>
- Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis, and Kim Christian Schrøder. 2014. "The Relative Importance of Social Media for Accessing, Finding, and Engaging with News." *Digital Journalism*, 2(4): 472–489.
- OECD. 2020. "Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave." <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>
- Scott, Jonathan, David Millard, and Pauline Leonard. 2015. "Citizen Participation in News." *Digital Journalism*, 3(5): 737–758. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.952983>
- Wall, Melissa. 2015. "Citizen Journalism." *Digital Journalism*, 3(6): 797–813. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.1002513>
- Spyridou, Lia-Paschalia. 2019. "Analyzing the Active Audience: Reluctant, Reactive, Fearful or Lazy? Forms and Motives of Participation in Mainstream Journalism." *Journalism*, 20(6): 827–847. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918784733>
- Zeilinger, Thomas. 2020. "Das Netz der öffentlichen Kommunikation. Publikum und Medien in interaktiven Zeiten." *Communicatio Socialis*, 2(53): 158–171. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0010-3497-2020-2>