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Citizens as political participants: The myth of the active online audience?

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Publication date
2013

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bakker, T. P. (2013). *Citizens as political participants: The myth of the active online audience?* [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The advent of participatory media has led scholars and pundits alike to expect a fundamental reconfiguration of the triadic relationship between journalists, politics, and citizens. The emergence of the technical possibilities provided by the Internet has enabled ordinary citizens to seemingly effortlessly produce, share, publish and distribute information without requiring access to expensive printing presses or cable networks. Using participatory media like weblogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and discussion forums, citizens are no longer necessarily passive news consumers. They are now able to enter in greater numbers the public and political debate.

It is argued that increased participation of citizens is a welcome contribution for public discourse, because it allows for more diverse, open and interactive information and discussions. The revolutionary potential of participatory media is well reflected in number of book (sub)titles from the last decade: “How audiences are shaping the future of news and information” (Bowman & Willis, 2003), “How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture” (Rodzvilla, 2002), “Understanding the Information Reformation That’s Changing Your World” (Hewitt, 2005), “How the Newest Media Revolution is Changing Politics, Business, and Culture” (Kline & Burnstein, 2005) and “The Prospects for Political Renewal through the Internet” (Shane, 2004). Perhaps the most exemplary and influential work is “We the Media” (Gillmor, 2004), in which the author sketches a media landscape in which previously inactive citizens will finally stand up to collectively share facts, ideas and opinions with fellow citizens with no or little help from news media:

After Gutenberg, the word of God was liberated from the Pope’s doctrine. The Internet is the most important medium since the printing press. (...) When anyone can be a writer, in the largest sense and for a global audience, many of us will be. The Net is overturning so many things we’ve assumed about media and business models that we can scarcely keep up with the changes (p. 236).

Others, however, have voiced serious concerns over the rise of increased political and journalistic participation, as most citizens are not thought to be capable to perform the role of professional gatekeepers, which requires objectively and ethically selecting, filtering, interpreting and publishing news. An exponent of this perspective is the author and Internet entrepreneur

Andrew Keen (2007), who summarized the consequences of the increased participation of citizens as follows:

This blurring of lines between the audience and the author, between fact and fiction, between invention and reality further obscures objectivity. The cult of the amateur has made it increasingly difficult to determine the difference between reader and writer, between artist and spin doctor, between art and advertisement, between amateur and expert. The result? The decline of the quality and reliability of the information we receive, thereby distorting, if not outrightly corrupting, our national civic conversation (p. 27).

While both camps disagree on the potential benefits and threats of citizens' participation in the journalistic process, they are united in the notion that the technological developments have a substantial impact on journalism and even society at large. But although both sides are quick to substantiate their arguments with an impressive body of case studies and anecdotal evidence, there is a serious lack of systematic studies that investigates the degree, nature, and impact of citizen participation in the realm of news and politics. This dissertation sheds more light on the nature of citizens' participation in the realm of journalism and politics in the Netherlands, answering basic questions such as: how many people are actually participating, what characteristics do these people have, on which platforms are they participating, what content do they produce, and what are their goals? These questions are informed by key media and communication theories about the powerful role of media in deciding what becomes news and how that news reaches the public (gatekeeping, two-step flow of information, agenda-setting). As it has been repeatedly argued that the functioning of the public sphere is affected as a result of the diminished role of professional journalists and the increased prominence of participatory media, it is important to examine to critically re-examine the relationship between politics, media and citizens.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I will first discuss the development of citizen journalism and participatory media and their relevance for political communication research. After determining the main questions that have hitherto been left unanswered, I will formulate the main research questions and sketch the outline of the dissertation.

CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND PARTICIPATORY MEDIA

The notion that citizens should and could be more actively involved in the news process already started in the early nineties – before the Internet – with the emergence of civic or public journalism, a movement that aimed at closing an alleged gap that had emerged between citizens and journalists. Proponents of this movement appealed to journalists and news organizations to more actively approach and use citizens in the information gathering and production process. The basic idea is that when citizens and journalists closely collaborate, participate in meetings and debates and publicly discuss relevant information, this would benefit the local community and would do justice to the important democratic role of journalism in society (for overviews, see Black, 1997; Charity, 1995; Glasser, 1999; Merrill, Gade, & Blevens, 2001; Rosen & Merritt, 1994). Also, considered as a “radical, inclusive form of civic journalism” (Atton, 2003, p. 267), the various ‘alternative media’ movements in the last decades reserved a key role for citizens in the news production process (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001). Although the ideals of the public journalism movement may never have fully materialized on a wider scale, the idea that citizens can and should play an active role has survived until today, with the Internet as the most important driver and facilitator (Nip, 2006, 2008; St. John III, 2007; Witt, 2004).

Of course there have always been forms of citizen participation in the news process in the form of letters-to-the-editors and calls to the newsroom. But the Internet and all digital, wireless and easy-to-use publishing tools have substantially lowered the entry barriers for participation. Today, news organizations more actively call upon their audience to assist them in their news gathering process by sending in digital photos, video footage or other newsworthy information. Particularly during events like natural disasters (e.g., the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, 2005 Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans) and crisis situations (9/11 attacks, 2004 Madrid train bombings) *user-generated content* (UGC) has resulted in a vast amount of audiovisual material that has reached the front pages and broadcasts of mainstream media. Despite extensive start-up costs and many failed initiatives, most news organizations have integrated the use of UGC one way or another (e.g., Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007; Domingo, Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer, & Vujnovic, 2008; Thurman, 2008).

But citizens' participation of course reaches further than assisting traditional news organizations. Weblogs and media platforms like YouTube have allowed citizens to create their own information outlets, circumventing the editorial processes of traditional news media. For example, the popularity of Facebook, with more than 900 million monthly active users (newsroom.fb.com), has led to an alternative and worldwide news and opinion ecosystem that operates independently from mainstream news organizations. Also exemplary for the participatory age is the ability for citizens to consume unedited and extensive content that is derived directly from online political sources (e.g., U.S. president Obama's Weekly Address on YouTube).

Vivid expressions have been proposed to describe new and alternative forms of information provision about public affairs, such as *pro-am journalism* (Rosen, 2006), *grassroots journalism*, *networked journalism* (Jarvis, 2006), *open-source journalism* (Leonard, 1999), *crowdsourced journalism* or *distributed journalism*. However, the prevailing terms in popular and scientific literature are *citizen journalism* and *participatory journalism*. The most common definition of participatory journalism comes from Bowman and Willis (2003), which reads:

The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires (p. 9).

Jay Rosen (2008), making a pun on one of Prince's various designations, defined citizen journalism as follows:

When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism (para. 1).

While all former definitions speak of 'journalism', it is of course the question if, or to what extent, these online activities can be labeled as 'journalism'. Instead of going into this normative discussion, I will in this dissertation use a general view to describe the wide variety of online citizen activities in order to

provide a general picture of what citizens' contributions to the political and journalistic realm entail. How often are they contributing, on which platforms, in which forms and with what goal? In order to expand our knowledge about how and where people produce information, and what the nature of this content is, a broad approach is employed and various forms of citizen contributions are included: facts and opinion; discussion content; uploads; short and long contributions; citizen content within and outside the online platforms of professional news organizations. Throughout the dissertation, I will therefore speak of 'citizen participation' and 'participatory media'.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MEDIA AND POLITICS

Although divergent visions exist on the role of citizens in a democracy (Dahlberg, 2011; Held, 2006; Strömbäck, 2005), the increased online participation opportunities have led scholars to rethink the traditional relationship between citizens, politics and media. Media and communication theories have traditionally attributed an influential role to mainstream media with regard to the creation and provision of a common core of basic information. Media are found to influence citizens' political opinion formation and change, cognitions, perceptions and behavior (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2009). From this perspective, it is not surprising that in recent years communication scholars have started to wonder how the emergence of participatory media impacts longstanding notions about the pivotal role of mainstream media in aggregating information, relaying news to the public and serving as a political discussion platform. Below, I summarize the most important consequences of increased citizen participation for journalism on the one hand and politics on the other.

IMPACT ON MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

PERFORMANCE OF MAINSTREAM MEDIA. Participatory media have substantially lowered the barrier for citizens to express their concerns about the performance of mainstream media. Particularly in the United States, so-called media watchblogs are popular. For example, American media watchblogs have been credited with the resignation of long-time CBS news anchor Dan Rather who was held responsible for presenting manipulated documents about George W. Bush' draft for military service (Hayes, 2008). In Germany

BILDblog is a typical media watchblog, while GeenStijl functions as such in the Netherlands. But also less organized and sustained initiatives by individual citizens, such as publishing media commentary on Twitter, blogs and forums, are aimed at criticizing and correcting professional journalists and news organizations.

Some believe that the cooperation of professional journalists with 'amateurs' endangers the profession because it will blur and weaken professional standards such as neutrality and objectivity (Keen, 2007), practices that, in general terms, demarcate the boundaries of professional journalism (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Further, more news organizations report that the daily practice of dealing with citizen content is very time and energy consuming while the content has a high chance to be inaccurate, partisan and opinionated (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Nah & Chung, 2009). Based on surveys and interviews with journalistic professionals in the UK, Hermida and Thurman (2008) conclude: "Our study suggests that, in the longer term, established news organisations are shifting towards the retention of a traditional gate-keeping role towards UGC. This fits in with the risk-averse nature of newspapers and reflects editors' continuing (see Thurman, 2008) concerns about reputation, trust and legal issues" (p. 354).

DIVERSITY. Both the public journalism and citizen journalism movement have argued that professional news organizations and journalists have become too detached from the audience. It is argued that market dynamics, political influences and all-too-easy reliance on daily routines has resulted in news coverage that is biased towards elite groups or mainstream opinion, while smaller or less influential groups are overlooked (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). In this vein, Kenix (2009) describes the void that blogs can fill: "Blogs can (...) offer a deeper analysis, based upon a diverse range of sources and contributing citizen commentators, which is not possible through modern corporate, mainstream outlets" (p. 791).

Although the possibilities for individuals to publish their own news and opinions through online platforms and forums have vastly expanded, studies examining the composition, dynamics and nature of such discussions are still scarce (e.g., Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Ruiz et al., 2011). While online readers comments could reflect more diversity with regard to tone and range than traditional letters-to-the-editor (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012), Singer (2009) in her examination of online comments

reports various problems with regard to the composition of online debate: “Troubling is that the conversation was characterized by intense interaction only among a vocal few, with minimal participation by most of those who ventured into the discourse” (p. 490).

JOURNALISTIC STYLES AND PRINCIPLES. It is argued that ‘journalism’ performed by ordinary citizens is different from what is known from professional journalism, because the norms, ethics, backgrounds, goals and status are assumed to differ (Woodly, 2008). However, this has not prevented participatory forms of media, such as some political blogs, to become established platforms in the realm of mainstream media (Hindman, 2009; Perlmutter, 2008). It has been argued that the advent of participatory media may lead to new and additional forms of journalism, and that it may even impact the practices of professional journalism. For example, Deuze (2003) argued, following the ideals of public journalism, that technology could lead to *monitorial journalism* (where journalists publish content based on concrete questions and demands from the public) or *dialogical journalism* (in which there is no strict division between journalists and the public and content is produced together).

While there has been quite some inquiry into the emergence of new journalistic routines (e.g., Matheson, 2004; Platon & Deuze, 2002; Siapera, 2008) as well as the impact of professional newsroom cultures (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Nah & Chung, 2009; Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010; Wardle & Williams, 2010; Vujnovic et al., 2010), fundamental changes in this respect have not emerged yet. As Kenix (2009) notes: “There was no evidence in this sample of bloggers establishing a new way of organizing media or sharing meaningful self-disclosure that reported on personal experiences or struggles; no resistance narratives outside of established political norms and practices; no facilitation of democratic participation and cultural disruption” (p. 814).

IMPACT ON POLITICS

PERFORMANCE OF POLITICS. While politicians and governments are primarily held accountable through regular elections, participatory media have made it easier for regular citizens to openly and directly reflect on political actors’ behavior, expose misdemeanors and lies or bring to light other newsworthy information. This can happen both during elections and in non-election periods. For example, in 2002 bloggers were credited with the stepping down

of the American senate majority leader Trent Lott after giving a controversial speech (Davis, 2009). The most illustrative and recent examples of the power of participatory media are of course the political revolutions and protests in North Africa and the Middle East (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012; Lim, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Increasingly, not only news media but also politicians and political actors use participatory media to tap into public opinion and to consult and interact with the electorate.

PARTICIPATION. Because of the lowered participation thresholds, it was a natural expectation that more people than before would participate in public and political debate. While recent decades have been marked by the general notion that institutional forms of political and civic participation are low and in decline (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; Putnam, 2000), it has been noted that the popularity of less traditional forms of participation, such as 'political consumerism' and online protesting, are increasing (Dalton, 2008; Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). The unprecedented popularity of Facebook and Twitter (Löf & Seybert, 2010; Madden & Zickuhr, 2011), also for political purposes (Smith & Rainie, 2008), could be seen as a sign that the era in which the public debate was dominated only by a few elitist actors is coming to an end. It is expected that the lowered participation threshold could lead to a more egalitarian political environment, in which previously unheard and marginalized groups can have a say.

Despite the expectations for a reinvigoration of political participation, it has also been found that most people who are politically active online, are the same – or at least share the same sociodemographic and political characteristics – as those who are or were active offline (Dahlberg, 2001; Hindman, 2009; Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009). And on an even more critical note, it is feared that the increased possibilities for participation, leads to the fragmentation of the public discourse (Habermas, 2006; Sunstein, 2007; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 2005). The notion that people prefer information that matches or reinforces their own opinions and attitude, is not new (Festinger, 1957; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Sears & Freedman, 1967). However, the numerous participatory media platforms allow citizens even more than ever to seek out information, opinion and news topics that match their preferences and to create so-called echo chambers and information cocoons (Tewksbury & Rittenberger, 2012). Being one of the exponents of the dystopian 'camp', Sunstein (2008) argues: "The construction

of information cocoons and echo chambers is a real problem for a democracy, not least because polarization is inevitable. For many people, blunders and extremism are highly likely, not in spite of the blogosphere but because of it” (p. 95).

Looking back at the consequences that were passed in review, it is clear that an actual proliferation of participatory media and its ‘political use’ by citizens has important ramifications for media and politics, and consequently society. Although the origins and perspectives of these expectations diverge, many seem to share the belief that a large share of previously inactive citizens will seize the opportunity to get involved in contributing journalistic and political information and opinions to participatory media platforms. An empirical test of how many people actually participate, and what kind of content they contribute, lies at the heart of this dissertation. But before sketching the context and outline of this dissertation, a few critical gaps in current research are discussed.

VOIDS IN RESEARCH

Despite the explosive growth of academic attention for the consequences of participatory media, a number of issues limit our current understanding of the extent and the nature of the political uses of participatory media. Below, I list the three main shortcomings.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS. Surveys with a small number of respondents, case studies, and explorative content analyses certainly have a place in academic research as a means to describe upcoming phenomena or complex and abstract processes. However, the abundance of these type of studies, and the scarcity of studies with large-scale, systematic, and representative samples (Neuberger, Nuernbergk & Rischke, 2007), has led many to make generalizations about the influence of participatory media based on inadequate data.

NARROW GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS. The vast majority of citizen journalism studies originate from the United States. However, there are sufficient indications to expect different findings in other countries. First of all, the American political system and political culture are different from many other countries, including the Netherlands, which translates in differences with regard to voter turnout and levels of political engagement (for an overview, see LeDuc, Niemi, & Norris, 2010), which thus may also lead to differences in how forms on online citizen participation develop. And, related, there are

various differences with regard to culture (Hofstede, 2001), media systems (Curran, Iyengar, Brink Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009; Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and political communication systems (Baek, 2009) that account for differences in the development of the online participation of citizens and changes with regard to journalistic and political blog cultures (Hanusch, 2009). Also, the emergence of political blogging has started earlier the United States and the blogosphere may therefore be in a different state than 'younger' or developing blogospheres.

POLITICAL CITIZEN JOURNALISM? Many of the expectations regarding online participatory tools concern the *political* use of a *variety* of tools and platforms by *ordinary* citizens. However, the literature reveals that much of the research on participatory media is not concerned with the *political* nature or *political* impact. And, if politics are concerned, many studies are concerned with how news organizations, political actors and a handful of A-list bloggers are employing digital tools instead of examining to which extent *ordinary citizens* are using technology in a political way. Further, although using participatory media includes discussion forums, comments and uploading multimedia, most studies are focused on blogs and social networks.

This dissertation addresses the above-mentioned limitations by examining a *broad variety* of participatory media *outside* the United States (namely, The Netherlands), and used in a *political* context. Further, to increase generalizability, large-scale and nationally representative survey data will be used as well as various sampling steps in the blog content analysis to maximize the representativeness of the sample.

CONTEXT OF THE DISSERTATION: THE DUTCH CASE

It has been observed that most studies have been conducted in the United States. However, also in Europe, including the Netherlands, the emergence of participatory media has not gone unnoticed. Europe, and particularly The Netherlands, lies ahead of the United States in various ways, for example with regard to Internet penetration and broadband access (International Telecommunication Union, 2011). But also with regard to news consumption, both online and offline, and the use of participatory media, the Netherlands is a frontrunner (Newcom, 2012; Seybert, 2011; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2012). Moreover, the political situation in the Netherlands in the last years, which is characterized by polarization and intense immigration debates, helped shape

a culture in which there is much political debate (Boomkens, 2010; Oosterwaal & Torenvlied, 2010). Thus, being a front-runner with regard to Internet penetration and news consumption, combined with the political climate makes the Netherlands an excellent case to examine the development of participatory media in the political realm.

In the last decade, there have been various initiatives by news organizations to let the audience participate in the news process (Van Oers & Pleijter, 2011). Naturally, all news organizations facilitate their audience to leave comments under articles, to participate in forums and to contact the news desk. But there have also been more substantial participatory projects (Skoeps, VKBlogs, Dorpspleinen, NOS Net), and photos and videos of citizens on various occasions have been featured in the news (e.g., Theo van Gogh murder, the plane crash Turkish Airlines near Schiphol, video footage police violence against squatters). Furthermore, during the 2010 elections party leaders took part in public digital debates on Twitter and the (then) largest social network Hyves, the Dutch equivalent of Facebook.

But despite the omnipresence of many years of participatory features and platforms within and outside the Dutch media, even until today there has been a debate about the strained and undefined relationship ‘citizen journalists’ on the one hand and professional journalists and news organizations on the other (e.g., Bardoel, 2010; Costera Meijer & Arendsen, 2010). The – allegedly growing – popularity and prominence of platforms where citizens can anonymously and unfoundedly ventilate their opinions raises concerns amongst public figures and political actors about the quality of both the public sphere and professional journalism (Draijer, 2011; Knapen, 2008; Schnitzler, 2012; SP, 2009; Truijens, 2012). But despite these criticisms, and various failed projects, new initiatives are still employed and various news organizations and scholars see a future for citizen journalism (Van der Valk, 2011; Van Trigt, 2011).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

It is argued that the emergence of participatory media and citizen journalism can have effects on professional journalism, politics and society. But to find out to which extent this is really happening, it is of crucial importance to have a complete or at least broad and objective view of the current situation. It is therefore important to stress that this dissertation is largely exploratory in

nature. The central aim of the study is to examine the breadth and depth of the political uses of participatory media by citizens. It is argued that there is a need for answering basic questions: How many people actually participate, and how often is their participation political in nature? What kind of content do they publish? And why do they publish it? And what are the characteristics of these ‘citizen journalists’? Having answers to such questions would not only help to examine if and how extant communication theories needs updating, but also to what extent the emergence of online participatory media are leading to fundamental changes in the relationships between citizens, media and politics. More specifically, this dissertation thus aims to provide more empirical ground for the persistent debate between supporters of the ‘mobilization thesis’ on the one hand, and the people who believe participatory media will not significantly impact traditional structures (‘normalization thesis’) or even strengthen existing inequalities in terms of participation (‘reinforcement thesis’).

The set-up of the dissertation follows Harold Lasswell’s classic communication model (1948), which describes the central elements of the communication process: who – says what – to whom – in what channel – with what effect? Using two sets of survey data, I aim to shed light on the people who actually produce content (*who*) on participatory platforms such as blogs, Twitter and social networks: how many are they, what are their characteristics, what motivates them? Using content analysis, the content of political weblogs is examined (*says what?*), describing the frequency, form and nature of these publications. Using the survey data, I also asked who (*to whom?*) is using (consuming) the various platforms (*in what channel?*). Finally, this dissertation aims to provide a more systematic and empirical basis to examine the *effects* of participatory media and citizen participation in future research.

In chapter 2 and 3, the results of a large survey (N=2,081), representative of the Dutch population, are presented about the use of participatory media. In chapter 2, both ‘passive’ (i.e., consuming, reading, watching) and ‘active’ (writing, uploading) uses of participatory media are discussed, as well as the differences between political and non-political uses. In chapter 3, the explanatory role of personality traits and traditional political predictors is examined. More specifically, it is examined whether individuals who are more extravert and open to experience, are more likely to make political use of participatory media. Further, the mediating role of online news use, political

talk and political interest and the moderating role of external efficacy are explored.

In order to provide more detail on the actual content that citizens produce, in chapter 4 one specific participatory medium is singled out: blogs. Given the wide variety of multimedia features and publication and discussion options, this medium was viewed as the outlet that would provide the richest information about citizens' participation with regard to journalism and politics. The chapter covers the results of a content analysis of Dutch political citizen blogs that examines blog posts, blog characteristics and information about the bloggers. Further, particular attention is paid to the sampling of blogs: employing multiple steps, search engines, and keywords, it was the aim to compose a sample that goes beyond a handful of well-known and popular political blogs. Chapter 5 follows up on the content analysis of the previous chapter and examines the producers of political blogs. Based on extant findings combined with the insights from the other studies, a survey was conducted to ask political bloggers about their blogging behavior and perceptions. More specifically, bloggers are asked about their role perceptions, the reasons to blog and the perceived effectiveness of their outlets. Chapter 6, the last chapter, provides a concise overview of the main results and the implications of the dissertation.

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