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

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Chapter 6

Conclusion

Those who come out on top of this struggle for eyeballs are not middle schoolers blogging about the trials of adolescence, nor are they a fictitious collection of pajama-clad amateurs taking on the old media from the comfort of their sofas. Overwhelmingly, they are well-educated white male professionals.

Matthew Hindman, 2009

When I hear the term “citizen journalist,” I reach for my pistol.

Jon Talton, 2008

At the moment, social media are just another tool, not unlike phone calls and letters to congressional offices, a way to take the pulse of a highly selective public.

Barry Hollander, 2011

Media innovations have historically been received with both hopes and fears regarding their influence on the intricate relationship between citizens, politics and media (Schoenbach, 2001). It is therefore not surprising that the increased availability of participatory media have led to the expectation that a fundamental reconfiguration and extension of the field of journalism would be inevitable. Political institutions and mainstream media have been experimenting heavily with the implementation of Twitter, Facebook, blogs and online discussion platforms. The increase of citizen participation has been thought to result in more diverse and less elitist news coverage and in participatory media that would allow citizens to publicly debate about politics and perhaps even exert control over the performance of politics and mainstream media. Critics on the other hand feared political polarization and fragmentation of the audience and claimed that citizens’ contributions would harm the quality of journalism and public discourse.

Despite the lively debate, systematic and empirical studies in this field, particularly outside the United States, are scant. And, existing scholarly work

has led to quite divergent views: while some studies seem to show that the increased availability of participatory media has been leading to a more diverse and representative composition of the political debate (the mobilization thesis), others have demonstrated that existing differences between those who participate and those who do not persist (normalization thesis) or even become more pronounced (reinforcement thesis).

This dissertation has consciously not taken sides with one of these camps. However, in order to contribute to the debate about the political and journalistic contribution of citizen journalism and participatory media, this dissertation has attempted to answer a number of straightforward but also fundamental questions. How many people are actually using participatory media such as Twitter, blogs or social networks? And what are their characteristics? And if they maintain a political blog, what do they write and how authentic is it? And also, why do ordinary citizens blog about politics, how personal or political are their reasons? The main goal of these explorations was to provide more solid ground for theorizing about the impact of participatory media on politics and public discourse.

A SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

In the first empirical chapter the results were presented of a large-scale survey among a sample representative of the Dutch population about its use of participatory media like social networks, Twitter and blogs. It was found that the non-political and more or less 'passive' uses of some participatory media, like social networks, are moderately popular. However, asked about the frequency of using these media in a *political* sense (e.g., reading political comments or tweets), or asked about actively contributing to participatory media (leaving commentary on forums or showing activity on social networks), activity rates drop substantially to only a few percent. The results of the survey suggest that traditional participation patterns (low number of active people, skewed with regard to sociodemographic characteristics) persist online.

In the next chapter, using the same data, the distinctive characteristics of the small group of active participants were examined more in-depth. The analysis confirmed the expectations that people who are more extravert and more open to experiences are more likely to make use of participatory media. Further, mediation analysis revealed that higher scores on the personality

traits extraversion and openness to experience lead to higher levels of interest, talk and news consumption, behaviors that in turn are significant predictors of using participatory media. Not only does the study show that dispositional characteristics such as extraversion and openness directly and indirectly influence participatory media use, it also provides support for the notion that a combination of established theoretical frameworks that have proved to have predictive power in the pre-Internet era, can help explain relatively new and unexplored online phenomena such as the political use of participatory media. More specifically, it appears that using dimensions from the Big Five personality model in tandem with established factors that are typically used to explain conventional forms of political participation help understanding the mechanisms that underlie participatory behavior.

Chapter four and five zoomed in on political blogs, one of the most typical forms of political citizen journalism. First, a content analysis examined the style, topics, originality and functions of the blogs. Besides only finding a relatively low number of active political blogs, many of the blogs contained personal opinions and expressed political criticism. For their content, they relied on mainstream media. Overall, three types of bloggers were identified: *columnists* (focus on national politics, more personal and opinionated, often express political criticism), *local activists* (prefer local over domestic issues, more often feature original content, try to mobilize the audience) and *filter bloggers* (content derived from mainstream media, mainly providing hyperlinks to external sources).

The last chapter surveyed the bloggers from the content analysis about their characteristics, practices and beliefs. It was found that most citizens who blog about politics are men from higher age categories with a political leaning to the left. For their content they often rely on mainstream news sources, and they do not have the feeling that their blog is very effective in terms in influencing politics or the media. Only a fifth identifies with the role description 'citizen journalist.' Concerning the reasons for blogging, bloggers attributed high importance to drawing attention to topics that mainstream media did not cover and tried to influence public opinion. It was notable that the personal reason 'organizing and archiving my thoughts by writing' was also important, and that respondents seemed to be more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically. In many ways, blogging about politics comes across as a way of personal political expression akin to acts of political participation, rather than acts of 'journalism.'

In sum, the findings of this dissertation challenge various utopian and dystopian views on the nature and scope of citizens' journalistic contributions. The studies have not found that a large and diverse army of citizen reporters has emerged that regularly and substantially contributes to the realm of news and politics, nor that many people feel or act like pro-typical 'citizen journalists'. The findings seem to fall in line with studies on the use and nature of interactive features of online news sites and on the collaboration of professionals and amateurs. They found that journalists are largely irreplaceable (Reich & Lahav, 2012), that user-generated content is more entertainment than hard news (Bergström, 2008), that collaboration between journalists and their audience is complex and often not cost-effective (Domingo et al., 2008; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011) and that interactive features are often left unused (Quandt, 2008).

Although this dissertation may provide little support for people who expected more or less revolutionary changes, by no means do the findings suggest that scientific inquiry into the phenomenon of citizen participation is irrelevant, that it is all old wine in new bottles and that political communication is not undergoing changes. Instead, I argue that the results help more adequately identify relevant future research avenues. While there are of course various findings that are suitable for further exploration, I will specifically link the implications that are discussed in the next paragraphs with the expectations and questions that have been described in the introductory chapter. These have all focused on the overarching question as to which extent regular citizens, as a result of digitalization, are using participatory media for journalistic and political purposes. Given the fact that the studies have showed that the majority of citizens does not participate, that participation is often not political, that consumption is preferred over contribution, and that the content of blogs and the motivations of bloggers do not seem to suggest that professional journalism is seriously challenged, I propose four different research perspectives below that are relevant exploring based on the results from the dissertation.

REPRESENTATIVITY

Participatory media have been thought of as a means to widen the options for politics and news organizations to probe citizens' opinions and attitudes. Instead of relying on a handful of mainstream news sources, blogs and social

networks could offer voices from the full political gamut, younger generations and minority groups.

Given the small number of active political contributors identified in the dissertation, it would not be unlikely to find a discrepancy between the active and inactive group regarding their characteristics and political opinions and attitudes. If scholars argue that, normatively, it is desirable that society actively mobilizes underrepresented and inactive citizens to participate online, future studies could examine the possibilities to increase the participation rates of underrepresented groups of individuals. Interviews could yield insight into the barriers and considerations that play a role for hesitant spectators and case studies and experiments could be employed to identify the success factors and bottlenecks of participatory media. In this respect, the notion that privacy considerations seem to inhibit active participation (see chapter 2) while at the same time anonymous participation is considered to be at odds with the ideals of political discourse, is a relevant research avenue.

Relatedly, it would be relevant to examine to which extent participation rates and structures online correspond with the democratic system in the country at hand. This approach is particularly interesting given the recurrent claims of many authors that active participation of the audience in journalistic and political processes is natural and desirable now that the participatory tools are available online (e.g., Benkler, 2006). While the normative criteria of participatory and deliberative democratic models indeed include active participation and deliberation of citizens in journalism and at different stages of the political decision process, other models make far less normative demands on citizens (see Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Strömbäck, 2005). For example, supporters of the representative liberal theory share “the belief that ordinary citizens are poorly informed and have no serious interest in public affairs, and are generally ill-equipped for political participation. Hence, it is both natural and desirable for citizens to be passive, quiescent, and limited in their political participation in a well-functioning, party-led democracy” (Ferree et al., 2002, pp. 290–291). From this perspective, the dominance of and preference for certain theoretical democratic models in specific countries, could perhaps serve as suitable indicators of participation patterns online.

The notion that there is nothing wrong with a more or less passive electorate can of course also be connected to the ‘monitorial citizenship’ model that was introduced by Schudson (1999). He argues that although

many citizens may not be pro-active when politics are concerned, this not problematic for democracy. For the majority of people, being an ‘informed citizen’ is not only infeasible but also inefficient: Most citizens ‘monitor’ politics – generally by following the news – from a distance and are “poised for action if action is required” (p. 311). Thus, finding out under which conditions people move from being poised to actually swinging into action, is a challenging task for future studies.

ONLINE OPINION LEADERS

It is still common parlance to expect previously inactive or ‘disconnected’ citizens to become politically active now that participatory media are available. And sure, the absolute number of Twitter, Facebook and WordPress accounts has increased exponentially in recent years. But closer inspection of the survey data revealed that the large majority of respondents who indicate to use such media prefer ‘consuming’ – lurkers – over actively contributing content, and mostly in a non-political way. Combined with the insights from the survey among bloggers and the content analysis, the results seem to suggest that citizens with more resources are more likely to participate. This group, we now know, is relatively small.

But despite the low number of active online political participants, recent years have seen an everlasting attention by media, politicians and scholars for participatory media like Twitter, Facebook and Hyves. Why? It can be assumed that the small group of participants has a significant effect on how political information and opinion spreads, even to those who do not use these participatory media. Indeed, a recent PEW report (Purcell, Rainie, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010) showed that the majority of social network users are being updated about current affairs and news through the updates and hyperlinks that are posted by the people in their network: “75% get news forwarded through e-mail or posts on social networking sites and 52 percent share links to news with others via those means” (p. 4).

Such dynamics, of course, bring to mind a classic communication theory, gatekeeping (White, 1950). While the influential role of elite sources and the journalistic practices and newsroom culture in the sourcing and production of news (Gans, 1979; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Sigal, 1973) may largely remain, it has been found that nonelites are crucial for further dissemination over the Web (Dylko, Beam, Landreville, & Geidner, 2012; see Bruns, 2005,

for an elaboration on the concept of 'gatewatching').

In the same vein, there is much attention for the role of 'hubs' in information networks, such as (online and offline) opinion leaders (Farrell & Drezner, 2008; Eveland, Hutchens, & Morey, 2011; Himelboim, 2011; Mutz & Young, 2011). Besides online opinion leaders functioning as contemporary gatekeepers, they also seem to perform an agenda-setting function (Trenaman & McQuail, 1961): They seem to be capable to influence the public, but also mainstream media, as to what think or write about. And, their relatively strong power to influence people's knowledge, opinions or attitudes and political engagement can of course be traced back to the classic two-step model of information flows (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Although the two- (or multi-)step model has been thought not always to apply in the context of public opinion about politics, technology has altered this view:

We see great potential for this theory to experience a renaissance (...). When news consumers confront the excessive choices of today's media environment, one extremely important way they decide what to pay attention to is through recommendations that reach them through their online social networks. Given the well-documented tendency toward homogeneity in social networks, social media recommendations have considerable potential to polarize people's information environments (Mutz & Young, 2011, p. 1038).

The new modes, possibilities and speed of sharing and publishing information merits specific attention for how and by whom 'the audience' is confronted with information. How many steps are involved, what do the networks of online opinion leaders look like and which characteristics (e.g., retweets, number of followers, search engine ranking) affect how, if at all, information is spreading to the audience. It is also not surprising to see an upsurge in online credibility research that examines the circumstances, cues and contexts that determine whether online information is believed or not and is, as a result, more likely to have a wider circulation (e.g., Chung, Nam, & Stefanone, 2012).

CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

The advent of participatory online tools for citizens has led to a reinvigoration of studies that examine how these tools are affecting the public sphere. However, in the Netherlands, the results from this dissertation, combined with the journalists and online developments of recent years, seems to suggest that the success of ‘citizen journalism’ in the realm of politics is limited. Could an explanation be that this is the Netherlands?

Of course, there are various practical reasons: people may not be stimulated or facilitated enough, they do not have the skills to actual participate or they simply do not have the desire to get politically or journalistically engaged at all. However, there may be important other sociopolitical or contextual factors that could account for changes in levels of success of participatory media (e.g., Watson & Riffe, 2011). Similarly, much importance has been attributed to blogs, social networks and Twitter in igniting and organizing the ‘Arab spring’ (Howard & Parks, 2012) and in facilitating political mobilization and spreading uncensored information in less democratic and politically unstable countries, such as China, Cuba and Iran (Loewenstein, 2008). Thus, the limited level of success of participatory media could very well be a sign of a situation in which, generally speaking, the level of satisfaction with the regime and the media system is higher than in other countries. While participatory media are a suitable platform to voice criticism about the performance of politics or media, this has not become common practice among all Dutch citizens. Discussed from a rational choice theory perspective, it could thus be argued that the benefits of participation in countries with well-functioning mass media and stable politics are marginal and do not outweigh, at least for most people, the time and energy (costs) that are involved.

EFFECTS ON TRUST AND ATTITUDES

As a final point, I contend that it is relevant to consider whether there may be less ‘manifest’ effects of participatory media. It has been established that only a few contribute to the online public discourse. In many ways, this is not much different from the pre-Internet era, in which only a small portion of the population actively participated in political matters. However, the introduction of participatory media has substantially lowered the barriers for participation:

sending an e-mail, following a politician on Twitter or contacting a journalist are only a click away. Thus, these possibilities provide citizens with the *opportunity* to express their political opinions online, share newsworthy information, contribute content to mainstream media or contact politicians. This experience – of being provided the opportunity to participate – may impact citizens’ sense of political ‘confidence’. Seeing how fellow citizens are actively participating in political discussion on the Internet could develop citizens self-confidence as to their personal ability to also be able to participate effectively in politics (i.e., their internal efficacy). Or, witnessing online discussions between citizens and political actors may increase individuals’ trust in the responsiveness of politicians and authorities (i.e., external efficacy).

Alternatively, it could be that confrontations with abusive content and polarized discussions on online platforms have detrimental effects. Besides decreasing the likelihood that some people will decide to opt out of future participation, negative experiences may also affect their opinion about the public and political climate in their country or region. One can only speculate about the consequences when citizens are confronted with a blogosphere as envisioned by critics, vividly described by Miel and Faris (2008): “The manipulation of the blogosphere—and hence public opinion— is the newest dark art. A deluge of meaningless, self-centered chatter drowns out rare glimmers of online insight or truth” (p. 4). Relevant in this respect are for example the links that have been found between individuals’ perception of political polarization and attitude extremity (Van Boven, Judd, & Sherman, 2012), a phenomenon that of course also applies to Web.

THE FUTURE

It is undeniable that participatory media have left their marks on society. They have led many to expect that previously inactive citizens would start to engage in acts of ‘political citizen journalism’. The central aim of this dissertation was to shed light on the strong assumptions about the political uses of participatory media by citizens. Overall, I arrive at the conclusion that despite the various expectations, it seems that many things have remained unchanged regarding the relationship between politics, journalists and citizens: A few vocal, critical and politically interested citizens engage themselves in public political discourse, while the majority prefers

consumption over participation or refrains from it altogether. And even this active group of people does not seem to aspire to be direct competitors for professional journalists.

Does this conclusion mean that all the developments of the last decade have no consequences for media, politics and science? Certainly not. However, I contend that my findings lend little support for viewing the political potential of participatory media as a democratic panacea or a digital disaster. Before the Internet there were people who wished to participate, and today they are still there, only now equipped with far more advanced and attractive communication tools. It therefore also makes sense that media and politics employ participatory tools to consult and interact with this group. There are lively political discussions on the Web, media eagerly publish user-generated content to complement their own news coverage and the establishment of Twitter and Facebook is revolutionary. However, the small proportion of people who participate compared to those who do not, makes online participatory media not necessarily the best tools for gauging public opinion.

What do my findings mean for political communication science? In the last decade, there have been many scholars that have argued that extant theories, categorizations and conceptualizations would undergo radical changes as a result of the advent of participatory media and citizen journalism. The roles of journalists as gatekeepers, media as agenda-setters and a small elite as opinion leaders would gradually play out. And on even a broader societal level, it has repeatedly been argued that participatory media would affect the arrangement of the 'public sphere', as online citizens would collectively assume power from the mass media, which were accused of being too commercial, elitist and irresponsible as it came to offering a well-functioning platform for political information and public discourse. These aforementioned contentions, however, were largely based on studies that used anecdotal evidence or lacked methodological rigor otherwise. The findings from my studies however suggest that the role of citizens has remained largely unchanged, which would mean that most extant theories and mechanisms still apply. Nevertheless, the debate about the fundamental societal changes that participatory media will bring about will certainly continue when looking back on previous introductions of 'new media'. As Schoenbach (2001) has noted: "The myths of media and audiences in their sensuality and simplicity are often more convincing than the scientifically established but complicated answers" (p. 372).

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