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

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English summary

The great potential and the ubiquitousness of the Internet have led scholars, journalists and political actors alike to critically reexamine the triadic relationship between politics, media and citizens. The wide-ranging possibilities for ordinary citizens to easily and publicly express themselves by using participatory media like blogs, Twitter and social networks have led to the notion that those media should also have considerable effects on journalism and politics.

The nature and direction of the alleged effects vary widely. On the one hand, increased citizen participation has been hailed as a valuable addition to professional journalism and public discourse. Optimists claim that new media techniques allow for more participation by neglected groups of people. Topics and opinions can be brought to light that have received little to no attention. Mainstream media can be reprimanded by the audience for unbalanced news coverage while interactive collaboration between professional journalists and citizens could lead to better products. Critics, on the other hand, have asserted that increased citizen participation will primarily be detrimental. They fear that professional journalistic standards and practices (accuracy, independence, objectivity) will fade when lay people are allowed to engage in forms of 'citizen journalism', that public debate will be filled with speculations and unfounded opinions from mostly anonymous sources or that public discourse becomes fragmented now that people are, more than before, able to seek out information sources that match and reinforce their political attitudes.

Despite their different expectations, the optimistic and pessimistic camps are united in the notion that, in any case, the establishment of participatory media and their lowered threshold for citizen participation impact traditional notions of professional journalism and political participation. This dissertation, however, starts with the observation that most of the claims regarding the consequences of participatory media largely rely on case studies and anecdotal evidence.

More systematic studies that have sought to examine the degree and nature of the use of participatory media are scant. Further, despite the political significance ascribed to participatory media, politics is often not the focus of research in this domain. The same goes for the prominence of citizens: Many studies focus on the use of participatory media by professional

news organizations, by political actors or by other elite figures (A-list bloggers) rather than 'regular people'. Also, most often the topic has been studied in the United States. However, there may be differences in political, cultural and media systems that could make generalizations problematic.

In order to fill some of the gaps described above, this dissertation has tried to shed more light on citizens' participation in journalism and politics in the Netherlands, answering basic questions such as: how many people are actually participating, what characteristics do these people have, on what platforms are they participating, what kind of content do they produce, and what are their goals? These questions and the relevant historical and theoretical perspectives are outlined in chapter 1.

In chapter 2 the results of a large survey (N=2,081), representative of the Dutch population, are presented about the use of various participatory media: blogs, Twitter, social networks, discussion forums, commentary options and uploading photos and videos. Besides examining the frequency of participatory media use, the survey distinguished between passive and active use (i.e., *reading* messages on Twitter or actually *writing* tweets) and between political and non-political use (blogging about politics or blogging about entertainment). It was found that around 6% of the population actually contributed political content to participatory media on at least a monthly basis. It was found that these citizens are more interested in politics, talk more about politics, are Internet-savvy, have a stronger political self-confidence and are much more likely to have a better education. The results thus seem to suggest that traditional participation patterns – a relatively small number of active people, skewed with regard to background characteristics – reappear online.

Chapter 3 examines the distinctive characteristics of the small group of active participants more in-depth. The study follows the nascent literature that has recognized the significance of personality traits in predicting human behavior and therefore zooms in on the explanatory power of two of the 'Big Five' factors: extraversion and openness to experience. As hypothesized, citizens who are more extravert and more open to experiences are more likely to make political use of participatory media. Also, these traits further political interest, political talk and online news consumption, which in turn increase the use of participatory media.

Chapter 4 is devoted to examine the content that citizens produce. To this end, a content analysis was conducted of Dutch political blogs produced by

ordinary citizens. The data collection resulted in 162 blogs that regularly published political content. The results reveal that many blogs are rather personal (written in first-person), opinionated and not very interactive (i.e., comments are rare on most blogs). Most bloggers do not engage in journalistic research activities (conducting interviews, quoting others, describing events as eyewitnesses), but heavily rely on mainstream news media for their information. The bloggers that actually *do* produce their own content, mainly focused on local politics. The majority of bloggers – about whom information was available – was male and between 40 and 60 years old.

Chapter 5 surveyed the bloggers from the content analysis about *why* they blog. Most bloggers do not view their activity as a form of (citizen) journalism. Despite the fact that many people blog in order to influence public opinion or to cover subjects that get too little attention by mainstream media, the majority is not under the impression that their blog influences mainstream media or politics. It is therefore not surprising to find that personal and intrinsic motivations to blog, such as blogging to organize and archive one's ideas and thoughts by writing them down in a blog, were deemed very important. Still, there is an – albeit very small – share of bloggers regularly publishing information based on first-hand information.

In chapter 6, the main implications of the studies and directions for future research are discussed. In sum, the results show that most people do not participate, that most participation is not political, that consumption is preferred over contribution, and that the content of blogs and the motivations of bloggers do not seem to challenge professional journalism seriously.

Despite these assertions, by no means do my findings suggest that scientific inquiry into the phenomenon of citizen participation is irrelevant. Instead, I argue that the results help more adequately identify future research avenues. It would, for example, be important to examine how participatory media in today's society impact lurkers' political attitudes. Although most people refrain from participation, witnessing how fellow citizens are actively contributing to political discussions could develop citizens' self-confidence – to also be able to participate effectively in politics. Or, witnessing online discussions between citizens and political actors may increase individuals' trust in the responsiveness of politicians and authorities.

Alternatively, confrontations with abusive content and polarized discussions on online platforms could have detrimental effects. Besides

making people opt out of future participation, negative experiences may also affect their opinion about the political climate in their country or region. Another perspective that should be examined in internationally comparative research is whether satisfaction, for instance, with the political regime plays a role. Perhaps the benefits of popular 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 involved.