Public Service Broadcasting’s Participation in the Reconfiguration of Online News Content

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This article analyses public service broadcasting in Europe, looking at public broadcasters’ role as promoters of participative processes. Computer-mediated communication and studies rooted in mediated human interactivity are used to explore participative elements provided by digital technology, and how these can be incorporated into the news websites, through an empirical study of 5 case studies in the European market. The analysis is based on the methodology of content analysis with the goal of outlining the particularities of the participative elements implemented by each broadcaster and revealing the most common participative strategies. The findings suggest that although public service broadcasters offer a wide variety of possibilities, encouraging audiences to take on more active roles, their role is still peripheral and complementary.

Key words: Public service broadcasting, participation, online news, Europe, cross-media, television, Internet.

doi:10.1111/jcc4.12014

Introduction

Public broadcasting is facing new challenges as a result of the process of technological convergence that is transforming the nature of the media. In a technological environment that increasingly facilitates user interaction, and one in which the increased number of digital platforms makes it possible to create and exchange information, public broadcasters need to develop strategies to promote public intervention in alignment with their classic objectives: inform, entertain, and educate.

On a formal level, technological development brings with it the implementation of new kinds of participation, and on a structural level these services modify the current regime on which the public radio and television systems are based. Both phenomena call for new strategies, since although participation has been historically important in the media, digital technologies are increasing the space and central position that audiences occupy in their content.

This article analyses public radio and television services in Europe, looking at their role as promoters of participative processes. We focus on the introduction of online tools that allow the public to take an active role in the production of news and current affairs content and in generating public opinion.

Specifically, we examine news websites to find out how public broadcasters encourage their audiences to participate in the production of news content. This study focuses on news contents not only as one of the areas that has aroused the most interest in academia in recent years, but also because of
its ability to adapt to ongoing technological changes and challenges related to the new ways that people access and interact with information. As Kjus (2009) notes, today media websites serve two purposes: both as a means of finding information and as arenas of debate and opinion. The results in this area of study have shown that interactivity is a core characteristic of the new media (McMillan, 2002) and have transformed journalism and its productive practices. Nevertheless, several debates have emerged regarding the active role of the audience and its ability to choose the news items, as well as how these practices may influence news production processes (Pavlik, 2000; Boczkowski, 2004). These debates have become more important in recent years as there has been an exponential rise in participation in the media (Bardoel, 2007).

Setting out from that basis, the study has two main objectives: to analyse the phenomenon of online participation in public television channels and to compare the different strategies used to encourage participation. We gathered information on the changing nature of the public broadcasting services in the digital age and studied citizen participation and public news services on the Internet.

The analysis is focused on the news websites of public radio and television corporations in Italy (Radio Audizioni Italiane, RAI), France (France Télévisions, FTV), Germany (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, ARD), the United Kingdom (British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC) and Spain (Corporación Radiotelevisión Española, RTVE).

Even though previous studies have identified a variety of participative resources in the media (Chung, 2008; Domingo et al., 2008; Masip et al., 2010), there are few studies which tell us how a settled, successful public broadcaster can transition from the analogical to the digital model, maintaining its quality and creativity while taking advantage of the possibilities for participation afforded by the new platforms.

This study establishes a taxonomy of the options for participation and records the different kinds of services proposed. The participative elements on the news websites are detected, quantified and assessed. Not only did we detect and quantify these elements; rather we also analysed the way that they were implemented through a qualitative evaluation of the tools offered.

**Strategies for online participation in European public service broadcasting**

Today, broadcasters have developed strategies and services aimed at fostering the interaction processes with visitors in order to win over the public. With increasing frequency, online news items are complemented with related contents, and mechanisms are developed to make it possible for users to intervene. In the digital age, the new media are expanding the horizons of public broadcasting services (Bardoel, 2007). The feedback provided over the Internet allows social groups to interact with each other. However, these processes need to be negotiated with the former values of public services, which are in the midst of a wholesale redefinition today (Kjus, 2009).

Public broadcasting services were originally envisioned as a way to distribute information universally, facilitate public debate, and help to build a national identity (Council of Europe, 1994; Moe, 2008a). This initial mission of these public services is complemented with the activity in cyberspace, and the possibilities afforded by the Internet have served as an argument for some authors to defend the fact that online communication has a democratic potential through new tools like discussion forums and chat rooms. Online communication can improve the public debate if it manages to ensure more balanced citizen participation. In this way, the service principles for the media would be expanded (Enli, 2008; Harrison & Wessels, 2005; Kjus, 2009; Ytreberg, 2009). The relevant point put forth by Moe (2008a) revolves around the capacity that the online public media should have to provide well-designed spaces.
that foster balanced participation by all interested citizens. Online debate sites should be designed around professionally produced news and the links chosen from outside sources. In this way, the new means through which the audience gets involved with the media via the Internet could be viewed as progress in the values of public service (Harrison & Wessels, 2005).

In any event, the most prevalent doubt is whether the public media are truly conducting a strategy that utilises the possibilities of multiplatform media, particularly those that arise from Internet-based forms of participation (Bennett, 2008; Debrett, 2009; Herrera, 2003). Authors like Bardoel (2007, p.45) criticise the fact that “PSB’s Internet presence often is a product of ‘shovelwaring’ existing content to the new medium or of putting additional information, a by-product of the research done for the programme, instead of the result of a deliberate strategy to serve distinctive target groups by a cross media approach”.

From the academic vantage point, it is crucial to understand the processes of transformation that the media are currently undergoing. In the case of publicly owned broadcasters, the challenge of adapting to the new context is threefold. First, they are facing the challenge of remaining central stakeholders in technological scenarios that are radically different to those in which they began to operate (European Broadcasting Union - Digital Strategy Group, 2002). Secondly, as the audiences adopt new ways of media consumption, as they choose to receive contents through the new media more and more, the public broadcasting services must follow through on this trend through cross-media strategies and/or by developing new genres and formats (Bardoel, 2007; Lowe & Bardoel, 2007). Thirdly, a transparent policy must be set up on how to present the audience members who choose to participate actively through the tools placed at their disposal and how to manage the contents that are produced in this environment (McNair, Hibberd & Schlesinger, 2001).

One recurring theme in recent academic texts and research projects in the field of communication is the one that addresses the transformation that the industry is undergoing as a consequence of the process of digitalisation of the different stages, including production, distribution and reception of the contents at a time in which the Internet is gaining ground. Public service broadcasters’ expansion goals to the online world has triggered some controversies, such as the one that besieged the BBC in 1997 when it opened its BBC Online portal, whose success Europe-wide made groups like the Association of Online Publishers demand higher support from institutions, as it regarded the Internet as a space that should be exploited by the private sector (Humphreys, 2008).

The organisational structure of the traditional media is being adapted to a new context that is quickly changing. The realm where this evolution is the clearest is related to managing technological change, a transformation that poses a huge challenge for the communication industry (Küng-Shankleman, 2008). The Internet is a good example of how the advent of a new communication technology has the potential to upset the development of the media’s traditional business models (Mierzejewska, 2010).

Technological change has a direct influence on the strategy that the media industry uses, and the suitability of an organisation’s response in this area will determine its future (Küng-Shankleman, 2008). Public broadcasters have a prime chance to improve their service if they manage to take advantage of the potential of the available tools and are capable of establishing a true venue of communication with citizens.

**Participation in news media**

Participation is not a new phenomenon in television channels. Some resources, like the reader’s ombudsman, phone-ins, and surveys, have been a part of mainstream news production for decades (Deuze, 2006; Hibberd et al., 2000). In fact, letters and faxes are mentioned as ‘older forms’ of
user-generated content (UGC) (Scott, 2009). However, it is understood that the new digital tools entail a major step forward for participation. According to Deuze (2006, p.19) “online participation goes farthest, as the media corporation move towards what has been called ‘citizen journalism’ websites, combining editorial filtering with user-generated content.”

Participation has become a fashionable term in many of the vast number of studies that have researched journalism on the Internet, but as Herrera (2003) warns, the different approaches used have not undergone linear or cumulative development.

In the broadest sense, participative journalism seems to be understood as the users’ contribution to the news media without a framework regulated by professionals (Nip, 2006). Here, citizens are invited to actively contribute to the process of news gathering, choosing, and publishing, in addition to making comments and discussing their viewpoints publicly. All of this takes place with the cooperation and interaction of journalists.

The option of participating directly in the news entails a drastic change in the power relations between those who supply information and those who receive it. As Castells (2009) notes, power is not an attribute in itself; rather it is the outcome of a relationship between subjects which is always asymmetrical. That is, in power relations there is always one subject with a higher degree of influence than the other. The switch from a vertical relationship between the media and the audience to a more horizontal one is grounded on the premise of well-informed readers and the sufficient technical conditions to create contents and make them reach the media.

The fact is that participation is a concept with a heavy ideological weight and major political implications. In the field of sociology and in public communication studies, criticism has often been levelled at unbalanced power relations. In this area, participation is often distinguished from pseudoparticipation and total participation from partial participation (Pateman, 1970; Prado, 1986; Servaes, 1989; Verba, 1961). To distinguish them, Carpentier (2007) suggests that we consider to what extent those participating have enough power to influence others’ decisions.

To distinguish genuine or authentic participation in the media, Servaes (1989) underscores the need for the audience to be able to get involved in the process of producing, administering and planning the information, otherwise “participation may be no more than representation and consultation of the public in decision-making” (Servaes, 1989, p.85).

**Participation and its technological dimension**

For the purposes of this study, we understand audience participation from the perspective of studies that view it as new feedback opportunities provided by digital technology. These opportunities are incorporated in various combinations of traditional broadcasting and new media (Enli, 2009). The concept of participation is thus linked to the very act of being able to participate due to the availability of a series of opportunities provided by the technical media for the public to choose, have feedback options or convey their ideas, reactions or requests. We researched the participation opportunities at the level of reception, that is, the ways that users may engage in a conversation with the news producers or take part in the process of content production.

Both journalism and participation on the Internet are marked by their technological dimension, since as Deuze (2001) explains, the journalistic practices established in this environment are heavily determined by the possibilities afforded by the web and by a setting regulated by computer-mediated communication (Singer, 1998) and analysed from the perspective of studies on mediated human interactivity, in which the communication experience is regulated by a technological environment that is equipped with certain interaction tools that provide a potential framework for communicational action (Rafaeli, 1988).
One of the most widespread meanings of the term ‘participation’ in the digital media is the one coined by Jenkins (2006), according to which participative culture “contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship.” In the new digital context, consumers and producers exchange functions. “Rather than talking about media producers and consumers occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” (Jenkins, 2006, p.3).

The material developed by the public needs to go through a process of interaction which takes shape in the act of sending and participating in the offers made by the broadcaster, but theoretically the ways in which this action materialises and the theoretical concepts to be used to describe this process seem ill defined. McMillan (2002) compares the idea of interactivity to interaction, explaining that interactivity takes place when spaces are created to facilitate interaction. In contrast, after demonstrating that interaction is a multidiscursive concept, Jensen (1998) chooses to use interaction to reflect interdependent actions between two or more individuals, from their sociological grounding, and to use the idea of interactivity in communication settings determined by technology.

Situating ourselves in this second current, participation fits in with the idea of interactivity viewed as the possibility afforded to users/readers to take part in the news experience (Deuze, 2001). However, this interactivity or participation can take shape in many different ways, through a simple exchange of e-mails between journalists and the audience or through any tool available on the online news site, such as sending contents and chat rooms.

**Methodology**

For this analysis, we chose the online news sites of Radio Audizioni Italiane (RAI; www.rainews24.it/it/), France Télévisions (FTV; info.france2.fr/), Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (ARD; www.tagesschau.de), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC; news.bbc.co.uk/) and Corporación Raditelevisión Española, (CRTVE; www.rtve.es/noticias/).

These broadcasters all have extensive experience in their respective countries, emerged in an analogical environment, and have experienced an industrial reconversion as a result of the processes of digitalisation and convergence. This transformation was aimed at meeting the new audience demands through collaborative tools and multiplatform distribution.

Two samples were taken, the first during the week of 22-28 February 2010 and the second on 27 and 28 May 2010. The sample from the first week was taken daily starting at 5:00 p.m., by the time all the websites had been updated at least once. This sample was used to verify the behaviour of the news items present on the different websites as well as to establish the taxonomy of the participative elements found. The observation enabled us to confirm that there were no significant changes in the participative elements on the different days of the week analysed. In consequence, since no differences were recorded in this first observation, the team decided to concentrate the analysis and develop a smaller, two-day sample in order to make a more in-depth analysis and a detailed study of all the participative elements present on the news sites’ homepages and all the internal news items that appeared on the different homepages.

Likewise, the dates chosen were expected to be normal news days on which no special events would happen that might alter the results. This premise was indeed fulfilled since no exceptional news item was produced on the days of observation.

Factors taken into account:
Classification of the participative elements implemented: the elements were divided into four categories according to the aforementioned classification of their functions: a) elements that foster debate, b) elements to spread the contents, c) elements to contribute, and d) elements to evaluate the news.

Insertion strategies: The structure of the news websites of each broadcaster was analysed along with the locations where the participative elements appear. We noted whether the participative elements appeared on independent pages apart from the news website, such as special sections devoted to participation, or whether they were placed next to or inside the news texts. Our goal with this exploration was to find out whether or not the public service broadcasters are encouraging the integration of audience-generated content into the journalistic contents.

Handling of intellectual property rights: We noted the conditions of use, editorial guidelines, and rules for participation that mentioned ownership of the rights to publish, broadcast, and distribute the content sent in to the broadcaster by users.

Participative Elements

All the links to services, contents, and applications through which communication can be established between the medium and the audience have been considered participative elements. The idea of a participative element, then, seems associated with the opportunity to participate or interact. This notion rests on the principles of interactivity described by Rafaeli (1988), who explains that some new media are potentially interactive, while others can be quasi-interactive (reactive) or noninteractive. The difference lies in the fact that although many media may have elements that foster audience feedback and are theoretically envisioned as two-way communication channels, there is often a low level of communicative exchange.

Therefore, in this study we analyse the participative elements as the audience's chances to take part or intervene in news websites. By doing so, we take for granted that these participative elements have the potential to be interactive in that they make it possible for two parties to engage in dialogue within a responsive dialogue model, according to Rafaeli's (1988) classification.

Once we have defined what we mean by participative elements on news websites, the second challenge of this study is to classify them. In this field, there is no general agreement on a classification system that encompasses all the participative elements found in online newspapers, and each author has coined his or her own taxonomy. For example, in a study on 16 online newspapers, Domingo et al. (2008) identify up to 17 participation variables offered on the websites. Similarly, Wardle & Williams (2008) propose a classification system divided into five kinds of UGC, while others like Chung & Robinette, (2008) organise the participative resources according to a scale based on five categories that allude to the websites' level of interactivity.

Without downplaying the valuable contributions of these authors and their efforts to separate out the participative elements, in this study we believe that participation in an online environment may be viewed as a dialogue mediated through certain technical resources that make interaction between the medium and its audience possible. Therefore, we believe that we should rely on discourse studies to distinguish between the participative elements according to their communicative function, which we have divided into four main categories:

- Elements to foster debate: Debate is a useful communication technique for setting forth different perspectives on a problem. The comparison of stances must always be orderly, so there have to be rules or subjects that moderate the members' participation. These conditions are fulfilled...
in the digital sphere by forums, chat rooms, blogs, comments, and digital encounters, in which readers/users can air their opinions in interviews or events that have previously arranged.

- Elements to spread the contents: When we talk about spreading the contents, we are alluding to the possibility of acquiring, ordering, sharing, and distributing contents in order to influence other subjects’ perceptions and preferences. In essence, this category encompasses the idea of community and the ways in which information circulates within a specific kind of social integration (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970). This category encompasses social bookmarking services like Digg, Delicious, and Menéame, as well as social networks where users exchange, share, or distribute contents. In the latter we include links that lead the user to the particular profile that each medium might have on networks like Twitter and Facebook, in addition to implementation of the tools developed by these networks in the news, such as the ones that offer readers/users the chance to indicate whether or not they like a particular news item.

- Elements to contribute: This category includes all the technical resources that make it possible for readers/users to contribute to the media content by sending in still images, moving images, texts, or audio that can be used in the news. In the digital environment, this kind of participation, which is widely called user-generated content or UGC, breaks with a paradigm of news production exclusively for the privileged classes. Thanks to the new technological resources, audiences shift from being consumers to producers and thus revitalise the ideals of the democratic potential of the public sphere (Wei, 2009).

- Elements to evaluate the news: In this category we include content tagging, a tool derived from 2.0 applications to organise and classify the news according to the reader/user’s preferences, in addition to surveys and evaluations through which a current news item is recognised, rated, or deemed worthwhile. These mechanisms are aimed at marking preferences and appear with closed questions that are particularly useful for ascertaining the readers’ impressions of and attitudes towards a current event or their personal preferences regarding the news published, thus contributing to the editor’s job.

The purpose of the study is to identify and compare the participative elements present on the news websites of each broadcaster. The study of five public broadcasters will be used to define the participative models and strategies offered in relation to the tools available in their online news contents. We have based this study on two fundamental research questions:

RQ1: What kind of participative elements do the public service broadcasters offer on their news websites?

RQ2: How are the participative elements integrated into the daily news?

Bearing in mind that the public broadcasting services have implemented a wide variety of services to promote audience participation (Bardoel, 2007) and that in the digital environment interactivity is one of the main feature of the media (McMillan, 2002), we hypothesised that:

H1: The participative elements have been included as a significant component of the message on public broadcasting services’ news websites.

Among the numerous alternatives for participation that might arise in the online environment, we sought the ones that positively foster not only users’ experiences but also the role of the public broadcasting services as organisations charged with strengthening democracy and facilitating citizens’
access to the public debate (Council of Europe, 1994; Moe, 2008a; McNair, Hibberd & Schlesinger, 2001). Hence we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: The participative elements with the highest presence on the news websites are the ones aimed at facilitating debate and socialisation among citizens.

Based on a critical perspective on participation, in this study we posit that audience contributions lead to a change in the power relationships between the media and its audience (Castells, 2009). According to this premise, the participative tools and comments, contributions, or debates that emerge from this interaction must be integrated into the daily news as part of the journalistic discourse. For this reason, we hypothesised that:

H3: Public broadcasting services rarely include audience contributions in the daily news.

Interpretation and analysis procedure

The information gathered in the sample was recorded in a bank of data where the results and observations from each capture day were qualitatively described. The headlines and news items were digitally saved as still images and later edited to point out the location of the participative elements.

The first evaluation, which was qualitative in nature, was used to construct a global analysis whose purpose was to specify the particularities of the participative elements implemented by each of the broadcasters and to discover the most prominent participation strategies.

In this data collection we confirmed the existence of the sample through an evaluation of the intercoder agreement. The researchers participating in the coding discussed the doubts and problems concerning how to define the participative elements that were analysed, the rules for gathering the information and the way the participative elements examined in this study were described in order to confirm the consistency and rules of the coding process until they reached enough consistency to proceed to the coding of the final sample.

Once the attributes of the different opportunities for participation had been qualitatively described in order to corroborate the information gathered, explore quantitative differences and illustrate their representativeness, the participative elements that appeared the news websites on 27 and 28 May 2010 were tallied. A total of 10 headlines and 295 news items were analysed.

According to studies on human-computer interface and computer-mediated communication, we focused on the elements that permitted users to interact in the new medium. Following the standard methodology used in content analysis, we noted the participative elements in the headlines and internal news items that appeared on the headline pages over the course of both days. If the elements were repeated on the same page, such as a link to a social network appearing on the upper and lower part of the news items, they were tallied just once in order to avoid duplication.

In this way, the tallies of blogs or commented news items, for example, yielded important information on the volume of participative elements, while the qualitative analysis on the insertion strategies allowed us to discover how they influence and are articulated in the news content. If we only limited ourselves to tallying the participative resources, we would consider that their abundance is at least partially the result of an opening or democratisation of the media and fall into an analytical reductionism driven by novelty (Carpentier, 2009). However, in this way, the data in the qualitative analysis enable us to measure the number of participative elements and at the same time understand the structure governing and determining this participation within the news discourse.
This methodological position is grounded on a critical vision of participation as well as studies on society’s adoption of technology, innovation, and technological change, where despite more or less important differences, authors like Mahler & Rogers (1999), Latour & Woolgar (1995) and Bijker (1995) all reach the agreement that the processes of technological evolution are both linked to and conditioned by a given social context.

Results

Classification of the participative elements implemented

The study revealed that the websites analysed use similar participative elements. Regarding the first category established, elements to foster debate (forums, chat rooms, citizen blogs, and comments on the news, as well as special sections where the public has the option of comparing their points of view), the Spanish broadcaster was the only one to insert invitations to participate in forums in the headlines and news items, while none of the media offer chat rooms.

On a quantitative level, what stands out is the prominence that blogs have earned in the news portals. All told, 403 links were found to blogs on the different homepages and news contained in the headlines. The broadcaster’s international news correspondents write most of them. Non-news-oriented blogs are also common on the broadcasters’ programmes, a trend that indicates synergies among different websites and the contents of different programmes on the news portals of the television stations. Even though entries in citizen blogs were not found on the headline pages or news in any of the media, France Télévisions stands out for being the only one that offers its users the chance to create their own blog inside its website.

In the analysis we detected that all the media offer the possibility of commenting on the news items or videos. Digital encounters with special guests are also common on RTVE and ARD, which occasionally offer the audience the chance to participate by sending in questions both in advance and live to the online interviews scheduled by the broadcaster.

Compared to the scarcity of tools like forums or chat rooms, comments and blogs written by professionals on the headline pages do stand out for being quite common. This circumstance indicates that these participative resources are more widely accepted by the media as gateways of access for users to take part in the website.

Regarding the second category, elements to spread the content we noted that offering social bookmarks is also a widespread practice, as is the possibility of sharing the information by e-mail. All the broadcasters offer some tool that enables users to save their favourite pages and contents in a personal profile – located outside the broadcaster’s website. Likewise, users also have the chance to organise, send, and recommend items. In contrast, we saw that elements to contribute through which the audience can send in still images, moving images, texts, or audio are rare. During our exploration, we hardly found any links in the news items and headline pages that allowed for this possibility; in fact, we only found them twice in RTVE and once each in ARD and BBC.

Finally, within the group of elements to evaluate the news (surveys, votes, and cataloguing information), we did find some differences. In none of the news websites analysed did we detect a feature to catalogue the news. However, we did observe that votes on contents are quite widespread. RTVE includes a feature developed by Facebook\(^2\) to indicate whether readers “like” a particular item, along with a counter tallying the number of people who have already indicated that they “like” it. Similarly, some news items can be rated with a score of one to five stars. This kind of invitation to participate was noted in all the broadcasters studied with the exception of the BBC. Surveys are less frequent and were only found on the websites of the French and German broadcasters.
Table 1 summarises the participative elements noted and organises them according to the proposed classification. The percentages and absolute numbers were extracted over the total sample, which was made up of 1,049 participative elements found on the 27th and 28th of May 2010. It is clear that even though all five European broadcasters have implemented similar elements, each deploys its strategy using different tools. The Italian RAI concentrates on mainly offering tools to spread and rate the news. France Télévisions also uses a significant part of its invitations (24%) bookmarking, although it also asks readers to send in their comments 29% of the time. For the German ARD, comments account for 15.8% of their news items, but the importance of blogs (25.7%) and the section devoted to participation (24.6%) is weightier. The BBC distributes its participative elements in a similar fashion. In the sample, the participative tools offered by the British broadcaster were divided into three main areas: blogs (30.4%), bookmarking (31.1%), and links to the section devoted to participation (Have Your Say) (31.1%). Finally, RTVE devotes more than half of its participative elements to blogs (55.6%) and relegates tools for spreading contents (29.9%) and virtual encounters (11.8%) to secondary status.

Insertion strategies
The media analysed have adopted similar participative elements but in differing proportions and ways. Even though access to the news website is similar in all cases through a tab in the upper browser of the broadcasters’ homepage, each broadcaster has developed its own web format, and both the design and structure differ depending on the country.

If we first consider the participative elements present on the news homepage, we see that the size of the headlines and the number of new items published on the dates analysed vary considerably and affect the number of participative elements found on each website, but not proportionally. For example, despite the fact that France Télévisions offers less news than the other media analysed and has a second, smaller headline, it is the one that promotes the most participative processes on the front page, with 35 elements that encourage users/readers to interact.

The position on the pages occupied by the participative elements in relation to the journalistic texts reveals a distance between the audience-generated contents and the news items written by the newsroom. Generally speaking, we can see 77 participative elements on the headline pages, which account for 8% of the total of 1,049 participative elements found on both the headline pages and internal news pages. The alternatives for participation on the headline pages are primarily elements to foster debate. Specifically, we found 26 links for commenting on the news, which account for 33.8% of the total participative elements found on the headline pages, followed by links to the broadcasters’ different blogs (25 links; 32.2% of the total number of participative elements found on the headlines pages).

The elements to spread the content proved to be common resource in the news pages on the upper or lower bar on the screen where the daily news appears, as are rating tools through which users can recognise, evaluate, or assign merit to a news items. However, elements that encourage the audience to send textual, audiovisual, or sound contents were rarely found next to the news; rather they were placed on the pages or sections devoted to participation as a permanent option.

As can be seen with the white boxes in Figure 1, there are common trends in the headline pages regarding the practices of inserting participative elements, such as links for users to register located on the upper parts of the websites, links to contact the broadcaster on the lower part of the headlines pages, and links to blogs and participative sections on the main menus located on the left and right columns of the headline pages.

The participative elements on the headline pages are mainly inserted in the lower quadrants (66; 85.7%), where users have to scroll down to find them, while the central areas are set aside for the news features.
Table 1  Participative elements found on the 27th and 28th of May 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participative elements</th>
<th>RAI</th>
<th>FT</th>
<th>ARD</th>
<th>BBC</th>
<th>CRTVE</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To foster debate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forums</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
<td>1 (0,1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chats</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>12 (3%)</td>
<td>5 (1,2%)</td>
<td>50 (12,5%)</td>
<td>49 (12,1%)</td>
<td>287 (71,2%)</td>
<td>403 (38,4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>7 (7,6%)</td>
<td>46 (50%)</td>
<td>29 (31,5%)</td>
<td>6 (6,5%)</td>
<td>4 (4,3%)</td>
<td>92 (8,8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital encounters</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>12 (16,4%)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>61 (83,6%)</td>
<td>73 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To spread the contents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookmarking tools (Digg, Delicious or Menéame and others)</td>
<td>55 (24,9%)</td>
<td>38 (17,2%)</td>
<td>3 (1,4%)</td>
<td>50 (22,6%)</td>
<td>75 (33,9%)</td>
<td>221 (21,2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to social networks (Twitter, Facebook and others)</td>
<td>57 (39,3%)</td>
<td>2 (1,4%)</td>
<td>3 (2,1%)</td>
<td>4 (2,8%)</td>
<td>79 (54,5%)</td>
<td>145 (13,8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To contribute</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links inviting users to send in still images, moving images, texts and audio</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>2 (50%)</td>
<td>4 (0,3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tagging</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To evaluate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>8 (80%)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>10 (0,9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements to assess the information</td>
<td>54 (54%)</td>
<td>15 (15%)</td>
<td>27 (27%)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
<td>100 (9,5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>185 (17,6%)</td>
<td>108 (10,3%)</td>
<td>133 (12,7%)</td>
<td>110 (10,5%)</td>
<td>513 (48,9%)</td>
<td>1,049 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to the elements appearing in all the websites in the sample, such as the possibility for users to register and contact the broadcaster, we can find a link to the readers’ ombudsman, which operates as a mediator between the public and the news website, on the headline pages of RTVE and FTV. With the exception of the Spanish broadcaster, there are several sections on the main menu of the headline pages of all the websites in the sample devoted exclusively to participation, in addition to links to other websites that centralise the audience-generated contents related to all the programmes and topics that are of interest to the broadcaster.

If we examine the volume of participative elements, we find that the broadcaster with the highest number of participative elements is RTVE (513; 48.9%), followed by RAI with 185 (17.6%). This is mainly due to the fact that the Spanish broadcaster’s website has no specific sections devoted to participation; rather it chooses to distribute a variety of online links that encourage the audience to interact with the different contents throughout the entire website. These links are repeated and offer the same participation options in the different content appearing on all the pages. This strategy gives the readers the impression of finding numerous participative options during their browsing experience. In RAI, the abundance of elements that encourage participation mainly reflects the inclusion of numerous links to the social networks to comment on the news in practically all the news items and elements.
As some authors have already noted (Emmett, 2008; Stassen, 2010), the social networks have had a major impact on the news organisations’ communication strategies. However, even though the broadcasters have developed their own profiles on many of the social networks, these profiles are still rarely or marginally integrated into their websites, since in none of the broadcasters in our sample did users’ contributions to these networks appear in the news website. Only RTVE introduces some Facebook tools (the so-called “social plug-ins”) in its pages, while the other broadcasters only offer external links to the social networks.

The social network services tend to be designed and programmed by professionals from outside the public corporation, and the conditions of use do not seem to be defined by the broadcasters. This practice shows a low degree of transversality in managing participation among Internet participation services and a low level of development of strategies that enable the social networks to be integrated into the news websites.

If we further examine the numerical representativeness of the participative elements offered alongside the news, we find that 99.3% of the total of 295 news items viewed contain at least one element that enable the public to participate. This figure indicates that the public services take participation in the news into account, at least from the quantitative standpoint. However, we found a tendency to spatially separate user participation from the journalistic discourse. This is clear when we analyse the functioning and location of all the links that allow for participation, since most of the participative elements detected in the news (80.1%; 964) send users to a different page than where the news item is.

Likewise, we only found 13 links (1.5%) that encourage participation within the body of the news text; the others are located above, below or next to the news item, indicating their peripheral or complementary role. This tendency to include links encouraging participation inside the news is noticeable in the BBC, ARD and RAI. However, in none of these cases is it possible to see the audience-generated contents on the same page. In other words, we may find several links to share opinions on a news item right below the headline, but we cannot find the text produced by the audience within the news items, since this link moves the users to another page, thus creating a distance between the news produced by the broadcaster and the audience’s contributions.

The BBC encourages its users to comment on some news items and send in audiovisual material. However, these contents sent in by the audience are not usually shown on the same page where the news item can be read. Most of them are only accessible through the section entitled Have Your Say, which includes summarised versions of some news items in order to encourage participation, and under them the users’ comments. Exceptionally, some of them are harvested to be included within quotation marks in the internal news items, but this procedure occurs very occasionally and was only seen on a handful of occasions.

Nor does the RAI show the audience’s comments on the same page as the news; rather it directs citizens to the blog Di la Tua, where they can include comments not only in the guise of text but also as videos. On both RAI and the BBC, the boundaries distinguishing invitations for the public to send in contents to the broadcasters and invitations to debate and share opinions on the news are quite widespread, because both offer the chance to include videos, texts and sound in the comments. This tendency indicates not only that both broadcasters are beginning to use comments as a way to provide the audience with a space to build a story parallel to the mainstream story but also that they are strategically seeking to reuse these contents to reinforce their own news discourse. ARD and FTV display a much more integrative strategy and choose to situate only some of the comments under the news items with a link leading to another page where all the comments related to each item are shown.

The still-incipient practice of inserting audience comments in the news shown on the BBC suggests a substantial step forward in how the public’s contributions are being handled, as they are beginning to be viewed as comparable, at least from the formal standpoint, to the contributions from news
professionals. This policy contrasts with the creation of specific sections devoted to participation, where the audience can exchange opinions, send in contents and rate the news, but on different pages than the ones used to publish the news.

The BBC section *Have Your Say* offers numerous elements that encourage the audience to comment and share their comments on the news. Even though it is presented independently, this section is related to the contents of the news website since some of the audience contributions are directly included in the current news items. In turn, the main menu of the RAI news page presents a section of blogs which includes the blog *Di la Tua*, in addition to a beta website shared with all the broadcaster’s programmes called *Community*, where users can share their comments in blogs, send in videos, make comments on videos, participate in live cross-media events and take part in text and video chats, multiconferences, forums, and surveys.

FTV gives access to two sections devoted to forums and blogs on the upper menu of its news page and its news site, ARD offers users a section for rating and commenting on the news under the name meta.tagesschau.de, in addition to a blog that brings together in a single online space all the journalists associated with the company (blog.tagesschau.de/) and an independent website which is in charge of participation, political news, and the new media (politik-digital.de).

The goal of these sections devoted to managing participation is to focus the audience’s attention on specific spaces that centralise the audience-generated content. However, the only sections that are exclusively linked to the news pages are *Have Your Say* (BBC) and meta.tagesschau.de (ARD). In these options, we can witness a certain reluctance to include audience contributions in a natural, contextualised way in the different news items.

**Management of intellectual property rights**

With the exception of the BBC, the broadcasters observed transfer the publishing and dissemination rights of the material sent in by the audience to the broadcaster free of charge. They accept no responsibility for the way users utilise their websites and interactive services and require participants to guarantee that they hold the rights to everything they send in.

RAI states that the materials sent in by the audience come to be owned by the broadcaster, which can edit and modify their contents, as well as distribute them to third parties free of charge. The Spanish broadcaster states that it will exclusively hold the exploitation rights of the recordings sent in along with the authority to lend the materials to third parties for the maximum protection time set forth in the laws in place on intellectual property, and that it can use these materials in any country in the world. Similarly, the users of France Télévisions authorise the broadcaster to use the images without compensation to be disseminated through the media of its choice and in all of its media formats. The German ARD does not offer the possibility of sending in contents on a regular basis. We only detected an invitation for this kind of participation as part of the football World Cup held in South Africa in June 2010. Just like the other European broadcasters, the rules for participation stated that the contributors granted exclusive broadcasting and distribution rights to ARD.

The BBC does not exclusively hold these rights, but it does note that the user grants the broadcaster his or her permission to disseminate the materials free of charge and worldwide. According to its conditions, the BBC pledges to try not to modify or edit the contents, to cite the source whenever possible, to contact the owner should the information be shared with third parties and to try to ensure that these third parties do not modify the content of the materials sent in. The BBC is the only broadcaster that states explicitly in its website that it earns no direct revenues from the pieces sent in.
Conclusions

The results of this study reveal the strategies to stimulate participation used by five European public service broadcasters and describe the nature of the different participative processes offered on their news websites. The analysis of the range of participative elements available has enabled us to identify general trends as well as particular strategies on how the leading public radio and television broadcasters in Italy, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain administer audience participation in their online news websites.

The quantitative methodology applied in this study made it possible to get specific data that we used to answer the research questions; likewise, the detailed and critical interpretation of the results has expanded the horizon of the findings. Additionally, the categories established as participative elements were extremely useful for categorising the audience participation on the news websites. This taxonomic proposal could be used to develop new models to interpret the audience interaction on news websites.

Regarding the first research question on the kinds of participative elements implemented, the results of this study show that the online news media of the public radio and television stations have incorporated a wide variety of tools that enable the audience to interact. In fact, all the headline pages of the online sites analysed contain participative elements, and 99% of the news items viewed have at least one tool that encourages the audience to interact on the website. These results confirm what other authors such as Harrison & Wessels (2005) have stated when they say that the audiovisual sector is morphing and adding to its traditional functions another one linking the users to the medium (Born, 2004).

The analysis of the kinds of elements offered on the websites indicates that there are similar trends in the use of participative tools that allow the audience to share, debate, opine, or send in text, visual, or sound contents. Specifically, regarding the elements that foster debate, all the news websites in the sample include links to blogs, applications for the public to send in comments on the news items and links to different bookmarking services. We found chat rooms on none of the websites examined, and only the Spanish broadcaster offered invitations to participate in forums on the headline pages and news. These results show that the comments are replacing the role that chat rooms and forums used to play as communication resources that made communication between users and broadcasters possible and as places of encounter and debate. In line with Reich (2011:113), we agree that “user comments mark a new stage in the evolution of participatory spaces”. This kind of participatory element offers a more direct access for any user that wishes to express his opinion about a news topic in comparison to forums or chats.

To the contrary, we found differences related to the elements used to spread the contents in the inclusion of links to social networks on the headline pages and news items, as well as in the inclusion of applications developed by social networks like Facebook that facilitate the exchange of users’ opinions. The analysis reveals the importance of blogs in channelling most of the comments from the audience and the tools to spread the contents which proliferate on the headline and news pages. Regarding the elements to contribute and rate the news, there are differences related to the links encouraging the audience to send contents, located in special sections, and inclusion of surveys, systems to rate or score the news, participation options in interviews through digital encounters and the possibility of participating in video blogs, which are still in the minority.

The second research question posed in the study focuses on how the media include participative elements in their daily news. In response to this question, we discovered that all five public service broadcasters analysed have developed different models. The Italian RAI bases itself on exploiting the possibilities of spreading and rating the news and the blog Di la Tua, where the public has the opportunity to participate. In France, France Télévisions focuses on more direct audience participation.
It is the only broadcaster analysed whose headline page asks users to comment on the news. In Spain, RTVE has channelled its efforts to interact with the audience by creating numerous blogs that are constantly listed on its news website. ARD has devised a strategy that revolves around blogs and the participative venue meta.tagesschau, where users can debate and comment on the news. Similarly, the data on the BBC show that the British broadcaster has divided its strategy into three main areas: encouraging participation in blogs, spreading the news and offering links in the Have Your Say section, which contains the different possibilities for participation.

However, the analysis has also demonstrated that participation is a peripheral and complementary resource. The strategies pursued by the different public broadcasters do not harness all the potential that the available tools make possible, such as a more fluid relationship with audiences and with it an enrichment of the journalistic message. However, in an innovative vein we did notice a rise in the amount of space set aside for participation within the pages where the news is featured. In the BBC, we noted a quest for formulas to include these audience contributions into the news contents. Thus, the BBC seems to be indicating one possible way of making inroads towards a more balanced and horizontal relationship between the media and the audience through participative elements. This point leads us to studies that are concerned with the concept of quality in relation, to the news, comments, and debates that arise from UGC (Carpentier, 2009; Masip et al., 2010).

It is not enough to implement services that make participation possible; rather users’ contributions must be valued, and to do this, strategies must be designed that properly administer the audience-generated content. Along the lines suggested by McNair, Hibberd & Schlesinger (2001), the participative elements present on the online news media should be targeted at promoting democratic values, specifically representation of the citizen in the public sphere; interrogation or what Habermas (1989) has called the critical scrutiny of political elites by the people; and the mobilisation of citizens to participate. Now the public broadcasting services have new tools at their disposal to articulate the debate and strengthen democratic values. However in this study, we saw how the public broadcasting services are facing a twofold dilemma. First, they have to defend their well-established reputations by offering unique, independent, and reliable news contents and services that make them stand out from the sites offering commercial services, while secondly they have to make their boundaries more flexible in order to ensure a “plurality of voices” (Blumler 1992; Humphreys 1996; Voltmer 2000). In concurrence with Kjus (2009), we saw that the public broadcasting services are looking for ways to make their audiences more active. However, the high number of tools that we have identified herald new challenges. It is not enough to include participative elements; rather they must be used to strengthen the values that have historically underpinning the purpose of journalism on the public broadcasting services. In this vein, subsequent studies should address participation linked to transformations in productive routines.

The public services need to implement participative strategies designed to enhance the quality of the information and foster public debate. Only through a more horizontal, democratic communication system which is sensitive to the diversity of sources, issues, and players can public broadcasting corporations truly contribute to the debate, to the consolidation of democratic values and to social cohesion.

Notes

1 This article forms part of the project entitled “Entorno cross media: transformaciones organizativas y productivas en los grupos radiotelevisivos” (CSO2009-09367), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Education under the auspices of the National Research, Development and Innovation Plan, 2010-2012, studying the ways in which large European public TV corporations are
approaching the phenomenon of cross-media production. The researchers form part of GRISS (Grup de Recerca en Imatge, So i Sintesi), a consolidated research group (2009SGR1013) of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, recognised by the Catalan government.

2 This is the Facebook “Like” button.

References


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