
User Generated Content in the Newsroom: Professional and Organisational Constraints on Participatory Journalism

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Abstract

The phenomenon of citizen journalism and the wider trend of user generated content are creating new challenges and opportunities for mainstream media. Traditional news media, like newspapers, tend to show increasing interest in the ways in which user generated content can be integrated into the professional news making process. Yet, scarce but growing research on participatory journalism suggests that the adoption of user generated content in the newsroom is hindered by several contextual factors on different levels of the newsroom organisation. By taking a social constructivist approach to examine the development of participatory journalism, we have tried to gain a better understanding of what these factors are and how they shape the adoption of user generated content. Empirical evidence was sought through twenty semi-structured interviews with the newsroom staff of two Belgian newspapers and one local community website. One of our main conclusions is that participatory journalism is developing rather sluggishly; however this is often due to newsroom structures, work routines and professional beliefs rather than unwillingness among professionals to open up the news production process to user contributions.

Introduction¹

Since authors like Dan Gillmor (2004) welcomed the trend of ‘grassroots’ or ‘citizen journalism’ with great enthusiasm, some media experts began to suggest somewhat optimistically that a new form of ‘participatory journalism’ was likely to emerge. Proponents of participatory journalism call for a radical change in professional journalism in order to meet the principles of citizen-generated media. It is argued that professional journalists will increasingly have to share their control over the news production process with their users, who are becoming more and

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more actively involved in the creation of content. This could not only result in an increased use of user generated content by journalists, but it could also stimulate collaboration between professional and amateur journalists. In other words, journalism will fundamentally shift from a top-down lecture to an open conversation (cf. Paulussen et al. 2007).

This paper looks at the challenges and opportunities posed by citizen journalism and user generated content to professional mainstream media. This means that the focus is not on the traits of citizen journalism as such, but on the ways in which traditional newsrooms make use of and react to the increase in user generated content. This brings us to the notion of ‘participatory journalism’. In the sociology of news literature, the term has become commonly accepted to refer to the wide variety of initiatives undertaken by mainstream media to enhance the integration of all kinds of user contributions in the making of news (Paulussen et al. 2007). Although some media scholars recognise that ‘participatory journalism’ is still ‘rather ill defined’ (Hermida 2008), we decided, for the sake of consistency, to use this term throughout this article.

In order to explore the organisational and professional factors influencing the adoption of user generated content in professional newsrooms, this paper analyses a qualitative, empirical study of the newsrooms of two Belgian online newspapers, both owned by the same media group. As we will show in our brief literature review on participatory journalism, mainstream media are reacting to the trend of user generated content in an ambivalent way. Although a kind of consensus seems to have grown among media professionals that user generated content is something they have to embrace, the current initiatives taken by mainstream media to promote participatory journalism suggest that professional journalists are still tend resistant to the idea of opening up the news making process to users. One of our main arguments is that this cautiousness and resistance among journalists is not just a matter of professional conservatism, but it should be understood in the broader context of work practices, daily routines, organisational structures and role perceptions in the newsroom.

Participatory Journalism²

So far, the literature on participatory journalism is rather scarce, as researchers have primarily focused on the emergence of citizen journalism as an alternative to professional journalism rather than on the synergy between both. Indeed, one can refer to several descriptive analyses of (online) citizen media and their (assumed) ‘impact’ on professional journalism (e.g. Lowrey & Anderson 2005; Lowrey 2005). Aside from several studies on the weblog phenomenon (Matheson 2004; Wall 2005), we can think of well-documented case studies of ‘alternative’ news websites produced by amateurs/citizens, such as *Indymedia* (Platon & Deuze 2003), *Wikinews*

(Bruns 2006) and *Obmynews* (Kim & Hamilton 2006). Although these studies show how citizen media offer interesting ‘bottom-up’ alternatives to conventional ‘top-down’ practices of news making, it is fair to say that the impact of weblogs and citizen media on traditional, professional journalism has thus far been rather limited. Some online media observers have pointed out that the question of whether blogging and other forms of citizen journalism are threatening professional journalism is losing relevance, as both forms of news production essentially ‘complement each other, intersect with each other and play off one another’ (Lasica 2003, 73). Rather than considering weblogs as a potential substitute for journalism, scholars like Wilson Lowrey (2005) or Jane B. Singer (2005) suggest that the major impact of blogging and citizen journalism lies in the fact that these online media developments are challenging journalists’ monopoly of the occupational practices and ethics that are at the heart of their professional identity and democratic role.

Only recently, however, have researchers started to pay more attention to how mainstream media are adopting user generated content in the process of news production. For instance, Alfred Hermida and Neil Thurman (2007) conducted a quantitative content analysis survey of citizen journalism initiatives by mainstream online news media in the UK. In an exploratory study, Hernik Örnebring (2007) focused on the way in which the Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* and the British tabloid *The Sun* deal with user contributions on their news websites. David Domingo et al. (2007) have tried to put the development of participatory journalism in an international perspective by investigating the structural characteristics of audience participation in 16 leading online newspapers in eight European countries and the USA. Although Hermida and Thurman (2007) observed a ‘progressive adoption’ of user generated content by mainstream news organisations, the overall conclusion of the studies mentioned above is that professional newsrooms appear to be rather reluctant and cautious ‘to open up most of the news production process to the active involvement of citizens’ (Domingo et al. 2007).

Direct user involvement in newsgathering, news selection and news production is minimal, and when it is [...], it is not displayed in the same way as articles produced by the regular journalists of the paper. The only reader material that is given similar status to material produced by the news organisation is reader photos of breaking news events (Örnebring 2007, 19).

The general findings of these studies are consistent with previous studies on interactivity in online journalism that revealed different contextual factors constraining the use of interactive features (Paulussen 2004; Domingo 2008). In order to reach a better understanding of these factors, Domingo et al. (2007) argue that further research should explore how the professional, social and market context shapes the ways in which new possibilities for audience participation are

adopted in the newsroom. By focusing our attention to the professional context factors, we want to investigate how user generated content is being adopted in professional newsrooms, and more in particular, why this adoption seems to happen rather slowly.

One of the first studies in this regard has been carried out by Neil Thurman (2008), who supplemented his analysis of user generated content features on British news websites with in-depth interviews with editors from leading online news media in the UK. Thurman gives a detailed and illuminating report of the conflicts between the editors' professional gatekeeper roles and their perceptions of user participation. Furthermore, he shows how legal, commercial, human and technological considerations influence the adoption of user generated content in online newsrooms. Whereas Thurman primarily focuses on the attitudes and roles of professional journalists towards user generated content, our study also tries to take into consideration the organisational context in which participatory journalism is supposed to take form. However, before providing further explanation of the study, we want to discuss the relevant theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework: Innovations in the Newsroom

To a certain extent, the ideas of participatory journalism recall early accounts of online journalism that also heralded a profound revisioning of the traditional models of professional journalism (e.g. Deuze 2003). Whereas immediacy, interactivity, hypertext and multimedia are the key words with which to capture online journalism in its ideal-typical form, participatory journalism is now described in terms of conversation, moderation and collaboration.

The buzzword in the 1990s was interactivity. Now it is participatory journalism. But the bottom line is the same: many professional and scholarly discourses tend to reproduce ideal models of what online journalism could be, taking them for granted as the path that news production on the Internet must walk. (Domingo 2008, 680)

While the theoretical ideal models of online journalism were initially all-too-easily taken for granted, Domingo continues, 'empirical research offered evidence that the development of these ideals in online news sites tends to be limited' (Ibid, 680). Indeed, the several empirical studies on the use of interactivity in online news media (Schultz 1999; Massey and Levy 1999; Paulussen 2004, Boczkowski 2004a) made clear that the adoption of innovation in the newsroom is not just determined by the availability of the required technology, but it is also shaped by the broader social context in which the technology is to be used (cf. Domingo 2006).

The early studies on online journalism particularly have been criticised because of the underlying ‘technological determinism’, which explained the observed changes in journalism as ‘caused by’ or ‘the effect of’ technological developments. The linear notion that ‘journalism has always been shaped by technology’, as John Pavlik (2000, 229) puts it, falls short in considering the social, cultural and economic contextual factors that influence how and to what extent journalists use new technologies (Boczkowski 2004a).

In recent years, technological deterministic accounts of online journalism have become outnumbered by social constructivist approaches, in which the adoption of online journalism practices in newsrooms is no longer seen as the result of a technology-driven process, but as the outcome of the complex interaction between professional, organisational, economic and social factors (cf. Paterson and Domingo 2008). Domingo (2008, 681) advocates examining media innovations from a perspective ‘that acknowledges that any development in online journalism is the consequence of decisions taken in specific newsrooms in particular circumstances by journalists that have a professional culture, knowledge and expectations about the Internet as a news medium.’ José Garcia Avilés and Miguel Carvajal (2008) agree that recent newsroom changes may not be seen as ‘the effect of’ corporate or technological trends only. To put it in their own words, ‘technical innovation is usually based on professional and economic decisions and journalists use new tools in order to fit their own expectations, skills and practices’ (Ibid, 226).

Assuming the ‘mutual shaping’ of technological and social developments, social constructivist studies, such as the ones by Domingo (2008) and Avilés and Carvajal (2008), focus on the ‘dynamic relationship between technology, social actors and context factors’ (Domingo 2006, 296). The study presented in this paper uses the same social constructivist approach to media innovation. More specifically, it builds on an analytical model proposed by Pablo Boczkowski (2004a), who also rejects the linear models that are often used to describe the process of technology adoption in the professional newsroom. In his work, Boczkowski comprehensively shows how the adoption and use of a new technology in newsrooms can only be understood within the broader professional and social context in which the technology is to be used. More specifically, he considers (a) organisational structures, (b) work practices and (c) representations of users as the three main production factors shaping the adoption process of innovations, such as interactivity and multimediality, in the newsroom (Boczkowski 2004a, 199).

Indeed, if we look beyond the technological deterministic accounts of online journalism (see above), recent literature confirms that the factors described by Boczkowski recur systematically in explanations for the finding that journalists do not fully adopt all technological possibilities for news production. With regards to

organisational structures and work practices, empirical studies - mostly based on newsroom ethnographies and in-depth interviews with journalists - point out that successful technology adoption in newsrooms is related to daily routines (Domingo 2008), working conditions and labour division (Cottle 1999; Meier 2007); management strategies and workplace organisation (Marjoribanks 2000); available resources, time and work pressures (Ursell 2001); technical skills and multimedia competences (Deuze 1999); and technical tools that are sensitive to the reporters' needs (Domingo 2006; 2008). Other studies have shown that the dominant journalistic culture – as articulated in journalists' attitudes, professional values and perceptions of their audience – plays an important role in the journalists' use of new technologies (Singer 1997). Many authors have explained the limited use of interactivity in online journalism by referring to journalists' scepticism about (the quality of) user contributions (e.g. Schultz 2000; Chung 2007).

Despite the growing body of research on the contextual factors shaping current developments in online journalism, most researchers emphasise either the organisational dynamics (e.g. Meier 2007; Ursell 1999) or the professional attitudes (e.g. Chung 2007; Singer 1997) as explanatory factors for the rather slow adoption of innovations in the newsroom. On the basis of the research by Boczkowski (2004a; b) and Domingo (2008), we assume, however, that both the structural (or material) and cultural (or attitudinal) characteristics of the newsroom should be taken into consideration, since 'the professional culture (...) (does) not exist in a vacuum, but rather (is) recreated and renegotiated in every production task, in the design of the content management software or in the staffing decisions' (Domingo 2008, 698). Despite its exploratory character, this study is an attempt to examine how both the organisational structure (including the way in which journalists' work is organised) and professional culture within the newsroom are fostering or hindering the development of participatory journalism.

Research Setting

The empirical data presented in this paper are based on a qualitative study in four newsrooms of the Belgian newspaper company Concentra Media. One reason for limiting our empirical study to the Concentra Media newsrooms is that the research is part of a larger project carried out by a consortium of which Concentra Media is one of the research partners (see note 1). This guaranteed us access to the newsrooms and full cooperation of the people involved, in this case the newsroom managers, IT employees and journalists.

Besides these pragmatic reasons for limiting our study to Concentra Media, the newsrooms of *Gazet van Antwerpen*, *Het Belang van Limburg* and *HasseltLokaal* also provide us with a particularly relevant case for examining the ways in which

professional journalists deal with user generated content and increased user participation in the different stages of news making. Through their regional character, both (nationally distributed) newspapers have a strong relationship with their community of readers. With a daily circulation of about 112,000 (CIM 2008), *Het Belang van Limburg* is the seventh largest nationally distributed print newspaper in Belgium, but in the province of Limburg (in the east of Belgium) the newspaper has a market share of 83%. Also *Gazet van Antwerpen*, which has a daily print circulation of circa 125,000, finds the majority of its readers in one province, namely Antwerp (De Bens & Raeymaeckers 2007).

In addition, with regards to user generated content, Concentra Media was the first news organisation in Belgium to set up a website for citizen journalism, called *HasseltLokaal*. The platform was launched in 2006 as a local community website maintained by an editorial team of about 15 citizen reporters, who voluntarily cover the (hyper)local news from around the city of Hasselt, the capital city of the province of Limburg, with about 70,000 inhabitants. The platform is coordinated and moderated by two professional editors of the online newsroom of *Het Belang van Limburg*. Although *HasseltLokaal* is often mentioned as a 'best practice' in participatory journalism, it has become apparent that the maintenance of such a user generated content platform requires thorough moderation, coordination and even training of amateur journalists (cf. Paulussen et al. 2007, 141). In terms of the present study, the inclusion of *HasseltLokaal* into our interview sample allowed us to explore the relationship between the journalists within the professional newsroom of *Het Belang van Limburg* and the citizen reporters working at *HasseltLokaal*.

Through twenty in-depth interviews, supplemented by participatory observations at the three newsrooms of *Gazet van Antwerpen*, *Het Belang van Limburg* and *HasseltLokaal*, we examined to what extent professional newsrooms are prepared to exploit the editorial possibilities of user generated content in the news making process. During the conversations, we paid attention to organisational structures, the editorial system, work practices, the agenda-setting process, news sources, knowledge and skills, and perceptions of user generated content. The interviews were carried out during April - June 2007.

As shown in table 1, both the print and online editorial offices were included in our study. Furthermore, we conducted interviews with persons on different levels of the newsroom, including the managers, the IT staff and the editorial staff. Five interviews were conducted with people from the editorial management. This level included two editors-in-chief, two content managers and one 'editorial operations manager'. Further, we interviewed the webmaster of the online newspapers, the IT manager responsible for the technological infrastructure in the different newsrooms and three IT managers working in the R&D department (their official

job title at the time of the interviews was ‘business architects’). Finally, we spoke with six professional journalists (three print journalists, one online editor of *Het Belang van Limburg*, two online editors who coordinate the local community website *HasseltLokaal*) and four amateur journalists working at *HasseltLokaal*.

Table 1: Overview of the interviewees

<p><i>Editorial Management</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">1 Editor-in-chief – <i>Gazet van Antwerpen</i>1 Editor-in-chief – <i>Het Belang van Limburg</i>1 Online news manager – <i>Gazet van Antwerpen</i> and <i>Het Belang van Limburg</i>1 Content manager – <i>Het Belang van Limburg</i>1 Editorial operations manager – <i>Gazet van Antwerpen</i> and <i>Het Belang van Limburg</i> <p><i>IT Staff</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">1 Webmaster – <i>Gazet van Antwerpen</i> and <i>Het Belang van Limburg</i>1 IT manager – <i>Gazet van Antwerpen</i> and <i>Het Belang van Limburg</i>3 IT employees (‘business architects’) – <i>Concentra Media</i> <p><i>Editorial Staff</i></p> <p><i>Professional Journalists</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">2 Print journalists – <i>Het Belang van Limburg</i>1 Print journalist – <i>Gazet van Antwerpen</i>1 Online editor – <i>Gazet van Antwerpen</i> and <i>Het Belang van Limburg</i>2 Online editors / coordinators – <i>Het Belang van Limburg</i> and <i>HasseltLokaal</i> <p><i>Citizen Journalists</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">4 Citizen reporters / amateur journalists – <i>HasseltLokaal</i>

Following Boczkowski’s useful distinction between organisational structures, work practices and representations of users (see above), the interview guide we used was built around three central research questions:

1. To what extent and in which ways do the current organisational structures influence the adoption of user generated content in the newsroom? To get a better understanding of the ‘organisational structures’, we studied hierarchies and job profiles in the newsroom. Further, we also looked at the technological infrastructure available to journalists to do their work.
2. To what extent can we expect that the moderation of user generated content fits within the prevailing work practices? Work practices are defined in terms of daily routines, work division, newsgathering practices and the manifest and tacit ways in which journalists do their job.
3. How do journalists’ representations of users influence the adoption and use of user generated content in the newsroom? Here we looked at how professional journalists perceive their role towards the

audience and we tried to identify the dominant attitudes about participatory practices of journalism.

To get a better understanding of the present work organisation, we stayed in the four newsrooms on the day of the interviews to make further observations. In total, we were seven days at *Het Belang van Limburg* and *HasseltLokaal* and four days at *Gazet van Antwerpen*. We are aware that such a limited period of internship is too short for ethnographical descriptions of the newsroom work, but the observations helped us to interpret and supplement the material retrieved from the semi-structured interviews.

Results

Our study reveals several contextual factors influencing the adoption of user generated content in the professional newsrooms. First, we will discuss how the organisational structures may hinder or foster user participation in the news making process. Second, we will consider how the work practices and daily routines are related to the use of user generated content. Finally, we will look at the journalists' attitudes and beliefs about their own professional role and the role of the audience in news making.

Organisational Structures

To gain insight into the organisational structures that may foster or hinder the adoption of user generated content among professionals, we questioned our interviewees about the hierarchical structures in the news organisation. Following the suggestion of Domingo (2008 689) to consider the 'materiality' of the work of journalists when researching the evolution of innovations in the newsroom, we also paid close attention to the technological infrastructure that is at the journalists' disposal.

We observed a quite strong hierarchy in the news organisation, not only inside the newspapers' newsroom, but also between the newsrooms and other departments of the media group. Recent management decisions even seem to have caused more internal competition between the different departments. Contrary to the general tendency in the media industry to integrate print and online newsrooms, the management of Concentra Media decided to split up the print and online activities into different divisions called 'business units'. Each 'business unit' operates as a separate division within the news organisation and has its own management, budget and staffing.

One can wonder whether it is possible to create a newsroom *culture* of collaboration if the organisational *structure* does little to promote collaboration between print and online editors, or between IT and editorial staff, or between

journalists and their users. 'Geographically, the online journalists are in the print newsroom, but this doesn't change the fact that we often work separately from each other', said one of the editors. Several interviewees confirmed that print and online editors rarely exchange information.

Another consequence of the current organisational structure is that there exists a (material and mental) distance between the print journalists, who belong to the newspaper division, and the citizen platform of *HasseltLokaal*, that is coordinated by the editorial staff of the digital media division. Indeed, the people involved said that there is neither structural nor informal cooperation between the professional print journalists and the citizen reporters of *HasseltLokaal*. The coordinator of *HasseltLokaal* stated that 'sometimes, when a citizen journalist witnesses something 'big', I report this to the journalists of the print newsroom. But it never appears in the newspaper.'

This situation leads to frustration among the citizen journalists. During the interviews, they mentioned their irritated feelings due to the neglect of their contributions by the professional journalists. The four citizen reporters we spoke with said that their input can serve as a valuable news source and content for stories. One of them said 'it is obvious that professional journalists can not simply put our article in their newspaper. However, sometimes we report a story that can serve as an interesting news topic or source for the professional journalists'. Generally speaking, they did not see themselves as journalists, but they believed that they could provide relevant contributions to the professional news making, especially concerning (hyper)local news affairs, if the professionals were more open to it.

Next to the organisational structure of the newsrooms, we also discussed how the new Content Management System (CMS) was welcomed by the journalists in the editorial offices of *Het Belang van Limburg* and *Gazet van Antwerpen*. The CMS was meant to facilitate the editorial process of news making, but the implementation of the new software also created a lot of tensions between the IT staff and the editors. A major concern among journalists was that the CMS required another way of working. Some journalists even preferred to work with the old editorial software – which was still running – and refused to use the new one. Other problems with the new CMS involved the number and complexity of the new functionalities. In this respect, the journalists argued that 'the new functionalities are too complex, sometimes unfinished, and there are just too many.'

According to the IT staffers, one reason for the resistance of some professional journalists towards the new content management system was their lack of basic skills in working with new technologies. This complicated the in-house training sessions. One of them said that 'it is very difficult to explain the new CMS if some

journalists don't even have a good foundation to rely on'. The journalists, for their part, claimed that their technical knowledge is good enough and complained about the way in which the new CMS was implemented in the newsroom. The majority said that 'the organised training sessions were too short and the shift to the new system was too abrupt.' This finding illustrates the tensions between IT and editorial personnel, which constraints the adoption of innovations in the newsroom.

Work Practices

Besides the organisational structures, work practices are an important contextual factor related to the successful implementation of a participatory journalism project. Through our observations and interviews, we tried to gain a deeper insight into the journalists' routines, the process of news production and the use of user generated content.

Although several interviewees noted that news days are rarely 'regular', a typical day at the newsroom does follow a certain pattern. At the Concentra Media newspapers, a journalist usually receives one or two story assignments in the morning. Most of these assignments are based on the output of other media, the agenda of press conferences and 'planned events'. For 'unexpected events', which occur during the news day, news agencies remain the main source.

Journalists' routines and the process of news production are thus characterised by a high degree of institutionalisation. Already in 1979, Peter Golding and Philip Elliot concluded from their sociological newsroom studies that 'even in highly equipped and financial news organisations there is an enormous reliance on the news gathering of agencies and on a few prominent institutional sources' (Ibid cited in Thurman 2008 143). Therefore, it can be expected that professional journalists will make rather limited use of user generated content, because they somewhat routinely and passively rely on a number of official suppliers of information.

However, some interviewees stated that journalists, and especially online journalists, increasingly tend to use non-official news sources. According to the interviewees, the Internet has become an important newsgathering tool, even though they experience problems of trust and reliability. The professional journalists said they therefore try to be very cautious about using online information. The Internet is mostly used for background information, but it rarely serves as a primary source. According to one of the professional journalists, 'it depends on the journalist, and the news he covers, but in most cases online sources are only used as background information'. It appears from the interviews that the same applies for user generated content. Making use of user generated content in the news gathering does not seem to be part of journalists' daily

routines and therefore it is not 'structurally supported' inside the newsroom. Consequently, some journalists do it, others don't.

Although user generated content and online sources are still generally considered as secondary sources of information, some journalists observed an increase of user input. *Het Belang van Limburg* especially receives a lot of e-mails and telephone calls from its readers. A member of the editorial management staff said: 'Counting all the letters, e-mails and incoming telephone calls, we have about 120 direct reader contacts per day. That is up to 500 or 600 in one week.'

Despite our observation that user generated content is considered a secondary source of information, most of the interviewees were convinced that handling user generated content and interacting with users are becoming more important journalistic tasks. Several interviewees noted, however, that this may lead to an increased workload. The journalists already complained about available time, resources and manpower, which forces them to focus only on their core tasks. One journalist mentioned that 'the high pressure of work makes it impossible to interact with citizens in a proper way.' This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that a lack of time averts online journalists from taking up new tasks, even when they believe these tasks are becoming more important (cf. Paulussen 2004).

This leads to an ambivalent situation. Although the interview transcripts are full of quotes concerning the increased importance of interactivity, we cannot but conclude from our interviews and observations that handling user generated content (blogs, forums, etc.) or interacting with users do not seem to be part of the daily routine activities in the newsroom. At the time of the study, the moderation of user input was the responsibility of only a few people. In the print newsroom, one editor was in charge for the letters-to-the-editors and reader e-mails, while another handled the telephone calls. In the online newsroom, two editorial staffers coordinated the user generated content on the *HasseltLokaal* platform. So instead of involving all journalists, it seems that the newsrooms tend to create new job profiles to fulfil the tasks entailed in managing the increase of user generated content and reader feedback.

Professional Attitude towards the User

Pablo Boczkowski (2004a) considers journalists' 'representations of users' as one of the main production factors shaping the adoption process of innovations in the newsroom. In our study, we looked at the journalists' perceptions of the user, but also at their concerns about the value and quality of user generated content.

When looking at the affiliation with their users, we see that *Het Belang van Limburg* especially has a strong community commitment and therefore tries to pay much

attention to reader contacts. Readers are encouraged to submit pictures and personal stories destined for special human interest sections in the newspaper or on the website. Reader input is thus primarily associated with 'faits divers' or 'small news' rather than with supposed hard news. The online news manager, for instance, agreed by saying: 'we usually get 'soft news' from our readers, such as pictures from weddings or jubilees, or stories from local community life.' These findings are in line with the study of Örnebring (2007: 19), who found that in online newspapers 'users are mostly empowered to create popular culture-oriented content and personal/everyday life-oriented content rather than news/informational content'. Many interviewees also stressed that reader input is particularly valuable concerning local news items. For instance, the content manager we spoke with said that many of the received e-mails and telephone calls are citizen complaints about local matters. These complaints help journalists to determine what is going on in the community, even though they all emphasised they still have an important role in filtering and verifying these complaints.

Although most journalists were positive about user contributions, our findings also confirm journalists' concerns about the quality of user generated content and audience participation. Most interviewees agreed that user contributions do not have the same credibility as official news sources, because amateur journalists may not live up to the standards of objectivity, independence and accountability the way professionals do (cf. Singer 2005, 14). One professional journalist, who works for the print newspaper, referred to the downside of the increase in user generated content as follows: 'The reader as a news source is sometimes problematic. Each day we receive a lot of nagging calls from readers who want to get their complaint published in the newspaper. Handling this kind of user complaint is time-consuming and unproductive for us'. Another journalist said that as a professional journalist 'you have to be cautious with user generated content because this information often has a personal bias.' This finding is in line with the UK study by Thurman (2008), who also observed a resistance among journalists to the personal tone of user contributions.

Conclusions

The findings presented in this paper show that the professional and organisational context of the newsroom shapes the adoption of innovations and new models of journalism, in this case participatory journalism. Therefore, it is expected that the implementation of user generated content initiatives by mainstream media will be complicated by several professional and organisational constraints in the newsroom. At the same time, our findings contribute to a better understanding of how the management and moderation of user generated content may fit within the present work organisation, routines and role perceptions inside the newsroom.

Of course, the relevance of our study goes beyond the specific context of the news organisation studied. We are convinced that the results help shed light on how participatory journalism is being adopted in professional newsrooms and why this adoption seems to be happening rather slowly. This is because adoption processes in newsrooms are not just ‘triggered’ by technological developments (such as the innovations that enable users to produce content themselves), but they are also shaped by the broader professional, organisational, economic and social context of the news production process. Even though the findings of the empirical study presented in this paper cannot be generalised, our data can contribute to the growing evidence on the organisational and professional contextual factors that foster or hinder the adoption of innovations in the newsroom. Social constructivist approaches provide an appropriate theoretical framework to reveal these contextual factors that help us understand more profoundly how mainstream news media are dealing with user generated content and citizen journalism.

On the basis of our results, we would argue that if participatory journalism is developing rather sluggishly, as literature suggests, this is not necessarily due to an unwillingness among professionals to open up the news production process to user contributions. A lot of other contextual factors play an important role. First, on an organisational level, we found that collaboration is not fostered by the present newsroom structure, which still represents a strong hierarchy and distinction between print and online journalists, between IT staffers and editors and between professional journalists and users. In such an environment, it is difficult to establish a culture of interactivity and participation. Secondly, the lack of negotiations within the newsroom is also illustrated by the opposite opinions of IT staffers and editors regarding the implementation of the content management system. Like all innovations, new technologies in the newsroom are always welcomed with initial resistance and cautious scepticism – a tendency that has been described in literature as the ‘suppression of radical potential’ (cf. Domingo 2008, 684-685). Thirdly, we found evidence that, especially in a context of high workload and lack of time and resources, journalists tend to fall back on the routines and sources they are most familiar with.

With regards to the attitudes of professionals towards user generated content, much of our findings are consistent with the conclusions by Thurman (2008), who interviewed ten editors working in mainstream online news media in the UK. Like Thurman, we found a general awareness of the growing importance of user generated content and audience participation. We hesitate to agree with the often-heard notion that journalists tend to be conservative and change averse when it comes to (technological) innovation. We did find indications of journalists’ scepticism towards new technology, but generally speaking, most of the people we spoke with acknowledged the potential value of user contributions in news making, especially for (hyper)local and personal stories. The general perception

about the complementary value of user generated content is consistent with Thurman's view that 'reader contributions are starting to offer alternatives to established news providers' (Thurman 2008, 153-154).

Journalists do recognise the complementary potential of user generated and professional content in the news making, but at the same time they agree that in their daily practice they still make limited use of the vast amount of alternatives opened up by the Internet. Domingo (2008, 698) also observed that the journalists in his study 'embraced interactivity as a crucial feature of their work, but in practice the professional culture (...) made them perceive audience participation as a problem to manage rather than a benefit for the news product'. Our interview findings confirm that the main factors for not using user generated content in news making relate to the professional newsroom culture: tasks such as the management and moderation of user generated content seem to be counterintuitive to the current work division, daily routines and professional values in the newsrooms.

Journalists seem to perceive a lack of time and concerns about user generated content as the main reasons for their strong reliance on material from agencies and official institutional sources of information. As journalists have to work under high pressure, they tend to rely heavily on well-known routines and hold on to their core task, which they still define in terms of gatekeeping. There is indeed a strong belief that the primary role of journalism lies in the selection stage of the news making process. Their gatekeeping skills are among the major traits through which professionals distinguish themselves from amateur journalists. Concerns are raised about the low newsworthiness, the personal tone and the subjective bias of user contributions. All journalists say that moderating user generated content and retaining control over the news selection are essential to keep the standards high. However, they add that these tasks are time-consuming, which makes it even more difficult for them to keep on top of the already high workload in the newsroom.

Notes

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