Participatory journalism – the (r)evolution that wasn’t. Content and user behavior in Sweden 2007–2013

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A contemporary debate in media studies concerns participation and empowerment, and to what extent digital media shift power to the citizens. This study assesses the long-term viability of participatory journalism using Swedish content and user data. Inclusion of comments and blog-links on news sites increased from 2007 to 2010, and decreased rather dramatically from 2011 onward. Posting user comments or writing blogs have never been activities that have appealed to a majority of the Swedes. Participatory journalism seems to have decreasing value to producers and little appeal to users. A shift in how power is distributed in the public sphere is absent. This is not primarily a problem of reluctant producers but, more importantly, a lack of interest from users.

Keywords: Participatory Journalism, Online Media, Deliberation, Surveys, Content Analysis.

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A central contemporary debate in media studies concerns participation, deliberation, and empowerment and to what extent various forms of digital media change communication patterns and, broadly speaking, shift power to the citizens (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009). This debate cuts through many communication subfields such as activism (Antony & Thomas, 2010; Moyo, 2009), political communication (Bennett, 2009; Bentivegna, 2006), popular culture (Andrejevic, 2008; Jenkins, 2006),
and journalism (Peters & Broersma, 2013; Singer et al., 2011), but is also more generally related to the
democratic potential of participatory media (Dahlgren, 2005; Gripsrud, 2009; Jönsson & Örnebring,
2011; Olsson & Dahlgren, 2010). A central line of conflict within previous research is drawn between
those who see communication technology as a tool for leveling hierarchies and empowering the people
(Bentivegna, 2006; Jenkins, 2006) and those who take a skeptical approach because they see limited
changes (Andrejevic, 2008; Comor, 2011; Humphreys & Grayson, 2008).

In this study we operate specifically within the field of traditional media and journalism but we
argue that the issues addressed have wider ramifications. Much of the debate so far has been informed
by case studies, cross-sectional studies, anecdotal evidence or purely theoretical discourse. While this
research has given some insights into and ideas about the democratic potential of participatory media,
it is hard to estimate the overall viability of the arguments. Thus, as other researchers have pointed
out (Lawson-Borders, 2003; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Steensen, 2011), we need longitudinal
research to give a fair assessment of the latitude of change. In this study we take a closer look at participa-
tory journalism through the lens of two longitudinal Swedish datasets on some specific participatory
features in news content and user behaviors.

Theoretical framework and research questions

Deliberation and digital media
Numerous theorists identify deliberation as a central aspect of democracy, and the media system, in turn,
as central to deliberation (Barber, 2003; Clarke, 1996; Sartori, 1987). Such claims are typically colored
by Habermasian conceptualizations of the ‘public sphere’ as an arena where, ideally, informed and equal
citizens interchange arguments to solve common problems. When in the 1990s, researchers and critics
alike started to raise serious concerns about the conditions of deliberative democracy – concerns rooted
in significant trends in Western societies such as the deregulation and commercialization of the media
market, the growing cynicism and disengagement among citizens, and the professionalization of politi-
cal communication – the concurrent breakthrough of the Internet raised much optimism among those
hoping for a democracy marked by citizen-to-citizen as well as citizen-to-authority dialogue (Dahlgren,
2005; Wright & Street, 2007). Usenet and Listservs were rapidly identified as virtual forums that would
spark public conversations and hence “revolutionize” democracy (Wright, 2012, p. 245). As both the
Internet and the discourse about its potential to breed deliberation have matured, the most optimistic
claims have been met with counter-arguments, rooted, for example, in early empirical studies on online
discussion forums suggesting that these are arenas where outlooks are reinforced rather than traded
(Davis, 1999; Wilhelm, 2000) and where the level of participation is generally fairly low (Schultz, 2000).
Yet, although more critical perspectives on the deliberative potential of new media have surfaced (see
e.g. Goldberg, 2011), the optimistic stance is still highly visible in the debate – not to mention in the
practices and rhetoric of the media companies as well as politicians (Dahlberg, 2011). With the advent
of Web 2.0 and social media in particular, the interest in consumer participation has indeed proliferated.

Digitalization, participatory journalism and power
History tells us that technological innovation and development related to media and communication
brings forth brave ideas about how this new technology will bring great changes to the production and
consumption of media (Cardoso, 2007; Castells, 2000). Curran (2010) gives a brief review of how cable
television and then interactive digital television were expected to change the way film and television is
produced and consumed. However, he also notes (2010, p. 31) that the typical, more or less utopian,
forecasts are pregnant with the problem that they ignore “the way in which the wider context of society
influences the new technology’s development, content and use.” This is no less true in regards to utopian prophecies about how new technologies will revolutionize journalism; however, as noted by previous research (Domingo, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Singer et al., 2011) technology is seldom the sole factor influencing developments in journalism and its practice. Thus, even if the technology is available, “the professional and organizational context of the newsroom shapes the adoption of innovations and new models of journalism” (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008, p. 36).

Participation is practiced in many forms, platforms and outlets but regarding participatory journalism, Nip (2006) provides a useful distinction suggesting that it takes place within a framework set up by professional journalism and media organizations. This in turn implies a relatively large reach and impact, instantly raising important questions of reasons for and access to participation.

Media companies – as well as advertisers – seem increasingly interested in promoting consumer engagement and participation as a way of increasing profits. Sundet and Ytreberg (2009, p.385) find that media executives in Norway stress “being active” as a key attribute of their audiences. Similarly, Hardy (2011), Fast (2012) and Guschwan (2012) find that contemporary media companies and marketers seek to cultivate consumer engagement by building immersive brand experiences. The general aim is consumer loyalty (Jenkins, 2006), consumer data and feedback (Andrejevic, 2007), user-generated content (van Dijck, 2009), peer promotion (Baym, 2009), and/or an enhanced brand or product experience (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). It is important to note that inviting the audience has a history longer than digital media (Griffen-Foley, 2004; Hayashi, 2000), and is not unique to media businesses; many request and welcome customer feedback. Critics claim that this kind of sanctioned and controlled form of participation – governed more or less by rigid ‘rules’ and protocols – is ultimately a way to make consumers ‘work’ for free for the industry (Caraway, 2011; Comor, 2011; Humphreys & Grayson, 2008).

While the media industry at large tends to be increasingly oriented towards strategic cultivation of consumer participation, differences between industry sectors should be acknowledged. Unlike companies involved with the production of entertainment, most news organizations are characterized by a slow adaption to consumer participation and are reluctant to let the audience into the field of production (Domingo, 2008; Matheson, 2004; Thurman, 2008). This reluctance is not at all new; there has been a rather a well-documented resistance to audience participation and orientation for decades (Williams, Wardle & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). The arguments against letting people into journalistic platforms can be widely found within journalism: from legal and ethical issues (Peterson, Brink Lund, Smith & Weibull, 2007) via economic and other resource related concerns (Cardoso, 2007; Chung, 2007; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Thurman, 2008), to questions related to the role of the professional journalist (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Karlsson, 2011; Singer, 2009).

Among editors and journalists, an unwillingness to let go of control is evident, and the value of user contributions is questioned (Bergstrom & Wadbring, 2015; Witschge, 2012). User-generated content (UGC) is not perceived to fit existing professional categories (Viscovi & Gustafsson, 2013). A paradox between an obligation to keep control of the journalistic online news spaces and an urge to avoid getting involved in UGC appears to occur (Braun & Gillespie, 2011; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Robinson, 2010). Given what has been elaborated above, the paradox need not, however, be so surprising when seen in the light of the professionalization of journalism that has taken place over the last few decades (Strömbäck, Nord & Shehata, 2012).

An important facet of UGC and participatory journalism is power, and, as noted by Jönsson and Örnebring (2011) the relationship between the media house and its public is far from simple. Their research suggests that although the use of UGC can partly be seen as empowering the audience, the final say, and thus control of journalistic content, lies in the hands of the media organizations, making UGC a bit of a “interactive illusion” (Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011, p. 127). Hence, studying the use of participatory features on news sites over time makes it possible to see inclinations of change on behalf
of the producers. Previous theoretical and longitudinal research proposes that change takes time, is evolutionary in character, and scanty in scope (Dunaway, 2011; Karlsson, 2011; Lowrey, 2011; Thurman & Hermida, 2010). More specifically, research tracking participatory features has found a variety of formats – blogs, comments, have your say, message boards, polls, chats, reader blogs, reader stories/images, fact-checking and gathering information for the media organization – but also notes that the introduction of new features seemed to have slowed down (Karlsson, 2011; Thurman & Hermida, 2010).

Numerous previous studies have focused on the unwillingness of news organizations and journalists to 'let go' and invite the audience, despite the interactive nature of digital media and the orientation of other, more 'collaborative,' media companies. However, this focus presupposes explicitly that this is something that the audience desires and appreciates.

**Participation in practice**

An important prerequisite for deliberation and participation is an engaged public. Indeed, user-contributions and ambitions to invite the audience into journalism predate the online era. The classic ways of contributing have been sending letters to the editor but, also, sending letters or making phone calls to the newsroom, or to special broadcast programs; and readers reporting for or writing segments of the newspapers.

Historically, there has been little research regarding actual audience contributions. Studies focusing on the attractiveness of different news genres and newspaper content tend to point out readers’ letters as less important and less read than other content (Andersson & Weibull, 2013).

Furthermore, user-participation in digital news environments seems to be especially relevant in times of social crises and natural disasters when the news media do not have their own representatives in place. User-contributions appear both as eye witness reports and as independent sources in, for instance, catastrophes like the Tsunami in Asia in 2004, natural disasters in Haiti and Chili, military actions in Iraqi and Afghanistan, and the like (Braun & Gillespie, 2011; Gillmor, 2004).

On a general level, it is evident that a minority of users contribute with a disproportionately large proportion of the overall amount of UGC. Only a small percentage of the population create or edit articles on Wikipedia, write blogs, upload videos or comment on other people's contributions (Carpentier, 2009; Fisch & Gscheidle, 2008; Limonard, 2007; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007; van Dijck, 2009). Online news audiences seem reluctant to contribute to content in journalistic contexts and, to a large extent, use available interactive features infrequently (Bergström, 2008; Chung, 2008). Some argue that we are so used to taking on the consumer rather than the producer role, that we do not see the possibility of participating in interactive online contexts. One reason for this could be, of course, that the news genre has traditionally been regarded as a restricted area intended only for journalists (Chisholm, 2004; Hujanen & Pietikäinen, 2004; Roscoe, 1999).

The main reason for interacting and contributing, in the news context, is not primarily to create opinion or to debate, but rather to express personal matters (Mitchelstein, 2011; Paulussen, Heinonen, Domingo, & Quandt, 2007). The same has been found for blogging, where the main reason for maintaining a blog seems to be self-expression rather than to debate or produce journalistic content (Ekdale, Namkoong, Fung, & Perlmutter, 2010; Kline & Burstein 2005; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). This is what has also been shown to engage people in other online contexts, where the driving forces seem to be to establish personal identity, gain respect and publish one's own experience, and also to socialize with friends and to be entertained (boyd, 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Leung, 2009; Shao, 2009).

Numerous previous studies on participatory journalism have focused on the production side and the unwillingness of journalists and media organizations to lose control. While this is true, it also implicitly
suggests that there is a public eager and willing to step in, should this space be unrestrained. However, the literature review above indicates that this might not be the case. Given what is known about the public and its online participatory practices, there seems to be little potential for participatory journalism. Yet, participatory journalism and increased engagement with users is often assumed in media and journalism studies. This longitudinal study will be able to shed some light on how participatory journalism has evolved in the news media and, in addition, to illustrate whether there is a socialization process in which the public is growing more accustomed to participation.

Research gap, purpose, and RQ’s
There are several factors that condition the development of deliberation and participation, here in the form of participatory journalism. It is also evident that while much research has been performed in this area, few studies have employed a systematic and longitudinal approach. Against this background, the purpose of this study is to assess the long-term viability of participatory journalism using content and audience data. The secondary data sets that we rely upon restrict us to the investigation of two frequently used forms of participation in journalism – comments and blogs. While these forms of participation are limited, they are suitable to study since both are established forms of participation in journalism and thus can be tracked over time, hence indicating changes. Comments are an arena where everyone can have their (restricted) say, converse with other users and reach a significant audience. Blogs, on the other hand, provide space for more elaborate and multimodal musings under different juridical rules.

The necessity to limit the study to blog links and reader comments omits the development of social network sites (SNS) and other applications used by news media platforms in order to engage with users (Ju, Jeong & Chyi, 2014) as well as a host of other participatory features outlined above (Karlsson, 2011; Thurman & Hermida, 2010). However, blogs and comments surfaced before SNS was widespread and, since we track these forms of participation over time, the SNS’s fall outside the scope of our study. Further, social media networks are not necessarily in hands of the editor, and it could be questioned whether they should be compared to comments and blogs when defining participatory journalism (Weber, 2014). Nevertheless, SNS’s have since our study started to become widespread and could be viewed as a vehicle for participation. We will return to the issue of SNS’s in our discussion.

We pose the following four research questions. The first one concerns the opportunity to participate in journalism, thus relating to issues of control and power outlined in the literature review: To what extent does news media allow for comments (RQ1a) and blog links (RQ1b) in news items over time? Here we track how many news items the media outlets allow for commenting and for people to link in or ‘ping’ on their blog.

We next move on to investigate the usage of these affordances from a user perspective. Our second research question is (RQ2): How does the users’ linkage to blogs evolve over time? This research question addresses the willingness of the users to link their blogs to news stories – as manifested on the news sites – in effect tapping into how user interest in this form of participation is changing.

For the same reason, to capture the aggregate potential of linking blogs in the general population, we ask (RQ3): To what extent do people write (RQ3a) and read (RQ3b) blogs over time?

Similarly, in order to see if there is any change in interest concerning comments, we ask: To what extent do users post (RQ4a) and read (RQ4b) comments over time?

Method
To capture the participatory news environment and how producers and users interrelate, we use a mixed methods approach drawing from two Swedish datasets – one a content analysis, the other a survey. Sweden is one of the top 10 countries in terms of Internet access, skills, and usage and has a history of high
Data concerning the facilitation of comments on news sites are based on a yearly longitudinal study spanning from 2007 to 2013. The study focuses on the four largest, nationwide (i.e., the parent medium is nationwide), news sites in Sweden: Aftonbladet, a tabloid paper owed by Shibstedt; Svenska Dagbladet (SvD), a broadsheet paper also owned by Shistbedt; Expressen, a tabloid paper owned by Bonnier; and Dagens Nyheter (DN), a broadsheet paper also owned by Bonnier. The data is based on quantitative content analysis. 8,459 news items were analyzed for various variables – two of them being whether comments and blog links were allowed for the specific news item. In order to be able to accurately study changes over time it was necessary to collect the data at roughly the same time period every year. Thus, data were gathered during an 8-week period each year (March to April). As noted in previous research (Herring, 2010; Karlsson, 2012; Krippendorff, 2013), the web is ephemeral in its nature, posing challenges to any researcher who tries to use it for study. In the earlier years of the study (2007–2009), the homepage of the news sites was downloaded at 12:30 pm 7 days a week. However, due to changes in the technologies behind the websites (e.g., the blocking of ‘bots’ to scan and download entire sites) the method had to be altered. Beginning in 2010 screen capture software (SnagIt) was used to take a screenshot of the entire homepage (front page) at 12:30 pm each day. Also, the continuous week used in 2007–2009 was changed to a constructed week (i.e., one Monday, one Tuesday, and so on). After taking the screenshot, each news item on the homepage was coded live on the web with the drawback that a news item could actually change during the time of coding. Only the news items in the main news column were coded since it is here that the most prominent news are posted. The number of news items for each year varied over time, with fewer items in the beginning (966 items in 2007) and more in the later samples (1,504 items in 2013). Although using different methodological approaches is problematic, it was done of necessity; moreover, analyzing the patterns in and between the two datasets, no irregularities have been found. The reliability of the coding has been tested twice. Eighteen percent of the 2007 sample was recoded by one of the authors 16 months after the initial coding (an intracoding procedure) testing a total of 25 variables resulting in an identical coding in 95 percent of the news items. An intercoder test was made on 2 percent of the 2009 sample resulting in a Cohen’s Kappa of 1.0 for blog links and 0.94 for comments.

News commenting and blog writing among the public was captured in the Swedish national SOM surveys (Society, Opinion, Media). The SOM survey is a representative sample of the Swedish population between 16 and 85 years old and has been conducted since 1986 as an annual mail survey. Each year, between 3,000 and 17,000 people living in Sweden receive the survey. Data used in this analysis were collected between the years 2007 and 2013. The design of the survey has changed somewhat over the years. In 2007 and 2008, the sample was 6,000 people aged 15 to 85 years. Between 2009 and 2011, 9,000 people aged 16 to 85 were included in the sample, which was expanded in 2012 to 12,000 people and in 2013 to 17,000 persons (see Vernersdotter, 2014 for a detailed methods report). The survey is based on two to four questionnaires sent to 3,000 persons respectively (3,400 in 2013). The questions about blogging and commenting were posed in one or more questionnaires, which is why the n value varies from year to year.

The net response rate for the questionnaires used in the analysis ranges from 64 percent (2007) to 54 percent (2013). Respondents are divided in almost the same way as the Swedish population in terms of gender, social class and level of education. Older people are, however, overrepresented since the response rate in the youngest group is below average (64 percent among 80 – 85 years old, 40 percent among 16 – 19 years old). This means that there might be some underestimation of habits strongly related to younger people, for instance Internet consumption habits. The average questionnaire consists of approximately 20 pages and 80 – 90 questions; most questions have response sets. The dependent variables in this analysis
derive from the question, *How often during the last 12 months have you used the Internet for the following purposes?* Blog writing and commenting on news articles are part of a large battery of areas of use. A seven-grade scale was used: *Never, once during the last 12 months, once during the last 6 months, sometime in the quarter, sometime in the month, sometime in the week and several times a week.* Blog writing has been an item in the question each year between 2007 and 2013 whereas commenting was added to the battery in the 2010 survey, previously only appearing occasionally in similar questions.

Taken together, the two datasets provide samples of media content and of public habits with regard to participatory journalism in terms of comment fields and blogging. The collected data allows generalizability over a time period of 7 years. However, they do have some limitations regarding in-depth knowledge about what drives content providers and consumers. The scope of the conducted study is, however, to compare content and use on an aggregate level and over a longer period of time.

**Results**

The results will be presented according to the order of the research questions. Our first research questions asked: *To what extent does news media allow for comments (RQ1a) and blog links (RQ1b) in news items over time?* Table 1 shows the development of the average share of news items that afford user comments on all four news sites.

As we can see, 16 percent of the items afforded user comments in 2007, but the share increases rapidly and peaks in 2010 with almost 65 percent. This indicates quite a large willingness from the news organizations to invite the readers/users into the discussion. However, from the peak in 2010 there is an almost equally fast decline, and in 2013 only about 29 percent of the items afford user comments. This might be seen as the media organizations being less eager to facilitate a public discourse – in the form of comments – on their sites. While we only report the average share here, and not the numbers for each output, the news sites follow the same pattern, in effect mimicking each other.

Another way to promote public discourse is allowing bloggers to link to news items on the web site. That way a reader can quite easily connect with others who have written about, or at least linked to, a specific news item and can thus share readership with the news site. Moving on to the second part of the first research question, the second row in Table 1 shows the development of allowing blog links in news items. As with the user comments, the pattern is clear. Starting at a 12 percent share in 2007, the share of items that afford blog links increases steadily, peaking at 61 percent in 2011. There is quite a drastic decline in 2012, a decline that continues in 2013 where only 22 percent of the items afford blog links.

Overall, these patterns indicate that from 2007 to 2010/2011 media organizations were increasingly interested in, and willing to, invite readers to discuss the news. However, since that time, our results on the opportunities to comment and link blogs show a decline, indicating that journalists and the media are becoming more inclined to facilitate control of over these features, as time goes by. Moving to data on users, the results get more complicated.

Allowing readers to engage in discussion is one thing; whether the users chose to engage is quite another. Consequently, three of our research questions explored the user dimension of participation. The second research question was: *How does the users’ linkage of blog links evolve over time?* The third row in Table 1 shows a) the mean amount of links per news item that allowed for blog links, and b) the standard deviation.

As shown in the table, there is a significant difference in the mean amount of blog links over the years. In 2007, the mean amount of blog links was 3.8, with a standard deviation of 5.1, and in 2013 the mean was 1.6 with a standard deviation of 2.8. These patterns indicate two important things. First, interest from the readers in engaging in discussion through blogging about the news is somewhat erratic between 2007
Table 1  Overview of comments and blog links in news items 2007–2013 (percent, mean and standard deviation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>News items affording comments. Tau-c 0.077***</th>
<th>News items with blog links. Tau-C 0.044***</th>
<th>Blog links/item, mean (std.dev.)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3.8 (5.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>3.2 (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>3.6 (6.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>3.1 (5.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>3.1 (5.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>2.7 (4.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>1.6 (2.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment: The table shows the share of news items that 1) allow for comments, and 2) has blog links (n = 8,459), and, 3) the average amount of blog links in items with blog links. Kendall’s Tau-c indicates the correlation between the dependent and the independent variables. The measure varies between −1 and +1 where −1 indicates low correlation and +1 is a perfect positive correlation. 0 = statistic correlations are absent.

*** = p < 0.001.

$There is a significant difference in number of blog links over the years. One-way ANOVA: (F(6,3029) = 6.238, p < 0.000, r = 0.11 (n = 3,036).

through 2011. It starts out at a high level in 2007 then drops over time, with the exception of 2009, and from 2012 onward it drops rather sharply. Second, looking at the standard deviation we can see that the number of items receiving many blog links is also dropping – another indication of declined interest.

Our third research question, which captures the potential of linking blogs in the general population, asked: To what extent do people write (RQ3a) and read (RQ3b) blogs over time? Table 2 reports the results.

About one out of five users read blogs at least once a week and roughly 1 in 20 write blogs every week. Reading blogs has increased significantly over 7 years from 24 percent on a monthly basis in 2007 to 38 percent in 2013. The number of monthly bloggers has doubled from 3 percent in 2007 to 6 percent in 2013. On an aggregate level, the blogging population is still quite small. It is also evident that the correlation between blog writers and blog readers is rather strong (r = 0.43 p < 0.01), which points to the fact that blog writers, to a large extent, reach other blog writers with their content.

Comparing the results from the survey with those from the content analysis presented in Table 1 above it seems that the drop in news items with blog links is rational from the perspective of the news sites. Rather few people take regular interest in writing blogs and the dwindling numbers in Table 1 indicate that bloggers might be increasingly disinterested in connecting and relating to traditional media, at least in the form of linking their blogs to the news sites, and, arguably, are connected to other parts of the Internet. However, the conducted survey cannot tell whether or not people link their blogs to regular news reporting when the opportunity is given; on the other hand, there could be no blog links without bloggers.

Research question four asked: To what extent do users post (RQ4a) and read (RQ4b) comments over time?

Contributing with comments related to news articles is something that, as in the case with blogging, few Swedes do on a regular basis. In 2007 and 2008 only very few people (1 percent) posted comments on a weekly basis (Table 2). When adding those who commented less frequently (at least once in the last 12 month), less than 10 percent proved to be active. Commenting was then measured again in 2011 when 4 percent claimed to comment at least once a week. The numbers were roughly the same in 2013.
### Table 2  Writers and readers of blogs and comments, 2007–2013 (percent and Kendall’s Tau-c)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Written own blog (Tau-c 0.01)</strong>:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Daily</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Once or a few times a week</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Once a month</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Less than once a month, at least once a year</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Read other peoples’ blogs (Tau-c 0.13</strong>*):**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Daily</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Once or a few times a week</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Once a month</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Less than once a month, at least once a year</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Posted comments to news article (Tau-c 0.02</strong>*):**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>- Daily</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Once or a few times a week</td>
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<td>- Once a month</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Less than once a month, at least once a year</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Read reader comments:</strong></td>
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<td>- Daily</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Once or a few times a week</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Once a month</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Less than once a month, at least once a year</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=</td>
<td>1,769</td>
<td>1,661</td>
<td>3,269</td>
<td>3,305</td>
<td>4,720</td>
<td>4,746</td>
<td>3,316</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment: Reading reader comments are found in different datasets different years, wherefore Kendall’s Tau-c correlation could not be performed. – Indicates that the question not posed this year. Kendalls Tau-c:

*++++* = p < 0.001 ** = p < 0.01 * = p < 0.05.


About four times as many are active when measuring commenting on a yearly basis. The change over the years is statistically significant, but very small.

Reading comments, on the other hand, is evidently more attractive than posting one’s own comment(s). When measured for the first time in 2008, 2 out of 10 read comments at least once a week, and in 2013 the share was about the same. When looking at less frequent readers, it turns out that about half of the adult population do read other users’ comments at least every now and then over the year in 2013. The share has doubled since 2008.

The development of comment reading and writing over a period of 7 years points to an increase, but the baseline in the first survey was low. Just as for other kinds of UGC content, commenting does not engage large shares of the population on a regular basis and it is obvious that only a few contribute to a large share of the comments (Fisch & Gscheidle, 2008; Hargittai & Malejko, 2008; Limonard, 2007). The correlation between comment writers and blog writers is rather strong (r = 0.40 p < 0.01), which indicates that there is a large share of the population not engaging at all in these aspects of participation and a limited group engaging more widely.
Participatory journalism – small value, little interest

Producers will reach a limit when there is no further possibility of adding value or capitalizing on participation. Likewise, there will be a limit to how much devotion users can pour into news and participatory features. Inevitably, at some point there will be ‘peak participation’ regardless of whether the ceiling is set by producers or users. Our study set out to explore how two dimensions, comments and blogs, of participatory journalism evolve both from content and user perspective. There is indeed a peak; a rather high and pointy peak in content but an absence of a peak concerning user interest since it is low and flat regarding the measures, blogs and comments, utilized in this study.

In some of the literature there is a strong emphasis on how technology enables empowerment (Bentivegna, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). Conversely, other researchers argue that the way technology is strategically maneuvered by companies to foster controlled types of participation benefits the industry rather than the consumers (Andrejevic, 2008; Comor, 2011; Humphreys & Grayson, 2008). Regardless of the different interpretations of the social consequences of consumer participation, researchers seem to unite in the conclusion that media companies, to increasing extent, understand the value of having active, engaged consumers (Sundet & Ytreberg, 2009) and thereby work strategically to create such modes of consumption. Given this, it is remarkable to observe that the news companies researched in this study do little to cultivate consumer participation through comments and blog links.

In seeking explanations for this ‘passivity,’ economic factors need to be considered. Most importantly, the type of commodity produced and companies’ perception of the value of consumer participation should be reflected upon. As we have learned, consumer participation per se does not equal empowerment; nor should we assume that it automatically boosts profit. In cases where consumer comments, for example, deal more with events covered on the news sites than with the news site as a product, the commercial value of such deliberative dialogue would be less evident than the potential democratic value. Compare this, for instance, to popular culture fans who voice ideas and opinions about a certain film, game or TV-show on an official message board – ideas and opinions that the industry could directly incorporate into future products. Thus, the fact that news organizations, increasingly, choose not to encourage consumer participation through blog links or commentary sections might indicate that little commercial value is located in that type of participation, and that, consequently, the deliberative value is not considered a strong enough motif to maintain such functions. Additionally there are, as brought up in the literature review, ethical, juridical, managerial, and resource issues to edit, moderate, and otherwise handle user contributions that would limit their use. But those issues are all controlled on the production side, assuming that people are willing to provide and appreciate to partake user contributions. Without significant, broadly speaking, value for producers and users, user participation becomes less of a concern.

On the users’ side, the lack of involvement in blogging and commenting might be due to the fact that news is an omnibus product addressing everyone and no one at once. Similarly, users do not seem to engage in the participatory features studied, and, as a result, creates little incentive to maintain the features. Although previous research stresses the need for control on behalf of journalists and media organizations for various reasons, our results indicate that it is rather the users’ interests being the bottleneck concerning participatory journalism and, thus, deliberation would not take place even if the throttle were more open.

One alternative interpretation, and merited objection, is that the lack of open and meaningful forms of participation put people off, and that traditional media, with their modus operandi, are not a suitable arena of exploration to take stock on participation and deliberation. However, as opposed to many other forms of participation, news by definition, ideally, address users as citizens as a part of a polity and should thus be a very suitable arena for deliberation. Furthermore, as our results show, the opportunity
to write virtually unlimited number of blogs does not seem to trigger any more activity. Neither does
the chance to reach an audience through comments. Perhaps, it is not the arena, the form of participa-
tion or the possibility to express oneself or interact with others that is the most important factor, but the
outlook of individual users and the social preconditions of those outlooks. In a time when participa-
tion with media content is imposed as a civic “duty” (Andrejevic, 2008), perhaps the audience is actually
content with being ‘just’ consumers of news, and turns to media organizations because they appreciate
how journalists are putting the world together. Or perhaps researchers, in our search for the engaged
citizen/media consumer, mistake non-participation with news content for ‘passivity’? In any case, the
results of this study encourage less focus on potential and opportunity on behalf of technology and pro-
ducers and more on the motivation and ability of users. For instance, we know some of the demographics
of those who comment (Bergström & Wadbring, 2015) and that participation is mainly driven by needs
of self-expression than political debate (Mitchelstein, 2011; Paulussen et al., 2007), but we still know little
about their political preferences, opinions on societal issues and life-style activities.

Furthermore, there is little evidence in our survey data for a socialization effect. Rather, with the
possible exception of reading reader comments, participation in these forms seems to have plateaued
and only concerns less than a fifth of the population at all, with an even smaller percentage being more
active. This observation, together with the previous research on the motives of participation, implies that
participation, as far as the measures used here are concerned, has less to offer journalism in general
compared to what previous research suggests but can be useful in special cases such as times of crisis or
in highly opinionated or profiled issues, or allegedly, as a marketing tool for distributing news on social
media platforms. This calls for more in-depth studies to see under what circumstances participation
takes off or not.

Social media networks were not included in this study and could well be seen as a potential par-
ticipatory arena. But given the results presented here, and what is found in studies of news and social
media networks, one should probably keep expectations low regarding participatory journalism on these
platforms. During the period of the study, use of social network sites has increased both among news
providers (Ju et al., 2014) and users (Author, 2014). Yet, data from the Swedish context (Internetbarom-
etern, 2011; 2012) shows that accessing (not to mention commenting) news through SNS engages 10
percent of the population through Facebook and 1 percent through Twitter. In 2011 the numbers were 6
and 1 percent respectively. Thus, it does not seem plausible to assume that commenting news has, in the
measured time period, migrated to SNS’s since we know from previous research that the active audience
is really small. It seems reasonable to suggest that SNS is an increasingly important gateway to discover
online news, especially for younger people, but that interactivity in terms of discussing or commenting
news stories is less common. This is especially evident in Northern European countries (Reuters Institute
Digital News Report 2014), which also highlights the need for more in-depth comparative studies.

The survey data clearly indicate that younger people are more likely to comment and blog, mean-
ing that we can expect these practices to increase on an aggregate level. Whether or not this will affect
participatory culture within news journalism is impossible to predict, since participatory journalism is
situated in a rather complex context, highly controlled by the editors.

Overall, we conclude that these data from Sweden indicate that participatory journalism, at least in
terms of blog links and comments, is on the decline and, for that matter, has previously been given more
value by editors and academics than by the citizens allegedly empowered by this phenomenon. Conse-
quently, we see these results as an indicator that there is no major shift in how power is being distributed
or how deliberation takes place in the context of news and journalism. This is not only a problem of
producers letting go of control but also, more importantly, a lack of interest, for whatever reason, from
users. However, it must be stressed once again that the measurements, blog links and comments, are
limited and that a number of participatory features that previous research has reported (Karlsson, 2011; Thurman & Hermida, 2010) was not, due to the limitations of our data sets, explored.

A general limitation of the study is that it is performed in a Swedish context and therefore, results might be very different in other countries and, thus, comparative approaches are welcomed. Swedes are very trusting of their media institutions (Weibull, 2014), which might possibly affect how they engage in participatory possibilities in comparison to more restricted media cultures. However, very few other longitudinal data exist and hence more research is needed. Furthermore, the questions raised by this study concerning the reach of participation in general, and the motivations and abilities of users to participate in particular, in contrast to studies on the affordances of technology or limitations installed by producers, are still valid.

As noted in the methods section there are limitations to the methods, as different approaches have been used to measure content and the survey, in spite of an internationally high response rate, is not fully representative. Another limitation is that there is not perfect alignment between the datasets as we, for instance, do not know if the bloggers in our survey are representative of those linking their blogs to news items. The results and conclusions must be read with these limitations in mind; however, we argue that the quality and longitudinal character of data are still a good approximation and, in contrast to the general lack of longitudinal data elsewhere, make an important contribution to the field.

We encourage future research to track if and how participation takes place in arenas outside traditional media and in other applications than blogs and comments. Our results show decreased blog linking practices but not a decrease in blogging itself. Maybe this is a sign of decreased interest in news platforms and that the debate, if it exists, instead takes place in other traditional media, social media platforms, alternative media or is dispersed. Should that be the case it has ramifications for deliberation, participation, and traditional media’s role in delivering the news to a broader public. However, since users are showing little increased use in two specific participatory practices over time, we caution against assuming or implying that a new technological platform will trigger high levels of participation amongst the larger population since that would suggest a theoretical linkage between technology and user behavior that we have not seen in web-based journalism.

Not only have producers and content been the focus of previous research on participatory journalism, when it comes to users, most available data on participatory journalism, including ours, are quantitative. In particular, this highlights the need for qualitative approaches to the users place in participation including, especially, the nonparticipators. Who will provide or restrict, have access to, and participate in a deliberation marked by what overtones in what contexts?

These results demonstrate that certain participatory features are on the decline on the news sites and that participation in journalism has diminutive appeal to many citizens. Based on this, we think that it calls into question the strong research foci on digital media and social change in general, and participatory journalism in particular.

Note

1 More elaborative descriptions on the method have been published previously by the authors but are shortened here due to space limitations.

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