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SOURCING AND ENGAGING THE CROWD: AUDIENCE INTERACTION AND PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE-ONLY SLOW JOURNALISM PLATFORMS

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Relevance

The rise of the web 2.0 and subsequently new forms of media have deeply affected journalistic practices. Promoting a culture in which speed, accessibility and connectivity are key ideals, the possibilities opened up by the Internet challenge the self-understanding and practices of traditional quality journalism. Scholars and journalists have argued that the situation fosters highly competitive and ultimately superficial practices, often based on mere assertion and attempts to draw more readers with click-bait or soundbites. While the horizontal architecture of the Internet can potentially extend the public sphere, foster the value of sharing as a collective, and enable individual interests to be expressed (Ruiz et al 2011), legacy news media seem reluctant to make full use of the potential the interactive new media hold for more democratic collaborations in a digitalized, interconnected world.

Traditional outlets do acknowledge the need to adopt new, participatory forms of online journalism, yet remain reluctant to leave their top-down practice behind out of fear of jeopardizing their authority as source of trustworthy information about society (Canter 2013). Consequently, the exchange between newspaper staff and audience is usually given a low priority, which means that journalists often lack the motivation as well as the time to engage more with the public (Canter 2013).

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Against this background, new 'slow journalism' startups like *De Correspondent* and *Krautreporter* in respectively the Netherlands and Germany explicitly emphasize the value of audience involvement as an additional way of gathering in-depth information from different perspectives. Characterized by in-depth, and time-consuming research, transparency about its methods and procedures, and a more personalized coverage, the discourse and practice of slow journalism takes a more bottom-up approach, emphasizing the benefits of a more participatory culture of reporting and the necessity to engage with the audience. The respective outlets present their online-only journalistic platforms as the necessary step to bring journalism into the networked society of the 21st century (Harbers 2015).

Research goals

This paper examines to which extent slow journalism constitutes a re-negotiation of journalistic quality standards and practices in the light of the increasingly participatory discourse of internet culture, especially with respect to the roles attributed to and performed by both the journalist and the citizen on online journalistic platforms. By analyzing not only how audiences engage through their comments but also how journalists interact and collaborate with their audience, our research seeks to illuminate how the bottom-up approach of projects like *De Correspondent* and *Krautreporter* reshapes the traditional top-down journalism practices by making crowdsourcing, audience interaction and the emergent news sharing culture an integral part of the reporting process.

It does so by searching for answers to three crucial questions: What is the nature of the debate and deliberation amongst the users? To what extent and how do journalistic professionals engage with the audience in comment section? And how do journalists and the audience together negotiate journalism's quality standards in their interaction? The paper ultimately aims to explore the ways these outlets interact and collaborate with their audience, and what this tells us about the way quality journalism is being redefined in 21st century society that is more and more determined by the affordances of a networked online culture.

Research design

Our research will be based on a quantitative content analysis in combination with a textual analysis of the comment sections of *De Correspondent* and *Krautreporter*. Our corpus consists of all the comments on the articles published in the contributions from April 2016. The sample will consist of 100 to 150 journalistic articles containing 1000 to 2000 comments per platform.

As a measure of the nature of debate and journalists-audience interaction, each comment will firstly be coded for the type of *interaction* (with the content, journalist, and/or fellow participant). Secondly, it identifies the *function* of the comments (e.g, arguing, providing/requesting information/sources, acknowledging/thanking, requesting reader input, giving advice, criticizing/defending journalism, making corrections, updating the story, or promoting their work). The function of the comment can be

specific for the roles of the user or the journalist but they may also overlap. Finally, its *influence* is coded (e.g., receiving replies, changing the tone of debate).

Based on our observations, we will reflect upon the implications for journalistic knowledge production and quality journalism, seeking answers to questions like: Do comments reflect on journalistic practices of the platform or article, provide additional viewpoints or suggestions for further research, relate to other comments, or look for new information? What happens when a journalist participates in the discussion: how do they relate to their audience, do they receive replies, and does their contribution impact the debate? The comparative framework also allows us to elucidate on the different ways slow journalism is developing as a professional practice that explicitly embraces the new opportunities of participatory culture rather than hesitatingly grapple with its challenges.

Relevance

So far, little research has been done on the collaborative relationship between journalists and citizens, even less so in the context of slow journalism. Indeed, the focus has been mostly on traditional news organizations. This paper begins to fill these gaps by examining the role of the audience on new slow journalism startups, which seeks to move beyond traditional professional standards and redefine quality journalism as a more collaborative practice of gathering, verifying and interpreting information.

Projects investigating the exchange between journalists and their audience or the engagement of commentators in the online editions of traditional journalistic quality outlets have often found that there is little actual interaction, for example due to restrictive moderation policies or a lack of time on the part of journalists (Ruiz et al 2011; Canter 2013). If readers do engage in journalistic discourse and become active participants, studies show that they tend to increase the diversity of viewpoints (Baden & Springer 2014; Graham & Wright 2015) in a generally civil manner (Ksiazeka 2015) and to conduct debates of deliberative quality (Graham & Wright 2015; Rowe 2015). Due to the particularities of slow journalism regarding target groups, moderation strategies and the emphatic support of audience participation, we expect our cases to show a significantly higher level of interaction and a considerable degree of democratic quality in the discussions.

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