Living in two worlds: Role taking of participatory journalists

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Abstract

This study examines ‘participatory journalism’ from the perspective of participants. Through case studies in two different contexts set up by Dutch professional news organizations, the conceptualization and expectations that participants have of their own and journalists’ roles in participatory journalism are investigated. This study builds on a previous study in which the authors concluded that participatory journalists experienced a clear breach between their expectations and evaluations of their participation in journalism: a need and a wish for ‘reciprocity’, but also a lack of it. The present study adds to this an analysis of how participatory journalism brings together different worlds: participants blend a communication model, based on rules and expectations of interaction from daily life, with the traditional model of the journalistic process. Although the analyses point to several general principles underlying participants’ experiences of taking part in journalism, they also demonstrate that each participatory environment creates its own form.

Keywords

Participatory journalism, audience participation, role taking, journalism as social system, reciprocity
Introduction

Fuelled by digital media technologies, ‘participatory journalism’ potentially changes journalism’s traditional “we write, you read dogma” (Deuze, 2003) into a more egalitarian principle of ‘co-creation’ (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Rosen, 2006). Digital media would enable the audience to make news themselves, to take up a role traditionally executed by professional journalists, thereby causing a landslide in journalism’s traditional ‘social system’ (Loosen and Schmidt, 2012) of journalists in the role of producers and the audience in a role of receivers. This ‘blurring of boundaries’ not only challenges traditional business models based on mass media conditions, or journalism as a profession but supposedly also the place and task of journalism in society, or the “implicit bargain between journalists and the public […] about how society should handle the collection, filtering, and distribution of news information” (Lewis, 2012, p.838). However, the reconfiguration of formerly fixed roles is far from determined yet. Both journalists’ and the audience’s roles in a participatory kind of journalism are still in the process of being (re-)invented.

Existing research into participatory journalism shows an unbalance in scholarly attention. Most studies focus on the possibly changing role of professional journalists, while few studies have been conducted into the potential changes in the role of the audience. This leaves an essential actor in participatory journalism underexamined. This article addresses this gap in the existing literature. Through two qualitative case studies, the conceptualization and expectations that participants have of their own and journalists’ roles in participatory journalism are investigated.

Shifting traditional roles and expectations

The interest of this paper lies with the potential shift of roles and expectations of these roles that is implied in participatory journalism. Existing research largely focuses on professional
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Most of this research is based on qualitative interview studies and suggests that journalists adopt a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward audience participation. On the one hand journalists wish to encourage audience participation: they accept audience comments to journalists’ stories (Jönsson and Örnebring, 2008; Domingo et al., 2008; Örnebring, 2008; Singer, 2011), and embrace audience material when it yields extra (source) material that enhances their stories (Harrison, 2010; Robinson, 2010; Singer, 2010).

On the other hand, journalists adhere to the control inherent to their traditional gatekeeping role (Chung, 2007; Domingo et al., 2008; Karlsson, 2011; Singer, 2010) and discard audience material when it threatens to overthrow existing routines, practices and values (Harrison, 2010; Wardle and Williams, 2010; Williams et al, 2010). This is not only found within journalists who operate in traditional news media, but also among innovative journalists. A repertoire analysis of interviews with frontrunners who pioneer with various forms of audience participation, demonstrated that even these journalistic innovators talk about participatory journalism in terms of traditional notions of ‘control’ (Borger et al, 2013): when journalists’ control over content decreases and participants’ control increases, audience participation becomes problematic, or even no longer thinkable as journalism (p.50).

In summary, the existing literature demonstrates that, even though participatory opportunities have certainly increased, journalists do not envision any radical shifts in their own role or the audience’s role. By and large, journalists adhere to their traditional role of gatekeeper and protect very much the notion of control that is needed to fulfill that role. Participatory journalism is envisioned only in a supportive role that does not fundamentally change the position of the professional journalist. This has led several researchers to conclude that, in the main, journalists are still journalists and audiences are still audiences (Heinonen, 2011; O’Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008; Quandt, 2008; Williams et al, 2011).
The few studies that focus on the potential changes in the role of the audience suggest that, in general, the audience accepts its traditional role of receiving information produced by journalists. Researchers found that the audience appreciates that the opportunities to participate exist, but that they show little interest in actually using these opportunities (Bergström, 2008; Chung and Nah, 2009; Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004; Larsson, 2011; Lowrey and Anderson, 2005).

However, these studies are all based on quantitative large-scale survey research. An audience study that takes a more qualitative approach finds an alternative explanation for patterns of little or non-use of participatory features: based on an ethnographic study of ‘productive news use’, Picone (2011) proposes that the audience experiences engaging in productive news use as an act of ‘self-publication’, as an act of making oneself public. He suggests that the audience is not so much ‘uninterested’ vis-à-vis participation in the news, but rather that some audience members refrain from it because they are not comfortable with publicizing themselves to an audience (Picone, 2011, p.117). The results from Picone’s study demonstrate that more qualitative research is needed to complement existing survey research to come to an in-depth understanding of how participants experience participation in journalism.

What is more, existing studies demonstrate that, when the audience is participating, their agenda does not necessarily coincide with what is expected from them by news organizations and media scholars. First, survey studies found that the audience does not participate on democratic grounds, as scholars and media observers initially hoped, but rather to have ‘fun’ (Bergstrom, 2008; Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004). Furthermore, qualitative interview studies suggest that participants want to develop their own norms and values regarding news that can deviate from traditional journalistic norms and values (Robinson, 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen et al, 2010).
Still, these studies provide only the first insights into participants’ expectations regarding participation in journalism in specific contexts. More research in different contexts is needed to more generally understand participants conceptualization and expectation of their own and journalists’ roles in participatory journalism. In the next section we lay out a general model that describe the role taking and the expectations that come with this role taking in journalism in a systematic way. For this we integrate the work of Loosen and Schmidt (2012) with Rennen’s (2001) model of the journalistic process.

**Journalism as a social system of role taking**

During the 20th century, the social system of journalism as sender of news to a receiving audience flourished under the conditions of mass media. Conceptualizing journalism as a social system, means placing an emphasis on the roles that actors in a system fulfill and the expectations and images actors have of their own and other actors’ roles (Loosen and Schmidt, 2012). Loosen and Schmidt explain that journalism as a social system has “system-specific performance and complementary audience roles” (p.872). Under the conditions of mass media, the performance role was exercised by journalists. Journalists were acting as ‘gatekeepers’ who see to it “that the community shall hear as fact only those events which the newsman, as the representative of his culture, believes to be true” (White, 1950, p.390). The audience role in journalism’s traditional social system was fulfilled by the audience – both terms semantically coinciding with each other – receiving the messages created by journalists. Although this role was never considered to be a truly ‘passive’ one (Van Dijck, 2009), it is safe to say that journalism’s traditional social system was “based on the asymmetry between its performance role and an audience role that was restricted to the selective use of communicative offers” (Loosen and Schmidt, 2012, p.873). This renders journalism as a “communicative unit” (p.872) in which the relationship between journalists and audience was
structured by reciprocal and fairly stable expectations “about what journalism should and will deliver, and what the audience should and will receive” (p. 870).

The notions of roles and reciprocal expectations are helpful in making sense of the journalistic process (Loosen and Schmidt, 2012). However, this conceptualization of journalism as a social system needs to be complemented by an approach that includes the role of sources, as sources are an essential part of the journalistic process (Ericson et al, 1989). Rennen’s (2001) model of the journalistic process, as presented in his dissertation research, provides such an approach. Rennen (2001) builds his model on the adaptation of the central idea in Gerbner’s (1956) communication model that communication can be considered as a two dimensional process: the perception dimension where an actor perceives information and the production dimension in which an actor reacts (in a situation through some means) to make available materials (in some form and context conveying content of some consequences) (Gerbner, 1956). In most communication processes, actors can fulfill both roles or swap roles, but in processes of mass mediated communication perceiving and producing information is mainly done in fixed role positions.

This coincides with the central idea in journalism as a social system, where the perception of information is done by the ‘audience’, semantically coinciding with Loosen and Schmidt’s (2012) audience role. The production of information is done by the journalist; he is Loosen and Schmidt’s (2012) ‘performer’. Rennen’s model of the journalistic process stresses that journalism’s social system typically includes a third role: the source role. In Figure 1 we present our model based on Rennen’s model (2001, p. 38). In the model, the actors that take certain roles are symbolized by circles. The communicative products (statement about an event and journalistic product) are depicted as squares with rounded ankles, symbolizing the fact that these products always relate to ‘real-world’ events (depicted as a strait square). Journalism is conceptualized as a social system with three distinct roles, that are characterized
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by a specific way of handling on the perception and the production dimension. The actor in
the source role acts as primary perceiver of information (he takes the audience role in the
perception of events in the real world), and makes statements (in the role as producer) that
journalists can cite as fact (Ericson et al, 1989) when producing news. Only the actor in the
role of the journalist can produce a journalistic product, based on information that he or she
perceives from sources or from direct observation of the real world (in the role of audience).
Sources, thus, fulfill a performance role that is supportive of the journalists’ performance role.
The role of the audience is basically restricted to the audience role of perceiving the
information the news product provides.

Figure 1. Model of journalism as a communicative unit, adopted from Rennen

On the whole, existing research accepts that the traditional division of roles in
journalism has reached its expiry date with the proliferation of digital media. With the barriers
to produce and share information having radically been lowered, journalism no longer is the
sole maker and distributor of news, but now faces many competitors. Among these

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1 The model is based on Rennen’s model of the journalistic process (2001, p. 38). We adopted the concepts
(which we translated) and symbols but mirrored the model so that it can be intuitively read from left to right.
competitors are parties that once were journalism’s sources, but potentially also the audience. Journalism observers and scholars expect that a new kind of ‘participatory’ journalism will come about, in which the audience would be able to produce and disseminate news and information (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Rosen, 2006). This ‘blurring of boundaries’ (Bruns, 2005) between formerly fixed roles potentially challenges journalism’s traditional social system. This raises the questions whether the three roles in journalism’s social system, source, journalist and audience, will change and what will happen to the expectations accompanying these formerly fixed roles. More in depth research in different contexts is needed to understand participants conceptualization and expectation of their own and journalists’ roles in participatory journalism. We thus can formulate our research questions as follows:

1. How do audience participants conceptualize their own role in participatory forms of journalism in terms of perception of information and production of news and what do they expect from this role?
2. How do audience participants view their own role in relation to other possible roles in journalism as a social process (role of audience, source or journalist)?
3. How do audience participants experience their current participation in journalism against the expectations they had when they started taking part?

In this study, we focuses on participatory journalistic acts of ‘producing’ rather than ‘participating’ (Shao, 2008). This differs from Picone’s (2011) focus on ‘productive news use’. Shao’s notion of ‘producing’ involves the actual creation and production of one’s own content, whereas ‘comprises acts like ranking and sharing articles. Participatory journalism in this study is interpreted literally, as the participation of the audience within the context of professional news organizations. The reason for this is twofold: first, in a previous literature study on ‘participatory journalism’ (Borger et al, 2013) two-thirds of the articles associated
the phenomenon with the audience taking part in professional news organizations, rather than with citizens engaging in journalistic activities elsewhere in the journalistic field. Second, this study is specifically interested in participants’ ideas about participation in professional contexts, as this is where we might find the strongest confrontation between formerly fixed roles.

**Method**

Participants and materials

The data for this study consist of 32 in-depth interviews with participants in two different contexts set up by professional news organizations. Based on previous research (Borger et al, 2013) two environments, labeled *Project X* and *Project Y*, were selected for study. These projects were chosen because they are each other’s opposites in terms of ‘control’ (Borger et al, 2013). *Project X* is a traditional journalistic setting in which a lot of influence is in hands of the journalists, whereas there is relatively little control at the end of the participants. *Project Y* is a profit-driven setting, in which participants can take the initiative.

*Project X* is part of a publicly funded, national news broadcaster (television, radio, and internet), which was started in early 2010. The broadcaster’s goal for the project is to get in touch with ‘experts’ – either from a certain discipline or by lived experience – among the Dutch population. The editorial staff calls them ‘news partners’. People can approach the editorial staff on their own initiative, but in most cases reply to the organization’s request for information put out by the editorial staff. Such requests are posted on the broadcaster’s website, or sent to organizations and companies that forward such a call for information to their employees or members. People are, thus, explicitly addressed as experts and invited to contribute as such. Once a participant has been in touch with the project’s editorial staff, his or her contact details and field(s) of expertise are noted in a database that is available for all
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journalists in the organization. At the time of the interviews, over 1000 news partners were in Project X’s database.

Project Y, by contrast, is a hyperlocal online news network. Its slogan reads “The latest news from your neighbourhood”. The project is owned by a large commercial media corporation that owns newspapers, magazines, free local papers, radio stations and websites. The project started in early 2010 with the goal to set up a new, profitable business model for local/regional journalism. People are explicitly invited to make their own news. Once people sign up as a ‘co-writer’ they can post their own news (footage, text) on the website. Most co-writers represent local companies, organizations or social clubs. At the time of the interviews, Project Y consisted of over 40 local news communities. Most communities were located in the western part of the Netherlands, as this is the area where Project Y started.

Sampling

Interviewees were recruited with the help of both news organizations. In the case of Project X, a research assistant was given access to the project’s database, and contacted participants via e-mail. In the case of Project Y, all community managers recommended one or more participants to take part in the research. Participants were thereupon approached via e-mail. Depending on who responded willingly to taking part in the research, interviews were set up.

In total, 32 participants were interviewed. This number was determined by theoretical saturation: interviews were transcribed and put through a first global analysis shortly after they took place. When no new results emerged from this first, rough analysis, the interviewing stopped.

From Project X, 17 news partners were interviewed (Box 1); 11 men, six women; ages varied from 32 to 60, most were in their forties and fifties. The interviewees came from a variety of disciplines and fields of expertise, reflective of the diversity in expertise in Project X’s database. Eight interviewees ended up in this database by replying to a request put out by
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the editorial staff, seven had been directly approached by the editorial staff, only two interviewees had approached the editorial staff on their own initiatives. According to the editorial staff, this is reflective of the common state of affairs. From Project Y, 15 participants were interviewed (Box 1); 11 men, four women; ages varied from 23 to 72, but most interviewees were in their forties. All interviewees could be labeled as ‘active’ co-writers; they uploaded a new message at least twice a month. The interviewees came from a wide variety of local communities, reflective of the entire population of communities. This means they came from both rural areas as well as from urban areas, and that some were active in communities with many participants, whereas others came from relatively quiet communities with only a few participants.

Box 1. List of interviewees from Projects X and Y

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project X</th>
<th>Project Y</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description interviewee</td>
<td>Description interviewee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 local politician, artist, female, 38</td>
<td>1 dietician, female, 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 team leader crew of firemen, male, 39</td>
<td>2 secretary, female, 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 priest, male, 46</td>
<td>3 copywriter, male, 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 postal worker, female, 45</td>
<td>4 retired employee insurance agency, male, 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 pilot, male, 42</td>
<td>5 student, male, 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 local politician, owner event management agency, female, 44</td>
<td>6 policeman, male, 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 teacher, female, 33</td>
<td>7 retired bicycle repairman, male, 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 chairman educational organization, male, 60</td>
<td>8 consultant, female, 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 importer fruit and vegetables, male, 44</td>
<td>9 student, male, 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 writer, female, 40</td>
<td>10 consultant, member local political party, male, 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 employee mental health care organization, male, 50</td>
<td>11 mathematics teacher, male, 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 director water management agency, male, 53</td>
<td>12 director interior company, male, 50+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 physician, male, 58</td>
<td>13 retired archivist, male, 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 psychiatric nurse, male, 56</td>
<td>14 nurse, female, 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 coach for entrepreneurs, male, 51</td>
<td>15 civil servant municipality, male, 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 member society for patients with epilepsy, female, 50+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 merchantiser sports gear company, male, 30</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The interviews revolved around the interviewees’ participatory activities in the selected news environments. A topic list was used to ask about role conceptualization, current experiences with participating in the environments under study, and the expectations interviewees had beforehand. The interviews lasted one to one-and-a-half hour. Most were held at the homes of the interviewees, some at their work. The conversations were recorded with consent of the interviewees, and literally transcribed.
Analytical procedures

A thematic analysis was applied. The data were subjected to a process of open coding in which the notions ‘role conceptualization’, ‘expectations’ and ‘experiences’ were used as sensitizing concepts. Short segments of data, up to 100 words, were examined to identify key ideas that could represent categories. Through the constant comparative method, segments of data and codes were compared to one another, and similar incidents were grouped together and given the same conceptual label. As such, gradually more abstract categories emerged. In a process of axial coding, codes and categories were reassembled by making connections between main and sub-categories. Finally, selective coding involved making connections between the discrete categories, and the refinement and refitting of categories around an emerging core category. The transcripts from Projects X and Y were analyzed separately, because of the differences between the projects. However, during the stage of selective coding, the analyses of both projects were compared with each other to identify common principles underlying the interviewees’ participation experiences.

Results

The results from Project X and Y will be discussed separately, as the projects differed considerably from each other in terms of rationales and set-up. For both projects, the main themes will be discussed in the order of the research questions. When necessary, alternative or minority viewpoints that deviated from dominant positions have been indicated. For the purposes of this article, representative quotes have been selected from the interview data on the basis of the thematic analysis.

Project X

Role conceptualization and role expectations of participants
In the invitation to participate, potential participants were explicitly addressed as experts – so in the role of (expert) sources – that could help journalists by providing knowledge and expertise from their fields. The data reveal that the interviewees adopted this view of themselves as experts.

Excerpt 1 – taken from Interview 5

*I think I could be a filter for Organization X on aircraft-related news. In the sense that I have certain knowledge that one can’t expect a journalist to have. I can verify. [...] Like, we’re reading this, but let’s check this information with the people from the field. Is this correct? How should we interpret this?*

Excerpt 1 illustrates that interviewees consider themselves as knowledgeable and competent, often as even more knowledgeable than journalists. They were confident that they had a valuable contribution to make and that journalists could really benefit from their input. Interviewees expected to be helping journalists on matters of content. They imagined providing journalists with an insider perspective, background information and in-depth knowledge and expertise from their field.

*Expectations of other roles*

Although interviewees could easily identify with a role of providing journalists with input, they did not feel comfortable with completely taking over a journalist’s role:

Excerpt 2 – taken from Interview 17

*You know, I’m not a storyteller. [...] I think he [the journalist] is the one who can tell stories in an interesting and clear way.*

Excerpt 3 – taken from Interview 7

*I don’t think I have the capacity to produce a good item. [...] There are these journalism studies and schools for a reason, you know.*
The interviewees did not think they were capable of doing journalists’ work, of performing the production role traditionally attuned to journalists. They considered journalism as a craft for which skills and education are required (Excerpt 3). In addition, most interviewees highly respected the news organization behind Project X, a national broadcaster with a long-standing reputation of producing ‘quality journalism’. At numerous instances, interviewees called it a “beautiful idea” (Interview 7) or a “great initiative” (Interview 16) that such a well-known and high quality news organization asked ‘ordinary people like them’ for input, which illustrates that interviewees looked up against the news organization behind Project X. By viewing themselves as expert sources and journalists as skilled craftsmen, interviewees adopted the role division that the news organization had proposed in its call for participation.

Motivation: getting a voice

When interviewees discussed their motivations to take participation in Project X, they consistently referred to a larger group they were part of:

Excerpt 4 – taken from Interview 4

And really, there are things going on that are just unacceptable. Mailmen that have been working for forty years, plodding out in the weather, and they are set back in salaries, just like that, without mercy, and they get an offer of 21 hours [of work] a week at the most. And these people are breadwinners! […] And then I’m thinking… they should look into this!

Excerpt 5 – taken from Interview 3

I hope to make things more nuanced. To get back to that subject of sexual abuse, for example. To indicate that the Church does more than just that. So it’s a blot, and a very ugly one, too. But it’s not the entire menu. And that balance, yeah, that can get lost in the media. And then the public conversation gets distorted.
The excerpts demonstrate that the invitation to participate triggered a sense of duty and social responsibility towards the other members of their field, often co-members of a profession or organization. Instead of considering participation in *Project X* as an opportunity for self-actualization, expressing personal opinions (Picone, 2011), the interviewees took it as an opportunity to represent the larger group they are part of. In doing so, participation in *Project X* was about getting a ‘voice’ for their social or professional group. As demonstrated in Excerpt 5, the need for this voice was rooted in criticism of how their group was usually represented in news coverage: as too globally, lacking nuance, one-sided, and as focusing too much on negative aspects. They expected that by taking part in *Project X* they would be able to contribute to more representative news coverage of their group. So the motivation to partake in project X is rooted in their dissatisfaction with their traditional role as audience. A role that allowed them to perceive news information that they perceived as an inaccurate or unbalanced image of their group, but almost no chance to contribute to a more balanced representation.

*Evaluating experience: feeling invisible*

Although interviewees highly appreciated the invitation to take part and were motivated to participate, many did not appreciate the actual participation. A frequent complaint was that the project’s editorial staff was unresponsive. Note that most interviewees appeared highly surprised to have been approached for the research interview of the present study, since they had never received acknowledgement that they were indeed registered as a partner of *Project X*. In their experience, they had once responded to the call for participation, but had never received a confirmation of actually being a ‘news partner’ and had finally considered their relation with *Project X* as not realized. Others recounted that they had provided the editorial staff with input, but never had received a response of some extent, apart from an automated
‘thank you’ e-mail. The following extract is typical of how interviewees experienced participation in *Project X*:

Excerpt 6 – taken from Interview 3

*Yeah, I’m looking for a word here, because I have the experience that journalists want to know everything about you, until the moment of their deadline and after that has passed, you never hear from them again. [...] So, yes, it’s like a lost love. Maybe that’s not the right comparison, but it’s that idea, that you suddenly get abandoned again.*

This interviewee, like many others, felt discarded. He had invested time and effort in participating, providing journalists with input, but, in his experience, without getting any serious response, and without being truly listened to. Interviewees felt invited to become part of the journalistic process and expected to be engaged in a co-operative, interactive relationship with journalists, but ended up feeling invisible instead, like they were in their traditional role of audience.

The only interviewees who reported being satisfied with the editorial staff’s responsiveness were the two local politicians (both chairwomen of political parties), the physician (the former representative of a national society of physicians), and the program director of the water management agency. These four interviewees, thus, can be considered rather traditional sources in the sense that they presented so-called traditionally “*authorized positions to know*” (Ericson et al., 1989): their organizational status and affiliation recognizably put them in a position ‘to know’, at least from a journalists’ perspective. They already occupied a traditional ‘source role’. Vice-versa, those interviewees in less traditional ‘positions to know’ had the experience that their input was not acknowledged or needed after all. They were convinced they were experts, but felt treated as unauthorized to know and therefore unauthorized to speak. This experience gave raise to negative emotions such as feelings of sadness or anger.
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Project Y

Roles: participants as news makers, journalists as facilitators

The website of Project Y invited participants to upload their ‘own’ news. Interviewees literally responded to this call for participation in the sense that they really felt owners of their news. They wanted to make sure that their messages came across as they intended. As a result, they preferred to write and publish themselves, without journalists intervening in the process:

Excerpt 7 – taken from Interview 10

*I like being in control myself. [...] So that you’re sure that it’s read by people without someone else putting his spin on it.*

Expectations of other roles

Considering themselves as newsmakers in charge of content – a task traditionally performed by journalists – , the question arises what interviewees expected journalists to be doing on the platform. They did not think of them as traditional journalists making news, but rather envisioned them as supportive of participants’ activities:

Excerpt 8 – taken from Interview 5

*[Her task is] Managing and delegating. I think her [the journalist’s] job is to... she needs to find news, but she needs to get other people to write about it.*

Others added journalists should also “promote the platform and its options” (Interview 2) and that it was their task to “look for advertisers” (Interview 6). In other words, interviewees considered it the journalists’ task to be creating the preconditions for a participatory environment and to encourage people to become active in it. The interviewees, thus, radically altered the traditional role division between journalists as producers of news and the audience as mainly receivers. They transferred the spotting and making of news from the journalists to participants and envisioned journalists’ in a mainly facilitating role, enabling participants to
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take part. As such, interviewees adopted the role division between journalists and participants
that the news organization behind Project Y had in mind.

Motivation: generating exposure by doing PR

The website of Project Y invites people to participate by a button that says ‘Post your own
news’, leaving the definition of ‘news’ up to participants. The interviewees were strikingly
uniform in the way they interpreted this call for participation. They all expected Project Y to
be an opportunity to generate positive attention for a certain (concrete) cause.

Excerpt 9 – taken from Interview 2

You know, we organize musical evenings at our Church. [...] And we’re now trying to
give publicity to it, because we want to attract more visitors, to keep doing this. [...] So
that’s the reason why I started doing this. Like: maybe it helps to put this on a digital
website of a newspaper or something.

The majority of the interviewees, around two third of them, got involved in Project Y to
promote an organization or social group they were part of; either an employing company,
their political party, or the club they were a member of (such as sports club, musical club, or
theatre club). The remainder of the interviewees, approximately one third, aimed for the
generation of positive attention for their local surroundings: they wanted to celebrate ‘local
heroes’ (Interview 14), or to announce interesting aspects of (Interview 7 and 13) or
interesting activities (Interview 15) in their neighbourhood. In short, participants in Project Y
considered themselves as PR agents who aimed at generating exposure for a certain cause of
interest in their immediate context.

Experience: appreciating interaction, doubting output

First and foremost, participants in Project Y were very satisfied with how participation took
place. Interviewees appreciated that they were given a clear field to post whatever news they
wanted, without the editorial staff putting any obstacles in their way. More importantly, however, interviewees valued how the editorial staff related to them:

Excerpt 10 – taken from Interview 3

Well, normally you never hear anything about it anymore. Little response, in general. But they, yes, we immediately were in touch you know. They responded!

Excerpt 11 – taken from Interview 2

So I asked: [if I want to get it published in the local newspaper] where should I send it to? And he [staff member] said like: I’ll send it to them for you. Let me try. And then I received an e-mail back from him stating ‘well, they’re going to publish it’.

Both excerpts illustrate that the editorial staff made an effort to be in touch with participants, something which they highly appreciated. What is more, Excerpt 11 demonstrates how staff members put in extra efforts to help participants generate exposure for their publications by using their own journalistic contacts to get the participants’ articles published in a local print newspaper too. Interviewees appreciated that participation in Project Y meant interaction: a mutual process in which participants provided input and the staff responded. Although interviewees considered interaction to be a matter of ‘common decency’, they acknowledged it as exceptional for journalists to relate to participants in this way, given their previous experiences with the media.

Paradoxically, interviewees expressed concerns about the results of their participation, since they were not satisfied with the general quality of publications on the platform. Most interviewees said they only posted articles, but did not read other articles, while classifying the platform as trivial, unimportant, and not urgent:
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Excerpt 12 – taken from Interview 5

What’s on the website actually doesn’t interest me. And I’m not surprised by that. It’s about things of which I say: well that really has no news value at all. It’s just, yeah, it’s really just a ‘good news show’.

Interviewees assessed themselves as capable of making valuable and interesting news, but doubted that the material of others would meet these criteria. Several interviewees even advised the project’s staff to make participation more exclusive to give the platform a quality boost:

Excerpt 13 – taken from Interview 1

I would hope that they provided only a selective group of people with an inlog code. You know, if you ask me to upload a recipe, and say ‘here are the inlog codes’, yeah, I get that! It means less work for them. And I get that. But to just let anyone make his own inlog code, yeah, then I think, what’s the added value of that?

Participants expressed that they took over the work of traditional journalists, and made clear that they expected the editorial staff to watch over the quality of the output in return. Providing only a selective group with inlog codes, as suggested in Excerpt 13, was considered one way to guard the platform’s quality. Another interviewee explicitly stated he expected the staff to “put a stamp” (Interview 9) on output by way of quality control. Evaluating the news on the platform as generally being of low quality, interviewees doubted whether the platform would attract an audience. And without an audience, interviewees reasoned, what was the point in producing content?

**Discussion: comparing Project X and Y**

Having presented the results of analyses, this article now proceeds to a discussion of differences and similarities between Project X and Y in the light of the research questions. Can a comparison of the individual projects help us understand how participants
conceptualize and experience participatory journalism, given the notions of roles and expectations as derived from social systems theory and as combined with Rennen’s (2001) model of the journalistic process?

To begin with, for most participants, participation in both projects has its roots in criticism of current journalism. In the case of Project X, participants feel that current news coverage about their group (based on profession or shared experience) is not representative of reality. In the case of Project Y, participants feel frustrated that their group (company, club, neighbourhood) been kept at a distance by other news media. In both cases, participants feel ignored in terms of journalistic output and process, and start participating to correct these perceived shortcomings.

Second, contrary to previous studies suggesting that participation in journalism is a form of individual entertainment (Bergström, 2008; Hujanen and Pietikainen, 2004) or an act of ‘self-publication’ (Picone, 2011), this study demonstrates that taking part in Project X and Y did not revolve around personal entertainment or publicizing oneself. Instead, participation took place on a supra-individual level, in that participants were representing a cause higher than themselves: a group based on professional or lived experience in the case of Project X; a group based on connections with the local surroundings in the case of Project Y. One might argue that, contrary to what previous audience studies (Bergström, 2008; Hujanen and Pietikainen, 2004) demonstrate, participation in Projects X and Y in fact is democracy-oriented. Participants might not say about themselves that they are acting in the name of democracy but the nature of what participants are doing when participating – claiming a voice, bringing their own issues to the fore – can be considered activities that aim to contribute to a more democratic type of journalism (Carpentier, 2003).

However, it should be stressed that how interviewees conceptualize and experience participatory journalism depends on the context in which participation takes place. This study
Role taking of participatory journalists illustrates that different participatory environments create different forms of participatory journalism. Project X and Y were both initiated and facilitated by news organizations, but by their different goals and functional structures elicit different participant roles and expectations accompanying these roles. In Figure 2-5 the participatory journalistic process in both projects is depicted in terms of Rennen’s journalistic model. The figures also demonstrate where potential difficulties might arise.

Figure 2 shows the journalistic process in Project X from the vantage point of the news organization. Participants are invited to fulfill a role as ‘expert source’ and to provide journalists with input who will thereupon create the journalist product. From a journalists’ point of view, Project X is an optimization of the traditional journalistic process: it will make it easier to find and contact sources. Figure 3 shows the journalistic process in Project X from the vantage point of the participant: participants are willing to be consulted as experts with knowledge and expertise of specific matters, but they have different expectations of this source role than the news organization envisions. Participants expect that providing journalists with input is more than a transaction between actors about sharing information; they want this transaction to be accompanied by interaction, i.e. by establishing a relation. One could say that participants bring their own communication model, based on rules and expectations of interaction and politeness from daily life (Brown and Levinson, 1987), and blend this model with the traditional model of the journalistic process, based on rules and expectations of transaction. The interaction that participants add to the journalistic process is symbolized by a two-sided arrow.
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Figure 2. The participatory journalistic process in Project X as designed by the news organization

Figure 3. The participatory journalistic process in Project X from the vantage point of participants

In Project Y participants are invited to create their own news, and thus to occupy the position of the journalist (Figure 4). Participants in this context subsequently also envision themselves as producing their own coverage with journalists in a supporting role, facilitating participants’ activities. This facilitating role implies interaction between journalists as
representatives of the news organization and the participants. But the position of the roles of participant as journalist and journalist as facilitator in the journalistic process are the same. At the end of the journalistic process in Project Y, difficulties arise. Due to doubts about the platform’s quality, the position of the audience threatens to become vacant.

The comparison of Project X and Y demonstrates that a notion of ‘reciprocity’ plays a role in both projects on two levels. First, reciprocity plays a role on the level of ethics: participants expect to be involved in a ‘reciprocal type of journalism’ (Lewis, 2013). This reciprocity relates to both the process of participation as well as to the output of the participation. In Project X, process-reciprocity is most salient: participants are willing to provide input as sources and they expect an interactive exchange with journalists in which both their presence and contribution are acknowledged. Participants also have expectations regarding output (better representation of their social or professional group), but output-reciprocity is mentioned less frequently. An explanation for this could be that participants do not reach the conceptualization of output, as problems already arise on the level of process. In Project Y, participants talked mostly about output-reciprocity, as their expectations regarding the process of taking part were already fully met. Thus, in short, according to participants in both projects, participation should take place on a ‘quid-pro-quo’ basis.

**Figure 4. The participatory journalistic process in Project Y**
Second, reciprocity plays a role in relation to the entire journalistic process as a communicative unit. As Loosen and Schmidt (2012) write, traditional journalism social system was a functioning communicative unit, because the traditional journalistic process was structured by reciprocal and stable expectations between the various actors involved. However, in neither of the participatory journalistic projects under study, the expectations between the news organizations and the participants turn out to be reciprocal. Project X is traditionally designed in that the relationship between expert-sources and journalists is transactional, but participants expect it to be interactive. In Project Y, the news organization assumes that providing the opportunity to participate in itself is sufficient, but participants expect the organization to safeguard the quality of the output in order to guarantee the existence of an audience. Our data suggest that these mismatches in expectations do not threaten the viability of the projects immediately, since, in Project X, participants are easily satisfied again when journalists try to renew contacts, and in Project Y the intensive contacts between staff and make up for a lot. However, in the long run, the failure to meet participants’ expectations diminishes their willingness to participate and is, thus, likely to be an obstacle for the coming into existence of fully functioning ‘communicative units’.

**Conclusion**

Previous research demonstrated that news organizations, generally, do not approach audience participation from the vantage point of the participant and that journalists set rather self-serving conditions regarding audience participation (Harrison, 2010; Singer, 2010; Singer, 2011; Wardle and Williams, 2010; Williams et al, 2010). The present study shows that participants, on their part, have their own set of expectations and conditions when taking part in journalism. Contrary to audience studies that point to a lack of interest in participation (Bergström, 2008; Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004; Larsson, 2011), this article proposes an alternative explanation for not, or no longer, participating in journalism: the viability of
participatory projects could also be diminished by a mismatch between participants’ and journalists’ expectations of the participatory journalistic process.

Previous research into journalists’ ideas about participatory journalism demonstrated that for professional journalists, the notion of control is key (Borger et al, 2013; Harrison, 2010; Lewis, 2012; Singer, 2010). Journalists struggle with the balance between giving up and keeping control in the face of audience participants entering their field. This study suggests that from the perspective of participants, participatory journalism is not first and foremost about control (although issues of control can play a role), but rather about reciprocity. Participants are not aiming to compete with journalists about roles or power, but they do expect adherence to a basic set of rules: ‘quid-pro-quo’ in terms of process and output. This means that for news organizations, simply providing the opportunity to participate – which, to journalists, already is a big step – is not enough; participants expect something in return for investing time and effort in participating – if only ‘simple’ interaction. This study illustrates that, fuelled by online media, participatory journalism brings together different worlds with different social norms. Ordinary people cannot be treated as traditional sources, who generally have a more powerful position in their transaction with journalists than the average person. If news organizations want to embark on a more participatory relationship with ‘ordinary’ people, they need to live by ‘ordinary’ rules of interaction and politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Although the analyses point to several general principles underlying participants’ experiences of taking part in journalism, they also demonstrate that each participatory environment creates its own form of participation with its own roles for journalists and participants and expectations accompanying these roles. The findings of this study can thus not be generalized to the entire phenomenon of participatory journalism. The study of participatory journalism could benefit from complementary audience research of different
participatory environments to arrive at a richer understanding of the participation experience from the perspective of participants. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated how participants view their own and journalists’ roles in participatory forms of journalism. Future research could examine participatory output in order to determine how participants actually become manifest in news coverage – in which types of roles and with which types of ‘voice’.
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