

# SOCIAL MEDIA AND JOURNALISM: A RESEARCH AGENDA TO VINDICATE CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN THE ERA OF DISINFORMATION AND ONLINE HARASSMENT

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**Abstract:** *This article proposes a critical overview of two decades of research on the relationship between journalism and social media. Through a literature review, key theoretical concepts are presented, and findings and blind spots discussed. The article concludes proposing a research agenda with the aim of fostering civic participation and deterring disinformation and harassment in online public spaces.*

**Keywords:** *Social media; Participatory journalism; Audience engagement; Citizen journalism.*

**Resumo:** *Este artigo propõe uma visão geral crítica de duas décadas de investigação sobre a relação entre jornalismo e media sociais. Através de uma revisão da literatura, são apresentados os principais conceitos teóricos e são discutidos os resultados e pontos cegos. O artigo conclui propondo uma agenda de investigação com o objetivo de promover a participação cívica e dissuadir a desinformação e o assédio em espaços públicos online.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Media sociais; Jornalismo participativo; Envolvimento da audiência; Jornalismo cidadão.*

In the last two decades, the relationship between journalists and their publics has been at the centre of attention of a growing body of research. The internet, and social media in particular, have reignited idealistic biases among journalistic scholars, who saw these technologies as an opportunity to solve a perceived crisis in audience trust (Borger et al. 2013). This article proposes a critical overview of the research on this «audience turn» in journalism studies (Swart et al. 2022), in order to identify the findings and the blind spots, and propose a research agenda that contributes to foster civic participation and deter disinformation and harassment in online public spaces.

The first wave of studies on audience participation in journalism in the early 2000s was dominated by technological and normative determinism (Kreiss and Brennen 2016): the assumption was that, as the internet allowed an unprecedented easiness for anyone to produce content, citizens would be eager to participate in public discussions online and particularly in connection to journalism. Social media were just in their initial stages of development, but it was not the focus of those studies, which were

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media-centric, following the tradition of journalism studies of focusing on newsrooms rather than audiences when analysing innovations (Gajardo and Meijer 2022).

In one of the early studies (Singer et al. 2011), interviews with journalists developing participatory journalism spaces in online newspapers showed a diversity of attitudes and motivations, with several common trends in ten different countries: economic objectives (fostering loyalty to these news websites among the public) were the driving force of the participatory initiatives, but journalists resisted to share the core of their tasks with the citizens. In the news production process (Fig. 1), participation spaces were mainly limited to the observation phase (citizens as sources) and the interpretation phase (comments in news). Journalists admitted to be overwhelmed with the management of participation, while at the same time admitted that just a small fraction of their audiences actually contributed content. Apparently, not every citizen wanted to take the time and effort to participate.

Despite these early findings, outside of mainstream media there were projects that involved citizens more intensely, with or without a collaboration with professional journalists. The concept of «citizen journalism» tried to capture this phenomenon, and the work of Ahva (2017) showed how there were many different reasons for people to participate: *in* journalism (producing content), *through* journalism (in order to express themselves, participate in the public sphere), *with* journalism (forming a community of practice to learn to produce news), *around* journalism (getting access to events), or *for* journalism (with the aspiration of becoming professional journalists).

But these projects were always in the margins, fragile, and citizen involvement tended to lose momentum after few months or years.

When journalists started to use social media platforms, they carried their practices with them, despite the challenge to journalistic identity of being in a space where they had lost the monopoly of the production of knowledge about current events. They used social media as a source and a publishing platform, and eventually as a space of interaction and of expression of their political views, which created tensions with their media companies when newsrooms embraced ideals of objectivity as their editorial posture (Domingo 2019). Beyond professional journalism, research explored social media as a space where news production could be conceived as a collective activity to which any social media user could contribute, producing what was labelled as «ambient journalism» (Hermida 2010) or «journalism in dispersion» (Domingo and Le Cam 2014), as citizens and professionals contributed to construct the narration of events.

However, this research on social media and journalism repeated the same biases of previous approaches to participation in the news media: scholars expected that social media would provide a net positive effect to the relationship between journalists and their publics, assumed that social media discussions could reflect general public opinion, and overestimated the power of social media in shaping journalistic practices (Lewis and

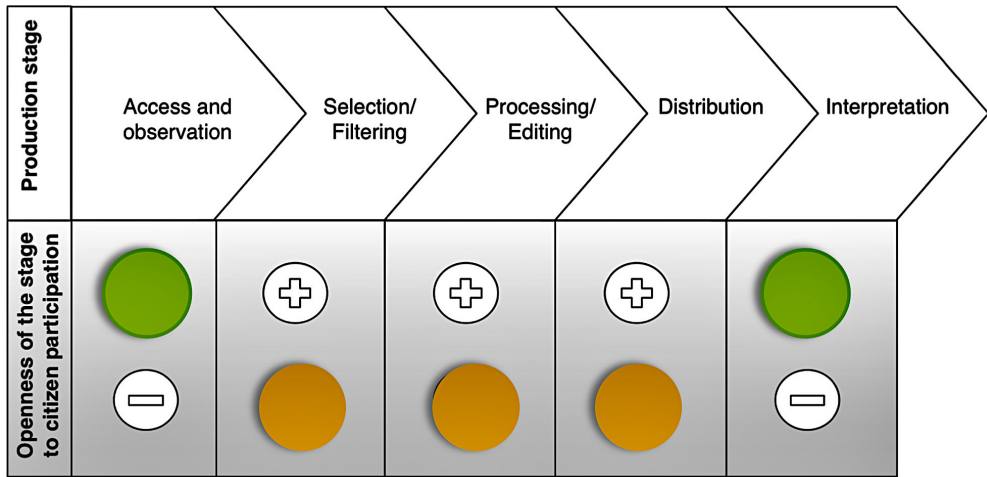


Fig. 1. Audience participation in the news production process: green indicates the phases where online newspapers in 2008 offered more opportunities for citizen input, orange those where it was not common  
Source: Singer *et al.* 2011



Fig. 2. Front pages of *Time* magazine. The change in tone in nine years is telling of the evolution of perceptions in journalism studies as well  
Source: *Time* magazine

Molyneux 2018). Nonetheless, empirical results on social media and journalism have tended to show a lot of resistance among most journalists to engage with their audiences, and a lot of useless and hateful content that goes against all the idealistic images of participation fostering democracy that were taken for granted not only by researchers, but also by a lot of professional journalists (Fig. 2).

In recent years, research on social media and journalism has explored more openly what Quandt (2018) conceptualised as «dark participation»: the rise of fake news, plot theories, online harassment. Researchers started to acknowledge the fact that not only most citizens did not want to participate in public discussions about the news, but those contributing content online did not have an altruistic motivation. Participation is often strategic, tactical, or pure evil, made to manipulate, influence or disrupt citizen engagement in democracy. Research focused on the role of social media platforms in fostering these negative dynamics in the public sphere, and concepts such as filter bubbles and echo chambers tried to capture the polarisation dominating the political arena in many countries. Quandt (2018) warned that as researchers we should not swing to the opposite end of our initial optimism with the internet, and proposed that «a future agenda for the research on participation must accept and include both perspectives, light and dark, and it needs to offer clearer benchmarks on the societal relevance of both phenomena and everything in between». The work of Bruns (2019) shows how it is possible to provide a nuanced analysis of the effects social media on the diversity of perspectives about news received by citizens. We cannot deny that the internet is being used to manipulate and harass, but empirical evidence shows that filter bubbles are not as isolating as initially assumed.

Researchers have addressed this more nuanced understanding of audience participation by looking at what the public does beyond explicit «participation». Studies on «audience engagement» have tended to focus on measuring quantitative indicators (clicks, attention span), but there are many things that cannot be captured with metrics, it is hard to know if users really *feel* engaged (Fig. 3). Steensen, Ferrer-Conill and Peters (2020) suggest that researching engagement requires to operationalise emotion, question normative assumptions and include contextual sensitivity to space and time in order to make sense of what citizens do with the news. Gajardo and Meijer (2022) proposed a model that would integrate the diversity of approaches for a comprehensive understanding of audience engagement, from the normative and professional (habitual) perspectives typical of early studies to the understanding of metrics (spatio-temporal) and feelings (embodied) to include the perspective of news users (Fig. 4).

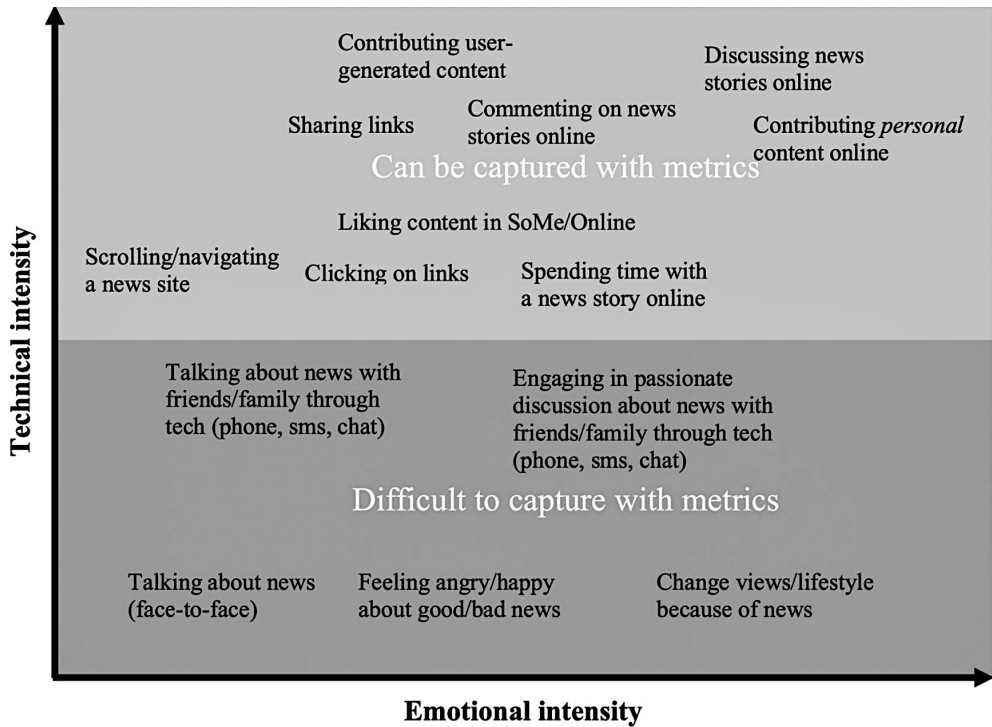


Fig. 3. Elements of audience engagement  
Source: Steensen, Ferrer-Conill and Peters 2020

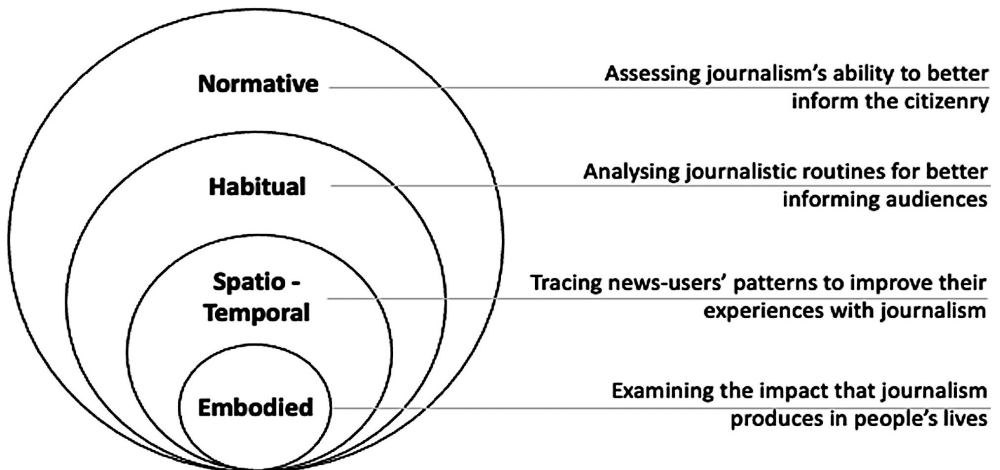
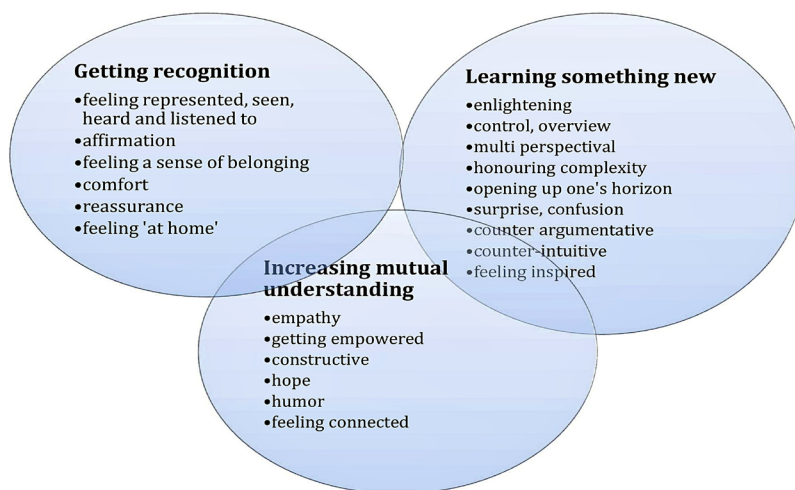


Fig. 4. A dynamic model for the analysis of audience engagement  
Source: Gajardo and Meijer 2022

This emphasis on the audience perspective has been at the core of the work of Costera Meijer (Meijer 2022) through the concept of «valuable journalism». Instead of taking as starting point the normative concept of quality journalism, defined by the professionals, she encourages researchers to try to understand if a news experience is meaningful for the citizens, which would determine how engaged they feel with journalism. Through her empirical work, Costera Meijer identifies the reasons that lead audiences to connect with journalism, from learning something new to getting recognition and increasing mutual understanding (Fig. 5). This approach may seem far detached from the initial focus of journalism studies on «audience participation», but it actually helps to put it in context without the media-centric normative assumptions of early studies.



**Fig. 5.** Reasons that make journalism valuable for the audience  
Source: Meijer 2022

From the perspective of journalists, there is also room for new empirical approaches, focusing on exploring how the audience is taken into account by professionals when doing their work. Analysing this attentiveness of journalists towards the citizens without the pressure of an expectation for active audience participation allows the researchers to identify new roles and tasks in the newsroom (Gajardo, Meijer and Domingo 2021): observer (paying attention to the metrics to know what works and what does not in attracting audience's attention on social media), listener (interacting with the public online and offline to understand what they need), and connector (to enter into a dialogue with the public understood as a community, make them feel represented). Beyond dark participation on social media, there is space for the journalists to care for their audience, making sure that they have a valuable news experience.

As researchers and citizens, it is legitimate to have normative aspirations for journalism, and focus our research on initiatives that foster civic participation and create (online) public spaces that are protected from disinformation and harassment. We can offer critical empirical studies that explain what works and what does not to engage citizens with journalism and create the conditions for meaningful participation. In order to do that, we need to at least keep three principles in mind to guide our research:

1. A constructivist approach to deconstruct the power of algorithms: we need to open the black box of social media platforms in our research, both the technical one (how do their algorithms shape public debate and journalism) and the socio-economic. They are very different from media organisations, which often combine a public service and a business rationale. Does Facebook really want to contribute to a healthier democracy? They defend freedom of speech to escape legal control, not necessarily because they believe it will make democracy better.
2. Putting normative values explicitly at the centre of the studies: we should not take for granted the values and principles guiding the actions of journalists and citizens in their interactions. Why do people do what they do when producing, consuming and engaging with news? We should put explicit questions about their motivations and their reasons. We should also be explicit about our own values as researchers, and the changes that we wish to contribute to, explain what kind of society we want to help build with our work.
3. Do not forget the social context of social media: there have always been power inequalities in society, and social media do not erase them. Political and economic dynamics are important in any analysis. Does social media help journalism find a sustainable business model or has it become dependent of platforms? Social media platforms connect *social* networks beyond the internet, and therefore we need to do empirical work beyond them and explore how is social media embedded in everyday life.

In order to deploy such a research agenda, we need to pay attention to the methodological choices we take, and opt for the approaches that would support these principles. The analysis of online spaces makes it very tempting to use digital tools for the quantitative analysis of big data corpuses. We may learn a lot from millions of tweets, but we should not forget to have a critical perspective on the construction of big data sets: what are the constraints the platform imposes in the gathering process, how can our own choices shape the results. Complementing quantitative approaches with qualitative old-fashioned methods like interviews and ethnographic observation (online and offline) is an important antidote to avoid jumping into conclusions that lose perspective of the contexts and the reasons of news uses and audience participation. And for many research questions, qualitative approaches will be the only ones that can offer meaningful data.

Research designs combining audience and journalist perspectives would also allow to overcome the limitations of focusing on one of the sides of the story. Thinking of journalism and social media as spaces of relationships will encourage us to have a complex understanding of the way news still play a central role in contemporary societies.

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