# Forcing the gates of the fortress: the growing impact of public participation in Flemish newsrooms

**Jeroen De Keyser & Karin Raeymaeckers** [1]

ABSTRACT

Traditional mass media have a history of being one-way transmitters of information, closed fortresses regarding the input of the public. Although some cautious attempts to give a voice to this public can be demonstrated in some media (e.g. by introducing a letters to the editor section), these have been proven to be insufficient today. One major change is the explosion of free news content on the internet, often generated by citizens outside of the traditional news flow.

At the beginning, traditional media unanimously opposed to any form of "citizen journalism", but their attitudes start shifting. More and more media are experimenting nowadays, offering users online tools to participate in some parts of the professional news process. Although the professional journalists ultimately remain in control, the experiments can be considered free content generating mechanisms, helping to reduce costs related to the process of newsgathering.

In the presentation, results of recent research in Flemish news rooms will be presented, with respect to the different potential activity levels of the public.

## INTRODUCTION

The news media have been confronted with an enormous amount of societal, economical and technological changes in the past decade, especially given the emergence of citizen journalism and participatory journalism putting pressure upon the traditional "we write, you read" format. This paper gives an overview of how that change has occurred, how the media responded to it and to which degree it affects the current Flemish media market.

Participatory journalism in this text is analysed from a top-down media perspective starting from the definition of Joyce Nip: "*participatory journalism takes the form of the news users generating content, more or less independently of the professionals, whereas the professionals generate some other content, and also produce, publish and market the whole news product. User contribution is solicited within a frame designed by the professionals*" (2006, p 217).

Therefore we don't consider *participatory journalism* as a synonym for *citizen journalism*, a format that implies some kind of spontaneous bottom-up movement in which the traditional media don't play a part of great importance (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Garcelon, 2006; Gillmor, 2004; Nip, 2006). We neither consider it equal to *civic journalism*, a concept that is not primarily inspired journalistically. Civic journalism aims at repairing some democratic flaws in the U.S. (Merritt, 1998; Rosen, 1999a, 1999b) by strengthening the ties with the public (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Merrill, Gade & Blevens, 2001), and by teaching the public how to act as citizens (Chaffee & McDevitt, 1999; Merritt, 1995; Schaffer, 1997). With user-generated content (UGC), we indicate the sum of participatory journalism and citizen journalism.

We'll first give a short historical overview of the media's level of openness towards their public. Secondly we discuss the changes of the past decade, the reasons why they occurred and the reaction patterns of the traditional media. We propose a basic model to classify the level of the public's access into different media and we test this model against the Flemish media market.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**A history of being closed fortresses**

Throughout the 20th century, traditional media organizations were one-way information transmitters (Gans, 1979; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987). Still in the 21st, they are characterized as largely top-down defined information models that have moulded moulded their working atmospheres into closed fortresses regarding user input. In such a context, it may come as no surprise that journalists only use the most authoritative sources available (Ericson et al., 1987; Soloski, 1989; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004), and neglect the possible value of other information.

The tiny entrance of the public in traditional newsrooms is the letters-to-the-editor mailbox (Davis & Rarick, 1964; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989; Lander, 1972; Schultz, 2000, Raeymaeckers, 2005). This letters-to-the-editor section, however, is not a genuine forum for interactive communication, "*unless journalists or other readers (in subsequent letters) respond to the initial communication*" (Schultz, 1999). Some studies have shown that other reasons for publishing letters-to-the-editor might be equally or even more important than mere fostering of public debate. Both Bromley (1998) and Raeymaeckers (2005) consider the marketing aspect of the letters sections as an important motivational element. It is striking, though, that even in the most "audience flavoured" of all newspaper sections, one of the selection criteria remains the authority of the letter writer (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002).

New technologies haven't fundamentally changed this situation, although more audience input has become possible through feedback mechanisms such as the telephone or a live audience in the past (Moe, 2008). Dupre & Mackey (2002) compared traditional letters-to-the-editor to phone-mails to the editor, and concluded that the latter facilitated the input of less literate citizens. They notice, however, that the journalists were more reluctant to the latter because those "*[p]hone-mail columns require[d] extra work and vigilance on the[ir] part*" (p 146). Domingo (2008) notices a sped-up writing and sending process while comparing old-fashioned letters-to-the-editor to their electronic counterparts.

**Evolutions in the last few years**

The media landscape has changed a lot in the past decade. Three evolutions merit special attention in the context of this paper. First, the rise of free news content. Second, the emergence of citizen journalism. Third, the combination of plummeting readership figures for traditional media.

The traditional media have to cope with increasing competition from free news content, both offline and online. In many countries in the offline Western world, commuters in metropolitan areas have access to free dailies; a continuously growing media market (Bakker, 2002). In the online world, too, choice for free news sources is ever growing thanks to the introduction of weblog and wiki software. Some are professionally maintained by internet access providers (Dahlberg, 2005; van der Wurff, 2005) or internet service providers such as *Yahoo!* or *Google* (Carlson, 2007). Other news outlets are bottom-up driven by amateur newsmakers, individually or collectively (Garcelon, 2006; Platon & Deuze, 2003; Bruns, 2006). To be journalistically successful, the mere introduction of software applications is insufficient; it is to be linked with an idealistic philosophical drive pushing the public into a more journalist role model (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Deuze, 2004; Gillmor, 2004). Thus, Garcelon notices while studying *Indymedia*, "*Internet challenges both broadcast media and centralized control of news*" (2006, p 56).

The declining circulation figures of traditional media come as an extra challenge (van der Wurff, 2005; Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger, 2007). Jane Singer concludes that in such a media environment "*journalists see their role as gatekeepers changing as their audience becomes simultaneously easier than ever to reach and harder than ever to hold*" (1997, p 74).

These economic pressures force traditional media to protect their profit margins (Lowrey & Mackay, 2008). Singer (2007) connects these economic pressures (together with some other factors) to a higher awareness of professional accountability amongst journalists.

The traditional media organizations' reacted twofold. In the first wave they took the hedgehog position, in the second wave they turned to various offensive strategies.

**The first response: defence**

Traditional media firms at first neglected the new trends on the information market and traditional newsroom practices (such as gatekeeping processes) were translated into the new internet environment (Boczkowski, 2004). Domingo (2008, p 685) explains this defensive reaction as a policy to maintain power and to suppress "*the potentially dangerous effects of a radical innovation*". The traditional news media acted as closed fortresses neglecting the new online reality while evolving into a paper-*and*-bytes model (Fortunati, 2005, p 30). The newspapers' site served "*as a display window*", a nearly identical copy of the offline newspapers. Only in a second stage of development the online newspapers developed their own strengths. This type of reactive strategy did not stop the more pro-active new players in the media field to attract a part of the public (Lehman-Wilzig & Cohen-Avigdor, 2004).

In an effort to counter the emerging bottom-up news initiatives traditional media started to stress the importance of traditional journalistic norms and ethics, thus implicitly suggesting that the new user initiatives lacked those (Lowrey, 2006; Lowrey & Mackay, 2008; Singer, 2007). As a result, also journalists working for the online version of their newspaper could not sufficiently innovate their working practices (Boczkowski, 2004; Chung, 2007); one could suggest that they left their fortresses with their harnesses on. Scholars have noticed that some journalists indeed like to add UGC to their reporting, but only if they can have the last word; a replication of the traditional gatekeeping practices (Lowrey & Mackay, 2008; Domingo, Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer & Vujnovic, 2008). Journalists also seem to prefer certain types of user input, especially 'soft news' (Örnebring, 2007; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008).

The logic that journalism will survive UGC by belittling the latter may only partly make sense, though. On the one hand we tend to agree with those who are saying that traditional media will guide us through information overflow (O'Sullivan, 2007; Schultz, 2000; Singer, 1997). On the other hand we go along with scholars who notice that citizen initiatives such as *Indymedia* do have intrinsic value because they "*generate widespread awareness of their existence, and occasionally break or highlight stories that then feature in the content of major news media services*" (Hutchins, 2007, p 213).

**The second response: offence**

The negative trend on the circulation figures of traditional news media and the rise of new citizen media are constantly intensifying competition, forcing increased readiness to implement new technologies (Lowrey, 2006; Lowrey & Mackay, 2008; Marjoribanks, 2000; Ursell, 2001). It is a "*fear-driven defensive innovation culture*" (Nguyen 2008, p 92) and not a full-fledged use of the available technology, changing merely some aspects of delivering the news, such as the shape or the timing (O'Sullivan, 2005). It seems that citizen journalism hasn't fundamentally undermined the position of the traditional news providers (Bivens, 2008). Moreover, the popularity of some citizen journalism technologies seems to be fading (e.g. in Germany: Fisch & Gscheide, 2008), and they don't attract as many contributors as once was hoped for (Moe, 2008). McChesney (referred to in: Chung, 2007, p 44) even argues that "*only a few major online media providers have challenged existing media systems*".

But traditional news media learned that a more proactive strategy is necessary to maintain this position (Oriela PR Network, 2008; Thurman, 2008). Lehman-Wilzig & Cohen-Avigdor (2004, p 718) refer to this in a positive way, since "*the older medium has the advantage of knowing what its audience wants*".

The more offensive (proactive) strategy is necessary to keep audience shares although it changes elements in the traditional gatekeeping processes. Bruns (2005) suggests therefore a model of gate*watching* which allows readers to generate content while journalists keep in control at the output side of the information generating process. This is important, as journalists consider it a necessity to be able to moderate the user input (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008). It may also be inevitable in order to retain the perceived authority of the traditional media (Hutchins, 2007).

Secondly participatory technologies can offer opportunities for cost management of wages (van der Wurff, 2005), for technical support (Ursell, 2001), or for newsroom management (Cottle & Ashton, 1999). Participatory technologies can also cut costs using user input as a free news source. User input could counter the problem that many online versions of traditional media are still failing to produce profits (Dahlberg, 2005).

Some scholars mention possibilities to downsize the (online) staff (Deuze, 2004). Other researchers are stressing the technological investments (Chung, 2007) and the high technical costs (Thurman, 2008; Nguyen, 2008). But even if the participatory technologies do not directly reduce costs, they still offer indirect competitive advantages due to increased interactivity (Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger, 2007) and a frequently visited website can serve as promotion for the paper version of the same title (Singer, 1997).

**Levels of forcing the gates**

We propose three levels at which traditional media can open their gates for the audiences. Mark Deuze (2001, 2003) organizes news sites into four clusters depending on their levels of content connectivity and participatory communication. Our model takes into account technology related to the public's access. We want to emphasise that the proposed model can take on various forms in the future; not every news medium will (or should) end up granting top level access for its public. Also, we don't imply that top level access automatically is more useful than limited access for the public.

The *limited access level*, an extension of the defence model, gives readers opportunities for expression while the core of the news making process remains in the newsroom. This provides some restricted feedback opportunities (e.g. mentioning e-mail addresses) (Hendrickson, 2006), allows commentaries (Domingo, 2008; Outing, 2005), or adds polling instruments to the website (Schultz, 1999). Limited access might also use more advanced technologies, although active use of it is limited to newsroom staff (e.g. j-blogs) (Singer, 2005; Robinson, 2006). When J-blogs allow user comments, they could be used as yet another way of monitored citizen participation (Lowrey & Mackay, 2008; Singer, 2005). This could be extended to citizen journalism outside the traditional media sites as well; e.g. external blogs as information sources (Bivens, 2008; Lowrey, 2006; Singer, 2007). Traditional media thus guide the public through the abundant information on the World Wide Web (Moe, 2008; Singer, 2007).

The *moderate access level* grants users input possibilities, although visibly isolated from the professional content; e.g. through a special UGC handling system to which users can send texts or graphics (Bivens, 2008). Other examples are selected citizens maintaining a weblog on the news website (Lowrey, 2006). Outing (2005) suggests open-source reporting where users can contribute to an article in progress. In case of *top level access* for the public, traditional media fully encourage the audience to participate, thus demolishing the gates of the fortress, allowing anyone to contribute to the main product (and not, as mentioned before, to a secondary derivate). This can be with or without supervision of professional journalists. Gillmor (2004) mentions some examples, though he chiefly defends an important role for professional journalists.

## RESEARCH

### Method

Our research[2] is based on the comparative model of Domingo, Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer and Vujnovic (2008) although some critical reflexions remain. We notice that the researchers compared participatory technologies in different countries, without taking into account the distinctive journalistic (and political) cultures. Secondly, the comparison disregards the impact of the different market sizes of the studied countries, nor does it consider the various levels of societal acceptance of modern technologies. We adapt the method for our research in a local media market (Flanders) and we extend the media range to three clusters: websites of print media, audiovisual media and citizen media[3]. The sites were analysed in from February till April 2008 by a team of trained coders. Every website was separately analysed by at least two different persons, thus ensuring intercoder reliability (the mutually independent coder couples agreed in 98% of the cases).

### Results

The print media cluster is strikingly different for magazines and newspapers. The research indicates that news *magazines* are not keen on public participation. Only one magazine in our sample allows for citizen input, presumably just because (a) the input remains highly controllable (e.g. story ideas or photos) and (b) it stands apart from the real journalistic content (e.g. by allowing funny stories to be posted on a dedicated site section). News magazines do offer commenting modules underneath stories or j-blog posts, polls or discussion boards. They don't push this to the boundary though, for they do not stimulate journalists to use that kind of input. The results are more diverse for the newspaper segment. The overall picture indicates that newspapers offer few access possibilities for the public. There is a big difference, though, between the newspaper brands in Flanders. Some are eager to experiment with participatory technologies, e.g. by publishing citizen stories or hosting selected citizen blogs. Those innovating publishers present themselves as more open to user commentaries, both in-site (e.g. by publishing user comments in the actual newspaper) and off-site (e.g. by comment trackbacking). It is worth noting that De Persgroep, the largest newspaper groups with a very profitable selling position is situated on the other side of the spectrum, reluctant to experiments of this kind; both the possibilities for input (e.g. its popular newspaper's content submitting tool is well hidden on the site) and for commenting (e.g. restricted comments underneath online articles or polls) are limited.

The news website of the audiovisual medium in our research sketches a different picture. No participatory technologies are deployed whatsoever, except for an occasional poll and j-blogs offering readers the possibility to comment. These comments aren't moderated, though; the even aren't read by the bloggers. Therefore, it is obvious that the Flemish broadcast media cluster restricts citizen participation to the minimum, not deploying the available technologies or even not offering a true news website at all.

The third cluster of citizen media offers the highest degree of participatory possibilities: every stage of the news production process is controlled by non-professional journalists. But some remarks remain: Flemish citizen media don't provide every participatory technology available (e.g. we only noted one poll and no discussion boards or systems for influencing story hierarchy). Secondly, citizen news websites all restrict the number of active contributors. Some use specific selection procedures to screen the journalistic quality and standards of every would-be participant. Others prefer to invite contributors themselves. This indicates that citizen media are to some extent replicating the closed fortresses approach of the traditional news media although the overall picture shows that they welcome participation (e.g. asking to submit images or story ideas, or offering the possibility to comment on articles). *HasseltLokaal* is a good example, offering citizens multiple chances to participate. This is a striking example since the brand initially founded by a traditional newspaper. This reflects the increasing readiness of some print media to try out participatory technologies in a type of life laboratory. The inattentive visitor of *HasseltLokaal*, however, wouldn't notice its traditional media roots.

**Discussion & conclusion**

The results of our research in the Flemish media world are quite surprising. One could expect the print media to be rather conservative concerning audience output. The results of our monitoring analysis demonstrate that this largely counts for some among them, but that other print media start getting the "idealistic philosophical drive" we mentioned before. We found no indications that they might be using the public as a free content generating source, although the wide availability of commenting opportunities could indicate a commercially motivated bonding strategy. The online counterparts of the traditional print media certainly aren't full-fledged providers of participatory technologies (yet), but the fact that some are truly experimenting in that sphere is a striking observation.

Contrarily, since the broadcast media are traditionally faster adopters of novelties, one could expect them to offer participatory technologies more readily. The analysis of the monitoring research contradicts this hypothesis. The commercial Flemish broadcaster has no news website (except for minor use). The public Flemish broadcaster has a well updated and informative website but clearly feels no need to involve its public more closely through participatory technologies. This is remarkable, for one could expect a public broadcaster to play an important role exploring the newest technological possibilities of the democratic society.

The most surprising result came out of the monitoring of citizen media initiatives. Though they are rooted in technology and bottom-up oriented by definition, they clearly don't offer their publics the largest possible range of tools to participate in the news production process. While producing the news, they even seem to replicate the traditional approach of being closed fortresses, restricting the public's access to the making of the final news product.

Our research that monitored a large selection of possible media formats and media brands in Flanders did not reveal even one example of top access for the public. On the other hand, every medium offers its public at least a limited level of access, although this was sometimes restricted to the minimal level (e.g. a poll). Except for those poll-elements, some media were still chiefly closed fortresses. We also found some examples of moderate access possibilities, especially among some print media websites. Some citizen news websites, too, offered this level of access, although not as many as could be expected.

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