

# Participation as a guarantor of journalistic quality standards

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Journalism continues to play an important role in shaping society, especially in an era marked by the global pandemic of COVID-19, continuing economic crises and geopolitical transformation resulting from conflicts such as those in Russia and Ukraine. However, the role of this profession as a mediator may have been weakened, especially as it has become increasingly fragmented, polarised and with multiple sources of moral authority. In this hybrid scenario, different factors coexist, such as the crisis of media mediation, segmented audiences, questioning of business models, and increasing public distrust of the media as a guarantor of quality information.

Currently, the journalistic profession is in a stage of reconceptualisation where it hybridises and confuses its informative exercise in a supposedly democratic coexistence with aspects more related to economic and business interests in a media “Super League” marked by the attention economy (Wu, 2020). According to the Annual Report on the Journalism Profession in Spain (APM, 2020) and through a professional survey of journalists, a substantial change can be seen in the consideration of communication work in relation to journalistic work. Thus, those who affirm that communication is not journalism assert that it does not try to inform about current affairs, but rather in terms of the company’s objectives. For those who consider it journalism, the main reason is that in both cases the objective is to communicate certain content to third parties.

This chapter aims to show how the current state of journalism in the perception of its practices is conditioned by the way in which different audiences interact with the information content. In this way, we aim to offer an approach to the situation of contemporary journalism, marked by a crisis of mediation that goes beyond the consequences of disinformation and information disorders. To do so, we will review the most recent academic literature, a review that is inevitably influenced by the selection criteria and authors’ judgements.

### What do we talk about when we refer to the quality of the content?

When we refer to the term “quality”, we touch on the different properties inherent to a certain object or idea and which make it possible to generate a certain judgement about its effectiveness. The characteristics of what is observed, on the one hand, as well as the impact it has on the person who assesses it, must therefore be taken into account.

News media quality is a socially constructed argument, especially because of its political implications. When we talk about quality journalistic content, we refer to a concept that is complex to define, operationalise and measure. In a first approach, we can understand quality journalism as a process of filtering, contrasting, as well as an accurate writing that facilitates citizen knowledge about different topics related to current affairs. According to Reuters (2017), the definition of quality news is distributed in four key attributes: accuracy and reliability, helping with understanding complex issues, communicating strong viewpoints and opinions, and providing amusing and entertaining content.

However, public perception plays a determining role in the very definition of news media quality or quality journalism. Mistrust also plays an increasing and determining role in the conception of these concepts. According to the Digital News Report 2022 (Reuters, 2022), trust in the news has fallen in almost half the countries in their survey, and risen in just seven, partly reversing the gains made at the height of the Coronavirus pandemic. Thus, it continues to register one of the lowest levels in the last five years (Reuters, 2020). Moreover, Spain is among the Western European countries with the lowest levels of trust in the media (Pew Research Center, 2018). All this requires a more detailed reading if we take into account “the persisting ‘trust gap’ between traditional and online media. Trust in social networks has constantly declined, reaching its lowest since it was first measured in 2014” (EBU, 2021). In this sense, it is relevant to highlight aspects such as the use of TikTok to get information has increased from 3% in 2020 to 15% in 2022, especially in Latin America, Asia, Africa, the United States and Northern Europe (Reuters, 2022).

The attempt to define quality in journalism is not exactly new (Bogart, 2004). We understand news media quality as “a dynamic, contingent, and contested construct” (Bachmann *et al.*, 2021). In this sense, to speak about it implies the consideration of different approaches that affect the concept itself, such as the case of news pluralism, the more classic distinction between hard and soft news or media ownership, for example. As Lacy and Rosentiel (2015) explain, “the meaning of the term quality journalism will vary from individual to individual, but because of socialization, meanings are more likely to be shared by group members who have

some common experience” (2015, p. 10). Thus, the authors explain the difference between the definition of this concept from the academic, professional point of view, but also from the individual’s perception of consumption, as well as their interests and needs. Given the circumstances, this paper aims to approach quality journalism from the point of view of its relationship with the audience and their involvement in the journalistic process.

Some authors have approached “good journalism” from a more primary perspective in terms of its function as a contribution to an informed society and guardians of the public’s interests. In this sense, Gómez Mompert (2001) highlighted four broad general sections:

- Ethical and deontological issues.
- Sources and documentation for information.
- News processing and development (Nguyen, 2012).
- Relationship with public opinion.

This same author (2009) already mentioned a denaturalisation of journalism in relation to how the ownership of journalistic companies has passed into the hands of capitalist companies that speculate with the aim of pursuing commercial interests at a global level. More recently, other studies have proposed an approach to the term from different positions (Larrondo-Ureta *et al.*, 2014), differentiating the quality of journalism according to hypertextuality and website parameters such as information access, SEO and accessibility. In other cases, the confrontation of both perspectives has been highlighted: “The press versus the public” (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013).

The act of informing oneself is intrinsically related to the context in which the media is situated. Recent studies have been able to detect, for example, how news consumption and media coverage during the COVID-19 confinement in Spain has been perceived as over-informed, ideologically biased and sensationalist (Masip *et al.*, 2020). This audience perception of media practice during the pandemic, as well as declining trust in the media, has also been reflected in other countries such as Belgium and Hungary (Media Councils in the Digital Age, 2021).

Therefore, the audience’s perception of the journalistic practice is also a value to be taken into account when addressing quality standards of journalistic content. Some studies have already shown some findings suggesting that journalists and citizens could cooperate perfectly to ensure a future for high-quality journalism (Van der Wurff & Schoenback, 2014).

The citizen informs himself in order to satisfy the different inputs they expect from the media. This is especially marked by a variety of emotions

related to the need to share knowledge, to have fun, or even to act as an information gatekeeper and alert other friends or family members. In this regard, it is imperative to take into account the digital transformation of the news industry, as well as how this may have impacted the news media quality (Martens *et al.*, 2018).

Thus, this meaning of news media quality or quality journalistic content also enters into the social media environment. There is a growing influence of online platforms in the media industry. This translates into a greater or lesser investment in the resources dedicated to the different possibilities offered by each of the existing social networks, such as the personalisation or combination of content (De Corniere & Sarvary, 2022). Similarly, it is also important to consider the user-generated content quality in the digital space (Agichtein *et al.*, 2008).

In other words, it is not possible to understand or study the media itself. That is, they are part of an environment that is especially characterised by participation and interaction with all kinds of audiences. In this sense, citizens become an indisputable element for the very definition of media. Citizens do not live with the media, but are part of them. It is, therefore, a relationship with the media (Deuze, 2011) where everyone is part of the creation of informative or uninformative content.

### **Interaction with content in the crisis of democracy**

The South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2021) offers an approach to digitalisation and the crisis of democracy in his book “Infocracy”. Han defines the “information regime” as the form of domination in which information and its processing by algorithms, together with artificial intelligence, decisively determine today’s social, economic and political processes. Thus, in the capitalist transformation of information, people, as citizens but also as audience, undergo a mutation and degradation to the conception of data and consumer cattle.

What is the relationship between audience participation or audience interaction with journalistic content in relation to the conception of quality journalism? As Reifova and Svelch (2013) argue in their work with regard to the concept of participation, this chapter aims to delve deeper into its definition, beyond extolling or dismissing its different meanings. Thus, it is necessary “to invest it with meaning-to identify, examine, question, and critique it in its specific contexts” (2013, p. 264).

The concept of interactivity has been defined as polysemic by many authors (Carey, 1997; Godzic, 2010; Kim and Sawhney, 2002; McMillan, 2002; Rafaeli, 1988; Rogers, 1983). Other authors, moreover, highlight

that a determining aspect when approaching this line of research lies in the need not to confuse interactivity with interaction (Bergillos, 2015).

Carpentier (2011) developed the AIP Model (Access, Interaction and Participation) whereby he differentiated between interaction through socio-communicative relationships and participation in the co-decision process. In terms of interaction, Carpentier draws a distinction between the ability to co-produce content as a group or community and the consumption of media in a joint way from the point of view of reception. This leads to an assumed discussion of content in an organisational context that enhances feedback. For this, it is necessary that sender and receiver not only generate a transfer of ideas from one position to the other, but also share the same space in which reflection on their roles and adaptation to new needs and consumption habits are enabled.

### **Social media pseudo-participation**

Bergillos (2015) explains that a reformulation of “participation” is necessary. A concept whose definition does not include different terms that may be detached from the original one. Furthermore, as Carpentier (2008) mentions, when we include the media as facilitators of participation, the analysis becomes more complex.

For this reason, the author proposes the concept of pseudo-participation, given the complexity of its definition and the possibility of falling into a duality. On the one hand, it is positioned in a pessimistic camp, centred on media control, which some authors affirm (Hibberd *et al.*, 2000) and others deny (Andrejevic, 2004) when on the other optimistic side is based on the idea of citizen empowerment (Toffler, 1980; Bruns, 2009; Fumero & Roca, 2007; Jenkins, 1992).

In this context, it is worth mentioning the controversy that has arisen regarding the possible intentions of the media in terms of the participatory services they offer. Here it is relevant to differentiate between the idea of enhancing activism or executing practices with a more mercantile logic (García-Avilés, 2010; Meso-Ayerdi, 2013). It is here that the question arises as to whether the media “harness” participation rather than “trigger” participation. González and Ortells (2012) explain that the real question is not so much whether the participation tools available to the citizen can replace the media or the journalist’s own work, but whether they can be integrated into daily practice and serve to generate an environment of greater connection between the parties.

Therefore, there is confusion in the meaning of the quality of the content generated by the media in social networks in terms of their relation-

ship with audiences through participatory processes and interaction. As Bergillos rightly points out, “the logics of social networks do not replace those of traditional media, but rather both are mixed in a new context where it is increasingly complex to interpret the differences between the commercial and the political or the private and the public” (2015, p. 71).

Traditionally, the media have used social networks, in some way, to continue controlling communication, establish the agenda setting and not to lose their position as broadcasters. This coincides with what several authors (Greer & Ferguson, 2011; Herrera-Damas & Hermida, 2014) have described as a use of Twitter focused on promoting content and the concept of “Tweeting but not talking”. In addition, other studies talk about the normalization of Twitter in terms of its use and writing routines. These practices constitute the typical *modus operandi* in which social media functions as a source of information, offering opinions, gathering news, reporting and directing traffic to websites (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018; Lasorsa *et al.*, 2012; Hermida, 2010).

However, it is also true that the media have been forced to change their practices in terms of their relationship with their audiences through social networks. A recent example is Relevo (May 2022), the new media outlet focused on sports information belonging to the Spanish mass media group Vocento. This new digital media outlet appears with a supposedly clear commitment to image and audiovisual content. At the same time, it will prioritise the use of social networks other than Twitter, such as Instagram, TikTok and Twitch. Relevo’s presentation strategy, at the end of May, consisted of starting to disseminate news and exclusives via the social networks, leaving the launch of the medium’s website for a later date.

This is connected to what is described in studies such as Vu (2014), where the variation in the professional routines of editors in the triangulation of journalistic value, economic value and editorial decision is manifested.

In one way or another, the media is being forced to change their practices for a connection with the audience that they are not able or interested in managing or controlling. They are now trying to go where new platforms such as Twitch are, reinventing themselves with supposedly renewed bridges that continue to propose interaction with products or services, to the detriment of a community functioning capable of acting independently.

The media build loyalty through an ongoing participatory and informative process. Viewers and users of social networks cannot be part of the dynamics of the media if they do not immerse themselves in the media practices. They are therefore in what has been explained as a kind of ham-

ster wheel paradox (Puertas-Graell & Masip, 2021). Participation in social networks places the audience inside the hamster wheel. Viral content (trending topics), information and entertainment are used to attract users, then, due to the interactive nature of social media, the users stay in the wheel and keep it moving. However, according to the "transfer" logic, users now feel that they are not constrained by the hamster wheel, since they can leave the environment of that single screen in exchange for the multiplicity of other screens (multiple wheel).

### **What do we mean by digital news interaction?**

Today's journalism, which has undergone technological transformations, has difficulty in responding to the needs of users to receive news. For this reason, digital journalism, not to lose its audience, has started to keep up with current technological developments because of users' requests of interaction. Through this, users have become part of the news production processes in digital journalism and they affect the course of the transformation of journalism.

Technological advancements in the last decade led journalistic practices to include new technologies to the news in order to increase quality and interaction. Users have started to interact with digital news more deeply and become "producers" as Bruns (2008) explained as a combination of the terms "producer" and "user" which shows how the users' role has evolved to include a potential aspect of production (Kammer, 2013). Through the technological influence in journalism, the public has become the creator and the consumer at the same time because users are encouraged to participate in the digital media by creating and contributing their own material (Guallar, 2007) specifically by uploading media, providing eyewitness reports, and leaving comments on news websites and social media, giving the story a new perspective (Fletcher & Park, 2017).

Another aspect that increases user interaction is defined by Chen and Corkindale (2008) as the combination of usability and enjoyability through the technological advancements used in journalism such as "multimedia content, interactivity, hypertextual interface" (O'Brien, 2011). People may choose and manage the information they wish to take because of the interactivity in digital journalism, which is known as "personalization". Bradshaw (2011) uses "geographical personalization" as an example of personalization. Users can, for example, give the website the relevant personal information and receive information about that location. Furthermore, by filling out the form of interests, users can only be directed to stories that are relevant to them, with no distractions. This allows enterprises to collect more information about users and identify

them (Vural, 2021). This type of interaction can be supported by Macmillan's definition of interaction. According to Macmillan there are 3 types of interaction as "human-to-human", "human-to-computer" and "human-to-content" which includes technological advancements and the platform as the technical features and user perceptions, beliefs as psychological aspects. Bradshaw's explanation of personalization can be defined with the human-to-content interaction in the light of the normative dimension of the user engagement which refers to "finding media texts or topics relevant and meaningful" (Steensen *et al.*, 2020). To sum up, we can summarise the types of interaction with the argument of Ksiazek *et al.* (2016) as "to act, interact, and co-create".

### Factors that shape news interaction

The relation between digital news interaction and news consumption habits is undeniable. Changes in news consumption and the effects that shape news consumption are influenced by four individual factors as Sang explained (2020). These factors are "demographic differences", "frequency of news access", "specific interests", and "trust in news". News consumption and interaction are affected by the age, gender, education level which also includes political alignment and beliefs. Also Reuters Digital News Report (Reuters, 2022) points that a significant proportion of young and relatively less educated people say they avoid the news because it may be difficult to follow or understand which can be linked with the demographic differences that shape news interaction. Frequency of news access is also linked with demographic differences and the access level of digital news. Demographic differences and frequency of news access can be also linked with Macmillan's "spatio temporal" dimension of audience engagement (Steensen *et al.*, 2020). Users who are consuming digital news regularly have a higher level of interaction and are more likely to share and comment on news. Online interactive elements like direct feedback, comments, sharing options allow users to participate more, implying a deeper level of engagement with the information (Ksiazek *et al.*, 2016).

Specific interests are also a key factor in interaction. When users are more interested in the topic of the news, they spend more time and interact with the news. Chu *et al.*, explained the significance of specific interests as: "If there is no personal interest, even the best design may be unable to impact the reader's attention and recall of information" (2009). According to Tenenboim and Cohen (2015), news articles in some certain content drive more interaction than others without the specific interest of the user. These certain contents are described as emotional, political and controversial topics.



Level of trust in news has been decreasing each year. Based on the Digital News Report (Reuters, 2022), trust in news decreased in almost half of the countries and increased in only seven among the participating countries in the research. The report also points to the decreased interest in news. To increase this, while some organisations seek to increase the quality of news, others produce news that is simpler, more understandable and easy to consume to gain more interaction with fake news and click-bait news. From this point of view, the relation between news interaction and trust in news is easily seen as a significant point to discuss digital news interaction. Users who have a low trust in the news media are more likely to share or remark on it online. They also favour non-mainstream news sources such as social media outlets, blogs, and digital native sources over traditional news sources. Users with low levels of trust are more likely to interact with news through sharing and commenting options to “express their disapproval of news coverage”. In addition, the motivation behind commenting and sharing is defined as ‘a desire to voice opinions on matters of public concern, exchange information, vent, interact socially, enjoy a discussion, empower themselves as citizens, and influence others’ (Fletcher & Park, 2017).

### **The current state of digital news and its interaction level with the audience**

When we say digital news, we mainly refer to the quality content which is reliable, communicative and amusing (Reuters, 2017). Through technological advancements, digital journalism entered the social media environment as well. This, undoubtedly, affected journalistic practices and user-generated content came into prominence. In this sense, users started to interact more with the news and also became a significant part of it as called “producers” in the literature. However, Carpentier (2011) explained the key necessity of this integration as the reflection on their roles and adaptability to new requirements and consumption patterns, sender and receiver must not only generate a transfer of ideas from one position to the other but also share the same place.

Today, journalism practices actively use the news gathering, reporting and traffic providing features of social media for interaction. However, it is also true that the media has been compelled to alter the ways in which they interact with their users on social media as we see the examples of many audiovisual journalistic content at Twitter, TikTok and Twitch. So, how do these audiovisual contents affect the interaction with users? Through digital news on online platforms, users can choose the content they would like to receive and consume. To achieve this, journalistic con-

tents offer hypertextuality and multimedia content on online platforms and social media environments to interact more with the users. In other words, personalization is the key element to increase interaction.

The literature also argues the media trust and its effects on news interaction. Previous research proves the decreasing interest and trust in news. To increase this, some organisations started to create fast consumable, easily-reading and fake news, despite the importance of quality news in user interaction. Users that are distrustful are more inclined to interact with those types of news by sharing and commenting to express their disapproval. Because influencing others, gaining awareness, and demonstrating one's level of knowledge are the driving forces behind commenting and sharing. Consequently, the journalism landscape has been changing for a long time and this change will remain in the agenda for a long time. Because digitalism in media always brings new topics to the table and the journalism profession is trying to keep up with the updates. Undoubtedly, interaction with the users will always be the main priority of digital journalism and users will continue to influence the journalistic practices.

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