



Online Media Participation - Benefits and Misinterpretations

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Abstract

The radical development and penetration of information and communication technologies in the online media space has resulted to essential changes in modern society. The most important change is reflected in the evolution of users' practice towards online media participation. Participation in the media space implies independent and interactive practice of users in the media and through the media in reception, interpretation, reinterpretation, modification or production of new media content or building and strengthening social ties. In fact, participatory competencies are becoming essential in the modern life, as they help individuals to effectively use new media and digital technologies in performing everyday functions and participating in a networked, mediatized society.

After defining online media participation and explaining different modes and levels of participation, the paper explores common misinterpretations and dilemmas regarding it: questions of privacy, free labor, quasi participation and manipulation of information. Main conclusion is that effects of participation lie in a way of its usage: by users, media corporations, authorities or third parties; and those potential negative aspects could be prevented primarily by understanding the overall processes of media participation and roles and interests of different parties in it.

Keywords: Online Media Participation; New Media; Digital Technologies

Introduction

The radical development of new media and technologies in the direction of changing mass communication into global, nonlinear, interactive communication in the online media space has contributed to essential changes in modern society. They are primarily reflected in users' informing, learning, communicating and interacting with media.

In contrast to mass media, new, digital media are characterized by convergence, interactivity and global user connectivity. One-sided, mass communication with little feedback from a heterogeneous and anonymous audience is transformed into interactive communication by an audience that becomes an active participant in the media space [1]. Today's, competent users of new media express themselves

socially and culturally in a radically different communicative way than in the previous century. Instead of an amorphous, culturally and intellectually inferior audience, the public is structured into a mosaic, fragmentary network that coexists on the media scene together with numerous other subjects, interest groups and movements [2].

In communication mediated by interactive technologies, users are not isolated actors in the media space, and communication flows are not one-way: media content is continuously upgraded by flowing through a digitized network. In that way, the media contents lose their finality, but with the circulation, with new uses, modifications and interpretations, they constantly innovate and change their meanings - the so-called "Spreadable media" [3,4].

In addition to the media and other communication and cultural centers, former passive media users also actively participate in the production of content circulating on the global network. Today, almost all Internet users have the ability to produce original, or download, modify and redistribute content from the web. In addition to expressing personal opinions and ideas, Internet users are increasingly expressing themselves creatively through various forms. In addition, for a less active and creative audience, there are available tools that allow existing content to be modified, enriched. Through these processes, users assign new meanings to adapted content and place it in a new communication context.

Media users download, manipulate, modify and redefine the ways in which content is understood and finally, users generate their own insights and versions of reality. The most important change in user practice is reflected in the production of new media content. Users develop new skills and abilities necessary for participation in communication processes: they develop media participatory practices.

Although the idea of participation has been present for years, with the emergence of interactive media, today it has taken a new shape. Participatory competencies are a necessary factor in the modern life, in order for individuals to effectively use new media and digital technologies in performing everyday functions and participating in a networked, mediatized society. In fact, a rising phenomena called digital citizenship, which presents ones ability to participate and engage in society, politics and government using information technology in appropriate and responsible way, is a specific kind of digital participation [5].

Participation in the media sense implies independent, interactive and proactive participation of users in the media and through the media, which results in an increase in human knowledge, or in building and strengthening social ties. It is a joint activity in virtual environments that results in the creation of the so-called digital goods or digital commons [6].

Defining Online Media Participation

More explicitly, online media participation implies any kind of active participation and cooperation of media users in the media space (such as posting, sharing, correcting or upgrading existing content or co-constructing new content), and as a result can produce new value for society, culture and art, science and technology, economy, education, and above all, for the users themselves. Online participation is operationalized by user participation in interactive digital platforms, such as social networks, wiki applications, blogs, forums, online games for multiple participants, etc. It implies any kind of active participation and cooperation of media users in the media space by posting, correcting or upgrading

content, and as a result can have a positive value for:

- society,
- culture and art,
- policy,
- science and technology,
- economy,
- education,
- and above all, for the users themselves.

Online media participation can take following forms:

- civic and political activism and journalism,
- citizen participation in urban planning;
- cultural participation and participation in art,
- professional communities of practice,
- participation in open innovations,
- participation in various social networks (Instagram, Facebook, Linkdin, Researchgate, Google scholar, etc.)
- public participation in general.

Online media participation, can be, for example, upgrading open source software such as Linux (open innovation), writing or reviewing articles for Wikipedia, posting amateur news reports, volunteering in digitizing cultural content, taking part in online public discussions. Citizen taking a role of journalists are common manifestation of online participation, when users provide reports and share video records of public events. In the period of isolation during the pandemic of Covig-19 worldwide, importance of online participation in cultural or art processes of both artists and amateurs (e.g. in performing music with other users) has been realized. Moreover, online media participation can include some more simple activities as well, such as voting or signing petitions, initiating or supporting certain social movements, inviting the public to specific actions (environmental actions, humanitarian events, protests) etc. In a broader sense, participation also include commenting on media content, its sharing and even its liking. In that sense, some authors define levels of participation, depending on the influence and the power in decision making enabled [7,8].

From networks of users who interactively not only consume but also jointly produce media content and its meaning, emerges a convergent, participatory culture, as Henry Jenkins calls it [9]. The emergence of participatory culture, has been explicitly or implicitly pointed out by many other authors: networked culture [10], remix culture [3] or cyber culture [11], etc.

Along with the benefits of digital participation, of increased inclusion and connectivity, there is a cultural turn in terms of using the Internet, but also in terms of looking at creativity, authorship and individual expression. The essential advantage of online participation lies in the activities and ideas of a large number of users, bringing

a variety of perceptions of reality highly important for creativity. As a result of the increase of technological possibilities of content manipulation, interaction of the audience in the process of reception, interpretation and reinterpretation of media content is increasing. There is a significant change in culture or users' participation, as the act of involving, engaging, and actively contributing of the audience is intensified, not in mere reception and reception of media content [12,13]. When circulation of media content among users, it is modified and decontextualized. Changing the original context, contents evolve and new goods emerge, thus shifting existing boundaries of media production [3]. As a result of facilitated and frequent users' reproduction of media content, the notions of the original and the copy of the cultural property are destabilized, and "the object is no longer in the main focus of the observer" [14].

One of the basic arguments in favor of participatory culture, which Jenkins pointed out, is the development of democratic capacities by enabling users to take part in political, civic, environmental, journalistic and other movements in the online environment, i.e. strengthening the so-called civic activism [15-18]. Therefore, the main advantage of participation is the merging of the public and private media spheres through the daily involvement and contribution of citizens.

Another argument in favor of participatory culture is users' cooperation in the usage, modification, rearrangement, enrichment and creation of new media content-in other words: produsage. This co-construction of media content comes in various spheres of human activity: culture and art, economy, technology and innovation, theoretical and empirical knowledge, etc.

Jenkins and associates created a model of 4K participation (4C's of Participation – Reilly, et al. [19]):

- creating media content,
- circulation of media content between platforms, disciplines and over time,
- collaboration of users in terms of upgrading their mutual knowledge,
- connecting users and establishing productive networked structures.

Misinterpretations and Dilemmas Regarding Online Media Participation

New participatory media technologies can have a number of advantages, as outlined in the paper so far. However, it is necessary to realize that these technologies themselves, like all others, are neither positive nor negative. Their effect is determined by the way they are used, whether by users or media corporations, authorities or third parties.

In discussions about the negative implications of online participation, one of the leading arguments is the possible violation of the privacy and even security of users, i.e. the misuse of private data. Namely, detailed information about everything users do online can be routinely collected and generated into large databases and linked to user identities, either explicitly via usernames, credit cards, numbers, IP addresses; was implicit through data in the history of Internet search engines. This information can be combined with postal address, date of birth and gender, with the result of a very reliable information obtained about users. As databases flourish and analytical technologies evolve, it is becoming increasingly easy to use the Internet for data mining [20].

In this regard, the higher the participation, i.e. the more activities that an individual does through the media (socializing on social networks, searching the Internet, online shopping or informing about products, participating in forums related to various interests, reading books or listening to music, posting comments or participating in open discussions and debates or joining online societies), the more data about certain user is fed in databases. As cyber pessimists advocate, new media and technologies undoubtedly give great freedom and power to individuals for self-fulfillment and self-actualization; but also to companies, governments and other institutions to control individuals.

Furthermore, the attitude of dystopians is oriented towards the abuse of the potential of participatory culture, not only by users, but also from companies. Based on this theory, the abuse of participation is seen as a new form of unpaid work and a new, far more productive source of income for the media industry: users not only produce new media content; they even eventually pay to consume them. There are numerous examples of the practice of media corporations or profitable organizations, which use the advantages of open innovation or crowdsourcing to improve their products or services, through using freely users' ideas, effort and time. Namely, in voting, competitions or games, users choose or even develop new product solutions, from voting for the most desirable characteristic of technical products, through sketching clothing design to writing elements of a movie script. Involving the audience in the creation of media content is one of the established practices of large media corporations, by which they not only form content based on audience preferences, reduce costs of production and development of content, but also ensure safe placement of media products on market. Singer and colleagues from the point of view of journalism; Malmelin and Willy [21] in the context of creating a media brand talk about different phases of work in which audience members participate - from bringing ideas or creating parts of the content, to helping to spread the content on the Web and advertise the content. Simple examples date back to the very beginnings of media

participation: a television company, when running a reality show, invites audience the to vote on which participants will stay in the show.

This leads to the next debatable aspect of participation – structuring of users' participation by media companies [22]. When the audience, through voting or similar activities, is directed to the selection or creation of media content in a narrowly defined way in advance, their (micro-) participation is more superficial than qualitative. While micro-participation can have great advantages, it should not be misinterpreted with full democratic participation. The danger lies when public is misled to believe their activities have more impact than they actually have. Some critics see this as a way of "hiding" what is in fact top-down decision making - a form of pseudo-participation [7].

Finally, a potential negative aspect of increased online participation is manipulation of information. While new media has enabled immediate access to information and knowledge, it has also delivered structural and unprecedented challenges in the field of its dissemination and manipulation and caused information pollution. The lines between "fact, entertainment, advertising, fabrication and fiction" [23], are becoming ever more blurred, thus leading to the well-known phenomena of "fake news". Although it is a long-standing phenomenon, it is becoming prominent with the rise of social media, as it is mainly spread by social media platforms [24]. Manipulation of information came in three forms: misinformation (unintentional spreading false information, unaware and without harmful intent) and disinformation (intentional and deliberate spreading information that is false, with harmful intent) and malinformation (the sharing of "genuine" information with the intent to cause harm).

Online participation allows everyone to make their own realities (online and offline) with monitoring, networking and making a media content viral, but the awareness of its negative potential is crucial. In this sense it is a fundamental concern to be aware and attuned to the information that are disseminated, what are its dimensions and contexts; is it meant to manipulate, falsificate, contort or propagate.

Conclusion

Müller tries to reconcile the conflict of utopian and dystopian theories by shifting utopians to giving too much importance to participatory culture, and dystopians to favoring the influence of the media industry [22]. Carpentier approaches this conflict by defining participation as a structurally unstable concept and object of political-ideological struggle, due to which it oscillates between the minimum and maximum value. The maximum value of participation (either online or offline) can be expected only

in truly democratic societies. Carpentier, however, takes an optimistic view, presenting and analyzing numerous examples of good practice of democratic participation mediated by new, digital media [8].

During the twentieth century, scientific views on the importance of media influence on participation change in the form of a continuum that connects two extremes: cyber optimism and cultural-optimistic attitudes, and on the other side cyber pessimism and cultural-pessimistic interpretations of participation. The center of this continuum is made up of those who try to find acceptable alternatives and options in the complex problems of new media theory, while one-sided answers cannot be offered, even within the same media paradigm.

As mentioned above, new participatory media technologies, like all the others technologies, are neither positive nor negative - their effect is determined solely by the way they are used. In this regard, potential negative aspects could be prevented primarily by understanding and being aware of the overall processes of media participation and roles and interests of different parties in it.

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