

Audience participation in public service media. From an instrumental to a purposeful vision

*La participación de la audiencia
en los medios de comunicación públicos.*

*De una visión instrumental
a una visión propositiva*

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Palabras clave

Medios de comunicación de servicio público; Participación ciudadana; Gobernanza de los medios de comunicación; Televisión.

Abstract

Audience participation has become a buzzword in Public Service Media policies, strategies and debates. Different types of audience involvement—for example, adding social media to programs or media co-creation projects with young people—have been linked to the achievement of societal objectives such as increasing the

diversity of media content. Yet, audience participation has failed to live up to its promises in the practice of public broadcasters. This article addresses the challenges of the implementation of audience participation in a Public Service Media context, especially in the phase of content creation. We critically question the underlying assumption in Public Service Media scholarship and media theories that more audience participation is automatically better for the achievement of societal objectives. Insights from political theory on participatory and deliberative models of democracy are adopted to move from an instrumental to a more purposeful vision on audience participation in Public Service Media.

Resumen

La participación de la audiencia se ha convertido en una palabra de moda en las políticas, estrategias y debates sobre los medios de comunicación de servicio público. Los distintos tipos de participación de la audiencia —por ejemplo, la incorporación de los medios sociales a los programas o los proyectos de cocreación mediática con los jóvenes— se han vinculado a la consecución de objetivos sociales como el aumento de la diversidad de los contenidos mediáticos. Sin embargo, la participación de la audiencia no ha cumplido sus promesas en la práctica en el caso de los entes públicos. Este artículo aborda los retos de la aplicación de la participación de la audiencia en el contexto de los medios de comunicación de servicio público, especialmente en la fase de creación de contenidos. Cuestionamos críticamente el supuesto subyacente en los estudios de los medios de comunicación de servicio público y en las teorías de los medios de comunicación de que una mayor participación de la audiencia es automáticamente mejor para la consecución de los objetivos de la sociedad. Se adoptan ideas de la teoría política sobre los modelos participativos y deliberativos de la democracia para pasar de una visión instrumental a otra más propositiva acerca del papel de la participación de la audiencia en los medios de comunicación de servicio público.

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Introduction

Today, Public Service Media (PSM) organisations are losing the connection with young people, lower-educated audiences and minorities (Andersen and Sundet, 2019; Horowitz and Lowe, 2019; Panis, Paulussen and Dhoest, 2019; Sehl, 2020). There seems to be an increasing gap between the loyal audiences of public broadcasters, generally consisting of educated and/or older people, and less educated and/or younger audiences. This while the shift from Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) to PSM in the 2000s heralded the democratic promise to involve different audiences more often and more profoundly than ever before (Debrett, 2009; Jakubowicz, 2010; Lowe, 2009).

For many, the presence of public broadcasters across media platforms, the «M» in PSM, did not only entail a technological change, but also an opportunity to re-vamp the emancipatory project of public broadcasters. Different types of audience participation—for example, adding social media to programs or media co-creation projects with young people—were linked to the achievement of societal objectives such as increasing the diversity of media content and enabling media users to become more involved in society (Glowacki and Jakiernia, 2017; Iosifidis, 2010; Jakubowicz, 2010). In other words, audience participation was considered a «gift from heaven» (Bardoel and d’Haenens, 2008: 341) to strengthen the emancipatory project of PSM. The idea behind this participatory turn was to open up PSM organisations and media practices to the people. That aspiration has turned out rather problematic in practice and sets out from some shaky theoretical assumptions.

We start with an overview of the challenges of audience participation in practice. In this part, we discuss two waves of audience participation: audience participation in the distribution phase and audience participation in the production phase. Empirical research has demonstrated that audience participation in these phases did not result in the achievement of societal objectives and was not always appreciated by audience members themselves (Coudry et al., 2010: 124, 149; Glowacki and Jackson, 2013: 35). Furthermore, a lack of vision on the concept of audience participation in PSM policy often led to an instrumental approach in practice. Rather than to start from the needs of the audience, PSM producers adopted audience participation in ways that were most convenient to them (Enli, 2008).

In the second part of the article, we challenge the underlying assumptions in PSM scholarship and media theories that more audience participation is automatically better for the achievement of societal objectives. We detect the origin of this assumed link between more and better participation, «naturally» resulting in the achievement of democratic objectives in political theory. Indeed, for the study of participation media theories have tended to draw upon key lessons from political theory, such as how participation can be evaluated in participatory and deliberative models of democracy (Carpentier et al., 2013; Held, 2006; Horowitz and Napoli,

2014).¹ Accordingly in this part, we apply some of the same critiques on participation from these models to audience participation in a PSM context. As such, we question the argument for «more» participation of participatory democrats and the fetishization of participatory processes as goals in and of themselves (Barney, et al., 2016: xv). Subsequently, we study how societal goals mostly connected to participation in political theory can be aspired for audience participation in a PSM context. In the conclusion, we adopt the insights and lessons learned from the practical and theoretical challenges with participation to move from an instrumental to a more purposeful vision on audience participation in PSM.

Audience participation in policy

The transition from PSB to PSM gave rise to an overload of buzzwords in public broadcasters' policy and strategy documents (BBC, 2004; NPO, 2010; VRT and Vlaamse Regering, 2011). Audience participation and related concepts such as interaction and co-creation were increasingly being mentioned in policy documents and public broadcasters' strategies, the *Building Public Value* paper of BBC being one of the first (BBC, 2004; see also NPO, 2010; VRT and Vlaamse Regering, 2011). Especially audience participation in the production of PSM programs was thereby considered very important as a means for the public to participate in society or to attain wider societal objectives such as empowerment, media literacy, and creativity (BBC, 2013: 3; France Télévisions, 2009: 15; NPO, 2010: 11; VRT and Vlaamse Regering, 2011: 13).

By focusing on responsiveness to and collaboration with the public, several public broadcasters hoped to regain support for the PSM project that was being questioned in a changing media sector (Just, Büchi and Latzer, 2017). Accordingly, audience participation was employed to counter critiques on Public Service Media as a legitimate policy project for the future and thus prove the relevance of public broadcasters as media organizations that address media users not merely as passive consumers but also as active citizens (ibidem). However, in actual policy debates, little attention was given to audience participation. The focus still seemed to be placed on conversations on the independence and market impact of public broadcasters, as illustrated by the discussions surrounding the 2016 White Paper of BBC (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2016). In addition, the concept of audience participation was often conflated with strategies to personalize the online offers of PSM. Although both had the same goal, i.e. to reconnect with the public, personalization strategies seemed to be gaining more attention in PSM practice than the development of a clear vision on audience participation (Just, Büchi and

¹ The correlation between the study of citizen participation in media and political theory can be explained by the fact that, on the one hand, politics are enacted in the media, and, on the other, the media, i.e. press, radio, television, and the Internet, continually impact the nature of politics (Carpentier et al., 2014: 134; Dahlgren, 2009).

Latzer, 2017: 996). Furthermore, scholars, policy makers and public broadcasters remained vague about how they defined audience participation (Donders, 2019). There was little clarity on the status of audience participation as a goal or as a means for fulfilling public broadcasters' democratic tasks (see for example Council of Europe, 2009).

This lack of vision on audience participation in both government and PSB policy led to some challenges in practice. This implementation of audience participation can be divided into two waves: the introduction of audience participation in the distribution phase and in the production phase. Each wave was characterized by its own particular set of challenges.

From distribution to content production

With audience participation in the distribution phase we mean interaction and minimal forms of participation, such as commenting on and sharing of content during or after the dissemination of PSM content (Bakker, 2011: 244). In the beginning of PSM, opportunities of digitization mostly sparked these types of audience involvement. They were easy to add to programs and not too intrusive to the production process. For example, interactivity was spurred during or after the program was broadcasted by asking the audience to vote via SMS for entertainment shows or to comment online for current affair issues and, to a lesser extent, drama (Selva, 2016; Van Es, 2016). Together with the emergence of tablets and smartphones, this led to the second screen trend and the introduction of social television in discourses on television and new media (Andersson Schwarz, 2016: 128). In a short time, social media became so integrated in content strategies of public broadcasters that users were encouraged not only to comment, but also to share PSM content via their own networks (Moe, 2013).

Audience involvement in the distribution phase, however, became problematic when there was a call for audience input, but there were no sufficient resources to follow-up on these comments. A lack of transparency and expectation management about the actual use of audience input created frustration with media users. Moreover, scholars criticized these marginal forms of participation for continuing to address the audience in traditional terms rather than to facilitate actual co-creation. Jakubowicz (2014: 229), for example, considered audience participation in distribution a mere artificial add-on to traditional media and a display case for marketing purposes.

The increasing emphasis in PSM discourse on becoming more public-centric or people-centric, led scholars such as Jakubowicz (2010) and Jackson (2013) to make a case for audience participation, which took place earlier in the content production process, such as opportunities to contribute to concept design and content creation (Jakubowicz, 2010: 16). As a result, user-generated content was being

celebrated. Jackson's (2013: 244) study of children's opinions of Adventure Rock, a 3D online gaming environment, illustrated this point clearly. Jackson investigated how children were invited to give feedback on the trial version of Adventure Rock. She praised the fact that children's preferences were considered but argued that Adventure Rock might have been more of a success if children had been involved earlier in the production process. She advocated to «involve children in the development process of new services right from the start» (244) and to go beyond «simply using audience input as a resource». In a similar fashion, Flew et al. (2008) argued for higher intensity participation in terms of content-making within PSM organizations, stating:

«[...] there is a strong case to be made for providing more thoroughgoing and compelling mechanisms for participation, and more completely allowing users in as members of "content-making" communities. Public service media must move such efforts from the margins of their operations to the center». Flew et al (2008: 16-17)

This brings us to the second wave of audience participation in the content production phase. Audience participation in production is closely linked to co-creation. Participation in production entails that media users are invited to create content such as photos, videos, and texts, which is then complemented with or framed by content developed by media professionals (Wardle and Williams, 2008: 11). A notable example is the *Britain in A Day* project in 2011, where «anyone of the audience» could shoot a clip out of their day following concrete BBC guidelines and upload it via the BBC YouTube page. More recent projects include *BBC Taster* and *BBC Ideas*, both of which experiment with new ways of storytelling. *BBC Ideas* launched a beta version of its short form factual video platform in January 2018 so users could still provide feedback in its development phase (Ramsey, 2018). Other examples include the *ABC Open* website of the Australian public broadcaster and the *Les Observateurs* initiative of the television network France 24. Both encourage eyewitnesses and/or people at the heart of societal events to upload videos, photos, and stories they created themselves.

Public broadcasters also adopted co-creation particularly as a strategy to attract young people. It had been considered a way to tap into their lifeworld and to resolve the critique of being ignorant of their culture, concerns, and issues. Earlier research (Vanhaeght and Donders, 2016) showed that in participatory projects TV Lab (France Télévisions), BNN University (NPO) and Carte Blanche the expert knowledge of the media professionals trumped the insights, expertise, and skills of participating young people. Empowerment of audience members, one of the societal objectives for participation in PSM policy was undermined rather than fostered. This raised the question: If youth perspectives were of so little value to the production process, why enable participation in the first place? The aim of increasing the degree of participation seemed to be considered valuable in and of

itself here, without further reflection on the best conditions for participation or on the public objectives achieved.

Audience participation or technological interaction?

The lack of a clear vision on participation at a policy level created a questionable use of participation in practice. As audience participation in content production became the new trend, public broadcasters artificially added it to programs, without critical deliberation on whether participation actually contributed to the concept a program, let alone to the democratic task of public broadcasters. This participation for the sake of it presented many challenges.

Firstly, a conflict of expertise with audience members in terms of producing media content, including writing and filming, led producers and journalists to adhere to a broadcasting logic of restricting control of media production to a specific group of people with journalistic expertise and skills (Bennett, 2013). Empirical findings of newsroom culture have demonstrated that journalists do consider digital opportunities for participation of media users relevant for both marketing and democratic purposes (although often prioritizing the latter, see below) (Carlsson, 2013). At the same time, they do not regard media content created by media users as being of an equal standard in comparison to the news content they produce (ibidem). This reasoning, interpreted by some as a self-preserving strategy of elite expertise against the do-it-yourself culture of the digital age, becomes problematic especially when adopted by media professionals to have «a monopolistic claim on expertise in communicating “truth” about the world» (Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasora, 2012) On the other hand, independence of journalists and their final say on news content are still at the heart of the trustee model of journalism, ensuring quality content and a watchdog function in society (Carlsson and Nilsson, 2016) Moreover, audience research shows that media users frequently prefer good quality content made by professionals and do not always have the desire to participate (Carpentier, 2009)

Secondly, audience participation becomes complicated when there is a discrepancy between the levels of participation promised and the actual conditions created. A lack of transparency and expectation management about the actual use of their input can create frustration with media users. For example, when participation is seemingly invited in the production stage but is only allowed after distribution (e.g., there is a call to comment upon or share content after the program is disseminated). Or, when participation is asked in the distribution phase, but there are no sufficient resources to follow-up on these comments (Peters and Witschge, 2015).

Thirdly, audience participation in production and distribution of PSM programs often remained media-centric; it was implemented to keep audiences engaged with media, but did not encourage them to become active participants in society (Enli, 2008; Syvertsen, 2004). However, a public broadcaster’s democratic task is meant

to foster more active participation in society. This conflict can be explained by the fact that, due to a lack in vision, participation is frequently adopted in ways that are most convenient for PSM producers.

Rather than to foster audience empowerment, they use it as a strategic means to face the challenges of the digital age (e.g., audience retention). For example, second screen apps are implemented to reinforce users' loyalty or to get a better grip on content preferences but not to achieve societal goals such as increasing diversity (Carpentier, 2011; García-Avilés, 2012). Enli (2008) demonstrated that the BBC and Scandinavian public broadcasters SVT (Sweden) and NRK (Norway) mainly implemented audience participation to gain institutional legitimacy (Enli, 2008). As a result, these initiated participatory practices are often media-centric and not society-centric, that is, «they are designed to keep the audiences watching and additionally engaged with media» (Enli, 2008: 107). They do not aim for more democratic participation in society. In so doing, PSM organizations compromise basic public values, since it is the public broadcaster and not the potential contribution to society that takes center stage (Lowe and Palokangas, 2010). As such, the sincerity of public broadcasters' intentions with involving the *public* in PSM can be disputed as their reasoning is «product-centric at best and self-centric at worst» (Lowe and Palokangas, 2010: 136).

Of course, not all prior participatory projects of public broadcasters have been marketing attempts. Some had a clear vision and societal objectives in mind, such as ABC's *New Beginnings* project aimed at cultural diversity (Hutchinson, 2014). Other participatory projects, in turn, were initially marketing-driven, but engaged in more societal goals over the course of the project, or wanted to achieve both (te Walvaart, Dhoest, and Van den Bulck, 2018). For example, VRT's current affairs program *Vranckx* initially aimed to increase audience appeal by creating an online community, but media producers became concerned of more democratic PSM objectives such as decreasing polarization and including different perspectives throughout the project (te Walvaart, Dhoest and Van den Bulck, 2019: 57). This also shows that more minimal forms of participation or small acts of engagement (Picone et al., 2019), such as interaction in an online community, can foster societal goals equally well as some more elaborate forms of audience participation in media production (Dhoest and te Walvaart, 2018).

Hence, the question becomes how to move from mere technological interaction or participation for the sake of it to more meaningful participation that actually fulfils democratic objectives. In an attempt to reflect on a more integrated vision on audience participation in PSM, we look at some of the critical considerations made about the concept in media and participation literature in general. One of the most discussed problems with participation in political theory, which goes along the lines of the critique offered above, is the assumption that adding more participation is always better.

Lessons learned from political theory

Indeed, for the study of participation, media theory has tended to draw upon key lessons from political theory, such as how participation can be evaluated in participatory and deliberative models of democracy (Carpentier et al., 2013; Held, 2006; Horowitz and Napoli, 2014). Accordingly in this part, we apply some of the critiques on participation from these models to audience participation in a PSM context. As such, we question the argument for «more» participation of participatory democrats and the fetishization of participatory processes as goals in and of themselves (Barney, et al., 2016: xv). Subsequently, we study how societal goals mostly connected to participation in political theory can be aspired for audience participation in a PSM context.

More participation, the better?

Participatory democrats such as Arnstein (1969) and Pateman (1970) advocated for the right of people to participate in decision-making processes that affect them (Carpentier et al., 2014: 128). Following the model of participatory democracy, participation should thus not be confined to the strict sphere of politics and should be encouraged in many more spheres of society and everyday life. The ambitious goal connected to this participation is to educate «people to the point where their intellectual, emotional, and moral capacities have reached their full potential and they are joined, freely and actively in a genuine community» (Davis, 1964, as cited in Pateman, 1970: 21). Participation is clearly connected to societal goals of self-development and an equalization of power relations here (an interesting link, which we will return to in the part on purposeful participation).

Over the years, however, this interesting and necessary link between participation and the achievement of societal goals has been put aside in participatory democracy's theory² for the dominant concern of «adding more genuine participation» to policy processes. Indeed, the scholars of participatory democracy advocated for a move from participation as a mere form of tokenism to participation as true citizen empowerment, but seemed to forget to evaluate the actual emancipatory outcomes of that process (Cornwall, 2008; Tritter and McCallum, 2006). As such, more intensity participation tended to be equalized with more power-sharing, which is not only a fallacy, but also moved attention away from what societal goals needed to be achieved for actual emancipation to take place. This emphasis on the intensity of participation reminds us of the celebration of more or earlier forms of audience participation in the content production phase of PSM, without sufficiently considering how societal objectives such as self-development can be achieved. As

² Contrary to the common held belief, new theorists of participatory democracy such as Pateman (1970) were not radically opposed to representative democracy and did see possibilities to combine the latter with principles and practices of more direct participation (see also Carpentier, 2011: 33).

a result, some of the same critiques on participatory democracy can be applied to audience participation in a PSM context.

The argument for more participation in the theory of participatory democracy raises critical questions about the importance, meaning, and legitimization of participation. Political scholars Offe and Preuss (1991: 167, as cited in Held, 2006: 233), for example, contest the idea that there is an automatic positive linear relationship between more participation and reasonableness or societal progress. Also, according to Held (2006) «the evidence is by no means conclusive that increased participation per se will trigger renaissance in human development» (273). Similarly, Andrea Cornwall criticizes different typologies of participation evolving from a more active form of participation – participation as means to an end, to a transformative, more genuine, form of participation (Cornwall, 2008). Cornwall points to the ambiguity of categorizing different forms of participation and stresses the importance of also considering the unintended consequences and impact of participation: Participatory interventions may result in effects that were never envisaged at the outset. The most instrumental variants of participation can provide the spark, in some contexts, that can lead to popular engagement [...] Equally, the most transformational intentions can meet a dead end [...] (Cornwall, 2008: 274). Similarly, in a PSM context small acts of engagement or more minimal forms of participation seem to foster societal goals equally well in comparison to higher intensity forms (see above).

In addition, scholars of deliberative democracy argue that participatory models of democracy lack reflections about the desired quality and possible negative impacts of participation (Couldry et al., 2010). They are against increasing participation for its own sake, without assessing the deliberative quality and enhancing the forms of participation. Exemplary in a media context, is the critique on the use of vox pops as a poor-quality form of audience participation (Vanhaeght, 2019). In these short street interviews, the conditions for participations are far from ideal, as the man in the street is often too overwhelmed and does not get any room to think. In their work on the participatory condition in the digital age, also Barney et al. (2016: xv) continually argue that the participatory condition is not «one in which the quality, intensity, or efficacy of political experience is significantly greater, or more democratic». Carpentier (2011: 22), Couldry et al. (2010), and Dahlgren (2009: 13) also argue along this line of reasoning, claiming that more media participation is not necessarily beneficial, especially when there are no sufficient resources to ensure the follow-up of audience input (see also above).

Moreover, opportunities for participation are unequally distributed «in terms of access to opportunities, skills, knowledge, mentorship, and experiences, which make it easier for some groups to participate than other» (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013: 282); this is called the participation gap. In addition, the illusion of inclusion or representing what the people really want also means that the results of these

participatory processes become hard to question (Cornwall, 2004: 79; Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001). As already mentioned, also in a PSM context this danger of illusion of inclusion becomes apparent. For example when participation of young people is celebrated in discourse, while in practice their insights, expertise and skills are trumped by media professionals (Vanhaeght and Donders, 2016).

Consequently, it is less the intensity of participation and more the conditions of the participatory process, guided by values such as rationality and impartiality, that become the central focus in deliberative theory (Habermas, 1989; Trappel, 2009: 43). Not more, but better, or more rationally-driven participation becomes the objective here. In so doing, deliberative theory gets to the heart of many problems with participation and provides a starting point to critically assess the conditions that must be met to obtain meaningful participation, for example in terms of expectation management. However, creating the right procedure and conditions for participation is not sufficient to ensure that participation will actually lead to societal goals. In fact, an overemphasis on getting the techniques right holds the risk of losing sight of whether participation actually contributes to the objectives set for it.

From an instrumental approach

When optimizing the procedure becomes the prime focus, participation could turn into something technical rather than a political tactic of emancipation (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2016: 7). Sorochan (2016: 21) illustrates this point clearly in her analysis of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. Although she acknowledges the importance of having a sound participatory process, she argues that it is equally important to look at the outcomes and objectives of that process. She discusses that the absolutist approach of the OWS movement towards inclusion actually stood in the way of the movements' democratic goals (Sorochan, 2016). For example, everyone could join the OWS's general assembly even «when people would declare that their purpose was to disrupt a meeting» (34). Evidently, this made it very hard for the movement to come up with some shared political principles or an action plan, resulting in little social change. In this case, participation became an ideology:

When participation operates ideologically, the particular organizational structure or process, if properly adhered to, is thought to guarantee a beneficial or legitimate outcome, or the process or structure itself is understood to be more important than any eventual decision or consequence. (Sorochan, 2016: 31)

There seems to be a confusion of means and ends here, which brings us to the discussion of whether participation should always be a means to a democratic end or could be considered a goal in and of itself. In Arendt's (1958, as cited in Barney et al., 2016) view, participation in public life «is not validated instrumentally by the ends it achieves but is sufficient unto itself for the realization of a distinctive human excellence: Participation is its own reward» (14). Still, we could argue that Arendt

points to the human development that comes from the learning process participation can entail; namely, the ability to learn to act democratically by participating in many spheres of society and everyday life, also known as the key developmental approach to participation (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013: 281; Rousseau as cited in Pateman, 1970). Indeed, not only the outcomes, but also the process of participation could lead to the achievement of societal goals (see for example the goal of media literacy attached to the process of participation in media production, see below). It is, however, not always easy to determine which ends should be connected to the process and which to the outcomes of participation

In sum, what matters the most is that procedure, intensity and outcome of participation are oriented towards societal goals and are society—and not too participation—or media-centric. It is thus not only a question of degree and conditions, but also a question of orientation and direction. As long as participation is not directed towards the equalization of power relations or other societal goals, it has little value as an end in itself (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013: 283; Sorochan, 2016: 38). The question then remains which societal goals are mostly connected to participation in political theory and which should be aspired for audience participation in a PSM context more specifically.

Towards a purposeful approach

Aiming for an orientation towards society-centric objectives for audience participation in PSM, we conducted a literature review on the goals ascribed to audience participation in political theory, media studies and audience research. We identified three societal goals for participation: (1) learning to act democratically by participating; (2) diversity; and (3) social cohesion. These can also be applied in a PSM context. It remains to be seen, however, whether these objectives are apt and exhaustive in an increasingly fragmented and individualized media landscape.

1. Learning to act democratically

In political theory, three main functions were traditionally ascribed to participation: the educative; integrative; and collective functions (Rousseau, 1968, as cited in Pateman, 1970). The goal of *learning to act democratically*³ exactly refers to this first and prime educative function of participation. The integrative and collective function will be discussed below in relation to diversity and social cohesion.

We already touched upon the educative function earlier; namely, in order to participate constructively in the political sphere, people should be able to learn how

3 Here we follow the approach towards participation of developmental republicanism, emphasizing the intrinsic educative value of participation. Protective republicanism on the other ascribes a more confined function to participation as a protectionist mechanism to prevent or correct fraud committed by political elites (Held, 2006).

to act democratically in other, less narrow, social spheres such as family, culture, and the workplace. The argument behind the importance of this educative function is that an *a priori* set of democratic skills and attitudes is not present at birth. In addition, these skills and attitudes can only be learned by the process of participation itself. An equalization of power relations and the ability for people to take control over what affects their lives should go hand in hand with the development of capacities for responsible social and political action (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013: 281, 283; Sorochan, 2016: 24). On the one hand, exercising participation in daily life will not only make people more capable for democratic action, but will also raise awareness about the possible impacts of their own participation in politics (McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger, 2002). On the other hand, this implies that a negative experience with participation in a specific context, such as audience participation in PSM, can have detrimental effects for people's motivation to participate in democracy in general. Therefore, the significance of having a sound vision on whether participation is beneficial for society and its participants before implementing it becomes apparent here.

If we translate this educative function to a PSM context, participation in the different stages of a media program—input, content production, and distribution—can give users the opportunity to discuss, comment, and exchange opinions with other media users and media professionals through which their participatory skills will be developed (Livingstone, Bober and Helsper, 2005: 4). Participation in this context can induce people to imagine the effects of their participation in other social and political contexts as well. Moreover, participation in different stages of TV, radio, or online content can help to increase the transparency of the media process, allowing for a better achievement of critical media literacy and accountability goals. Critical media literacy—i.e., the ability to assess the social, economic, and institutional contexts of media companies—is, for example, considered to be learned best through hands-on training; people learn these skills through participation in the media production process (Buckingham, 2003: 82; Livingstone, 2004). This, in turn, fosters a watchdog function among media users, encouraging users to hold journalists and political elites accountable via critical questioning of certain decision-making procedures (Horz, 2018; McNair and Hibberd, 2002).

This goal of participation to learn how to act democratically should not, however, exempt governments from their responsibility to create policies to protect their citizens (Rossi and Meier, 2012). It can be argued that in the recent discussion on how to regulate international media platforms (Evens and Donders, 2018), participation and self-regulation have been used as an excuse for not doing anything or shifting the responsibility to solve problems to citizens (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2017: 7; Barney et al., 2016; Vanhaeght, Donders and Van Audenhove, 2019). The idea that hope for democracy should only rest on the shoulders of citizen participation is misleading and perfectly aligns with a neoliberal laissez-faire discourse

(Lunt and Livingstone, 2012: 131), in which case «participation ceases to be a check on political power and instead becomes a model for its exercise» (Barney et al., 2016: xxxi).

Looking at audience research, the goal of learning how to act democratically has seldom been recognized by audience members themselves. Audience members do not always conceive audience participation of others as particularly valuable or meaningful (see also Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013: 154).). Carpentier (2009) studied how media users evaluated two Belgian participatory programs *16Plus* and *Barometer*; Carpentier's work indicated that media users in particular seemed to evaluate audience participation positively when it adhered to standards of professional quality and social relevance. When audience input—in this case, user-generated content in the form of amateur films—were of too limited aesthetic and narrative quality, the interviewed media users disliked participation. However, when quality standards were met and audience input brought about authenticity and spontaneity, participation was considered an added value by the interviewed media users. Remarkably, some media users also criticized some of the human-interest stories in *Barometer*, «for falling into the human-interest trap of privileging the private and the personal without transcending it» (Carpentier, 2009: 414), which also demonstrates that media users were well capable to think beyond mere entertainment objectives and reflect on the societal relevance of audience participation. Furthermore, this also suggests that participation as a means of challenging popular opinion was valued over participation that brought about stories more in line with the status quo, which brings us to the second societal objective of participation; diversity.

2. Diversity

The general assumption is that the more voices can participate, the more diversity will be achieved. This, in turn, results in a better representation of people in the public sphere and more societal happiness (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013: 281; Flew et al., 2008: 20; McNair, Hibberd and Schlesinger, 2002). The underlying idea thereby is that collective decisions reached by a genuinely inclusive process will be more easily accepted by individuals, referred to by Pateman (1970) as the collective function of participation. Moreover, in our increasingly complex world, «the experiential and expert inputs of those outside the formal policy circle» become all the more pivotal to guarantee good decision-making (Coleman, 2007: 97). However, as we have already discussed, not everyone is always offered a seat at the table; even when they are, the plurality of voices is sometimes dismissed in favor of a rational discourse towards consensus controlled by the ones already in power. Both in PSM and audience research literature, diversity is the most frequently mentioned goal for audience participation. In collaboration with BBC, Wardle and

Williams (2008) conducted a large-scale audience research on how the audience values audience participation in news. The most frequently mentioned merit of audience participation was that it helped to produce stories, which otherwise would have stayed under the radar. As such, participation enabled media professionals and other media users to better relate to societal issues. Online communities in particular have allowed people who haven't had a voice—because of educational, economic, social, or cultural barriers, as well as physical or emotional impediments—to enter the dialogue by building a personal reputation (Bowman and Willis, 2004: 39; Bergström, 2008). By doing so, audience participation potentially increases the diversity of stories, arguments and opinions present in media content.

In addition to this diversity in programming on screen in terms of representation and plurality of voices, participation is increasingly being mentioned as a way to foster diversity behind the screen (Panis, Paulussen and Dhoest, 2019). Diversity behind the screen entails increasing diversity within the workforce and also training employees to deal with cultural sensitivities (see also Horsti, Hultén and Titley, 2014). With regard to the latter, Panis et al. (2019) argue that involving people with a minority background from the beginning of the creative process can be advisable, as often ideas and perceptions are counterchecked too late (i.e., only after programs have been broadcasted). Gradually, public broadcasters are also trying to adopt a more inclusive approach, producing programs in collaboration with members of different ethnocultural groups (Panis, Paulussen and Dhoest, 2019). As many challenges still exist for public broadcasters when it comes to representing different ethnocultural identities), strategies like these become all the more necessary for recognizing not only the multiculturalism, but also the superdiversity of today's society, acknowledging the intra-cultural diversity among migrant and ethnic minority groups as well.

Given that such a greater diversity of voices through participation is better able to challenge media professionals and politicians about the assumptions they have and the decisions they take, this diversity objective of participation is also related to the goals of accountability and questioning the status quo (see also goal 1, «learning to act democratically»). Furthermore, as audience participation enables a diversity of voices to encounter one another, it also serves to foster social cohesion.

3. Social Cohesion

Participation or taking part in collective decisions creates a feeling of shared responsibility and interdependence among participants, as well as a sense of being an active member of a community or society at large (Flew et al., 2008). We call this the integrative function of participation (Pateman, 1970). However, at present a combination of individualization and marketization in all areas of life has increasingly led to a shift in patterns in political participation towards persona-

lization and a fragmentation of society. Political engagement has become a kind of political consumerism, as «the neoliberal economic regime not only changed the world economy, it changed fundamental policies within nations by introducing privatization and market forces into daily personal life» (Bennett, 2012: 25). These conditions, then, are not anti-politics but serve to create the conditions of emergence for individualized collective action (Micheletti, 2003), «where large numbers of people join in loosely coordinated activities centred on more personal emotional identifications and rationales» (Bennett, 2012: 26). In contrast with the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which were more manifest forms of political activism, «this kind of civic engagement is usually composed of ordinary acts grounded in the everyday lives of people, not always officially labelled as traditionally political» (Murru et al., 2018: 162). According to Schröder (2012), we are entering a new phase of *ubiquitous citizenship*, characterized by the emotional, narrative, and subjective types of engagement in social spaces. Digital media facilitate these forms of mobilization, which operate via thin social ties and bring about mostly personalized expressions. It seems that social, cultural, and political processes are increasingly played out, addressed to, and organized around individuals rather than collectives, which leaves commentators pessimistic as individualism and consumerism is placed in opposition to activism and citizenship (Bennett, 2012; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012).

During the process of audience participation in PSM programs, media users share values and responsibilities with each other, which can lead to social cohesion. However, in keeping with the societal changes described above, public broadcasters in Western European countries went from a centripetal phase, being a central and dominant force, to a centrifugal stage, characterized by deregulation, globalization, and technological changes (Horsti, Hultén and Titley, 2014). The targeted content strategies, fragmentation, and filter bubbles this led to have complicated dialogue between different societal groups. As a result, public broadcaster's integrative function and their classical remit to foster social cohesion—whether or not it was through means of audience participation—has increasingly been challenged (Ramsey, 2013; Iosifidis, 2011). Considering audience research to address these questions, media users are increasingly valuing the concept of autonomy or self-government as a desired outcome of both their media and political participation (Just, Büchi and Latzer, 2017). Furthermore, Heise, et al. (2014: 416) established that journalists often overestimate the desire of users to interact with other users, while media content and services aimed at personal fulfilment, self-direction, and self-development are gaining ground (Hutchinson, 2017: 80; Leurs et al., 2018: 435). Starting from these findings, it would be interesting to further investigate the societal goal of self-development in relation to audience participation, which brings us back to the first educative function of Rousseau. Moreover, self-development fits well with the current trend of individualization, without falling in the trap of self-

interest. It can lead to increased awareness of issues of shared societal concern and, as such, provide a starting point for a necessary retranslation of PSM's social cohesion remit (Pickard, 2019).

Conclusion

Ten years after the participatory turn in PSM, overly optimistic connotations towards audience participation persist. This is evident in recent work of Bonini as he articulates that «everyone seems to agree on adding the dimension of participation to the classic Reithian triad» (Bonini, 2017: 110). Furthermore, Glowacki and Jaskiernia (2017) recently listed without further questions «to offer the publics the opportunity to participate in content creation» (Glowacki and Jaskiernia, 2017: 218) as one of the necessary points of attention for PSM renewal. In this paper, we have argued that such aspirations have turned out rather problematic in PSM practice.

What is apparent in PSM organisations themselves is, first and foremost, a complete lack of vision on what participation of audiences in PSM, let alone of citizens in society actually means. That has nothing to do with a conflated perspective on consumers, citizens, and users. It is more fundamental, touching upon the media-centric nature of what PSM organisations and their employees are doing on a daily basis. Practice still sets out from the aspiration to make something wonderful and broadcast or narrowcast it to as many people as possible. Simply adding audience participation on top of that does not automatically lead to the fulfilment of societal objectives. Participation for the sake of it entails many challenges such as audience frustration or the illusion of inclusion rather than actual audience empowerment. Furthermore, a negative experience with participation in a PSM context, can have detrimental effects for people's motivation to participate in society in general. In this regard, inspiration from political theory led to two important considerations towards a more purposeful vision on participation in PSM, also in keeping with the critique raised by scholars studying deliberative democracy. First, how to balance the process and conditions, as well as the societal goals of audience participation. Second, how better to relate audience participation to societal objectives such as learning how to act democratically, diversity and social cohesion. Moreover, the exploration of self-development as a societal goal for audience participation seemed an interesting avenue for further audience research in PSM.

In conclusion, a more purposeful vision on participation requires another view on audiences as not only receivers but also participants in PSM. The latter is important and does not only touch upon participation in production, aggregation or distribution processes. In fact, one could argue this goes beyond the celebration of user generated content. It is about how PSM organisations think together with that audience about what PSM is, how it should be governed and how it can be crystallised in reality. This comes with a radically different approach starting from

the needs of diverse audiences, which implies an openness, but also a vulnerability on the part of public broadcasters. Simplified: public broadcasters need to let go of their monopoly over the public interest in media, sharing responsibility with citizens.

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