The Evolution of Citizen Participation in the Greek Online Newspapers (2014-2018): A Quantitative Analysis

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Abstract: During the last two decades, the new media landscape has often been explored through the lens of audience participation in news production process. The diffusion of user-generated content both in news websites and on social media platforms has led media organizations to employ participatory formats that allow the audience to actively consume or co-produce content. As a result, journalists are often challenged by a vast amount of -vulnerable to problems- content that has to be handled in tandem with their other daily tasks. This paper focuses on the development of participatory journalism practices in Greek media. Specifically, in order to examine opportunities for users' involvement in news organizations, a comparative quantitative study in all national daily political and financial online newspapers in Greece was conducted in 2014 and 2018. For this purpose, both the integration of participatory tools and the use of quality assurance methods in the relative websites were investigated. The findings indicate a rather reluctant attitude towards productive ways of engagement. Participation takes place through a limited number of tools and user-generated content is accepted only when filtered.
Keywords: participatory journalism, user-generated content, media, tools, control methods

1. Introduction

In the ever-changing journalistic landscape, the concept of participatory journalism has attracted significant interest both in the academic and in the media environment. Whether perceived as a response geared towards potential economic benefit or being valorized in terms of its democratizing effect on media (Peters & Witschge, 2015), participation has engendered changes in traditional processes and has led to the transformation of the relationship between professional journalists and the audience (Reader, 2018; Sinton, 2018).

Not only online news outlets, but also social media platforms host huge amounts of user-generated content (UGC), mainly in the form of text, photos, video and graphics (Anderson, 2007). In order to include it in their daily work routine, media organizations

redesign their strategies, framing amateur content incorporation with professional control (Deuze, 2006). Aiming at the exploitation of UGC, many news outlets have built platforms where users can submit and journalists can elaborate content and have also started using artificial intelligence technology in new ways, for example for moderating reader comments, encouraging constructive discussion and eliminating harassment and abuse (Underwood, 2019). Through a flexible and iterative process, leading media organizations evaluate different approaches in terms of tools and procedures, mainly focused on building heterogeneous platforms providing the means to collect, report, analyze and disseminate UGC-driven news and information (Saridou et al., 2018).

Participatory journalism, as the process in which citizens contribute to professional journalists' news production (Abott, 2017), is actualized when professional journalists and media users co-produce news within a mainstream platform (Aitamurto, 2013). However, the possibility of ethical, legal and liability problems stemming from users' engagement has generated the need for thorough handling and control of the UGC (Saridou & Veglis, 2016; Veglis, 2013).

Research has shown that news broadcasters emphasize more on news-related UGC and the newsgathering benefits of being closer to their audiences, while newspapers tend to be more interested in engaging audiences over a wider range of non-UGC material in a way that can drive revenue (Noor, 2017). Moreover, it is stated that in the brief history of online media, newspapers have generally been the first to innovate, doing so more extensively than their magazine or broadcast counterparts (Singer et al., 2011). On the other hand, empirical studies indicate that engagement with audience communities in the daily practices of the newspapers is occasional, intermittent and not systematic (Villi & Jung, 2015), while the current practice of churning designates that established elite sources and actors are the main shapers of the agenda and viewpoints circulating on the Web (Saridou et al., 2017).

The present paper aims to offer an overview of the development of participatory journalism practices in Greek news media in the years 2014 and 2018. For this purpose, a comparative study was conducted in all national daily political and financial online newspapers. Specifically, in order to map the participatory services provided, the research focused on the integration of participatory tools and the use of quality assurance methods.

2. Participatory Tools and Applications

A large body of studies has explored media adoption of UGC in journalism websites (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, & Lewis, 2019; Scott, Millard & Leonard, 2015; Wang, 2016). Nonetheless, a unique typology of participatory tools has not been established, as researchers focus on diverse aspects of citizens' involvement. Examining the participation opportunities during the different stages of news production process, Singer et al. (2011) indicated that in the initial information-gathering stage, named access/observation stage, organizations are reluctant to allow users to set the news agenda, limiting the user's role to serving as a source of information or raw audiovisual

content. Citizen engagement is also very limited during the selection/filtering and the processing/editing stages, where participation is not promoted, apart from rare and strictly editorially controlled cases. In the distribution stage, participation seems to be the limited involvement in the dissemination of news stories, performed usually through automated content ranking features and social media sharing options. According to Singer et al. (2011), most opportunities for participation are provided in the interpretation stage, as users can vote via polls, take part in forum discussions and comment on published stories. Users are allowed to discuss the news content produced by professional journalists, who control and moderate the submissions.

In a different classification, Franquet, Villa and Bergillos (2011) identified four groups of tools that apply to different propositions within the communication process. These are discussion tools, which encourage debate and audiences can discuss, compare opinions and exchange ideas about the information, socializing tools for sharing content outside the news websites, contribution tools for acquiring users' images, texts and audio, and rating tools for evaluating information. Drawing on the concept of interactivity, Suau and Masip (2014) designed a typology that would allow the creation of different models of media participation. Thus, they define a group of features and services labelled "selective interactivity", which allows users to interact with the system in order to adapt the content according to their preferences and includes mechanisms for personalization. Secondly, tools of "participative interactivity" are employed in the context of a user-user or user-professional relationship and enable users to interact with journalists and other users, according to parameters previously established by the medium's website. Lastly, a third group of interactive features, labelled "productive interaction", also takes place in the context of a user-user or user-professional relationship and aims to contribution of original content.

Identifying the most prevalent and widespread participatory tools, Spyridou (2018) concluded to the following nine: i) Content rating, which is rating of content using the media organization's designated system, ii) polls, which are topical questions posed by journalists and answered by users using predetermined responses, iii) sharing through social networks via buttons provided, iv) audience footage in the form of audiovisual material, v) collaborative content (e.g. contributing interview questions), vi) comments regarding a news item, typically submitted through a form at the bottom of a webpage, vii) discussion forums, which are discussions led by journalists with topical questions posed by the newsroom in which submissions are fully or reactively moderated or places where readers can engage in threaded online conversations or debates, viii) submission of textual material and ix) citizen blogs, created by users and hosted within the news website.

3. Control Methods

Although engagement is a strategic priority in many newsrooms, the industry's embrace of engagement is shaped and constrained by organizational, business, and

professional cultural forces, along with new challenges arising from tools themselves and the ways newsrooms are incorporating them (Lawrence et al., 2018). In the field of responsibility, traditional legal liability models are questioned as the roles of author, editor and publisher change (Valcke & Lenaerts, 2010). Moreover, participatory spaces necessitate thorough handling by journalists, as - not rarely - the coexistence of professional and amateur content raises significant issues. Among them, research points out the excessive use of inappropriate language, flaming, stereotyping and superficial discourse that impede constructive public discourse (Manosevitch, 2011, p. 425). Incivility seems to be a common feature of public discussions as well, and, according to Coe et al. (2014), it conveys an unnecessarily disrespectful tone during discussions, mainly in the forms of name-calling, aspersion, lying, vulgarity and pejorative for speech. Furthermore, dark participation ranges from misinformation and hate speech to trolling and cyberbullying (Quandt, 2018), while the spreading of fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories in UGC are forms of deviances as well (Frischlich et al., 2019).

In order to avoid such problems and ensure the content quality, professionals use control methods, such as moderation, and check UGC before or after it is published, on their own or with users' contribution. When pre-moderation is used, every piece of UGC is checked before publication and high security is achieved. However, this method is labor-intensive and costly (Santana, 2014; Singer et al., 2011). On the other hand, post-moderation policies lead to more simple and open comment systems, but can lower the quality (Hille & Baker, 2014). When distributed moderation is chosen, users are involved in the control process, since news media allow them to moderate content by using buttons for comment ranking or abuse reporting (Hille & Baker, 2014; Lampe & Resnick, 2004).

Management of UGC often includes purely technical methods, such as automated moderation under predefined filters that detect and replace banned words, phrases, IP addresses and paragraphs (Veglis, 2014) or Completely Automated Public Turing tests to tell Computers and Humans Apart (CAPTCHA), which are employed in the websites more rarely (Saridou & Veglis, 2016), aiming to block computer-derived mass entries. The reCAPTCHA, which is offered by Google, is the most widely used CAPTCHA service and has been adopted by many websites for preventing automated bots from conducting nefarious activities (Sivakorn et al., 2016).

4. Methodology

The present study investigates citizen participation in the Greek media context. One of the major components of the crisis in the Greek media landscape has been the constant fall of newspaper circulation figures since 1989 (Siapera, Papadopoulou, & Archontakis, 2014) along with the paradox of having more than 60 newspaper titles of several types (daily morning, daily evening, Sunday, weekly, sports) in 2014. It should however be interpreted in the light of their political role and the declining revenues from advertising (Papathanassopoulos, 2001; Siapera, Papadopoulou, & Archontakis, 2014).

In order to map out how the adoption of participatory journalism practices was developed in the Greek online newspapers in 2014 and 2018, the paper engages in comparative quantitative analysis to address the following research questions:

RQ1: Which participatory tools are provided in the websites of all national daily political and financial newspapers?

RQ2: Which UGC control methods are used in the websites of all national daily political and financial newspapers?

For the purpose of the research, two online studies were conducted; the first one in 2014 and a corresponding study four years later. The initial analysis met the need for a quantitative approach to participatory journalism in Greece in terms of tools and applications. During the following years, the daily newspapers' landscape had recorded shifts in the ownership and circulation status, while in the political context the multiple election procedures in 2015 were followed by an uninterrupted government period for almost four years. For this reason, 2018 was considered as a proper time point for the corresponding study, aiming at the mapping of changes in the participatory journalism field. The data were collected in a one-week period each time (end of February – beginning of March 2014 and end of February – beginning of March 2018). The time period of each study was randomly selected. However, the criterion of "ordinariness" was met in terms of choosing a time period with no expected extraordinary news events.

The initial analysis included seventeen websites, which were the online counterparts of all daily political and financial newspapers in Greece in 2014. These newspapers and their websites were: Dimokratia (dimokratianews.gr), Ethnos (ethnos.gr), Eleftheri Ora (elora.gr), Eleftheros Typos (e-typos.com), Eleftherotypia (enet.gr), Espresso (espressonews.gr), Efimeris Dimoprasion & Plistiriasmon (dimoprasion.gr), Avgi (avgi.gr), Efimerida Syntakton (efsyn.gr), Kathimerini (kathimerini.gr), Naftemporiki (naftemporiki.gr), Imerisia (imerisia.gr), Iho Ton Dimoprasion (ihodimoprasion.gr), Kerdos (kerdos.gr), Rizospastis (rizospastis.gr), Ta Nea (tanea.gr) and Xrimatistirio (xrimatistirio.gr). In 2018, the websites of Ethnos, Eleftherotypia, Imerisia, Kerdos and Xrimatistirio were not part of the sample, due to ownership changes in the newspapers that finally led to the interruption of their daily circulation. On the other hand, Fileleftheros (liberal.gr) and Kontra News (kontranews.gr) were new newspapers and new entries in the second study. The websites were visited several times during the day, from Monday to Friday, and the research included not only the homepages, but also all other sections.

In the initial research (Saridou & Veglis, 2016), each newspaper was studied according to the following variables:

a. *Type of participatory tool*: Considering the abovementioned classifications of citizen participation (Franquet, Villa, & Bergillos, 2011; Singer et al., 2011), the study identified four main areas of user engagement in news production process each of which includes one or more participatory tools, namely i) discussion, which includes comments, forums, journalists' blogs (j-blogs) and citizen blogs, ii) content submission, which includes tools for text and audiovisual contribution, iii) distribution, with tools for sharing

to social networking sites and iv) evaluation, with polls and content rating tools.

b. *Type of control method*: When comments were allowed, the study sought which methods were used by journalists to protect the content quality. Methods were classified as follows: i) Registration, ii) CAPTCHA, iii) pre-moderation, iv) post-moderation and v) distributed moderation.

The corresponding study followed exactly the same coding in order to achieve a precise comparison. Additionally, in case of new tools and control methods, they would be taken into account.

5. Results

Research question 1 asked about participatory tools that are provided in the websites of all national daily political and financial newspapers. Regarding the adoption of discussion tools, findings (Table 1) indicate that users could comment on stories in eight (out of seventeen) newspapers in 2014 and in six (out of fourteen) in 2018. Specifically, two of the outlets that initially allowed commenting, did not offer this opportunity during the second study. On the contrary, three of the nine newspapers that did not provide comment sections in 2014, changed this practice in 2018. Among them, Kathimerini activated this feature only in section "Opinions" of its website. As for the new entries in the sample, users could post comments only in one of them (Fileleftheros). Moreover, Fileleftheros was the only online newspaper that hosted a forum in both studies. Examples of j-blogs tended to be scarce as well, since there was one in 2014 and two in the corresponding study, while citizen blogs did not exist as an opportunity for participation either initially or later.

Research also shows that content submission tools were not adopted by the online newspapers, apart from Ta Nea, where users could send textual material both in 2014 and in 2018. On the other hand, findings record the complete absence of features for photo, video and audio submission in all websites over time. Seeking to explore distribution tools, it seems that users could share stories to their social media accounts in fifteen websites in 2014 and in almost all websites in 2018 (thirteen out of fourteen). In particular, excluding the unavailable ones, all websites from which users could share a story in 2014, either directly or through a third party service, provided this feature in 2018, as well. Social sharing was also offered in the two new media outlets of the sample. As far as evaluation tools are concerned, polls were hosted by two newspapers in the first study, while none was found in the next study. Finally, content rating tools were adopted by thirteen websites initially and by ten websites four years later. It thus can be highlighted that the most widespread UGC tools in both studies were sharing to social media and then content rating and commenting. In 2014, polls, text submission and j-blogs followed, while in 2018 j-blogs, text submission and forums followed.

Findings, therefore, indicate a decrease of 4% in comment opportunity in the newspapers studied (from 47% in 2014 to 43% in 2018). In contrast, there has been an increase in both forum and j-blogs, with rates rising from 0% to 7% and from 6% to 14%,

respectively. No significant differentiation is recorded in the percentage representation of content submission tools. The slight increase from 6% to 7% for textual material is not due to an increase in the absolute number of newspapers adopting this tool, but to a decrease in the total sample by three media outlets. In a similar vein, while fewer newspapers provided social media sharing tools in 2018, the simultaneous sample decrease led to a percentage increase from 88% to 93% in this category. Lower rates are also found in the evaluation area, where polls vanished and rating tools were adopted by 72% in 2018 from 77% in 2014.

The examination of the twelve newspapers that were part of both studies shows that five of them adopted less participatory tools in 2018, four of them adopted the same number of tools and three of them hosted more tools. Furthermore, it should be underlined that no newspaper provided all tools, most provided two or three tools, Ta Nea was the newspaper that provided most tools over time (from six in 2014 to five in 2018) and one newspaper (Rizospastis) provided no tools neither in the first study nor in the corresponding one.

The research of the placement of the tools on the website homepages indicates that in 53% percent of the newspapers in 2014 and in 69% in 2018 at least one tool appeared on the homepage and this was content rating. Half of the newspapers that displayed tools on their homepage and were common in both studies increased this number, two displayed less tools in 2018 and two the same number.

The second research question (RQ2) asked which control methods are used by journalists in order to ensure the quality of citizens' contributions and to avoid problems. Half of the eight newspapers that allowed commenting on their posts and applied some kind of control and quality assurance methods during the first study are still available in 2018. In particular, Ta Nea used exactly the same methods, which were registration, CAPTCHA, pre- and distributed moderation, Dimokratia and Espresso enriched their practice with distributed moderation in addition to registration and pre-moderation, while Naftemporiki stopped allowing commenting in 2018. On the other hand, Efimeris Dimoprasion & Plistiriasmon, Efimerida Sintakton and Kathimerini, which had no comment sections in 2014, offered this tool in the second study, along with the adoption of two and three control methods respectively. From the new entries, only Fileleftheros allowed comments. However, research did not draw conclusions about the type of moderation method used, because the process of the required registration could not be completed despite repeated attempts.

Looking across comment sections, it seems that all newspapers that allowed commenting on their posts required users' registration both in 2014 and in 2018. On the other hand, CAPTCHA does not seem to be an extensively used method, as it was adopted by 17% of the newspapers in 2018 from 25% in the previous study. As indicated in Table 2, a large majority of the newspapers (75%) moderated comments before publishing them and this rate increased through the years (83% in 2018). On the other hand, post publishing moderation, which was initially employed by the one fourth of the newspapers, did not exist in the second study. However, findings show a considerable rise

in distributed moderation, where users take part in the process by responding to other users' comments or by rating them positively or negatively. Specifically, this practice was employed by 38% of the online newspapers in 2014 and by 83% in 2018.

Table 1: Participatory tools in online newspapers

Online newspaper	Comments		Forum		j-blogs		Citizen blogs		Text submission		Audiovisual submission		Social media sharing		Polls		Content rating		Total	
	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018
Dimokratia	✓	✓											✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	4	3
Ethnos		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a	✓	n/a		n/a	✓	n/a	2	n/a
Eleftheri Ora													✓	✓			✓		2	1
Eleftheros Typos	✓												✓	✓			✓	✓	3	2
Eleftherotypia	✓	n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a	✓	n/a		n/a	✓	n/a	3	n/a
Espresso	✓	✓											✓	✓			✓	✓	3	3
Efimeris Dimoprasion & Plistiriasmon		✓											✓	✓			✓		2	2
Avgi													✓	✓			✓	✓	2	2
Efimerida Syntakton		✓											✓	✓			✓	✓	2	3
Kathimerini						✓							✓	✓			✓	✓	2	3
Naftemporiki	✓												✓	✓			✓	✓	3	2
Imerisia	✓	n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a	✓	n/a		n/a	✓	n/a	3	n/a
Iho Ton Dimoprasion													✓	✓				✓	1	2
Kerdos	✓	n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a	✓	n/a		n/a		n/a	2	n/a
Rizospastis																			0	0
Ta Nea	✓	✓			✓	✓			✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	6	5
Xrimatistirio		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a	0	n/a
Fileleftheros	n/a	✓	n/a	✓	n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a	✓	n/a		n/a	✓	n/a	4
Kontra News	n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a	✓	n/a		n/a		n/a	1
Total	8	6	0	1	1	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	15	13	2	0	13	10	40	33

Table 2: Control methods in online newspapers

Online newspaper	Registration		CAPTCHA		Pre-moderation		Post-moderation		Distributed moderation		Total	
	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018	2014	2018
Dimokratia	✓	✓			✓	✓				✓	2	3
Eleftheros Typos	✓	n/a		n/a	✓	n/a		n/a		n/a	2	n/a
Eleftherotypia	✓	n/a		n/a	✓	n/a		n/a		n/a	2	n/a
Espresso	✓	✓			✓	✓				✓	2	3
Efimeris Dimoprasion & Plistiriasmon	n/c	✓	n/c		n/c	✓	n/c		n/c		n/c	2
Efimerida Syntakton	n/c	✓	n/c		n/c	✓	n/c		n/c	✓	n/c	3
Kathimerini	n/c	✓	n/c		n/c	✓	n/c		n/c	✓	n/c	3
Naftemporiki	✓	n/c		n/c	✓	n/c		n/c	✓	n/c	3	n/c
Imerisia	✓	n/a		n/a		n/a	✓	n/a	✓	n/a	3	n/a
Kerdos	✓	n/a	✓	n/a		n/a	✓	n/a		n/a	3	n/a
Ta Nea	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	4	4
Fileleftheros	n/a	✓	n/a	-	n/a	-	n/a	-	n/a	✓	n/a	2
Total	8	6	2	1	6	5	2	0	3	5	21	20

6. Discussion

The large majority of the Greek daily political and financial online newspapers adopt some form of citizen participation, however with a limited number of tools and a slightly downward direction in 2018 in comparison to 2014. Results concerning citizen participation in this part of Greek media outlets converge with imprinted on previous researches reluctance of news media to integrate audiences into online news production (Domingo et al., 2008, Hermida & Thurman 2008, Jönsson & Örnebring, 2010). Activities for social media sharing and content rating, that require a minimum of action by users, just a click for liking or even nothing more than reading a story, seem to be the most widespread. Findings indicate mostly selections from the group of features that Suau and Masip (2014) characterize as participative interactivity, which enable users to contribute in the form of a comment, grade or any other input that does not involve genuine creative activity. These are mainly options that allow media organizations to keep control of UGC, while leaving some space for minimal participation. During the news production process, distribution stage seems the most open to citizen engagement, while observation, filtering and editing stages are quite closed to participation.

Moreover, users in the media outlets interact with already published content; professionals produce the content and citizens productively consume it. They are not urged to produce or co-produce material for publication. It should also be underlined that participation does not take place in a specific external location, but it is detected only in the main website of the media organization, where users' contributions are tightly connected, though clearly separated from the professional content. Comments, for

example, are placed just below the professional stories, following a distinct visualization.

Lastly, it has to be noted that participatory journalism practices in the Greek online newspapers are subject to strict editorial control. No comments are allowed without registration and professionals check content before it is published, on their own and with users' cooperation. Quality assurance methods are used in combination with each other and research indicates a tendency to strengthen supervision of amateur content, since no organization in 2018 used less control methods than in 2014. On the contrary, while in the first study most newspapers employed two methods, four years later the majority chose to employ three, involving users in the process.

7. Conclusions and Future Work

This comparative research attempted to investigate the configuration of participatory journalism as adopted by the Greek online newspapers over the recent years. The forms of users' engagement offered by leading media and the control methods used by professionals in 2014 and 2018 reveal rather reluctant adoption of participatory journalism by the outlets studied. Such an analysis could help towards the direction of mapping citizen engagement in news media, contributing to a growing body of work that explores audience participation in other Mediterranean and generally European countries.

Since news production runs through a wide range of online outlets, further analysis of different media organizations, such as web native media and niche portals, could offer more precise delineation of citizen participation. Taking these findings as a starting point, future research could also focus on interviews, addressing journalists' perceptions of and actions for managing participation in Greek media. Lastly, in order to gain a better understanding it is important to study users' attitude towards engagement in news process.

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