

## **Roles of audience participation in multiplatform television: From fans and consumers, to collaborators and activists**

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### **Abstract:**

In the current media ecosystem, television content is distributed through a variety of platforms (TDT, the Web, mobiles ...) providing a growing level of interactivity, which increases the connections of networks and programs with their audiences. Both public and commercial broadcasters are developing cross-media processes that enhance audience participation in a variety of ways. The networks provide a wide number of initiatives so that the public might engage, by sharing, commenting, promoting or criticizing programs, as well as elaborating their own material or getting involved in the design, production or distribution of content.

This essay explores the dimensions of audience participation in Spanish television channels and their websites. Using a methodology of exploratory analysis, over one hundred activities of audience participation were examined in twenty commercial and public Spanish television channels and their websites, during six weeks across October to December 2011. My analysis focused on participative initiatives found on the websites and specific sections aimed at encouraging participation. The results show several strategies of participation through cross-media activities, which promote different images of the audience. There are classified into eight roles: citizens, consumers, collaborators, fans, players, commentators, benefactors and activists. The nature and implications of these audience roles are discussed.

**Keywords:** audience studies, consumers, fans, participation, television.

### **Introduction: Audience participation in “social television”**

The current broadcast system is undergoing a deep change in several aspects that shape its structure and functioning, such as the number of channels and distribution platforms, the innovation in formats and business models, the politics and regulation of the audiovisual industry, as well as a renewed relationship between the media and their audiences. What we knew so far is that “television” is benefiting from the advantages provided by the

Internet, incorporating online services and using the web as a new channel to enhance viewers' participation.

The gradual implementation of the HbbTV system, with technology based on the HTML standard, will allow the integration of the television set with access to the web, providing a more interactive experience of TV viewing. HbbTV products and services will provide consumers with a richer experience with entertainment services and on-demand video, social networks, videogames, interactive advertising, voting, as well as the possibility of interacting with any kind of content.

The synergies between television and the Internet have brought about innovative ways of considering the role of audiences and amplifying the reception of programs, as interactive technologies transforming the way television communicates with the audience, and also increasing the opportunities for audience feedback and engagement with programs. Television series, newscasts and shows are increasingly produced bearing in mind their online distribution, with spectators turned into users who are able to interact more intensively, sharing their experiences and participating with a large number of applications (Deery, 2003).

At the same time, online video consumption is growing both with mobile and fixed devices. The volume of available video on platforms such as Youtube, Vimeo, Blip.tv and Kaltura, as well as on the networks' own websites, is increasing steadily. According to a ComScore report published in June 2011, Spain ranks fourth in online video consumption in the European Union, with over 18 million unique visitors watching an average of 151 videos during 18.4 hours per month. Online video is also increasing its connectivity with social networks, providing a more intense and collaborative involvement. Online video users demand audiovisual content and value added services, with greater accessibility and an enriched viewing experience, depending on the size of the screen they watch (Bachmayer et al., 2010).

The concept of audience participation shares a variety of meanings. In this article, it is defined as the feedback which the broadcasters provide through a combination of traditional systems and new technologies. It thus encompasses tools such as voting by SMS for a particular candidate in a reality show, or calling in a talk show to give one's opinion. According to Nightingale and Dwyer (2006), most voting shows should be regarded as commercial transactions, where presenters behave like "sellers" who exhibit a persuasive rhetoric which seeks to engage viewers en masse. It includes the use of sites associated with the programs, where fans might engage in lively chat discussions and forums. There are also initiatives to support the production of a program financially with donations or with *crowdfunding*, which allows people to sponsor broadcast projects, obtaining in return several advantages (Carvajal et al., 2012).

Audience participation in European broadcasting grew in a significant way from the nineties, when the so-called "neotelevision" took off, by placing viewers at the center of the programming and providing them with a chance of getting involve in the production of

discussion programs (Carpentier, 2001), helping find missing persons or voting for their favorite stars (Hargittai and Walejko 2008; Karaganis 2007). As Syvertsen has shown (2004: 372), public broadcasters were hardly interested in participation formats, because they regarded them as too populist, commercial and of low quality. On the other hand, in the convergent media scenario, both public and commercial channels are increasing their offerings of content which is distributed through several platforms, in immediate, continuous and on-demand ways. Television viewing is multiplying on many screens, with content which is socially shared and renovated.

The Web 2.0 interconnected with the television channels, making it easier for users to generate their own content, thus becoming at the same time producers, distributors and consumers, as is the case in the strategies implemented in reality shows (Jones, 2004; Holmes, 2004) or in newsrooms which select stories provided by users (García-Avilés, 2010). The potential of participative media facilitates the involvement of the public, by commenting, sharing, labeling, criticizing and reacting to different pieces of news or entertainment (Jakubowicz, 2008). The Web 2.0 opens up unprecedented opportunities for more inclusive public engagement in the deliberation of policy issues and the role of gate-watching (Bruns, 2011).

“Social television” constitutes a fundamental shift in how people interact and socialize around audiovisual content (Harboe, 2009). Websites are combining video streaming services with social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. These developments have been labeled “social television”, for they allow “remote viewers to socially interact with each other via the television set, smart phones, tablets or the PC, where viewers might be separated in time and/or in space” (Cesar and Geerts, 2011). Features in social TV include remote talking or chatting while watching a television program, content-aware lists that show what your friends are watching, sharing and recommendation of video material based on social network statistics and trends, and easy accessible Twitter streams associated with a particular program. These changes also led to reinventing the very concept of audience.

### **Reinventing the television audience**

According to Siapera (2004), the way of addressing the audience that broadcasters adopt on the web is deeply conservative; most channels have benefited from the technical advantages of online media in order to increase their knowledge of viewers and users, and to try to get them involved in various ways. When addressing the public as spectators, consumers or citizens, television online platforms usually follow the current mood of the traditional broadcast channel. In this way, online viewers amplify the consumption mode, through a new screen where content is accessed. Broadcasters make the most of the advantages offered by the web as a distribution system, in order to increase their market share and explore new business models. As Cebrián Herreros put it, (2004:48), “generalist television exploits audience participation not so much as a communicative dialogic model, but as a

business model, as a way to finance programming". The concept of "audience" refers to a series of relationships that are established among the media and the public (Livingstone, 1998) which is deeply rooted in social and cultural values. As the 2011 "Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies" COST Report argues, " what kind of audience research appears to be most relevant and urgent seems to depend to some extent on the kind of society in which audience research takes place" (Bilandzic et al, 2011: 184). Also, specific relationships might rise with different audience models, depending on the way each television channel addresses its viewers. For example, Siapera (2004) makes a classification of six images of the public according to the various ways of relating with the television websites: spectators, fans, consumers, citizens, education receptors and web surfers. In this regard, Syvertsen (2004) argues that programmers also deal with the audience not only as citizens and consumers, but also as clients and players. In this context, Costera Meier (2004) points out the importance of the public as "enjoyer" of quality programs.

The vision shared by network executives about their audiences is particularly important in order to design participation strategies, as the type of involvement associated with a client or a consumer seems quite different from that related to a citizen or an activist. In this regard, the concept of "spectator" refers to "people who are busy in the contemplation, with the motivation and desires of someone who is prone to the spectacle or the morbidity of the images" (Pérez Tornero, 2005:251). On the other hand, the concept of "television consumer" tends to regard the medium as a business, so that the rights of the viewer in this case are similar to those of any consumer, who is persuaded to buy all kinds of products and is encouraged to shop online.

Therefore, the image of the citizen before the television set goes beyond the reductionist concepts of spectator and consumer. A citizen is not only the subject of the reception, nor the mere consumer of images and/or products, but a subject implicated in different kind of processes: communicative, cultural, social, political, etc. As Syvertsen (2004) has shown, the field of the rights and duties of the citizen is much more complex than that of the consumer.

The process of developing a civic identity is conditioned by a variety of circumstances. There seems to be a growing connection between media consumption and citizen participation in the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2007). Other authors emphasize the difference between traditional spectators and "digital natives", who tend to watch programs in Digital Terrestrial Television and the Internet. Jakubowicz (2008) argues that audience participation could be regarded as an aspect of the public service function provided by broadcasters. In the age of monopolies and large public sector, the ideal was for people to turn off the television set and actively participate in social engagement. However, new participation strategies pursue the notion that the audience will keep watching through any screen and also will get involved in a variety of activities.

According to Enli's study (2008, 112) on the participation policies of public broadcasters BBC, SVT, NRK and PBS, these channels regard audience participation as a

strategic element to face the challenges of the digital age, which represents a new turn in the traditional policy of public broadcasters.

Any strategy of collaborative communication is based on mechanisms that provide the distribution of content for users into any place, and allows a better knowledge of their demographics and socioeconomic profile. These policies intend to reinforce users' loyalty, facilitating a fluid conversation with users in order to improve the quality of the services.

### **The context of the Spanish television system**

The television market in Spain is in the midst of deep change. The consolidation of Digital Terrestrial Television since 2010 has brought about a proliferation of channels and increased market fragmentation. As a result, television companies are seeking new advertising and programming strategies targeting niche audiences. Six national channels serve a Spanish population of forty-four million and a television audience of thirty-six million. The public broadcaster Radio Televisión Española (RTVE) operates two generalist channels TVE 1 and La 2, as well as a sports channel, a 24-hour news channel and a children's channel. National commercial television networks include Telecinco, Cuatro, Antena 3 and La Sexta. Telecinco's parent company, Mediaset, acquired the Cuatro network in December 2009. Following a similar concentration strategy, Antena 3's parent company, Grupo Planeta, initiated a process of acquisition of its rival La Sexta, which could be completed by early 2013, if they comply with all the conditions set up by the regulators.

**Table 1.** Audience Share of Spanish television networks (February 2011-2012):

<b>Channel</b>	<b>Audience share (Feb. 2011)</b>	<b>Audience share (Feb. 2012)</b>
TVE1	15.1%	14.1%
Telecinco	14.4%	13.7%
Antena 3	11.3%	12.2%
La Sexta	6.3%	4.8%
Cuatro	6.5%	6.3%
La 2	2.6%	2.7%
FORTA (Regional stations combined)	11.1%	10.4%

**Source:** Kantar Media.

Due to a government decision, the public broadcasting corporation RTVE no longer shows advertising after January 2010, and is exclusively financed from public funds, and taxes on private broadcasters and phone companies. The public channel reduced its staff by 44% between 2006 and 2008. The government has increased the financial cuts in RTVE's 2012 budget, so that this constrained scenario will also bring about a redefinition of its content production and broadcast rights acquisition.

In addition, twelve public regional broadcasters are grouped in the Federation of Autonomous Corporations of Radio and Television (FORTA). Each one of these regional public broadcasters owns several television channels which offer regional news as well as home-made programs. They are financed by advertising and subsidies from the regional governments, and due to the economic crisis and inefficient management, they are facing serious budgetary restrictions.

According to Kantar Media, the audience of the main channels in February 2012 was the following: TVE1: 14.1%; Telecinco: 13.7%; Antena 3: 12.2%; Regional Channels combined: 10.4%; Cuatro: 6.3%, La Sexta: 4.8% and La 2 (TVE): 2.7% (see **Table 1**).

The evolution of audience participation in Spanish television is quite similar to that of most Western European countries: many programs and newscast provide tools for distributing people's comments and opinions, in the form of SMS, toll free calls, online comments, YouTube videos, quiz shows, customer services and chats, among others. The relationship between Spanish broadcasters and their audiences is still weak and, according to one study, online participation initiatives need to increase their efficiency and transparency with more clearly identified goals (Franquet et al. 2011).

### **Research purpose and methodology**

This article contributes to the body of literature on audience participation by analyzing this phenomenon as a key response to the challenges of public service broadcasting in the digital age. I have chosen a comparative perspective in order to reflect that the concept of multiplatform broadcasting includes a range of institutions of different sizes, and with different structures and goals. Comparative analysis is one of the basic methods in social sciences, and is regarded as a strategy for conducting research that seeks to control potentially confounding variables through careful case selection and matching.

My analysis focuses on participative tools found on the homepages, the news stories presented on the homepages, and specific sections aimed at encouraging participation. Participative tools include any service, content or application through which a communication connection is established between the broadcaster and the audience. This concept covers all the ways in which the public has the opportunity to participate in the news website.

In line with proposals made in previous studies (García-Avilés, 2011), and for the purposes of clarifying the different tools based on their functionality, I differentiate between four groups of participative tools that apply to different propositions within the communication: 1) Elements that encourage debate – including forums, chat services, citizens' blogs and comments on news and special sections with the option of expressing their views; 2) Tools for sharing content through social bookmarking such as Delicious, Digg and Menéame, and links to social media such as Twitter and Facebook, where users exchange and distribute content; 3) Applications for sending videos, pictures, texts and

audio to the media's production departments; 4) Elements for evaluating news, such as polls and ratings through which a news story might be considered or endorsed.

I have revised previous research on participation, interactivity and audience in broadcasting, with specific reference to some empirical studies on audience participation in audiovisual media (Council of Europe, 2009). Using a methodology of exploratory analysis, over one hundred activities of audience participation were examined in twenty commercial and public Spanish television channels and its websites, during six weeks from October to December 2011. The selected channels are included in the appendix. My analysis focused on participative initiatives found on the websites and specific sections aimed at encouraging participation, including all activities and tools that foster audience involvement through the screen and the web.

Activities include the participation in the program, the interaction with the channel or a mediator, the communication among users and their collaboration in content creation. I examine the field in which the participation is projected and the use of the interactive tools, following Sánchez's proposal (2010). I dismissed the use of quantitative analysis tools and instead we opted for a qualitative analysis of the programs and their websites. When applying this analysis, I did not differentiate the participation activities according to geographical criteria, nor by the public or private nature of the broadcasters or other specific criteria. Among the major weaknesses of the method are the limitations of generalizing the research results, and the difficulty of identifying the most popular participation activities, due to the lack of quantitative analysis.

### **Results: Audience roles according to participation strategies**

The analysis of the case studies of audience participation in Spanish television channels allows the drawing up of a classification of strategies which are strongly related to at least eight different visions of the public and its practical consequences: consumers, players, followers, commentators, citizens, collaborators, benefactors and activists. In this section, I show a selection of the cases of participation which illustrate these visions and I offer some insight into their implications.

#### ***Consumers***

When broadcast managers regard viewers as consumers, they tend to increase participation through a variety of initiatives geared towards buying products, interacting with commercials, sending SMS messages, participating in draws, betting and pay-per-view. Some networks pay special attention to the audience's consumption trends and attempt to foster them among targeted population segments.

Ten out of the twenty analyzed websites provide sections for online shopping and merchandising. The national public channel TVE offers DVDs with in-house series, and musical shows of RTVE's orchestra concerts. In the "Shop" of Catalanian TV3, users may buy a particular television programme DVD, a CD with melodies of children's programmes, a

game of the programme “El cazador de setas”, books and other articles. In this way, the channels foster the acquisition of products from its own brand and also as a new source of income. Cuatro’s website launched a section which is specialised in travel. Users can buy trips to different parts of the world at special rates. In a section called “Reportero por un día”, they are encouraged to submit the pictures and videos of their trips and to share their experiences. Those networks most commercially oriented, as it is the case of Telecinco, include a wide variety of products in their online shops, such as barbecues, watches, cologne, beauty treatments, etc.

A different participation activity consists of organizing draws open to the general public. Aragón TV offers the viewers within its regional territory the possibility of participating in the draw for Christmas gifts or concert tickets. The channel broadcasts spots which promote the draw and viewers might participate by calling in or sending an SMS. The programme *FutbolCat*, broadcast by Catalonia’s Canal 33, shows the draw of several prize winners among those viewers who have contributed to the programme. Galicia’s TVG gives away book prizes to the winners of several quizzes among those who participate by sending Twitter messages.

### **Players**

In game shows, such as “El cubo” (Cuatro), “Pasapalabra” (Telecinco) and “Saber y ganar” (La 2), members of the public, television personalities or celebrities, sometimes as part of a team, play a game which involves answering questions or facing trials usually for money and prizes. With emerging interactive television technologies, the game experience is not limited to participants inside the studio. Spectators watching the show can also play along and they even play together with other spectators, just as the participants in the studio compete or collaborate with each other. For example, in Antena 3’s “Atrapa un millón”, viewers can simultaneously play in the website while the game show is being broadcast.

Presenter-led quiz programmes are hosted by one or more presenters in a studio. Participation in these is generally accomplished by calling a premium-rate telephone number, such as “La ruleta de la suerte” (Antena 3) or “Taxi” (Canal Sur). The presenter’s role is two-fold: to encourage participation in the show and to explain the rules of play, to entertain viewers during quieter times, and to speak to participants when they come through to the studio. TV3’s website provides a game area, with quizzes about the channel’s in-house dramas, a competition about the results of the Formula 1 World Championship, a cartoon game about the characters of two comedy shows, *Polònia* and *Crackòvia* or a trip to the *Supecity*, based on the children’s channel Super3. Online users at TV3 also may engage in quizzes about current affairs, sports and culture.

Voting is a strategy which has been increasingly adopted by some reality shows, to hook in viewers and let them influence the outcome of the programme. Andalusia’s Canal Sur invites the public to vote for its favourite participant in each edition of its singing contest “Se llama Copla”. After the first choice by the official jury, the candidate who receives the

lowest amount of votes from the audience is expelled from the show. Therefore, the audience is awarded the final casting vote, to assure the continuation or dismissal of any contestant. Many of the programmes which use voting also at the same time offer options for viewers to participate in a personalized way; they also develop a rhetoric which intends to spark off voting motivation and to influence the show's outcome. Some shows also permit free entry via a website or via a premium rate text service. Voting allows television channels to generate additional income, by appealing to viewers' decisive role in influencing the result of the program.

### ***Fans***

Social media are providing instant feedback to television executives about the level of acceptance of the programs as they are broadcast, also becoming a thermometer to measure the level of audience engagement. Fans' involvement usually generates support and visibility for a specific program. The CCMA (TV3) uses social media in innovative ways for promoting its programs. Dozens of shows have launched their own Facebook profiles and fan communities, which provide exclusive interviews with cast members or tickets for the show's premiere. Viewers might share videos and pictures of their stars, join special fan clubs, comment in real time on the outcome of the program or follow their favorite actors on Twitter. TVE is also frequently using social media to increase audience participation with their comments in sport events, such as the Champions League, music shows (Eurovision song contest) and feedback about the most popular drama series.

Media stars try to foster participation among their fans, using different strategies. Sometimes the fans are keen to know details about their personal lives and they like to interact with them. Two of Cuatro's sports newscasters, known as "los Manolos", asked their fans via Twitter to send them videos about the games they play and to share their views on the development of the National Football League and to rate the players' performance in the matches. They received thousands of messages.

Some channels are promoting fan clubs. For example, La Sexta offers the possibility of joining "The Community", which gathers viewers of the different programs. In this way, groups are created among users who might send ideas, sketches, videos or creations to the shows that producers and might share their thoughts with other members of the Community. Those who interact through the web page might receive invitations to the programs, tickets for concerts and comedy shows or merchandising. This initiative allows them to strengthen the relationship with the users and to receive their feedback.

### ***Commentators***

Participation by users can indeed improve the effectiveness of gaining information and, under certain conditions, active engagement in the public discussion and deliberation of matters of public concern is enhanced through the use of online media. The websites of some channels (EITB, TV3, Telecinco) allow users to comment on the stories published

online. These comments often deal with aspects of stories that had not been considered in the original publication or broadcast. In addition, insights from the first comments are likely to be useful for other people in similar circumstances, and could spur some corrective actions on their part. Furthermore, the comments highlight considerably diverse viewpoints from which people interpret the same event. Therefore, spectators' comments can improve the effectiveness of a news item, so that people who read comments on that piece will get a more complete picture about the event, because the comments would have analyzed it from multiple viewpoints. Most social networking websites allow people to create discussion forums and exchange messages with each other. In some TV newsrooms, such as Antena 3, TVE or TV3, journalists use crowd-sourcing techniques in social networks like Twitter.

Some examples of social television services include the integration of Twitter updates during a live video stream and Facebook applications which allow commenting while watching video content. The news analysis talk show "La Noche en 24 Horas", in RTVE's Canal 24 Horas, brings in audience participation through Facebook: comments on the news events and a selection of viewers' opinions are included and discussed in the show. The daily newscast of "La 2 Noticias" also relies on users' comments on Facebook as a source of criticism, suggestions and story ideas while the news program is broadcast. It has reached over one hundred thousand followers in this social network. Rteve.es regularly publishes polls that encourage users to give their opinions about different current events. These are open to all visitors and they can participate without registering first. Similarly, Telecinco.com news stories can also be commented on and rated with a score from one to five stars.

Antena 3 daily newscasts ask viewers to vote and comment on a "question of the day", usually related to an important news event. The result of the poll is aired on its newscasts, and at the end of the program the anchor reads some of the viewers' comments received via Facebook, Twitter and the website. Inserting comments by the public within the body of the news suggests a significant advance in audience-generated content management. They are starting to be seen – at least from a formal perspective – as a contribution comparable to those made by news professionals. This practice points to a change in the journalistic discourse and a more symmetrical relationship between the television channels and their audiences. However, it is worth clarifying that this does not mean a loss of control over the journalistic discourse as it is the broadcaster – represented by the editor – that continues to act as gatekeeper for the news, determining which comments are included and in relation to which stories.

### ***Citizens***

The strategy of citizens' involvement intends to involve viewers in communicative, cultural, social and political processes which strengthen their rights as individuals and also spark their implication in the social sphere. In this way, the emphasis is placed on citizens' contribution to supervising the decisions, policies and messages of political leaders and government officials, as well as taking an active role in the outcome of current affairs.

During the electoral campaign of November 2011, the national public corporation RTVE invited members of the public to send in their questions for the political candidates who were interviewed on its radio and television newscasts. Individuals sent their questions by text or video message; a number of them were selected by a group of journalists and then were formulated in the interviews conducted with the electoral candidates from the different political parties. These interviews were broadcast in the news shows and also published in *Rtve.es*, where users could comment on them and engage in lively debates about the issues which should be part of the electoral campaign.

Three Spanish public channels (TVE, TV3 and Canal Sur) have developed the role of the Audience's Ombudsperson, as a mechanism to connect with the audience and increase its participation. It is a tool of journalistic self-regulation, in order to answer the suggestions and petitions of spectators and users and to resolve complaints about precision, impartiality, truthfulness, plurality and balance in the programming, thus inviting all the communication professionals as well as the audience to engage in a reflection on the public service work carried out by the media.

On February 2, 2006, RTVE created its Ombudsperson Office, which has developed guidelines for the improvement of quality of content; the respect for the dignity of persons; the right to privacy, honour and reputation; the protection of children; and the promotion of equality and tolerance. It has its own statute and a specific section on the web. The current Ombudswoman, the journalist Elena Sánchez, attends to comments from users, collects relevant explanations and issues assessments through the web site and her programme, *RTVE Responde* (RTVE responds), in addition to answering personally whoever contacts her. According to data from the Ombudswoman Office, she attends to an average of 2,500 consultations every quarter.

TV3 created the role of the Audience's Ombudsperson in 2008. Currently, the journalist Adelina Castillejo carries out this job, with a permanent area on the Internet, and answers the audience live from the programs "TVist", on TV3, and "Hem de parlar", of Catalunya Ràdio. The Ombudswoman watches over the rights of the spectators of *Televisió de Catalunya*, the listeners of the radio stations of *Catalunya Ràdio*, and the users of their websites. She heads Audience Enquiries, a service that receives queries and suggestions; researches claims about the veracity, rigour, plurality and balance of programmes; and invites broadcast professionals and the audience to exercise reflection on the public service nature of the media. It is the expression of the commitment to the defence and the exercise of the rights of the citizens on the part of the Catalan Broadcasting Corporation (CCMA).

In Canal Sur, the Audience Ombudsman was also created in 2008. The current Ombudsman, Patricio Gutiérrez, publishes an online weekly report dealing with users' complaints, such as the moderation of forums, mistakes in the titles screened in some newscasts or criticism about particular programming decisions.

Some networks also seek viewers' complicity in debate programs. RTVE's "Tengo una pregunta para usted", based on the French format "J'ai une question à vous poser"

broadcast by TF1, was an enriching experience for the participants and the production team. TVE launched the program on 27 March 2007, and to date ten national shows and five regional shows have been broadcast. In the program, a panel of one hundred guests selected from the population, pose their questions to a political or social leader. “Tengo una pregunta para usted” was a huge success of citizens’ participation in public affairs, connecting with audience interest and making politicians answer tough questions about the issues that truly concerned citizens, which are not always echoed in the media. Viewers’ questions were a fresh resource in the program, for they were related to their daily experiences, and not to the more official or established viewpoints. One of the show’s conductors, Lorenzo Milá, explained that his role consisted of “providing a voice, manage the participants’ interventions, but having it clear that the stars were those citizens invited to the program” (Milá, 2009).

The audience gave high ratings to this format, which became a milestone of democratic engagement. As some critics pointed out, viewers seemed to identify themselves with those who represented them in the studio and asked tough or simple questions of the politicians. At the same time, politicians had to take a “down to earth” role, as they tried to answer the concerns of ordinary folk. The shows were also broadcast live through [www.rtve.es](http://www.rtve.es), and users could vote for their preferred questions; contents could be shared through Del.icio.us, Digg, Facebook, Menéame, MySpace, Twitter and other social media.

### ***Collaborators***

The strategy of collaborative participation is based on the use of different platforms to distribute content in a more efficient way, to develop a more fluid conversation with the public. Broadcasters invite their audiences to send in audiovisual contributions. This shows that they take advantage of the possibilities of new technologies such as home video cameras and mobile tools that can record images and sound to let the public produce audiovisual material with no prior knowledge. Users are encouraged to actively contribute with content in some programs, thus increasing the value-chain of production. This is the case with some comedy specials, which show videos of monologues sent in by members of the audience, and newscasts which broadcast news clips recorded by eye witnesses.

Some channels provide specific sections for pictures sent by the users. Weather sections of Canal 9, RTVE and TV3 show pictures which have been sent by viewers: they depict climatic conditions in their geographical areas. Sometimes they request pictures on a particular topic, such as “the image of the summer”, “a Christmas picture” or showing adverse weather conditions. The Basque channel EitB launched a blog called *ZuKZri*. The materials sent by the users, related to stories or events that occur in their own town, are selected and some of the best pieces are broadcast in the newscast and posted in EitB’s website. Extremadura Television organized a literary contest, with the motto “Taste your creativity”, which invited viewers to send short fictional stories of less than one hundred

words. Rtve.es does scheduled interviews with special guests who offer the audience the chance to participate by sending in questions.

In November 2006, La 2 (TVE) launched “Cámara abierta 2.0.”, devoted to the Internet as a platform of news, creation and communication. The show relies on viewers’ participation, for they can send videos which illustrate their uses of technology. In a section called “Tú ruedas”, the producers provide people with a camera so that they can record 24 hours which are especially significant in their lives.

### ***Benefactors***

Some channels have launched solidarity campaigns which seek to get the audience involved as well as obtaining financial support for specific charities or projects. The Valencian Broadcasting Corporation promotes the active involvement of viewers with the *Gent per Gent* foundation. This is a non-profit organisation, of a cultural, scientific and social nature, which cooperates towards the development and promotion of research with the prime objective of financing biomedical research projects through fund-raising activities. This project involves citizens in the Valencia region, enabling them to understand the reality that other people face and consequently contributing to increase people’s awareness, participation and responsibility in the improvement of social welfare. *Gent per Gent* awareness activities come to a head every year in Canal 9’s annual television programme, in which everyone can make donations destined for biomedical research projects.

The Antena 3 Group created in 2008 the campaign “Ponle freno” (Step on the breaks), devoted to road safety. This initiative has fulfilled the objective of becoming a social movement, an active and decisive force in order to promote measures which have a great potential to decrease road fatalities. In 2009, Antena 3 launched a citizens’ platform to support the “Ponle freno” campaign, which developed best-practice road safety strategies focused upon the prevention of serious injury and death crashes in spite of human fallibility. Users might also send their own suggestions to this campaign, through Antena 3’s website and social media. After the success of the campaign for better road signs and elimination of black spots approved by the Government, “Ponle freno” achieved the assigning of money from fines to road safety projects. In 2010, the initiative got a Renewal Plan from the authorities to get road signs in poor condition repaired and focussed its efforts on three specific risk groups: motorcyclists, pedestrians and elderly people. In addition, “Ponle freno” organizes its annual Fun Run for Road Safety, an event in which the funds generated by the race are assigned to road safety actions via the Antena 3 Foundation.

TV3’s La Marató Foundation was set up in 1996 by the Catalan Broadcasting Corporation (CCMA) with the mission of encouraging and promoting biomedical research of high quality, as well as social awareness-raising about the illnesses featured in TV3’s La Marató program, through campaigns of citizen participation and action involving dissemination and education. The Foundation has become the main link between citizens and La Marató. Thus, it works especially to obtain the participation of a large number of

educational and civic centres in awareness-raising and dissemination campaigns. Since 1996, TV3's La Marató has raised nearly 100 million euros, of which 77 million have been distributed among a total of 535 research projects developed in various hospitals or university centres. More than 1,300 researchers have benefitted directly from the financial support to continue developing their studies.

### **Activists**

The open environment associated with the Internet gives rise to new ways of organization and participation, which are supported by social activists. In the public sphere, the use of the Web by social movements is opening new channels of communication, association and political action. In this context, activism based on or directed against the television networks is strengthening citizen participation, with greater visibility for their aims and actions. Both live television and real-time information are converging to reinforce each other and in the process are creating something new. Viewers become participants, and participants are now connected, which has implications for the way content is consumed and criticized by individuals and platforms for activist. Understanding that the conversation surrounding an event may be just as important as the event itself, television companies can leverage this growing trend to their advantage.

A couple of recent cases reveal the power of social media to influence a program's fate. In October 2011, Telecinco's talk show *La Noria*, which mixes gossip and political analysis with guests and commentators, invited the mother of Francisco Javier García, "El Cuco", a kid who had been charged and jailed for his part in covering up the murder of a teenage girl in Seville. When it was learned that García's mother was going to appear in exchange for 10,000 euros, many people took to the social networks asking for viewers to boycott the program. "El Cuco," who was a minor when the murder took place, has been cleared of rape and murder charges. As a result of the boycott campaign, *La Noria* lost a chunk of its advertising. Most of the larger advertising companies, such as Campofrío, Puleva, President, Bayer and Nestlé, all decided to pull their ads from the popular talk show. This exodus of advertisers from Telecinco "La Noria" resulted in the network's cancellation of the program in December.

In January 2012, Spain's largest viewers' association, ATR, asked advertisers to withdraw from those programs which violate the law of protection of children during special programming hours (from 17.00 to 20.00pm). They specifically mentioned "Sálvame", a talk show broadcast daily by Telecinco in the afternoon, and they said they have received many complaints about the contents of this show, as it deals with the lives of famous people in a sensationalist way. ATR's campaign to boycott "Sálvame" would negatively influence Telecinco's image and there have been talks to try to stop it. With over 20,000 members, ATR was set up by a group of citizens who believed that viewers had the right to give their opinion and influence television content. It urges public and commercial television channels

to practise self-regulation, and requests them to comply with the standards of pluralism, quality and respect for minorities, among others.

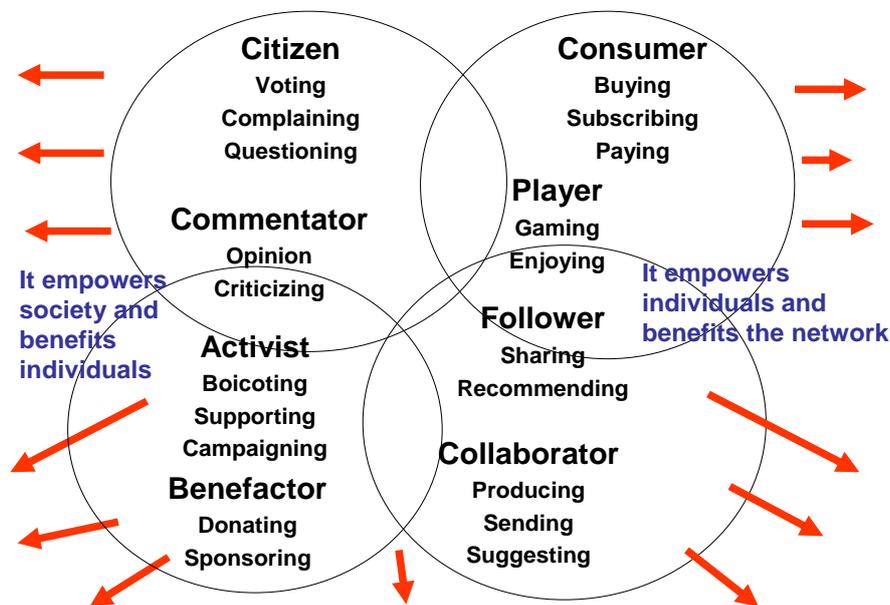
## **Conclusions**

We have seen that participation is understood as feedback that is empowered by technological innovations and presumably enables a great variety of audience contributions. These range from facilitating the public's access to content through non-linear offers and promoting viewers' engagement with live shows through mobile phones and social networks to increasingly interactive services offered via the broadcasters' websites. Thus, the networks are adapting to rapid changes in the current digital multichannel environment, as well as to changes in the viewing and consuming patterns and expectations of the audience.

The activities analyzed in this article embody different multiplatform participation strategies developed by Spanish public and commercial broadcasters. As is shown in **Graphic 1**, all these strategies are related to eight conceptions of the audience: consumers, players, followers, commentators, citizens, collaborators, benefactors and activists. It is clear that a strategy oriented towards the most commercial aspects, such as increasing consumption, buying products and online gaming, tends to place a higher value on getting a source of income for the network and receiving a material reward for the viewer.

Some of the examples provided also show that the objective of a wider democratic participation of individuals, the so-called "citizen strategy", emphasizes the social contributions viewers can make to improve the quality of programming, to build up social values in the public sphere and to increase pluralism by exchanging different points of view. Some of these activities, such as the Program "Tengo una pregunta para usted" or the work of the Audience Ombudspersons, increase the transparency of media processes and also give viewers and users the opportunity to discuss, comment and exchange opinions. Citizens also might experience the functioning of the political system and the complexities of political actions as well as questioning directly their public representatives.

Followers and commentators tend to raise problems or criticisms about program content, thus providing a better picture of the audience and its interests. Collaborators are becoming a source of additional content generated by the users, as they increase a program's dynamism and the proximity with the television professionals. At the same time, benefactors generally demonstrate more altruistic social interests and they get involved in a committed way with certain causes, while activists play an active role in criticising television content. However, participation activities promoted by Spanish public and commercial broadcasters are still far of reaching a wide interaction which would satisfy the demands of the most active members of the audience, who perhaps are finding in other media more intense and complete ways of participation. Broadcasters' success will therefore depend on the extent to which they manage to reach those individuals who tend to be more committed to communication processes and media production, with projects and strategies which will meet their interests and expectations.



**Graphic 1:** Network participation strategies. **Source:** Author's own research.

The networks' online activities resemble in many ways their television strategies. Although efforts to facilitate dialogue are recognizable in websites through the development of different spaces of interaction, there is a lack of information about how broadcasters manage the contributions of the audience. If media operators want to build a better online communication with their audience and establish a fruitful arena for opinion exchange, they need to create more transparent tools of participation and enable an improved space of opinion exchange between users and program producers. Likewise, they should guarantee a competent capacity to process all the contributions received.

"Social television" manages to integrate social media, websites and audiovisual content, allowing a greater social interaction among viewers who share the same experience. In this way, a social flux of content exchange is intensified by users' recommendations, which tends to transform the very structure of audiovisual content production and its acceptance by the audience. However, television is still a passive medium – one that requires the spectator to remain silent and still – and most viewers watch the programs without interacting on its content, format or programming schedules.

In the framework of audiovisual convergence, broadcasters are encouraged to design strategies that help reinforce their brand and to increase their visibility in a global market with new comers and growth of audience fragmentation. As participation devices get more sophisticated, further research is needed to explore the level of interaction among producers and viewers, as it evolves in a more collaborative environment. In this way, audience engagement with online and television platforms goes beyond a mere strategy to

connect with the public and gain legitimacy, but it becomes a necessary condition for the survival of interconnected television.

### **Biographical note:**

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### **Appendix:**

Spanish television channels which have been analysed in this study:

3/24

7RM

Antena 3

Aragón TV

Canal 24 horas (TVE)

Canal 33

Canal 9

Canal Sur

CLMTV

Cuatro

EITB

Extremadura TV

IB3 Televisió

La 2 (TVE)

La Sexta

Telecinco

Telemadrid

TV3

TVE1

TVG