

## **Social curation in audience communities: UDC (user-distributed content) in the networked media ecosystem**

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### **Abstract:**

The focus of this article is on the involvement of audience communities in distributing content produced by media companies. The networked media ecosystem and the tools provided by the legacy media and social media companies enable the effortless sharing of such media content that people find relevant, funny or interesting enough to be worth for others also to read, listen or watch. The article contributes to audience studies by theoretically and empirically elaborating on these practices as social curation. Results from a qualitative study among the personnel of a Finnish newspaper indicate that engaging the audience in social curation is more important than involving the audience in content production with or for the company.

**Keywords:** Social curation; user-distributed content; media industry; audience; Facebook.

### **Introduction**

In contemporary media culture, the consumption of media content in the online environment is increasingly a communal and shared social experience. Online media and the particular applications and services designed for sharing media content enable and encourage the audience members to share their media consumption experiences. As a result, the importance of audience communities in distributing and marketing professional media content is growing (Newman & Dutton 2011). In the US, for instance, up to 75% of the online news audience consume news forwarded to them through email or social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter (Purcell et al. 2010). Similarly, according to the study by Hermida et al. (2012), two out of five Canadians who use social networking sites receive news content on a daily basis from family, friends and acquaintances in social

media. A recent survey conducted in Finland (Matikainen & Villi 2012) shows how 17% of Finns consume news distributed by others online on a daily basis.

In this article, the plural *audience communities* is deliberately used when stressing that, instead of a mass audience, the social consumption of media content takes place in smaller, networked audience communities that maintain contact through several channels and communication tools (Marshall 2004, 103.) One's Facebook friends are an example of such a community. A close point of reference is the concept of 'networked publics', especially when it is used to refer to a networked collection of peers (boyd 2011). In social media, the dynamics of publication and distribution of news are being reshaped by networked publics (Hermida et al. 2012). In the same sense, audience communities can be active in disseminating media content. However, it should be noted that, like networked publics, the members of audience communities have different social ties to the group and also varying levels of interest in the media consumption activities. Thus, it is problematic to compare audience communities with each other or generalize how media content is consumed in audience communities.

This article contributes to audience studies by theoretically and empirically elaborating on the social consumption of media content as *social curation*. In practice, social curation can be accomplished by providing links to online media content by using e-mail messages, tweeting, tagging, 'recommending' (Facebook Recommend button), '+1ing' (Google +1 button) or by using social reader apps. In addition, specialized online services for curating digital content have emerged, such as Storify and Pinterest. Social curation is well attuned to the nature of the Internet as an environment that enables efficient horizontal communication between people (Lüders 2007, 194-195). The people the curators serve might be their friends or those of weaker connections who follow them on Twitter, for example. The curated content can be produced by professionals and amateurs alike, but in this article the focus is specifically on the role of the audience as *curators of content produced in media companies*.

Social curation of media content is not a clearly articulated theoretical model, but rather a conceptual theme describing the networked distribution of media content by adding qualitative judgement and imbuing the content with personal and social significance. To better understand the nature of social curation as a social practice, analogies from art curation can be drawn (Villi et al. 2012). In art curation, the curator is the linchpin in a system that imbues art with aesthetic significance, and curatorial decisions can catapult an object from obscurity to public exposure (Joy & Sherry 2003, 163). In the same vein, social curation as a practice can extend the circulation of various kinds of online media content.

Social curation is also theoretically closely linked to the discussion on audience/consumer/user<sup>#</sup> roles (Livingstone 2008; Merrin 2009; Banks & Potts 2010; Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010) and user-generated content (UGC) (Thurman 2008; Napoli 2010; Wardle & Williams 2010; Singer et al. 2011). Actually, social curation is a primary example of user-*distributed* content (UDC)(Lietsala & Sirkkunen 2008 17; Napoli 2009), as social curation is

essentially about horizontal distribution of content. In general, the participatory culture (Deuze 2007; Domingo et al. 2008; van Dijck 2009) serves as a macro-theoretical background for the discussion on social curation in this article.

By elaborating the concept of social curation, it is possible to shed light on the role of audience and consumer communities (Pralhad & Ramaswamy 2004, 8) in the practices of distributing and marketing media content, and understand content sharing as consumption phenomena on the Internet (Belk 2010, 730). As many media scholars have recently argued, for contemporary media corporations, engaging audience members in communal activities is more important than having them participate in content production (Domingo et al. 2008; Thurman 2008; Wardle & Williams 2010). Social curation as a phenomenon is currently inadequately understood and studied, despite the fact that it represents a strategically important change in the business environment for media corporations.

The focus in the article is on the media industry (Picard 2005; Chan-Olmstead 2006; Erdal 2009; Marshall 2009; Holt & Perren 2009) and in particular on news companies. The curating audience itself is not studied, but rather how media companies conceive the role of the participatory audience. For this, qualitative, in-depth interview studies were conducted with the staff of a Finnish daily newspaper. The researchers conducted personal, semi-structured interviews, including both journalists and marketing and development personnel. Empirical research in media companies on the perceptions of the role of the participatory audience has been scarce (Heinonen 2008, 18-19; Gollmitzer 2011), although studies such as Singer et al. (2011) have focused on the attitudes and views of journalists on the audience. Therefore, I consider it to be important to shed light on the significance of social curation especially from the viewpoint of a media company.

The article works toward a theoretically more sophisticated and empirically well-grounded conceptualization of social curation in the context of the media industry. Drawing from previous research, it argues that social curation as a framework is crucial in assessing the role of the audience in the participatory culture. With empirical data, it demonstrates how for a media company, social curation is a form of co-operation with the audience, and how social curation serves increasingly as a distribution channel for professional media content. Social curation is also valued as a 'radar' for exposing the agenda and interests of the audience. The main conclusion in the paper is that for media companies, engaging the audience communities in social curation is more important than involving the audience in content production with or for the companies.

### **Social curation**

Curation is essentially about people adding their qualitative judgement to whatever is being gathered and organized, as Rosenbaum (2011, 3-4) has argued. In difference to mere distribution, curation adds to the process value judgement, critique, assessment and selection, in a manner that is familiar from the curation of artworks (Rugg & Sedgwick 2007). Curation as a practice and concept has extended beyond galleries and museums into

different fields of consumption in the creative industries, as the words *curate* and *curator* have become increasingly common in describing activities such as selecting and presenting (Schlatter 2010). In the context of the media, curation is about people aggregating, sharing, ranking, juxtaposing and critiquing content on a variety of platforms (Clark & Aufderheide 2009, 6-7). In the literature on computer science (Ball et al. 2010; Goble et al. 2010), social curation is usually discussed in relation to data management. More explicitly, digital curation entails the management and preservation of digital material to ensure accessibility over the long-term (Higgins 2011, 79). This article parts ways with the data management approach and rather focuses on the aspects of mediation and dissemination when discussing curation (Gaskill 2010; Liu 2010; Ammann 2011). More specifically, curation is studied as an activity that centres on media content.

What makes social curation a specifically *social activity* is that it entails communicative interactions and relationships between two or more individuals. Social curation is about people distributing and marketing media content in their networks by making personal referrals and guiding their peers to consume content that they consider interesting and relevant. Social curation is involved in the shift from individualized and personalized media consumption toward consumption as a networked practice (Jenkins 2006, 244-255).

Social curators are knowledge brokers that interpret, publicize and endorse content. Thus, there is always an aspect of recommendation involved. This links social curation with word-of-mouth (WOM) communication (Brown et al. 2007; Kozinets et al. 2010). However, the difference between the two is that social curation is also about distribution, in that the access to the digital, Internet-based content itself is often provided with the recommendation. For instance, the recommendation of an online article by using the Facebook plugin offers a direct link to the article. By contrast, in WOM, the content is not necessarily distributed, just an awareness of its existence by means of expressing an opinion. This is comparable with how in the context of art, the curator provides the content, as opposed to an art reviewer or art critic who only offers information about the content (Villi et al. 2012).

In a sense, the filtering of online content, for example by using social plugins like the Facebook Recommend-button, is reminiscent of blogging in its early stages, only now the activity is more multifaceted and varied. Social curation can be both about gathering and aggregation (as in a Twitter feed or Facebook wall) and more direct delivery of content (sending links by e-mail). Curation differs from automatized and algorithm-based content aggregation (as in Google News), because it includes the element of human judgement.

It is important to note that social curation of media content is not a new social phenomenon; the sharing of news predates the Internet (Hermida et al. 2012). Audience members have for long shared information about media content that they have heard on the radio, seen on television or read in a newspaper or magazine. However, as already noted, in the online environment it is much easier to share the (digital) content itself, not

just provide verbal descriptions of it.

### **Submarines of the media sea**

Media contents are in constant flux. Manovich (2008, 203) uses the term 'media mobility' to describe a state where media contents never arrive at some final destination as in the mass communication model. Instead, they continue to move between sites, people and devices, and as they move, they accumulate comments and discussions (*ibid.*). Similarly, Jenkins (2009) uses the term 'spreadable media' to describe how the participatory network culture facilitates the sharing of content (see also Terranova 2004, 2). The transformations in the media ecosystem include the blurring of the range of places where people can encounter, interact with and contribute to media content (Gauntlett 2009, 147).

The changes in media consumption leading toward a more participatory and 'mobile' media culture have caused researchers to question the feasibility of the concept of the audience. According to Couldry (2009, 438), one-way senders, specialist media producers, and one-way receivers, 'mere' consumers or audience members, have become less common in their pure form, while hybrid sender/receivers are now more prevalent. This change challenges the ontology on which the mass communication paradigm was based (*ibid.*) Thus, being an 'audience' only captures one segment of the contemporary media experience, as an increasing part of the relationship with the media is 'doing': messaging, sharing, tagging, tweeting, Facebooking, chatting, commenting, reviewing, editing, posting, uploading (Merrin 2009, 24). In particular, the Internet problematizes the clear distinctions between audience, user, consumer and producer (Ross & Nightingale 2003, 162; Livingstone 1999, 63; Livingstone 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2010, 268).

The interweaving of media production and consumption can be expressed by the concepts of prosumerism (Toffler 1980) and produsage (Bruns 2007). Or perhaps 'prodience' or 'praudience' (producer-audience) would be even more apposite terms, expressing how audiencehood is augmented with production-related aspects. However, co-productory audiencehood (Jenkins 2006) does not cover all sectors of the media industry, as, for example, in the news media context the audience members still mainly consume news instead of directly producing them (Hujanen & Pietikäinen 2004; Larsson 2011). The core of the journalistic process, the actual production of the story, is still much out of the reach of the audience (Heinonen 2008, 97; Domingo et al. 2008; Singer et al. 2011). Overwhelmingly, journalists have remained journalists and audiences have remained audiences (Wardle & Williams 2010, 792; O'Sullivan & Heinonen 2008, 367-368; Hermida 2011). For many media companies, the audience is thus mainly an object, not a group of subjects.

In addition, only a small part of the audience actually creates new media content, so the large majority consists still of viewers, readers and listeners (van Dijck 2009, 47), and not viewer-producers, reader-producers or listener-producers. The influential visibility of a small active minority does not concern only social media, but also reality television, letters to the

editor pages and television SMS chats. But even if the lurkers do not participate in media content production, they can otherwise take part in the practices of the media industry more actively than earlier, for example by distributing and sharing content. Many people in social media are in a sense 'submarines in the media sea': they surface only episodically, but nevertheless they are present. Paradoxically, the 'submarine audience' is more visible than any audience before (Andrejevic 2008; Cohen 2008, 7; van Dijck & Nieborg 2009 865; Guo & Chan-Olmstead 2011).

This view entails an important goal of this article, which is to promote the need for the reconsideration of what constitutes audience participation, by going beyond the idea of content production as participation. Media scholars have argued that for contemporary media corporations, engaging, encouraging and assisting consumers in the circulation and distribution of media content is more important than having them participate in content production (Singer et al. 2011; Hermida et al. 2012). The audience participates in the processes of the media industry by consuming and distributing media content and enclosing it with social relations.

According to van Dijck (2009, 49), 'the user's role as a data provider is infinitely more important than his role as a content provider'. The communication of the audience has become a revenue generator for media organizations (Napoli 2010, 511-512) when the members of the audience lure their peers to consume media content, which then leads to more page views and thereby more income for the media companies from advertisers. The audience can now have an audience (Napoli 2009); they do not need the legacy media to act as an intermediary, but can directly have access to the potential audience. The audience can function as a narrowcast network. In this sense, interactivity is productive (Andrejevic 2009, 47), and media companies can capitalise on the social relations of people (van Dijck & Nieborg 2009, 865-866).

### **Content as social glue**

Social media have been always much about the sharing of content with others (Lietsala & Sirkkunen 2008, 19) and 'collaborative filtering' (Bruns 2007); the recent change is affiliated strongly to the tools for sharing content that have become more common and convenient. It can be assumed that these nifty sharing tools, such as those provided by Facebook and Twitter, have for their part led to the increased popularity of social curation. For example, even though in the United States 20-30% of the traffic to the legacy media online sites comes still via search engines, the social media services are increasing their significance in bringing in readers (*Economist* 2011; Guo & Chan-Olmstead 2011). Likewise, in Britain, the BBC, *Financial Times*, *Guardian* and the *Economist* have seen a sharp rise in the number of referrals from Facebook, Twitter and other social networks. Search engines are thus being partly replaced by social media as a portal to news and other information. (Newman & Dutton, 2011.)

Importantly, media content is not only curated actively, but socially curated content

is also actively consumed. According to a US study (Purcell et al. 2010, 40), when news is passed along by peers, 38% of the audience read the material all or most of the time, 37% read it sometimes, and only 23% say they hardly read it. Purcell et al. (*ibid.*, 41) also note how, in their study, 44% of online news consumers said that one of the factors they use in choosing where to get news online is whether it is easy to share the site's content with others (see also Hermida et al. 2012).

The degree to which media companies facilitate social sharing might thus become an important factor in the consumption of their content. In addition to the tools and the platforms provided to the audience, it is probable that also the content itself has an effect on the level and magnitude of social curation. Professional media content can be regarded as acting as a fuel for the sustenance of the social relations in social media: the content is social glue, it is the basic component of social interactions online. Therefore, media companies should practise – in addition to search engine optimization – ‘curation optimization’, in an effort to make content as spreadable as possible and encourage peer-to-peer distribution.

## **Method**

In order to illustrate the theoretical arguments and study how social curation is made sense of among media professionals, the article utilizes results from a qualitative in-depth interview study carried out in a Finnish newspaper. The newspaper was chosen for the study because it is an active player in the online environment; the online edition of the newspaper is among the five most popular Finnish websites (which, interestingly, all are media companies' websites). Of the different social media platforms and services, Facebook is a big phenomenon also in Finland with almost two million users in a country of 5.5 million inhabitants. Of the other global services, Twitter is much less popular. As of late 2012, almost 90% of the population is Internet users. Broadband Internet is widely available, and the amount of mobile broadband connections per capita is among the top three countries in the world.

The studied newspaper represents well such a legacy media company that has a notable presence in social media. In addition to news, the online edition offers a variety of services: theme pages, videos, platforms for online discussion, online games and archive services. Throughout its existence the newspaper has been considered as a discussion generator and a channel delivering meaningful news to people living their everyday lives. This position has been supported by their conception of journalism as an activity to create emotion and interest.

The empirical data consists of personal interviews with eighteen staff members. They comprise roughly one seventh of the total staff of the newspaper. In order to assure the full anonymity of the interviewees (as requested by the interviewees and the newspaper), their name or position on the newspaper staff is not revealed. The sampling procedure for the interviews was purposive, as the objective was to achieve maximum variation by

interviewing both journalists and marketing and development personnel. The interviews, lasting approximately one and a half hours each, took place between fall 2010 and spring 2011. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated into English from Finnish. The study relied solely on research interviews and did not include ethnographic observation.

A semi-structured model was used for the interviews. A set of questions divided into themes was presented to all of the interviewees. The dialogue during the interviews was staged according to a thematic, topic-centred structure (Mason 2002, 62–63). The researchers wanted the interviewees to continue their thoughts along new lines as well, and asked them to elaborate on certain themes that seemed interesting, and to express reflective and critical views. The interviewees were also free to introduce new topics into the conversation. The main interest was in the perceptions and interpretations of the interviewees (*ibid.*, 56; Silverman 2001, 83) in a situation where media companies are considered to sense pressure to move toward more profound forms of co-operation with the audience.

The accumulation of the empirical data and its analysis were systematic. The study proceeded with a considerable amount of textual data, moving from analysis and coding of parts of the data set (single interviews) to developing a holistic understanding of the practices and views expressed by the interviewees. By applying thematic analysis (Eskola & Suoranta 2008, 174-180), the following themes from the interview material were distinguished: co-production, changes in the media industry, strategy processes, revenue models, e-reading devices, mobile devices, online vs. print, marketing vs. journalism, social media and social curation. These themes were largely based on the interview framework and derived from the study of previous literature. However, when analyzing the data, I was also open to themes that arose from the interview material. Importantly, social curation was not included in the interview framework, yet it emerged in the interviews as an essential form of co-operation between the newspaper and its audience.

In order to illustrate the role of the participatory audience in regards to the operations of the newspaper, ‘telling extracts’ are reported from the data: articulate and apt expressions representing those views that were pronouncedly expressed by the interviewees (Silverman 2001, 83). As one variable, the age of the interviewees seemed to affect their views, in that the older interviewees were more cynical toward the role of the participatory audience. However, this observation was not systematically studied.

### **Social curation from the perspective of a Finnish newspaper**

The interview material proved to be useful when analysing the processes between a media company and the audience in the era of social media. A study realized among the staff of one newspaper does not provide possibilities for making generalising conclusions on the scope of these processes in the media industry at large. However, the conclusions based on the study are in uniform with those of previous studies (e.g. Domingo et al. 2008; Heinonen 2008; Hermida & Thurman 2008; Thurman 2008; Wardle & Williams 2010). What is common

to these studies carried out with journalists and other staff members in media organizations is that they question the importance of the audience as a co-productive partner in the daily operations of legacy media. Rather, the audience is considered most useful in providing raw news material, such as news tips, photographs and videos (Domingo et al. 2008, 334; Wardle & Williams 2010), and in re-distributing content online. Similarly, from the perspective of the interviewees in the Finnish study, the participatory audience of the newspaper consists of readers acting much on their own and not in a deep co-creative relationship with the professionals. An illustrative example of this attitude is expressed in the following quote:

If we then discuss the possibility that the users themselves would write news stories with us (...) we don't have any plans on that at the moment. We have other things, like when we ask the users for news tips or photos, videos, those that they have captured with their mobile phones. That kind of thing we have done for ages. (...) So, we do engage them, it might not be so open, we might ask 'have you experienced this, please send a message,' 'please send a photo,' this kind of things. So, the users do participate in that sense all the time, but it's not so open online, as in 'hey, in tomorrow's paper we have this kind of things, send us your comments and we will make a story based on them and it will be printed tomorrow.' That's not the model, and will not be very soon. (Interviewee A)

The audience does have an active role – but mainly in isolation from the journalists. In a sense, the relation of the newspaper to social media is not very social. However, social curation and other forms of social consumption of media content are a valuable asset for the daily operations of the newspaper. In order to enable effective social consumption of media content on Facebook and other social media platforms, it is important that the possibilities for sharing are optimized, curation-friendly stories are written and the audience is offered convenient tools for sharing content.

It's already quite normal for people to read news via the social media. They have the social filter on all the time, they read those news that their friends share on Facebook, and do not necessarily choose the news by themselves, or let the journalist choose them for them. (...) The social dimension is the big thing. (Interviewee A)

The sharing of news and the social consumption of news in general will proliferate. (...) It's kind of an automatic process, we follow what news spread, and then try to think what is special about a news story that makes it spread. But maybe more important is that we offer the people the tools, the possibility

for sharing them [the news stories] to their friends. Also we need to produce that kind of content that interests them. (Interviewee C)

Of course we need to sense online what is the big topic at the moment, what each web user is searching for. We need to produce that story in order it to begin spreading. (Interviewee D)

The quite uniform observations expressed in the study interviews indicate how social curation is an important channel for obtaining more readers for the online content produced by the newspaper. The audience acts as the 'output department' of the newspaper, a crowdsourced unit that concentrates on the distribution of content. These results coincide well with the data on the attitudes of the Canadian audience provided by Hermida et al. (2012), which indicate that sharing is becoming central to the way people experience the news. In addition, it has been demonstrated (Purcell et al. 2010, 40) that the links sent by people to each other lead often to the receiver actually reading, listening or watching that content. Thus, it is important that the audience is encouraged and assisted to participate in the circulation and distribution of media content (Lewis 2011).

Facebook in particular emerged in the interviews as an important channel for distributing content, almost as a news medium or portal in itself (see also Olmstead et al. 2011, 2; Newman 2012, 15; Ma et al. 2012). Facebook is a key to audience engagement. This transformation has taken place in a quite short time.

They [the readers] are distributors, and they accomplish the distribution in their own communities, and not necessarily with us. But they receive the impulses from us. (...) Facebook is the first one that has real significance for us. It is manifested in the visitor traffic to our site and the intensity, and also the regularity of the visits. They [those visitors coming via Facebook] are our loyal customers. (Interviewee B)

It has been growing all along. When I began in this work, I have been working for a year now, it was quite marginal, but now it [Facebook] is a significant source of traffic for us. (Interviewee C)

For us this sharing on Facebook has been around for a while now, it is a major phenomenon. I was quite surprised when I came to work here, how big of a phenomenon it actually is. A stupendously big part of users utilize the sharing services, it brings a major share of the traffic to our site. (...) This social news consumption and social sharing, it didn't exist in the beginning of the 00s. Facebook has really been the first one to establish news consumption with friends. (...) The search engines used to be important for us, and they still are.

But this [social curation] brings now a lot more [visitor] traffic than search engines. (Interviewee A)

In addition to being a distributor, the curating audience acts as a 'radar' and a tool for consumer inquiry for the newspaper (Andrejevic 2002; Caraway 2011, 697-698; Guo & Chan-Olmstead 2011). Heinonen (2011, 37-38) uses the term 'public sensor' to describe the same phenomenon, where journalists keep an eye on what users are talking about in social media. In a manner of speaking, the journalist can 'hang as a fly in the ceiling over the digital coffee table', monitor the audience without them knowing about it, and receive signals of the hot topics that rise among the audience and therefore should be made into news stories that inspire the audience to share them widely.

We follow the social media tremendously nowadays, although we do not necessarily use the audience's comments. But it is unbelievable how there, if some phenomenon begins to balloon, then it is Facebook where you can first observe what it is that people wonder and talk about. (Interviewee F)

We observe what is being discussed, we receive content-related impulses (...) Now we really know what the people are interested in and actually are aware of what the people talk about: this is what they want to discuss, of this they want to know more. Before it used to be just the try and see method, but now we really know. (Interviewee B)

As a result of this process of monitoring, the members of the audience gain power as 'assistant news editors' who *indirectly* can affect the editorial decisions by expressing their collective state of mind and their sphere of interests, prominently through social curation. Understanding what content the members of the audience are likely to pass along can be a key to what stories get covered in the first place (Olmstead et al. 2011, 1). Some interviewees expressed a view that the members of the audience try to influence journalistic decisions in a more direct way. In fact, they considered the participatory audience to be already too influential in reframing the news and thus undermining the top-down model of communication and the traditional gatekeeping function of the media (see Hermida et al. 2012). They expected the 'guiding influence' of the audience to further grow in the coming years.

Economically, the audience traffic is important, because we get more hits and thereby trigger more ad views. But increasingly the traffic is also an important source of news for us, it has a reciprocal function. (...) The readers can maybe influence our content more. Of course, the journalistic decisions are still made

in the editorial office, but the voice of the reader, what themes they want us to make stories of, that is now heard better in the editorial office. (Interviewee C)

We follow, the news editors and others follow, in fact everybody follows Facebook, of what themes people share news and else. You actually can sense what is the day's inflaming subject, something that should somehow be touched upon in the paper the following day. (Interviewee D)

Our idea is to be there [in social media], to have our news spread as much as possible and have discussion over them. We produce news, that's what we can do, and the news are kind of building blocks for social bustle. (...) The more we have such news stories that act as topics for discussion, the more we are there visible [online], and that is maybe enough of a purpose for us. (...) We and our news need to be present there. (Interviewee G)

By monitoring the curation processes, the newspaper staff can make choices regarding the content they produce. This practice represents in fact a continuous loop between the newspaper and the readers, a 'curation loop'. The newspaper produces stories, which the audience distributes through curation; the newspaper staff monitor this curation process to discover which news are curated the most, and then adjusts the production process accordingly. A news article influenced by this curation loop represents in a sense 'collective personalization'. The audience takes part in the development of a news item by influencing its formation through their personal curation choices. The risk here is of course that this collective personalization is based only on the voice of the age segments that are represented best in social media.

### **Concluding remarks**

According to Marshall (2009, 81), the successful operation of the media industry is in fact as much about content production as it is about facilitating the maintenance of social connections among its audience. Pre-existing social networks are becoming fundamental to the sustenance of media, and therefore the media companies need to acknowledge the convergence of media and communication, where the communicative (interpersonal) dimensions have invaded, informed and mutated the media elements (*ibid.*, 86, 88.)

Mediated and interpersonal communication work together to disseminate news in a society (Domingo et al. 2008, 329). Along the same lines, Jensen (2010, 14) proposes a shift of focus from media to communication – an agenda emphasising the recombination and reconfiguration of one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication. Thus, audience studies should shed more light on the links between consumption of mass media, interpersonal communication and networked communication. The significance of media use does not remain on the individual level alone, as it flows from personal media consumption

toward more collective experiences and social sharing. (Heikkilä et al., 2011.)

A key argument in this article has been that co-production of content and utilization of user-generated content (UGC) do not form necessarily the most adequate framework for understanding the role of audience work (Napoli 2010) in the era of social media, at least from the perspective of a legacy media company. The empirical study of the personnel of a Finnish newspaper demonstrates how other forms of participation – social curation as possibly the most important of them – are more essential in the daily operations of the company. It is of course possible to consider that the views expressed in the interviews reflect partly the desire of the newspaper staff to resist change and maintain conventional forms of journalistic work, which would limit the aspiration for direct interaction between the professionals and the amateurs (see also Singer et al. 2011).

Nevertheless, the results resonate well with Napoli's (2009) notion that when studying UGC, the focus is often misguidedly on the user's ability to produce, rather than distribute content. Therefore, the discussion on UGC should be supplemented with discussion on UDC when attempting to describe the instrumental activities of the audience from the perspective of media companies. This does not concern only legacy media, but also media companies acting primarily in the social media environment. When going through previous research, I have found similar results indicating the lesser value of UGC among the legacy media (Heinonen 2008, 97; Domingo et al. 2008; Thurman 2008; Wardle and Williams 2010; Qing & Hollifield 2011). As one interviewee in the empirical study noted, 'It kind of dried out, the thing that was discussed a few years back, that the content produced by the consumers would have a significant impact'. Interestingly, most of the views that stress the importance of UGC (e.g. Bowman & Willis 2003; Jenkins 2006) are not based on studies analyzing the views of media professionals.

However, my intention is not to claim that UGC does not have value for media companies. In the newspaper that was examined in the qualitative study, tips on newsworthy themes provided by the audience were utilized, incidents or phenomena in social media were reported in news stories (audience activity in social media as a source for news), but with the exception of photographs sent by the audience (Pantti & Bakker 2009), the readers' material was not organically used in the content production processes in the newspaper or on its website. The audience can rather be a challenge as they produce content that competes with the professional content (Hermida & Thurman 2008, 347; Gollmitzer 2011). In this sense, the audience is considered to consist of 'active recipients', who act and react to the news, but are not full participants in the news production process (Hermida 2011, 178).

The audience members act as 'media brokers', distributing content in audience communities. Peer-communication among the audience, the intra-audience connections, has a growing significance in the consumption and distribution of professional media content. By discussing social curation, it is possible to elaborate on the nature of curating consumers as members of consumption communities (Kozinets 1999, 259; Arvidsson 2005,

242). The social infrastructure and context forms an essential part in the consumption processes of media content – social curation is about connectivity. Social relations are the be-all and end-all of social curation; the consumption of media content is becoming increasingly a shared social experience, as people share links in e-mails and tweets, and ‘recommend or ‘+1’ content. As a consequence, mass communication turns partly into interpersonal communication, or at least the mass media increasingly utilise interpersonal networks in distributing their content. What is important in this process is that the audience consists of communities.

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