Audience territory

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In two recent studies[1], an analysis of participation in a sample of 80 Latin American and US newspapers and qualitative research on the use of Twitter and Facebook by regional news media, found clear patterns of a defensive strategy regarding the management of online audiences on the websites. There was no strategy at all and open movements in the Social Media arena (García de Torres, 2011; García de Torres et al. 2011). Despite the eminent proof on how news media promotes civic engagements and freshens up the news, little efforts have been made in the realm of traditional media to effectively intertwine the past and the present. Plainly stated in the Terms of Service by a prominent Spanish company: "This Portal will just enable a space, but will not participate in it at all" (or this is *audience territory*).

It does not come as a surprise that the takeaway findings of our first study were: spaces are open to participation but without supervision, direction or resources; users´ data gather in formats that freeze the conversation and citizen channels are conceived as a playground. Finally, chaos governs the architecture of conversation (the lack of harmony being particularly present in control features). As a result of this study, we decided to focus on social expectations and media policies regarding UGC.[2]

Later, when examining the practices of 24 outlets on Twitter and Facebook, we found motivation, enthusiasm and drive, to collaborate with the users in very small media outlets. Such as editors travelling to congresses or meetings to learn and teach the staff on coming back, and the reporters urging editors to take up the social networks voluntary shifts, to keep up with immediacy on Twitter. Also, disenchantment related to the inability to build a community, or sometimes the lack of answers by the users, where in some cases this is due to the technological gaps.

As researchers, we are challenged everyday both by the developments in new platforms and the weight of old theories frameworks. The clear picture of the quasi-petrified reader is replaced by that of the more ambiguous "produser" (Bruns, 2005). A

breeze of common knowledge and untutored practices, hits basic journalistic principles as reporters behave as users do on social news platforms (Lasorsa et al., 2011). We have this new process "... whereby ordinary people have an opportunity to participate with or contribute to professionally edited publications" (Hermida and Thurman, 2008:2), but still not the answer to important questions such as "How does UGC impact on the quality of journalistic content?" "Which is the safer approach to UGC in view to obtain meaningful insights of events?" "What does trigger interesting participation?" or "Which are the dynamics of conversation in a large, medium and small size outlet?" Most important of all: What has the audience summed up for in the 21st century?

Reasons for discouragement can be found in almost every study regarding the quality of UGC or the motivations that lie in the editors´ minds, regarding the audience's status on their website. In these times of turbulence, we have verified failure, but failed to point out innovative practices involving users and news media, as in Muthukumaraswamy (2010).

The citizens´ faults as real-time interpreters are well documented (Ornebring, 2008; Reich, 2008; Acosta, 2009; Pew Research, 2009, Ruiz et al., 2010). This is why the powerful concept by Hermida (2010), "ambient journalism", requires a careful examination. Not only because partiality and verification, when associated to citizen online publishing, go frequently hand in hand; but also because the sphere of personal interests are growing online. The audiences´ performance on a large scale is still under examination, and the "ambient" metaphor does not match findings on the consistency of citizen journalism (Lacy et al., 34-46).

On the other hand, news editors comply and adopt the new participatory formulas for the practical component, despite severe objections mentioned by them, such as: the lack of ethics by the users, poor knowledge of the legal consequences or professional routines and being too opinionated instead of fact-friendly (Lewis et al., 2010).

Participation is a valuable asset for news media. Very recently, the blog of Martha, a 9 year old girl, went viral because of a picture of her daily meal at school, resulting in a worldwide trend and a serious debate over health that has made headlines in many countries. Young reporter Martha achieved in a week more traffic than reputed pundits in a month. Worst of all, Marta´s tray is news in a very right sense.

To sum up, over the past decade, participatory tools on newspaper websites have been added either as a trend or as a technological asset, in view of Vujnovic and others (2010), in traffic or e-branding results; but rarely as a means to achieve what in essence constitutes the ultimate goal of a journalistic entrepreneurship; to enlighten the audience, to provide facts, context and meaning. This is a call for applied research and innovation, stronger interdisciplinary collaboration, original basic research and a new approach, in order to fuel the search for answers to conversational journalism.

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Notes:

[1] "Media in Cyberspace. The new environment in Spain and Latin America. Trends", Ministry of Science and Innovation. (BSO2006-15495) with funds by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, led by Elvira García de Torres.