**Media-hosted eParticipation in Slovakia (MHePS)**

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*Background*

The optimism that initially reigned about the democratic potential of the participatory web has given way to a more sceptical mood that accuses social media of contributing to a rise of incivility or the spread of conspiracy theories, with evidence for the coordinated manipulation of some online debate. Similarly, within journalism, a negative myth of participatory journalism (expressed in the slogan ‘don’t read the comments!’) has been gaining ascendancy over the positive myth, which embraced a new role involving community management, facilitation and conversation with readers. In a situation that is common when a change in the technical division of labour creates a ‘role problem’ at the level of professions‘ socially-defined mandates (Hughes 1958), we seem to be witnessing resistance to the incorporation of new tasks into journalism and diverging views about whether the competences required to perform them belong to the professional repertoire. An optimistic interpretation of these trends is that we have cast off some unhelpful illusions about eDemocracy and eParticipation, and learned to treat questions about the ‘democratic value’ of online discussion as empirical and practical challenges. This requires more contextualised approaches, sensitive to the ways actors enact online discussion, what they make of it and what they value it for.

This study takes up debates traversing communication studies, linguistics, science and technology studies, organisational and occupational sociology about the role of the media as democratic intermediaries in political participation, the creative possibilities for ‘amateurs’ as co-producers of digital news, the changing character of the knowledge professions and the dynamics of organisational innovation with respect to the mobilisation, retention and evaluation of knowledge and the ways in which arguments are produced and circulate in online public spaces. It focuses in particular on two new roles that journalists are called upon to play in a more participatory online media ecosystem – the administration (or moderation) of online discussion and the monitoring of and engagement in discussions below their own articles. By observing the varieties of argumentation performed by the actors implicated in online discussion in the light of sociolinguistic theories of argumentation, it shows how pragmatic norms of democratic debate are established, tested and contested, provides insights about the viability, attractiveness and effectiveness of what has become the standard model of online participation (post-moderated user comments below articles) in online newspapers, and gives an account of participatory journalism as a locally constituted, more or less stable arrangement of actors, artefacts, routines, competences and argumentative norms oriented towards the production of news and the animation of the public conversation that news generates. Its conclusions are addressed not just to the scholarly community but also to media organisations and the journalistic profession.

*Context and methods*

Slovakia is an interesting place to study participatory journalism for several reasons. The small size of the market, the turbulent history of the post-communist media system, and an unusually strong public demand for ‘participatory journalism’ (confirmed by polls about the extent of blogging and contributing to debate online) mean the pressures on journalists and media organisations to reconfigure their work are more intense than in most other countries. A two-year (2013-15) ethnographic study combining textual analysis, interview methods, observation of the online environment, newsroom observation and survey data, this research shows how two of Slovakia’s opinion-leading daily newspapers are questioning the economic and political value of online discussion, but (for now, at least) remain committed to participatory journalism and sustaining forms of audience participation that enrich journalism and democracy.

*Conceptual approach and empirical findings*

There are three key concepts that guide the investigation – three knowledge-related practices whose description underpins the analysis: the performance of work *routines*, the production of different *argumentative registers* and actors’ compliance with them, and the enactment, evaluation and sanctioning of cognitive, expressive, linguistic and other discursive *competences*. The daily iteration of *routines* is the context both for the appropriation and socialisation of technological artefacts and for organisational innovation. Any study of the forms of expression that occur in online spaces needs to come to terms with their *argumentative* diversity – notably the juxtaposition of vernacular species of argumentation and more specialised ones – and with the way arguments incorporate and reproduce, reflect and refract the framing devices (e.g. discussion interfaces, codices and quality control systems) within which enunciations are made. *Competence*, finally, understood here as both aptitude and jurisdiction, is one of the key stakes of online discussion, as journalists, moderators and contributors mutually evaluate one another and in so doing negotiate the standards for and the boundary between professional journalism and public criticism.

The study describes the work routines of online discussion administrators as they evaluate comment quality, enacting different ‘registers of justification’ that appeal to both rule-based and experience-based repertoires of judgement, anchored in a sense of journalistic craft but also diverging from it in important ways. It enumerates and describes the conversations between journalists and critical publics occurring beneath newspaper stories and tests the performativity of different types of comment (classified by the argumentative registers mobilised) in eliciting a response from journalists, highlighting the frequency of ‘metajournalistic’ exchanges that enact normative debates about what journalism should do for society and how journalists should do their job. It also describes techniques developed by journalists, administrators, bloggers and commenters to defend these 'public spheres' against perceived colonisation by professional political communicators, demonstrating how they are both vulnerable and self-regulating. Finally, it describes what participants value about the experience of discussing the news and how they tell good from bad arguments.

*Practical lessons*

Are online discussion spaces intrinsically inauthentic? What are their potentialities and their limitations? When and where should media organisations permit discussion? Is it possible to curate the quality of online discussion? Should journalists ignore, read or respond to comments? The research shows that argumentation practices in online discussion often diverge from the rational, dialogical models prized by journalism to include argumentative registers that are more conflictual, more emotive, more personal, more rhetorical and more ad hominem. They admit considerable variety so that they are not easily placed on any typology of argumentative forms, but one reasonable generalisation that can be made is that they tend to conflictualise public debate and lend disputes and controversies an accusatory dynamic. This is an advantage in some situations and a drawback in others, so the key is to work out how to ‘deploy’ online discussion effectively on news sites based on an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses.

Given the natural tendency towards conformity and suppression of disagreement in most everyday conversational situations, and a worrying tendency for political parties in many countries (including Slovakia) to close down argumentation by appealing to national interests, security threats and other crises – to use totalising arguments that disarm counter-arguments – the risk of non-participation is arguably a greater danger to contemporary democracies than an excess of aggressive participation, so devices that encourage the voicing of public criticism in whatever register are important. This study concludes by suggesting a redefined participatory role for media organisations and journalists – one of facilitating and dramatising the arguments (in both senses of the word) that contributors engage in, and trying to help them derive consequences from them. Participatory journalism could be about nurturing the argumentative imperative, in other words a shared belief that it’s worth expressing arguments in public and collectively testing their resistance to critique.

The research also suggests that sociologists should not shy away from normative positions given the importance of these problems to the democratic character of civil society, but need nonetheless to remain agnostic about what kind of discussion is best for democracy or what argumentative trajectories are productive for the treatment of public problems. Sociolinguistic research can contribute to a better understanding of the factors that promote mobility of actors and their arguments within the media ecosystem, across the whole infrastructure of civic participation, and between different discursive registers (from civil conversation to more conflictive forms of discourse, from consensus-seeking dialogue to accusation and denunciation, from informal to formal debating forums), obeying the principle that interdiscursive mobility/translatability is a defining characteristics of democracy.