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EMERGING TOPICS IN THE RESEARCH ON DIGITAL AUDIENCES AND PARTICIPATION An agenda for increasing research efforts

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the elements that is defining the (research on the) changing roles of audiences is a series of new features in the media landscape, such as the diffusion of social media, locative media, and apps. The media landscape is now in the process of becoming what we can call – from a social and technological perspective – a new large technological system¹ that provides the infrastructure for mediated and interpersonal communication, and for social interaction. This infrastructure for “networked communication”² is characterised by 1) the connection of mass media and interpersonal communication; 2) a new articulation of the time/space structure; 3) different dynamics of value creation; and 4) different degrees of access, interactivity and participation both *in* media and *through* media³. It is a new communicative scenario full of “risky opportunities”, to quote Sonia Livingstone’s⁴ catchy phrase in the title of a *New Media and Society* article.

The article discusses these changes, and the ways that they have been and need to be thematised in academic research, from a slightly unusual perspective, as it is based on an analysis of the individual reports⁵ produced by the members of Working Group 2 of the Cost Action Transforming Audiences Transforming Societies (TATS), which are dealing with the new digital environment and the stakes of these transformations. The article is also grounded in the work (and topical focus) of the “Cross-media Production and Audience Involvement” Task Force of Working Group 2.

These perspectives allow identifying a set of topics that deal with audience involvement and participation and are seen to be originating from a series of tensions. In

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¹ T.P. Hughes, *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

² G. Cardoso, “From Mass to Network Communication: Communicational Models and the Informational Society”, *International Journal of Communication*, 2 (2008): 587630. Retrieved from: <http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/19/178>.

³ N. Carpentier, *Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-Democratic Struggle*, Bristol: Intellect, 2011, 67.

⁴ S. Livingstone, “Taking Risky Opportunities in Youthful Content Creation”, *New Media and Society*, 10, 3 (2008): 393-411.

⁵ The list of individual reports we referred to in this article can be found at the end.

media and communication studies, the idea of challenges as tensions can be described as a conflict between concepts such as control and collaboration⁶, amateurism and professionalism, the individual and the collective, or copyright and open licenses. Academic research on participation, identifying these tensions, allows to show their multi-layeredness and complexities. Research can also suggest ways to alleviate these tensions. In particular, the analysis of the Cost TATS individual reports shows that three areas – media industry, journalism and politics – are fields where these tensions play, making them relevant fields for academic inquiry.

Arguably, the relevance of these research topics transcends the academic field. Here we should keep in mind that the academic field is not the only field that has expressed interest (and concerns) about the societal changes, and that has generated analyses of these changes. Still, academic research, dealing with the topics mentioned in this article has a series of socially relevant contributions to make, entering in intellectual dialogues with these other fields, and connecting more with the other parts of contemporary societies, within an era where academic work (including theory formation – as it is discussed in some of the other articles of this special issue) is not always tremendously valued outside academia.

First, we think that the academic research on these topics can help policy makers and many other stakeholders in their understanding what is at stake when dealing with changes and challenges that they are confronted with, also in relation to digital audiences and participation. What academia can do is showing the problematics (and tensions) behind the lived experiences of technological and societal change. Second, we think that academic research can also help shaping more specific approaches towards the dynamics of audience involvement, by firmly rooting these dynamics in a broader and critical analysis of participation, and in participatory theory. Following Ritzer's definition of theory as a system of ideas for the systematisation of knowledge⁷, we suggest that quality research, driven by participatory theory, can still be transferred fairly easy and quickly to media companies, governments and almost any kind of environment (on the condition that adequate translation is provided). There is also a need to do this, because without the systematisation offered by participatory theory, and without the rigid and systematic analytical procedures of academia, societal actors do not have the necessary tools and strategies to comprehensively deal with the vastness, richness and complexities of interactional and participatory processes.

This need for academic approaches appears especially relevant in the political sphere, within media industries and in journalism, where utopian and dystopian discourses have tended to paradoxically strengthen each other, combining the belief in the activation of citizens, consumers and audiences with concerns about the functioning and sustainability of (professional) political and media systems. Many issues have been raised here: amateurism against professionalism is one broad tension to explain differences in production, consumption, distribution and even hierarchy, especially when we talk about credibility or identity. The debates on journalism as a practice (of audiences) or as a job (of journalists); the social recommendation and distribution of music as a way of life (for emerging music groups) or as the death of music (for music industries); or

⁶ S. Lewis, "The Tension between Professional Control and Open Participation. Journalism and its Boundaries", *Information, Communication & Society*, 15, 6 (2012): 836-866.

⁷ G. Ritzer, *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots: The Basics* (2nd ed.), St. Louis: McGraw-Hill, 2007.

digital participation as a solution to develop utopian systems of direct democracy or as the channel for anti-system groups, are other examples.

2. PARTICIPATION AS TENSION IN THE MEDIA INDUSTRY

As we said at the very beginning of this article, some important structural transformations are taking place within media as a large technological system and they will have important consequences for the future of mediation and mediated interaction (in very different fields, ranging from entertainment to civic participation). These changes produce particular tensions within different fields of the social, of which the media industry is one.

The first emerging topic in this field is situated in the field of infrastructural policies, both in terms of participatory design and in terms of emerging forms of participation within social media platforms, as Storsul pointed out in her individual report. Indeed, researchers within the Cost TATS action advocate better knowledge of social media use, of the connection between online and offline information and education, and of audiences and their practices, especially in their appropriation of new technologies.

More than the existence of new audiences, it is also useful to underline the importance of new environments and routines of consumption. As Mikko Villi pointed out in his individual report, mobile devices and a multiplatform scenario have added more roles for the audience to play, which emerge as a big router for content of media companies: “The challenge for the industry is how media companies can tap into the communicative dimensions of participatory audience communities, in which, importantly, media content is increasingly consumed and distributed by using mobile devices”. Thus, research on the mobile media scenario, and how content is being distributed by audiences, is required in order to better understand the processes that we are witnessing nowadays.

These changes in consumption routines and the creation of new environments such as mobile media are some of the main trends that allow us to define emerging topics on digital audiences and participation. This also raises questions, such as: Do media have explicit strategies to manage processes like social recommendation or to adapt content for multiplatform consumption? And are these strategies participatory themselves? Participation reflects the growing tension between the possibilities of experimentation – as is, for instance, happening with the personal social network accounts of journalists – and the controlling attempts of media companies to maintain the traditional monopoly on production and distribution.

During the last years, the researches about media industry strategies have been developed from the perspective of platform and newsroom convergence⁸. Here, a new approach is useful, focussing on the *convergence of participations*, where media have to deal with audience-driven processes such as user-generated content⁹, user-distributed content¹⁰ and, even, with the consideration of participation as a strategic commodity for

⁸ T. Quandt, J. Singer, “Convergence and Cross-Platform Content Production”, in K. Wahl-Jorgensen, T. Hanitzsch (eds.), *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009, 130-142.

⁹ J. Van Dijck, “Users Like You? Theorizing Agency in User-Generated Content”, *Media, Culture and Society*, 31, 1 (2009): 41-58.

¹⁰ P. Napoli, *Navigating Producer-Consumer Convergence: Media Policy Priorities in the Era of User-Generated and User-Distributed Content*, The Donald McGannon Communication Research Center, New York: Fordham University, 2009.

the survival of media¹¹. Fans are a good example of these new audiences in a new media landscape. It is hardly new to say that fans usually gather in communities of practices to materialise their sense of belonging, and to discuss the shows they enjoy with fellow members¹². But they now also use new technologies such as the Internet to produce and share contents, for instance paratexts¹³ such as fan fictions, fan videos, or even sometimes ARG (Alternate Reality Games). They also spread and discuss content using social networks such as Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr. Media industries – and especially the audiovisual industries – have to adapt to these new consumptions, in a more and more competitive ecosystem. In order to make fans engage even more and explore the narrations, producers create what Jenkins¹⁴ has coined strategies of “transmedia storytelling”. Producers of TV shows or movies use the potentialities of media platforms to expand their universe and storylines in a movement that can be defined as augmented storytelling¹⁵; they scatter chunks of the stories or backgrounds on characters on multiple media platforms for fans to find and share.

Another topic, related to the media industry in a broader sense, is that we are witnessing a progressive *commodification* of participation in the media. Not only companies associated with the sphere of social media (like Facebook or Twitter) benefit from the communication with audience communities, but also *traditional* media companies can take advantage of a deeper connection within the activities and usages that users are creating with their products. The key point is here to understand participation as a systemic change in spheres formerly only associated with professionals, where the result of all interactions with the audience is more than the sum of each one. But processes of commodification still need to be taken into account as well.

Finally, the social experience that surrounds and penetrates the consumption of information and media content (sharing, voting, commenting, retweeting...) is becoming as important as the information itself. This information (user-distributed content) is of course relevant for the industry in terms of audience research, but also for developing cross-media strategies where the participation around the medium could be shown and sold as a product itself (directly and in terms of data production). Jenkins et al.¹⁶ uses the term of “spreadable media” in order to emphasise the importance of the circulation of official and non-official media content within communities of practice or in the public sphere. He also points to the importance of social networks in this circulation.

¹¹ J.M. Noguera, M. Villi, N. Nyiró, E. de Blasio, M. Bourdaa, “The Role of the Media Industry when Participation Is a Product”, in N. Carpentier, K. Schröder, L. Hallett (eds.), *Audience Transformations. Shifting Audience Positions in Late Modernity*, London: Routledge Studies in European Communication Research and Education, 2012.

¹² H. Jenkins, S. Ford, J. Green, *Spreadable Media. Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York: New York University Press, 2013; M. Bourdaa, “Taking a Break from All Your Worries: *Battlestar Galactica* et les nouvelles pratiques télévisuelles des fans”, *Question de communication*, 22 (2012): 235-250.

¹³ J. Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and the Other Media Paratexts*, New York: New York University Press, 2010.

¹⁴ H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press, 2006.

¹⁵ M. Bourdaa, “Transmedia Storytelling: Between Augmented Storytelling and Immersive Practices”, *InaGlobal*, 2012. Retrieved from: <http://www.inaglobal.fr/en/digital-tech/article/transmedia-between-augmented-storytelling-and-immersive-practices?rq=7>.

¹⁶ Jenkins, Ford, Green, *Spreadable Media. Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*,

3. PARTICIPATION AS TENSION IN JOURNALISM

If there is a field where the adjective “participatory” was embraced with enthusiasm, it was journalism, with no doubt. Just a few years after the emergence of the so-called web 2.0, participatory journalism was a current practice, but also a trendy topic for researchers to describe in a broad sense all the processes and/or platforms where the audience was collaborating with professionals in the news process. It seems as if it was chosen as the participatory (journalistic) flag in the digital age, although soon this concept epitomised a new problem (or tension). Participatory journalism cannot be reduced (as often happened) to a technology-driven process¹⁷, it also depends on the organisational media culture and on the ways in which possibilities of technology are defined and understood.

The tension, between the kind of participation that technology allows and the participation practised by people and/or media companies, is an emerging topic. One example is the recent work of one of the authors of this article on Twitter¹⁸. This tension requires a deeper understanding of the collaborative mechanisms at work in these kinds of horizontal environments, and a deeper analysis of actual practises, combined with a serious reflection on the new challenges emerging in the field, such as the new relations with sources, or the changes within the sets of formal and informal rules that have shaped and regulated news-making (at least in terms of discursive construction and formal definition if not at the level of concrete practises), as Sanchez Gonzales pointed out in her individual report. Moreover, the centrality of amateur content production, and of content filtering and circulation, not only calls for new regulations in the field of news-making but also for new literacies, both from the audiences and industries, as stated by Sirkku Kotilainen. In her report, she claims that it is absolutely necessary to work on media literacies but also to enhance the media companies’ understanding of audience participation, as is also emphasised in the individual report of Torres da Silva.

Finally, also the way audiences access information and news is changing, as Birgit Stark emphasises in her individual report, which produces another emerging topic. She argues that this is due to the fact that “the Web gives people more content choices, control, and the opportunity to customize their news consumption [...] Often media organizations lack a clear strategy and one may get the impression that many of them merely offer new participation features because others do so as well”. Besides this – apparent - lack of strategy, media companies are facing the challenge of “how to collect and treat the reactions of the audience”, as Nóra Nyirő wrote in her individual report. The huge amount of data about communications in several platforms, triggered by many actions – distributing, creating, commenting, sharing, ... – requires media companies to develop strategies to deal with this multitude of information.

4. PARTICIPATION AS TENSION IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The new landscape, defined by cross-media contents and mass self-communication, that is, “the communication organized around the internet and other horizontal digital com-

¹⁷ J. Singer, A. Hermida, D. Domingo, A. Heinonen, S. Paulussen, T. Quandt, Z. Reich, M. Vujnovic, *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers*, London: Wiley Blackwell, 2011.

¹⁸ J.M. Noguera, “How Open Are Journalists on Twitter? Trends towards the End-User Journalism”, *Communication and Society*, 26, 1 (2013): 93-114.

munication networks”¹⁹, is facilitating daily exchanges in the public spheres between institutions, politicians and citizens, which are “not only technically possible but also a healthy and a democratic practice”, as Zamora’s individual report mentions.

These different forms of participation have to be framed in a broad fashion and involve citizen networks, NGOs, social movements, protest activities. While the last decades have witnessed a decline in formal democratic participation (voting, trust in politics...), there are intense “civil society activities and alternative political engagement” allowing that “audiences are also rendered as citizens, that is, people who are or can become involved in the life of democracy”²⁰.

This means that new participatory genres are emerging (for example characterised by new temporalities, in content production and sharing, as stated in the Patriarche and Dufrasne individual report) within (exclusively or not) social media. These new genres need to be studied by academics, both on the side of traditional *policy participation design* (given that networked participation in some way challenges the processes based on the three steps: information, consultation and deliberation) and on the side of public opinion analysis. On this very last point: Just consider how Facebook’s likes or twitter conversations are more and more used, by political parties and media organisations in an attempt to set the agenda, or in the campaigning activities of political candidates (in very similar ways polls and surveys are used to track political preferences).

Some authors have underlined the co-occurrence of lower levels of participation within the sphere of formal politics – especially among youth – and the (limited) participatory ways offered by political institutions²¹, while other ways of civic engagement have become more popular, in many cases thanks to mobile media and the web. This idea is a central point in Peter Dahlgren’s individual report: “While the last two decades have witnessed a general decline in participation in the formal political system, the picture in the broader realm of civil society activities and alternative political engagement is more mixed, with some areas of intense activity”.

These “areas of intense activity” are redefining how the public sphere is considered and how it is constructed. They are also changing the relations between voters and candidates, and affecting political communication and campaigning, as Bergstrom noted in her report. And as Rocío Zamora states in her individual report, the influence of audience interactivity and participation in political contexts “is not only an academic research topic but, mainly, an issue for reflection from its real practical development, in order to improve the relation between media and democracy”.

5. CONCLUSION

Emerging topics in research on digital audiences and participation can be traced if we look for unresolved problems and tension. In other words, research is about the analysis of the tensions which are behind the obvious challenges. In this article, a number

¹⁹ M. Castells, “A Network Theory of Power”, *International Journal of Communication*, 5 (2011): 773-787 (779).

²⁰ P. Dahlgren, *The Relevance of My Research*, 2012.

²¹ R. Bendit, “Participación social y política de los jóvenes en países de la Unión Europea”, in S. Bardini (ed.), *La participación social y política de los jóvenes en el horizonte del nuevo siglo*, Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2000, 19-55.

of tensions were identified (by analysing the 26 COST TATS Action essays), leading to questions such as:

- Do media industries have convincing strategies to deal with user-led processes? Will they survive without these strategies?
- Do the journalists/media have the organisational culture to promote a kind of journalism with higher levels of participation? Would it still be *journalism*?
- Why is the informal political participation through social networks more accepted than the ones proposed by the institutions?

These questions are being raised using concepts such as authorship, identity, distribution, credibility, collaboration and professionalism. For instance, wiki-platforms allow collective authorships, copyleft licenses are dealing with products made from the remix, and transmedia storytelling is highly based on the social distribution and production by audiences. In this scenario, the position of professional authors (including journalists) is under threat but at the same time their presence within the web becomes (and remains) prominent, with considerable levels of interaction with audiences and the increased importance of personal branding in many fields (journalism, politics, cultural industries...).

As far as the challenges are concerned, academic research needs to assume that the bipolarity between production and reception is not enough to explain the complex processes of participation, especially “in a media environment where the boundaries between commerce, content and information are currently being redrawn”²². Media industries and journalists are facing an ongoing flow of relations and data which are related to many tensions around the above-mentioned concepts (authorship, identity, distribution, credibility, collaboration and professionalism). The social distribution of content is amplifying the importance of audiences in economic, political and media terms. Research about digital audiences and participation should be focused on this kind of tensions, offering specific answers to problems that media industry and other institutions have difficulties in solving.

At the same time, academic research needs to remember the tension of audience research itself, which needs to find a balance between the necessary and contextualised claims for a new notion of audience and the “hyperbolic discourse of *the new*”²³. One particular challenge in audience and participation research is about trying to avoid succumbing to these pessimistic/optimistic discourses about the new. In conclusion, we also want to mention the issue that academia itself is responding to the many challenges in this new ambiguous participatory scenario, also in relation to its own functioning. Academia is “becoming more concerned with the technological and practical application of their results”²⁴. This tendency becomes particularly manifest in the increasing scientific interest in the role media play in fostering creativity, promoting entrepreneurship and new forms of social innovation (Manuel José Damásio’s individual report). And this change in professional aims and practical functions also needs to be further analysed.

²² Van Dijck, “Users Like You? Theorizing Agency in User-Generated Content”, 42.

²³ S. Livingstone, “The Challenge of Changing Audiences: Or, What Is the Researcher to Do in the Age of the Internet?”, *European Journal of Communication*, 19, 1 (2004): 75-86 (77).

²⁴ S. Henriques, *The Significance of Our Research for Social Practice. A Perspective from Mobile Technology Research*, 2012.

INDIVIDUAL TATS COST ACTION REPORTS

- A. Bergström, *Audience Interactivity and Participation*, 2012.
- M.J. Damásio, *Individual Report*, 2012.
- M. Dufresne, G. Patriarche, *The Significance of Our Research on Citizen Participation for Social Practice*, 2012.
- S. Henriques, *The Significance of Our Research for Social Practice. A Perspective from Mobile Technology Research*, 2012.
- S. Kotilainen, *The Usefulness of My Research for the Stakeholders in the Field*, 2012.
- N. Nyirő, *How My Research Has Been Useful, or Could Be Useful, for which Stakeholders in the Field?*, 2012.
- H. Sanchez Gonzales, *Connectivity between the Audience and the Journalist: Regularization of the Use of Social Media and Information Quality*, 2012.
- B. Stark, *Changing News Consumption*, 2012.
- T. Storsul, *Individual Report on "The Significance of Our Research for Social Practice"*, 2012.
- M. Torres da Silva, *The Significance of Our Research for Social Practice*, 2012.
- M. Villi, *Mobile Media and User-Distributed Content in Media Management*, 2012.
- R. Zamora, *Individual Report on "Audience Interactivity and Participation"*, 2012.

SUMMARY

This article discusses the many implications of participation in a cross-media scenario where actions and behaviours of digital audiences are reshaping some key processes in journalism, politics and the media industry. The development of this research agenda is based on an analysis of a state of the art of the latest researches in the field of communication and media studies, as identified in 26 individual reports, written by members of Working Group 2 of the Cost Action Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies (TATS). This article frames these emerging research topics as tensions, arguing that the idea of *tension* is the best metaphor to identify and analyse the challenges of the 21st century media landscape.