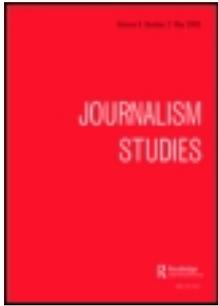


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Participatory Journalism: guarding open gates at online newspapers

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BOOK REVIEW

Participatory Journalism: guarding open gates at online newspapers

JANE B. SINGER, DAVID DOMINGO, ARI HEINONEN, ALFRED HERMIDA, STEVE PAULUSSEN,
THORSTEN QUANDT, ZVI REICH and MARINA VUJNOVIC
Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011
227 pp., £24.99, ISBN 978-1-4443-3227-8

Participatory Journalism examines the findings of an international research project which seeks to explore the fluid role of active audiences in 10 Western democracies. Divided into 10 chapters, the book is co-authored by eight researchers who interviewed nearly 70 journalists working at online newspapers between 2007 and 2008. The collaborators focused on leading national newspapers in Europe, North America and Israel, to provide a snapshot of how user-generated content is being incorporated into professional news products and the challenges this evolving relationship brings.

Each chapter is written by a single author and the book is helpfully divided into three sections looking at the impact of participatory journalism, how changes are being managed, and future issues and implications. Throughout the book a diverse range of topics are addressed including journalists' attitudes, roles and routines, economic motivations, ethical issues and the function of twenty-first-century gatekeepers. All aspects of user-generated content are examined from comments on stories, to breaking news photographs to eyewitness accounts of emerging disasters. The team of researchers focus on how interviewees' job roles have changed, how journalists deal with user-generated content and the amount of editorial control handed over to the public.

Despite having eight authors, the book has a consistent tone throughout due to Alfred Hermida's excellent second chapter which sets out the mechanisms of participation that subsequent chapters cross reference. Indeed, each author refers to previous and preceding chapters, making it easy for the reader to navigate between complex arguments and tie each thematic chapter together. The authors have obviously gone to great lengths to ensure that the book stands together as a whole, rather than appearing as a disparate selection of papers around a common theme. However, in some respects this is also one of the book's weaknesses as there are elements of repetition, such as the same interviewee quote being exemplified in two different chapters.

The overlapping of chapters works best when authors discuss the increasingly prevalent argument that market forces are driving participatory journalism. In Chapter Eight, "Participatory Journalism in the Marketplace", Marina Vujnovic competently explores the increasing pressures of market forces within newsrooms which threaten to undermine the democratic functions of Western journalism. Rather than take a deterministic approach, the assistant professor is more cautious and asks whether Web 2.0 is exacerbating this conflict by creating a "commoditized media culture" rather than providing a genuine alternative public sphere.

A minor criticism of the book, however, is that it makes the assumption that user-generated content—and therefore participatory journalism—has rapidly increased, but puts forward limited empirical evidence to support this claim. Indeed, some would argue that a sizeable amount of journalists are still of the view that reader participation is the same and it is simply the tools of communication that have changed, and it is disappointing that this view is not explored by the authors, let alone challenged. That being said, the breadth and scope of the collaborative project is an extremely valuable one

which unpicks the threads that lie at the heart of journalism and examines how those core threads are being rewoven in a digital age, where anyone with Internet access can be a publisher.

Like its authors, half of whom are both journalists and scholars, the book is also a hybrid—on the one hand, it serves as a robust piece of empirical research and, on the other, it is an excellent textbook for journalism students. This is evidently a deliberate device by the authors who wish to make a contribution to knowledge without alienating potential readers. The book is written in clear, familiar English resembling more of a journalistic style than an academic one, and each chapter ends with questions inviting the reader (or lecturer) to discuss and probe issues. There is also an effective glossary which explains terms which may be unfamiliar to those starting out in the field. In the main, this hybrid approach works to the book's advantage but in places it lacks the depth of argument needed to explore complex ideology surrounding the public sphere and deliberative democracy. Instead it tends to gloss over some of these concepts, with Habermas making only rare appearances. It is not until the penultimate chapter, "Understanding a New Phenomenon" by Dr Thorsten Quandt, that a conceptual sociological framework is provided, the book preferring to rely on applied knowledge rather than theoretical. And for a book that is perhaps trying to reach a wider audience this is an admirable and appropriate approach to take.

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