9-2009

Participation as Position and Practice: Rethinking Media Diversity and Policy in the Web 2.0 Era

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WORKING PAPER

PARTICIPATION AS POSITION AND PRACTICE:
RETHINKING MEDIA DIVERSITY AND POLICY IN THE WEB 2.0 ERA

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September, 2009

1. The Starting Point: Media Diversity 2.0

Making media policy must be one of the most challenging tasks of today's governing bodies, whether local, national or transnational. The media landscape is constantly changing, in diverse, even chaotic ways. The complexity of transformations has aptly been condensed by Brian McNair (2006) who labels the numerous and magnificent changes in recent decades as the shift from a 'control paradigm' to a 'chaos paradigm' in the contemporary communication environment. He lists several 'main constituents' of this transition, for instance the shift from information scarcity to surplus, from exclusivity to accessibility, from passivity to (inter)activity, from hierarchy to network and from dominance to competition (ibid., 199). One of the most important changes, according to McNair's 'chaos theory', is from *homogeneity* to *diversity* (ibid., 199).

This working paper is an attempt to reposition the question of media diversity from the perspective of audiences. In general terms, diversity is often conceptualised by content (variety in contents). The aspects of content diversity, in turn, are frequently understood as the quantitative, measurable *breath of programme-type supply* in a structural level (the diversity of output); the diversity of *issues* and *voices* presented in contents; or even as form-related aspects (for instance, how audiences are addressed in different kinds of contents, see, e.g., Aslama 2008). However, two other distinct, if related, dimensions of diversity are that of media sources (producers of output in a media system) and that of reception (breath of media consumption by, e.g., media, genre, different audience segments, and so on, c.f., Napoli 2001). Most analyses of (Western) media have in the past two decades focussed on the diversity of media organizations in a system, and the plurality represented in contents offered (e.g., Hellman 2001; Aslama et al. 2004).

In contrast, this paper suggests that in these times of exponential growth and globalization of the markets, rapid technological development, and the mainstreaming of user-generated content, the approach to the diversity principle could be found in rethinking media audiences in terms of *diversity of participation.* The idea of diversity of reception – the principle that is implied in

debates, policy papers and industry mission statements, but seldom explicitly and empirically addressed in research – should be taken seriously. In addition, the undeniable changes in the nature of 'audiencehood' in the past decades necessitate a broadening this idea via the concept of 'participation'.

The term participation is currently used mostly in the context of to the expansion of user-generated media content, but it could also aptly expand the idea of reception, or even of 'media practices' by audiences (c.f. , Hargittai & Walejko 2008; Karaganis 2007) – to entail people's engagement in content production, as well as issues pertaining more broadly to media structures. Understood in a multidimensional way, ensuring the diversity of participation, then, could be seen as the primary driver for media policy-making arenas.

2. The Context: Media Policy and New Diversity Needs

From the viewpoint of media policy, the new media certainly brings about a new, multi-layered mission. It could be argued that in the new media era, a certain tension has emerged between two aspects of diversity, that of media sources, and of media content (c.f., Napoli 2001). First, the question is about the basic question of content diversity of the entire system of a certain media segment. Similarly, it could be argued that since pay services in many digital platforms are becoming more and more common, there should be some guarantee for access for diverse content, free or only minimally charged. This line of thinking goes often hand in hand with the European public service broadcasting ideal. Consequently, in countries with a strong PSB tradition, there are still proponents of the idea of a full-service television channel to be maintained in the public service remit. A fragmented multi-channel strategy, the argument goes, may transform television, the former medium of social cohesion, into a medium of fragmentation that leaves lone consumer surf in specialized channels (c.f., Ellis 2000). And while distribution channels within one media segment have multiplied, diversity is no longer a one-medium affair. Most old media have

expanded into multi-platform presence. For example, 'public service media' (PSM) has already become, if not a household, then an industry term, and the concept has been recognized by numerous European-wide bodies, such as the European Broadcasting Union (already in 2002), and the Council of Europe. Diversity, then would need to apply to access to, and offerings of, different platforms and services (c.f., Aslama et al. 2004).

At the same time, media policy initiatives and practices in Europe and elsewhere seem to be at a loss as to how to tackle 'new media' and the 'Web2.0' era[1]; national and transnational approaches differ greatly (e.g., Aslama & Syvertsen 2006). Partly this may be due to the uncertainty of how the media landscape is shaping up; locally, regionally, nationally, or globally. In the beginning of this decade it was, in fact, feared that new technologies might pose a threat of marginalization for public broadcasters in the market-driven situation. This is illustrated well in the main scenarios that were put forward in Danish policy debates in the beginning of the millennium – The Sea of Information, The Digital Lagoons and The Media Islands (Jauert 2003, 198-199).

The Sea of Information scenario gave the dominant position to the internet as the most individual and interactive medium. Content would be produced and distributed with an infinite number of providers. The Digital Lagoons (also known as the gatekeeper scenario) placed a few global companies that would be active across the media and technologies in charge of the whole media chain. They would control everything from copyrights to set-top boxes and programme subscriptions.

While these two scenarios implied a strong possibility of marginalization of publicly-funded and nation-bound public service institutions, the third scenario, the Media Islands, suggested that public broadcasters may retain a more dominant position. It was argued that because of the lack of demand for interactivity and of investments in technology it would be difficult for new services to

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[1] The term 'Web 2.0' is vague and can be contested (Madden & Fox 2006), but it is making its way from everyday use to academic analyses (Aslama & Ericksson 2009). Here, it is used broadly to refer to refer to the participatory, user-generated applications and practices online.

earn a return, and consequently, the media landscape would not change as much as many of the prophets of the new media revolution have claimed.

Some ten years later, it seems that all of the scenarios have some truth in them. While some visionaries claim that the threat to media diversity lies in the global concentration of new technologies, gadgets and their applications, that will automatically narrow down consumers' options (e.g., Zittrain 2008), national or regional old media organizations are still doing relatively well in terms of content production. While young people are clearly more accustomed to the Internet as their main medium, and care less for television, this has been a trend for some time. In Europe as well as in the U.S. TV is still the main medium (even if less so than in the past) and ratings show no overly dramatic signs of audience fragmentation. Also, a global media sphere might be emerge in some respects, but several studies on Europe over the years seem to indicate that in terms of 'old media' content such as television programming, domestic production is still highly valued. (See, e.g., discussion in Aslama 2008, 80-87).

Also, the new media environment may be more global, but most viral new media fads, whether online services or multiplatform social media innovations, have not come from commercial developers. Clearly, Web 2.0 phenomena like Facebook, with its 250 million users (as of July, 2009) obviously have progressed beyond being platforms for students and other 'early adopters'. But none of the new social media innovations demonstrated true potential of being a comprehensive, or even a truly complementary, alternative to traditional media (and media organizations). While news and political campaigns may encourage intense blogging and reach millions via Twitter, they still rely to a great extent on 'traditional' media outlets as sources or counterparts.

3. The Focus: 'Diversity of Participation'

While interaction and more recently, participation, have been catchwords in public, academic, and industry discourses for quite some time, little thought or systematic analysis has

actually been given to either theoretical and conceptual aspects or concrete opportunities and solutions that exist in the current media landscape. In other words, there are the two axes of participation – theoretically, *participation as a position*; and pragmatically, *participation as production*. Consequently it could be argued that they should be equally important in terms of strategic development, if the diversity principle and the ethos of the media fostering democratic societies are to be taken seriously in the new media environment.

Participation as Position

To begin with, there are the abstract, conceptual, and often scholarly discussions about how audience members are addressed by the media, and/or how they position themselves. In broader terms, some scholars want to bypass the idea of audiences and talk about 'audienceship' as referring to the very interface between audiences and texts; as opposed to the subject positions of audience members.[2] Others note that the notions of mass communication and 'the work' of its audiences, are still valid concepts, when appropriately reconfigured (Napoli, 2008): Audiences are indeed 'working' in the user-generated environment, if not exactly referring to the theoretical vain of thought of the 1980s, that audiences 'work' for programmers and advertisers by watching (e.g. Jhally & Livant, 1986). A case in point is the flagship of the multimedia audience participation genre, namely reality programming. Both academic theorisation and public debate around reality TV tend to retort back to the 1980s idea of 'audience participation' and insinuate that viewers indeed work for commercial media enterprises when they are seduced by the manufactured authenticity of reality programming. Yet, many empirical analyses of audiences seem to indicate that a part of that 'authenticity labour' by audiences around reality programming deals very much with work on the self – self-development, discovery, identification, and the like. (Aslama & Pantti in print).

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[2] Conceptualisation by Li (2009): http://canarytrap.net/2009/05/audiences-and-audienceship/ (accessed 28 July 2009).

This example illustrates that some traditional perceptions about participation as a position still live on. The polarized audience positions that often have been linked to public service and commercial media – citizens versus consumers – still seem to live on, but some researchers have come up with additional roles, or modes of address. For instance, Preston (2001, 244), in thinking about the emergence of new media at the turn of the Millennium, has noted that there are multiple ways by which 'communicative communities' are discussed in public scholarly debates. He labels these positions as *Civic National, Affective National, Post-modern Cultural and Global Information*. The notion of the Civic National identity is based on citizenship: In a true 'Habermasian' fashion, identity means rational, critical members of a political community that collectively form a public sphere. The Affective National identity, in contrast, is a combination of a political identity and particular cultural or ethnic identities. These various identities take distinct national and other civic and social formations. The key actors are citizens and bearers of a distinctive cultural or expressive identity. In contrast, the predominant identities of the post-modernist cultural view are that of active audiences, in a situation where national and other modern social identities have collapsed. These identities, then, are individual and multiple, and the key actors are active audiences or reflexive consumers, sometimes called 'socially situated' audiences. Finally, the global information society view (in its neo-liberal version) sees the key actors of public communication simply as consumers of media products in the marketplace. From these definitions it is clear that potential participatory motivations and modes would be seen very differently for different communicative communities.

Somewhat less theoretical thinking has gone into audience positions and changes in broadcasting, often as opposed to 'new media'. John Ellis (2000) has theorised that the role of television in the new media era would be to offer unifying 'witnessing' positions and experiences (in contrast to lone surfing on the Internet). Mats Ekström (2000), in depicting modes of current television journalism, has noted that the imagined recipients of journalistic content are addressed as

knowledge-seeking citizens, listeners (of stories), or spectators (of spectacles). Trine Syvertsen (2004) has noted that broadcasters have indeed begun to address audiences not only as citizens and consumers but also, for instance, as customers and players; and Irene Costera Meier (2004) has advocated for the 'enjoyer' as a legitimate position for audiences, also in terms of quality programming of public broadcasting. Another way to diversify the thinking on audiences of public service media has been the evident divide between pubic broadcasting generations and 'digital natives', as aptly presented by Gregory Ferrell Lowe (2008). He characterises the PSB generations as traditionalists, universalists and collectivists, while audiences of new on-demand content and services are 'acquirers, hedonists, and independents'

The new audience positions depicted above offer a diverse array of starting points if assessed in terms of how such positions would foster participation and engagement. The kind of participation associated with a client is very different from that of a witness. It is clear, however, that the slogan of 'participation' -- audiences as 'participants' in (or even 'in partnership' with) the media -- is a marketing strategy of both conventional commercial and public ('mass') media organizations. The core question is now how prosumerism, proactive 'audienceship' or audience work in the era of Web2.0 is defined. Clearly, options are many. But conceptual choices would inform mission statements, policy stands as well as concrete options in development of content and services.

Participation as Production

To bring 'participation' to a more concrete level, the concept can refer to specific *platforms and content*. In industry parlance, the term 'Participation Media' is frequently used to refer to cross / multimedia content production and products, as well as to interactive possibilities for consumers to take part in the production. Most often, the presumption still seems to be that the framework of participation media is provided by specific, conventional media institutions, and a great part of the

content is produced by professionals. As mentioned earlier, 'reality programming' is often quoted as an example par excellence of 'participation media', and of truly 'active audiences', since audiences follow television shows, vote by mobile, and chat online (e.g., Tincknell & Raghuram 2002).

At the same time, non-traditional media outlets and social media tools have taken on some tasks of mass media. As noted by the recent PEW study on news media[3], social networking and citizen video sharing have broadened as a medium of distributing news, not only for social interaction and entertainment. This kind of *non-professional and/or informal* communication also facilitates serious political activism (Boyd, 2008). Facebook and Twitter provide for recent current examples regarding the crisis in Pakistan, and (albeit in different ways) in the elections in Iran and in the U.S..[4] And there have been earlier but similar instances where the production by amateurs has outdone mainstream media output in relevance and speed of communication, such as the diving sites in the case of the Tsunami news coverage in 2005 (Kivikuru 2008).

It could be argued that in between old-media led participation and relatively spontaneous, informal use of social media is yet another variation of the theme of user-generated content production; systematic yet independent from mainstream media: participation as in non-commercial, non-institutional blogging and participation as systematic *crowd-sourcing*. With the latter, the central aim is the joint production: While there is a hub that gathers the information, the production is not facilitated by and/or channelled through conventional, professional means of media production and distribution. The Wikipedia online encyclopaedia may be the most famous and successful crowd-sourcing activity. However, there are also (unfortunately, often short lived)

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[3] See, www.stateofthemedia.org/2009; accessed 20 July 2009.
[4] See the report by the Center for Social Media, American University, on Twitter and the U.S. elections: http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/resources/publications/public_media_20_field_report_building_social_media_infrastructure_to_engage/ (accessed 28 July 2009).

projects of crowd sourced journalism and some recent experiments include a Facebook-directed animation[5], or a collaborative translation service for TV shows[6].

4. Considerations: How Much is New?

These three basic modes for participation as production, and all their variations and combinations, are potentially important to media policy-making. It is clear that 'participation as production' is not a fad but a rainbow of interrelated phenomena that have very real and practical socio-cultural consequences. As noted by many, the period of 'individualistic experimentation' of participatory media is over and all kinds of digital platforms from YouTube to Second Life are currently being embraced not only by businesses but by civil society organizations, political parties and universities alike (see, e.g., Clark & Aufderheide 2009). Broadband penetration is extensive in the Western world (and growing in many parts of the world)[7] and the importance of mobile communication grows rapidly. Social networks are not only for the younger generations any more,[8] as is indicated by the fact that a variety of organizations, ranging from rock bands to university alumni associations, to the United Nations programmes, have established their presence in many social networking sites.

It is thus evident that participation as a catchword is not likely to be devalued any time soon. Some scholars even claim that we have entered into the era of the 'non-proprietary networked information economy' (Benkler 2006), or into a 'post-broadcast democracy' (Prior 2007). However, changes, no matter how rapid, tend not to be instant, one-directional, or ahistorical. Thus, new phenomena regarding *participation as production* and as *a position* both also entail several question marks as to what they really mean.

If the traditional diversity principle is to be taken seriously, then the question would pertain

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[5] See, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/16/movies/16mass.html?_r=5 (accessed 28 July 2009).
[6] See, http://canarytrap.net/2009/06/collaborative-transational-audienceships-viikiinet/ (accessed 28 July 2009).
[7] E.g., http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm (accessed 27 Jan 2008).
[8] E.g., http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/272/report_display.asp (accessed 27 Jan 2008).

also to how to provide different kinds of audience segments different ways of participation. While phenomena like Facebook could be said to have become mainstream, not everyone wishes to engage in microblogging, or choose the ending for an interactive drama. For instance, sending and receiving emails has maintained its popularity as a way of communicating in the Internet, despite the rise of instant messaging and popular social networking sites (Madden & Fox 2006). There is relatively little research, as of yet, beyond some aggregate statistical data, on the everyday uses and meanings of Web2.0. Still, studies on fans of multimedia products such as reality television and online fandom in general suggest that, even if the platform is offered, there is a scale of intensity of participation. Multimedia products may evoke 'hyperactive participation' (Hautakangas 2006), but not necessarily.

For example, a study on viewers who took part in an online activity involving a television series (Costello & Moore 2007), revealed a variety of approaches that audience members took regarding participation. At 'the lower end of the activity continuum' were audience members who merely wanted to *share their experiences* with other fans/viewers. Participation for them thus meant a more informed and pleasurable position as a consumer of a media product. However, they were not interested in influencing a program or the entertainment industry in general. They were indifferent about influencing the direction of a program or the entertainment industry. On the other end of the scale were those who wanted inform the production process and *create their own*, 'improved' versions of their favourite program.

Also, it seems that participation is supported more readily regarding entertainment, but that innovation of true participatory journalism by traditional media institutions is still limited.[9] Journalists share their blogs and offer options for commenting or sharing their stories. But for example a survey on citizen-based media in the U.S.[10] verified that citizens are mostly used as

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[9] There are, and have been, several experiments, such as the BBC World's citizen journalism project: http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/haveyoursay/2009/04/090406_yourstoryexplain.shtml (accessed 28 July 2009).
[10] See, http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2009/narrative_special_citzenbasedmedia.php?media=12&cat=0 (accessed 28 July 2009).

sources rather than given opportunities to really produce journalistic content. Also, the possibilities for participation may not directly translate into a sense of engagement. A recent Finnish survey on people's experiences with the power of the media (Karppinen & Jääsaari 2007) suggested that respondents felt that the least likely parties to have any influence on media contents were audiences.

Furthermore, it is not clear that the audience position of the information-seeking citizen would be a thing in the past. To continue with the example of Finland, numerous surveys and other research on audiences suggest some discontent – but do not indicate any major disengagement from – politics since the beginning of the 1990s. Studies, rather, imply that the citizen-viewer still exists, wanting to be addressed (among other identities and needs) as a citizen and remaining concerned, for example, with the diversity of television programming (discussion in Aslama 2008; Jääsaari 2004). The dilemma seems to be a more complex disconnect between the media, the decision-making elites of official politics, and the citizens (discussion, e.g., in Nieminen et al. 2005, 6–12).

The core question about the diversity of participation is analogous to the question of diversity of sources. In the 1990s the Internet evoked an avalanche of theorization about its democratic potential, most of it optimistic if not utopian: The infinite possibilities of online communication and magnificent diversity of content would result in new diverse forms of public spheres and counter-publics. Still today, there is plenty of theorising – and some empirical analyses, especially around social movements – suggesting that Internet-based communication creates alternative platforms, those platforms support political participation, and they also often connect the local and the global around a particular issue (e.g., Aslama & Ericksson 2009).

While all of this may be true, we also know about the challenges of online communication, ranging from digital divide and net neutrality questions, to privacy issues and 'harmful content' (infamous examples being child pornography and hate speech). And, as Matthew Hindman (2009) has convincingly argued, the empirical evidence shows that the diversity of sources in the Internet is, in some sense, an illusion. As he notes, speaking does not mean that one is being heard. For

instance, the political bloggers with a significant following form only a small, elite group, very much resembling political commentators in the old media (and to some extent, the two groups overlap). Hindman's systematic analyses prove that the popularity of websites is very concentrated on certain sites (and, for example, only some three percent of web traffic goes to news and media sites; ibid, 60-61), the search engines guide one's choices of sites, and so on. Similarly, to paraphrase Hindman (ibid.), to some extent the infrastructure of participation limits the kinds of participation that will place. Also, the diversity of participatory practices available is no automatic guarantee for (political, engaged, democratic) action and experiences.

5. Conclusion: Re-assessing Participation and Citizenship

The question of 'diversity 2.0', in the era of Web 2.0, requires careful re-thinking, since the developments in the media landscape are rapid and sometimes contradictory. The diversity dilemma, in real life and in policy terms, cannot be isolated to concern merely sources, content or 'reception'. And it could be argued that the Web 2.0 era really blurs the boundaries of these three categories; thus the need for new concepts and terminology such as diversity of participation. Furthermore, the diverse forms of *practice* of participation have to be coupled by support for different *positions* of participation.

The uttermost diversity of participation is envisioned by Jessica Clark and Pat Aufterheide (2008) in their report on *Public Media 2.0*. They note that 'the people formerly known as the audience now are at the center of media' and present a model of new 'public media' as 'people-centric'. By this idea, the authors insinuate that people deal with their needs, identities, affinities, services, emergencies, work, creativity, communities, issues, education, as well as organizations they belong and products they consume more though media, but also more directly than before: 'Connectivity, participation, and digital media creation will only increase' (ibid., 4). The paramount strategic policy task, then, would seem to be the decision on what participatory positions are being

marginalised and should be supported, and how those positions translate into concrete participatory opportunities, whether in terms of media policy, or even in terms of what our late modern Western democracies may mean. If the main aim of diversity policies still is, as it has been, to guarantee a diverse media system to support a functioning democracy, then the obvious participatory position to be supported would be that of the citizen.

One source for inspiration regarding diversity of participation is community media that, traditionally, have addressed specific needs in terms of geographic or thematic orientation, and have been specifically dependent on active engagement. For example, the European Union has clearly recognized this opportunity, since it commissioned a study on the matter.[11] In addition, while content, distribution, and the related roles of those (formerly?) known as audience members are important in the participation discussion, there's yet another sphere which is becoming increasingly crucial, in terms of content and access to communication in the Web2.0 era. People's awareness of, and participation in, media policy making could been seen as a crucial aspect if participation is understood in a broader sense. The so called media reform or media justice movements are not very typical to Europe but alive in North America, in the U.K., and becoming increasingly global. These civic organizations are specifically concerned with diversity, whether in reference to ownership concentration and alternative media outlets, diverse voices presented in media output, access to media technologies and contents, net neutrality, and so on. (e.g., Hackett & Carroll 2006; McChesney 2007).

Yet another point to consider is how diversity of participation could be *assessed*. As Bridget Griffen-Foley (2005) has pointed out, 'audience participation' has existed at least over a century as a part of mass communication. So how to assess the relevance of various forms in contributing to the ultimate goal of diversity? One option is presented (albeit implicitly) by Peter Dahlgren (2005) in his idea of 'Civic Cultures'. Dahlgren stresses the idea that citizenship can be understood through

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[11] See, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=REPORT&reference=A6-2008-0263&language=EN&mode=XML (accessed 28 July 2009).

the notion of political agency, as one mode of individual and collective action. Consequently, he brings forth the view on identity formation consisting of a multitude of aspects; citizenship thus being one identity – or rather, a part of an identity of an individual. 'Civic cultures', then, are 'those cultural patterns in which identities of citizenship, and the foundations of civic action, are embedded' (ibid., 422). He parallels civic cultures with Robert Putnam's idea of 'social capital', in that civic cultures are resources for individuals and groups when they act as citizens. In his view, the media's role is to provide a sphere for expressing such cultures, but also to take part in pre-structuring those cultures.

This vain of thought brings citizenship back to the palette of participation, even to the centre of participatory positions and opportunities. At the same time, Dahlgren (ibid.) dissects the aspects that foster the citizen segment of people's identity and presents those aspects as five circuits. Following his conceptualisation, then, the question would be, whether participatory possibilities foster those circuits; that is, whether they support (1) knowledge and competencies (related to democracy); (2) values (procedural and broader values that are connected to democracy); (3) affinity and trust (providing 'minimal sense of commonality among citizens in heterogeneous late modern societies'); (4) practices (those necessary for democracies), and/or (5) identities (as participants in a democracy). In addition, the circuits might not be as abstract as much of the theorisation on participation in general. Dahlgren suggests that these five aspects can be seen as integrated circuits with five mutually reciprocal dimensions and that can be taken as starting points for empirical inquiry about the media's significance for civic cultures. In other words, the circuits could be operationalised into concrete strategic actions as well as into evaluative indicators.

Maybe the diversity of participation envisioned, and endorsed, by media policy should indeed focus on the diversity of aspects that foster *contemporary citizenship*. That might be the most fruitful way to define how media policy can respond to, and provide for, the needs of the people formerly known as the audience – as well as to envision concrete measures to secure the diversity of

media systems.

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