

Contribution or Constrain?

Audience Interaction in Swedish Online Newspapers

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ABSTRACT— *A focus on audience interaction in online news media has increased rapidly during the past years. Online news media offer their audience several opportunities of interaction, for example, by submitting comments on articles or sharing pictures and videos. In addition, audience interaction has emerged as a fast growing research field: the motives for embracing online audience interaction have been analyzed and the kind of interactive opportunities offered by the news media has been mapped. Also, the question of whether audience interaction really contributes or rather constrains professional journalism has been vividly discussed. This study relates to the latter perspective as it examines professional journalists' views on audience interaction. By focusing on the case of Swedish newspaper journalists, this study investigates how audience interaction is perceived to impact professional standards and to what extent such interaction is believed to be beneficial or rather an obstacle for journalism. Based on a representative survey of Swedish journalists, conducted in 2011-2012, and a survey of journalists working at local morning papers in Sweden, conducted in 2009, the analysis reveals certain dividing lines in media practitioners' attitudes to audience interaction.*

Keywords— audience interaction, online participation, newspapers, journalists, chief editors.

1. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of Web 2.0 has largely influenced the audience's ability to participate in the process of creating and publishing online journalism (Nightingale & Dwyer, 2007). This interactive process sometimes comes off in 'cooperation' with established media organizations because online news media invites the audience to contribute with comments, pictures, and videos; a situation commonly described as the citizens' transition from the audience to the arena. Today, parts of the audience are not only receivers of mediated communication; they also hold the position as producers and senders of such communication (Carpentier, 2012). Often, scholars use the term "producers" to highlight a blend of producing and consuming (Bird, 2011; Bruns, 2006, 2008a).

Scholars and media practitioners generally describe the rise of this new kind of audience interaction as part of a larger trend that is revolutionizing journalism by disrupting the traditional relationships between journalists and their audience (c.f. Chung 2007, 2008; Deuze et al., 2007; Hujanen & Pietikainen, 2004). In many aspects, the focus on audience interaction in news media, as well as in other kinds of media, has led to certain situations where the professional media practitioners are potentially being challenged by the non-professionals. Lately, the role of the audience has become increasingly similar to the role of traditional gate-watchers as the audience has come to have the opportunity to keep track of and discuss the performance of news media in blogs and article comments (Bruns, 2006, 2008b). Given this particular development, this study addresses the question of what kind of implications such a challenge may have on professional journalism. For example, how do media professionals perceive this kind of audience interaction to impact journalistic work? And to what extent is the audience's increased participation in online news media believed to benefit journalism? These questions will be analyzed by focusing on the case of Swedish newspaper journalists. A quantitative analysis of the professional perceptions that are expressed in the news room will be used to establish knowledge about how increased audience interaction potentially impacts professional journalism. The analysis will show that media professionals often have a rather cautious approach to audience interaction. It further reveals the existence of a perceptual gap within the news organization as journalists and chief editors tend to value the importance of audience interaction differently.

2. THE CONCEPT OF AUDIENCE INTERACTION

The concept of audience interaction is generally described as a manifestation of participatory culture and Web 2.0. Depending on the specific context, there are a number of definitions for this term (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012). An OECD report from 2007 establishes a general conceptual definition on the basis of three criteria that are limited to the digital world: firstly, the content has to be produced outside the established framework of media professionals; secondly, it has

to be the result of a creative process (if ever so little); and thirdly, it has to be published via the Internet. In general, this concept also includes some kind of interactivity such as voting or commenting on articles (Hermida, 2011; Jenkins & Deuze, 2008; Chung, 2007). However, there is no general agreement about the participative elements for online news: each scholar has created his or her own taxonomy. For example, Domingo et al. (2008) identified up to 17 participation variables offered on the 16 online newspapers that were included in their multinational study. Similarly, Wardle and Williams (2008) have proposed a typology divided into five types of user-generated content while others, such as Chung and Robinette (2008) and Chung and Nah (2009), have organized participative and interactive resources based on a scale with five categories referring to levels of interactivity on news websites.

In this study, audience interaction is defined as an offer to the audience to share their stories, photos, and videos as well as an opportunity for the audience to comment and re-create existing content in the online news media. In other words, opportunities for the audience to participate by sharing and uploading photos or videos, responding to enquiries, commenting on articles, linking articles to social media, and creating and participating in blogs or chats. This definition distinguishes the concept from audience interaction, as well as audience participation, in general and allows the definition to be applied on online newspapers where chief editors still retain initiative and control over the content. A similar definition has been used by Franquet et al. (2011), Singer et al. (2011), Jenkins and Deuze (2008), and Örnebring (2008).

The transnational hype around audience interaction in online news media has not only made its mark in the media business; it also has emerged as a rapidly expanded research field. The motives for online news media to invite the audience into the news room – or at least the webpage – have been analyzed by scholars along with studies about what kind of participatory opportunities the audience really is offered by the news media. Furthermore, some studies have discussed whether audience interaction should be regarded as something beneficial or rather as an obstacle for professional journalism. Some of these studies will be discussed below.

3. INVITING THE AUDIENCE TO INTERACT: MOTIVATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

There are several strategic factors why online news media would focus on audience interaction. Creating customer loyalty by engaging readers is one such important factor in this participation process; increasing the website traffic – and thereby raising the online advertising revenues – is another central factor (Deuze, 2009; Hedman, 2009; Chung, 2007:58). Scholars have also found that strengthening the newspaper brand and winning back the non-reading media audience appear to be other important goals for many newspapers (Bakker & Pantii 2009:6; Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger, 2007). As most news organizations have experienced declining revenues, economic crises, and smaller staffs, the engagement of readers sometimes is regarded as a tempting shortcut to generate news at little or no cost at all (Deuze, 2009; Fortunati et al., 2009; c.f. Wildman, 2008:99). Also, research has showed that news media finds audience interaction particularly valuable when the audience provides the newspaper with content that is closely connected to the newspaper's own brand and when the contributions are perceived valuable by the audience (Domingo, 2008; Thurman, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Thurman & Lupton, 2008). Furthermore, scholars have revealed that editorial leaders often tend to express hope that increased audience involvement will improve the democratic function of news media, especially if such efforts give rise to various forms of participatory journalism (Domingo et al., 2008; Nguyen, 2008; Nip, 2008, 2006). Such hopes rest on the assumption that a strong audience engagement automatically leads to the enhanced democratization of news media. By encouraging the audience to monitor areas that usually are not addressed in traditional news coverage, the audience may in fact help the news organization to improve the range and depth of journalism and thus make journalism more relevant.

A multinational study of audience interaction on media websites in Europe and the United States found that news media most often equates audience participation with opportunities for the audience to comment on specific articles or current events (Domingo et al., 2008). Similar results have appeared in recent studies of Scandinavian media organizations (Larsson, 2012; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2010; Hedman, 2009). Some of the Scandinavian studies that have focused on audience participation appearing in Swedish and British online newspapers have found that the audience most often is “empowered to create popular culture-oriented content and personal/everyday life-oriented content rather than news/informational content” (Örnebring, 2007:19; see also Larsson, 2012; Jönsson & Örnebring 2010). These results indicate that the audience is given roughly the same opportunities to participate online as in the printed paper, with the main difference being the immediacy and the opportunity to directly respond to, or receive responses from, other people. There are a handful of newspapers, however, that take audience interaction a step further. The French daily *Le Monde* provides blogs to its subscribers and encourages readers to keep an electronic journal of their travels. The best of these contributions can be accessed through the travel pages at the newspaper's website. Moreover, the paper started a subsidiary, *LePost.fr*, a social media and newsroom of journalists who produce their own content and co-produce news with users (Helberg & De Munck, 2011:68). Although there indeed are some specific online spaces created for the audience in *LeMonde*, the audience still does not produce news or informational content that is considered for publication in the main paper.

In sum, few newspapers invite the audience to take greater part in the news production process; rather, news organizations choose to maintain the traditional editorial logics and principles of organization that for quite some time

have characterized the newsroom (Hermida, 2011; Domingo et al., 2008, 2007; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Paulussen et al., 2007). Research has also revealed that journalists themselves strongly tend to retain the traditional gatekeeping role in the process of selecting what kind of audience-created content that will be published online (Andersson 2013; Hermida, 2011; Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Such findings point to the conclusion that the increased focus of news media on audience participation has had a rather limited impact on the core of journalistic work: this kind of audience involvement only allows for the audience to influence certain stages of the news production process while other stages either are closed for audience involvement or controlled by the journalists. As the principle “we write – you read” still stands solid in the newsroom, the involvement of the audience may perhaps best be described as an interaction kept in strict reins.

3. PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS ABOUT AUDIENCE INTERACTION

Despite the fact that the traditional organization of news work appears to have remained rather unaffected by the emergence of online audience interaction, there are some fears expressed that certain journalistic values such as autonomy and accountability, both related to journalistic credibility, will be challenged with the increased level of audience involvement in online news media. For example, Singer (2007: 90) has argued that “the notion of autonomy becomes unavoidably contested” in this process. Other scholars have suggested that professional values such as credibility and reliability must be strengthened and reinterpreted if journalism is not to be weakened by the increase of audience interaction (Hayes, Singer, & Creppo, 2008; see also Deuze, 2008).

Doubts have also been raised concerning the ability for media professionals to maintain journalistic scrutiny and enforcement of press ethics when the audience is invited to participate via comments, articles, pictures, or movies (Singer, 2011, 2007; Nel, Ward, & Rawlinson, 2006). In their study of the *Guardian*, Singer and Ashman (2009) found that journalists often were concerned about the credibility of the kind of content that is provided by the audience. Also, media practitioners have expressed concerns about the potential challenge of journalistic authority that may come along with the increased focus on audience involvement in online editions. Additionally, critics have argued that journalists’ important gatekeeping role may be lost as their professional role is being diminished in the face of losing the monopoly on news selection and news reporting (Deuze, 2008; Lowery & Andersson, 2005). Such views are strongly linked to the normative perspective of journalism’s role in society as well as professional ideals about journalism and thus suggest that audience interaction in the long run may have implications for the quality and professional integrity of journalism.

However, Deuze (2005) points out that such a challenge is not a new phenomenon in journalism. Beside the increased focus on audience participation, most Western journalists have in recent years also debated the increased impact from new media technology, ownership concentration, and commercialization. And the results from these kinds of discussions have always been the same: “journalism continuously reinvents itself” (Deuze, 2005:447). Singer (2005:173) has come to the same conclusion as she describes how mainstream media have normalized participatory and interactive formats until they have become subsumed within traditional journalistic norms and practices.

One example of how audience participation has influenced the professional norms among journalists is the increased focus on transparency in journalism. Transparency is commonly described as a new norm in journalism which increases the accountability of news media (e.g. Newton, Hodges, & Keith, 2004) and also affects online news content through the inclusion of features like time stamps, external links, chats, blog links, comments, and e-mail (van der Wurff & Schönbach, 2011; Karlsson, 2010; Phillips, 2010). Karlsson (2012) has argued that the orientation toward increased transparency is owed partly to the high speed of online news that exposes the previously hidden journalistic processes of gathering and processing news. As a result, there is an increasing demand for professional journalism to relate not only to audience interaction and participatory journalism but also to justify itself, its norms, and its practices in relation to the non-professionals (Braun & Gillespie, 2011; Skovsgaard & Bro, 2011).

However, confusion still exists about how to implement and utilize this kind of interactivity. While the general consensus is that increased audience interaction is a good thing, more concrete problems are associated with the extensively liberated communication environment. Media practitioners and chief editors are generally interested in the idea of participatory dialogic journalism; however, putting it into practice may cause several problems (c.f. Chung, 2007). While most news media organizations are keen on embracing increased audience interaction, they also point out some problems associated with this kind of interactive online communication. Moderation and responding to audience comments usually means increased workload for journalists and editors (Domingo, 2008; Wardle & Williams, 2008; Chung, 2007). According to Domingo (2008), the moderation process sometimes was perceived as a nightmare in some of the newsrooms that were included in his study on Spanish newsrooms. Furthermore, Verweij (2009:81) cites a South-African news editor who embraces interaction with readers but does not want readers blogs because they are “too poor on journalistic standards and content.” Other news producers have expressed concerns over the uncivil environment and the noisy discussions that are created through interactive communication on the website: some of them find it necessary to pre-moderate, or at least post-moderate, article threads and forums on the website as the conversation often becomes unrelated to the primary topic or is considered uninteresting and, too often, even offensive (*Medievärlden*, 2011; Wardle & Williams, 2008; Chung, 2007).

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SETTING

Clearly, audience interaction has the potential of bringing both advantages and disadvantages to news organizations and their professionals. Some of these perspectives are posted by media practitioners themselves; others are sprung from the normative perspectives of scholars. The present study is conducted in a country often seen as being at the forefront of the digital transformation. In Sweden, the use of Internet and digital media is among the highest in the world and Swedish media organizations have been eager to develop cross-platform publishing as well as adopting digital and mobile technologies (Ekström, Eriksson & Kroon Lundell, 2013; Westlund, 2012).

During the past years, the focus on audience interaction also has emerged as a strong trend in Swedish online news media. Almost all Swedish newspapers provide their readers with an online version and most of them also make room for some kind of online audience involvement (Larsson, 2012; Hedman, 2009). Readers are most often encouraged to participate via email, polls, article comments, personal pictures/movies, and/or social networking (Larsson, 2012; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2010; Hedman, 2009; Örnebring, 2008). Some newspapers offer chats or interviews in which readers may submit questions to journalists and/or experts under the moderation of news professionals.

Furthermore, many newspapers engage their readers to submit content via personal blogs that are either published as an integrated part of the online edition of the newspaper or published on separate blog portals hosted by the newspaper. Blogs hosted on the newspaper's website are usually tied to certain subjects, such as being a first-time parent, high school student, or perhaps part of a minority group. Also, most newspapers encourage readers to send pictures and/or information about occurrences that may be of interest from a local or national point of view. However, hardly any newspapers invite readers to submit their own written articles on topical issues (Jönsson & Örnebring, 2010; Hedman, 2009; Örnebring, 2008): this stage of the news production process is still closed for audience participation. Lately, some newspapers have found it necessary to either pre-moderate the comments given on news articles or simply eliminate the opportunity to comment as the discussions have tended to become severely offensive and even racist in tone (*Medievärlden*, 2011).

This paper focuses on how professional journalists in Sweden perceive this increased focus on audience involvement in relation to journalistic work and professional values. For this purpose, the following research questions are posited:

RQ1: How do media practitioners perceive online audience interaction as a phenomenon?

The question addresses whether journalists believe that the audience should be invited to participate in the online newspaper, how journalists perceive the quality of such interaction, and also how audience interaction is affecting professional journalism.

RQ2: How do media practitioners perceive audience interaction to affect journalistic work?

The question addresses what kind of benefits or obstacles that media practitioners associate with increased audience interaction.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study draws empirical support from two Swedish journalist surveys. The first one is a mail survey of a representative sample of Swedish journalists. The Swedish Journalists Surveys (SJS) were carried out in collaboration between the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication at the University of Gothenburg and the Swedish Union of Journalists (SUJ). An SJS survey has been conducted every fifth year since 1989 and the present study was performed in the fall and winter of 2011-12. The representativeness of the SJS surveys comes from the very high degree of unionization among Swedish journalists. According to the union about 85 percent of all employed journalists and about 50 percent of all freelancers are members, and even a large proportion of top-level managers and editors in the media are members of SUJ (Andersson, 2012). To be accepted as a member of the Swedish Union of Journalists, one must be an active professional journalist, a freelancer, or employed by a Swedish media organization.

The SJS surveys targeted a sample of the members of the union. In 2011, the union had 17,500 members and the sample consisted of 2,500 individuals, selected through a random sample. The fieldwork was conducted between September 2011 and February 2012. Those in the selected sample received a postal survey with questions about a wide range of topics: gender, age, class, and education, work experiences, working conditions, professional values, and journalistic norms and ethics. The net sample consisted of 2,362 individuals. For newspaper journalists, the net sample was 966 individuals out of which 556 returned a completed questionnaire, providing a net response rate of 58 percent. The group that responded to the survey was representative of the journalist population in terms of critical factors such as gender, age, and workplace (Andersson, 2012).

The second study accounted for in the analysis was conducted in 2009 and focused on journalists practicing at three typical newspapers in Sweden, all of them subscription-based, published six days a week, and with a daily circulation of 25,000 to 35,000 copies. All employees working with mainly journalistic tasks were sent an online survey in spring 2009. The total sample consisted of 117 journalists and 80 replied to the questionnaire, providing a net response rate of 68

percent. The survey was conducted at the Department of Journalism, Media, and Communication at the University of Gothenburg and contained questions about audience participation in online news media.

In both surveys, journalists were asked a set of questions about how they viewed audience interaction in general and how they perceived audience interaction to have affected professional work. The exact wording of the questions and the given response set are presented in connection with the tables below. Measurements used in the forthcoming analysis are based on percentages and bivariate correlations (Kendall's tau-c and tau-b). Kendall's Tau rank correlation coefficient is a non-parametric test that measures the association between two variables. The coefficient varies between -1 to +1 where -1 equals a perfect negative correlation (i.e. high values on variable X corresponds to low values on variable Y) and +1 equals a perfect positive correlation (i.e. high values on variable X corresponds to high values on variable Y).

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Starting with the SJS 2011 survey, the results reveal a certain amount of ambivalence in the journalistic corps on whether the readership should be invited to interact online or not. Every second journalist agreed that the audience always should be invited to respond to articles in the online newspaper edition (Table 1). Many professionals are also inclined to stress that audience interaction usually makes news more interesting. However, a large majority also stresses that the comments on news articles made by the audience usually are of poor quality. This finding is somewhat unexpected as these two perceptions are seemingly opposite to each other. One possible explanation may be that the first statement is linked to a commercial dimension in the sense that journalists believe that an article increases in importance if it succeeds in catching the attention of the audience. When a number of readers pay attention to a certain piece of news, others will follow their lead and consequently increase the newsworthiness of the article from a commercial perspective. This perspective also has been stressed by journalists in previous research (c.f. Heinonen, 2011:38). Another interpretation is that the journalists tended to answer the question from the perspective of the audience, meaning that they believe that audience interaction increases the relevance of certain news for the audience itself rather than for journalism in general. As the other questions in this study appear to be considered from a professional perspective, the results suggest that the latter interpretation is less likely as an explanation.

Table 1. Journalists' perceptions of audience interaction, 2011 (Percent)

	Readers should always have the opportunity to comment on news articles	Reader-comments make news more interesting	Reader-comments usually hold low quality	Audience interaction is a threat to journalism autonomy
All journalists	50 %	70 %	81 %	56 %
Position				
Journalists	49 %	69 %	82 %	58 %***
Chief editors	56 %	79 %	76 %	45 %

Notes: The question was worded: *What is your opinion on the following statements about audience interaction in online newspapers?* The given response set was: fully agree, partly agree, partly disagree, and fully disagree. The table focuses on respondents answering *fully agree* or *partly agree*. The number of respondents included 481 journalists and 72 chief editors; in total 553 respondents. The significance test relates to Kendall's tau-c. *** $p < 0.00$

Source: SJS 2011

One may perhaps think that there would be a significant correlation between the perception that readers should not be given the opportunity to comment on news articles and the perception that audience interaction threatens professional autonomy. In fact this is not true; there are no significant patterns between the two perceptions. Half of the journalist group that perceives audience interaction to be threatening journalism also expresses a positive attitude to the issue of whether readers should be invited into the news room or not (Table 2). However, those journalists that perceive audience involvement as an impediment also agree that contributions from the audience are commonly of low quality. And not too surprisingly, the study also reveals that those journalists who embrace the importance of engaging the audience to comment on news articles more often find such contributions to increase the general level of interest in news. Those journalists also are less likely to agree that the comments from the audience are poor.

Although journalists find contributions from the audience to be of importance, they also question people's ability to express themselves in a decent manner (Table 1). This result goes in line with the research from other scholars. Hermida (2011) has concluded that although the tools of interaction are new, they are usually "designed and implemented in a way that steers user submissions toward conformity with pre-determined news selection processes" (p. 28). Similar conclusions have been drawn by Nip (2006, 2008), Hermida and Thurman (2008), Domingo *et al.* (2008), and Deuze (2009).

Table 2. Bivariate correlations in journalists' perceptions of audience interaction, 2011 (Tau-b)

	Readers should always have the opportunity to comment on news articles	Reader-comments make news more interesting	Reader-comments usually hold low quality	Audience interaction is a threat to journalism autonomy
Readers should always have the opportunity to comment on news articles	-			
Reader-comments make news more interesting	.34***	-		
Reader-comments usually hold low quality	-.32***	-.33***	-	
Audience interaction is a threat to journalism autonomy	-.05	-.19***	.19***	-

Notes: For question and given response set, see Table 1. The total number of respondents was 553. The significance test relates to Kendall's tau-b. *** $p < 0.00$

Source: SJS 2011

Inviting the audience to participate in (parts of) the news process inevitably means changes for the profession. Audience involvement such as crowd sourcing may be an excellent tool for investigative journalists but it could also open up a situation in which the scrutinizing journalists themselves may become scrutinized by the audience. Also, the social influence of journalists may be impacted as nonprofessionals gain ground in the digital media sphere. Some journalists may very well perceive these changes to be threatening to professional exclusivity and professional integrity. In the SJS 2011 survey, journalists were asked about their opinion on whether audience participation affects an important professional value such as autonomy (Table 1). The results show that just over half of the respondents agreed with this opinion while nearly half of them disagreed. The complex nature of this matter clearly shows as professional media workers divides in their perceptions of this question.

There are some perceptual differences found between media workers depending on their position in the news room. Comparisons have been made between those respondents working with mainly journalistic tasks (reporting, photographing, and editing) and those working as chief editors (top editors and editors-in-chief). In general, journalists are somewhat more worried about audience participation than their supervisors. This is especially true regarding the consequences such involvement may have on professional autonomy (tau-c -.13). Apart from this issue, the journalists and chief editors generally expressed perceptions that point in the same direction although chief editors most often tended to express a slightly less negative attitude to audience interactivity compared to their employees. Similar conditions were found in research on journalists' and chief editors' perceptions of commercialization (Andersson & Wiik, 2013) and should be explained by the emergence of increased market awareness among managing editors.

When moving on to the second survey, which was conducted at three typical midsize morning papers in Sweden, the findings point to similar results as the SJS 2011 survey. When journalists were asked about how contributions from the audience affect journalistic work, about half of the respondents found that such involvement had broadened the news coverage as the audience helped journalists to keep track of issues that usually were left uncovered because of lack of resources or competence at the newspaper (Table 3). Audience interaction also helped journalists to increase the amount of local news in the newspapers: two-fifths of the media professionals found this statement to be true. Viewed from this dimension, the audience can be described as generators of new ideas or perspectives (c.f. Heinonen, 2011:38). In addition, every second journalist perceived that audience interaction had increased the demand on accuracy in news work: if journalists provide the audience with incorrect or insufficient information, readers themselves can easily point this out in article comments or in social media and thus impact the credibility of the individual journalists and/or the credibility of the newspaper as such. This development should be seen in lights of journalism's orientation toward increased transparency (c.f. Karlsson, 2012; Newton, Hodges, & Keith, 2004) as higher demands on accuracy are likely to strengthen the accountability of news media. Also, increased accuracy may be one important way for professional journalism to position itself relative to the non-professional actors that have appeared in the arena and thus serve to justify the importance of professional journalism in society.

Together these findings suggest that the increased focus on audience interaction in news media has led to some improvement of news journalism, if ever so little. However, when the answers from journalists and chief editors are separated from each other, the analysis reveals a clear dividing line within the news room: while a majority of the chief editors find that audience interaction has had a positive impact on journalism, only a minor part of the journalists agree with this opinion (tau-c .36). This is also true when considering whether audience participation has brought media professionals increased knowledge about what kind of needs and expectations the audience has with reference to the newspaper. Here, only 16 percent of the journalists agree that audience interaction has increased the awareness of the audience needs compared to 50 percent of the chief editors (Table 3). Thus, there is a certain kind of ambivalence towards audience interaction in the professional corps. Clearly, some parts of the increased audience involvement are

perceived to lead to improvements in the everyday practice in the news room; however, those improvements apparently have not much to do with professional journalism according to the journalists in this study.

Table 3. Perceived impact from audience interaction, 2009 (Percent)

	Online audience contributions:				
	Help us cover areas we do not find the time to cover ourselves	Increases the amount of local news in the newspaper	Increases demand on accuracy in journalism	Have a positive impact on journalism	Make me more aware of the audience's needs
All journalists	50 %	45 %	52 %	31 %	23 %
Position					
Journalists	44 %	41 %*	52 %	21 %***	16 %**
Chief editors	71 %	60 %	53 %	65 %	50 %

Notes: The question was worded: *What is your opinion on the following statements about online audience contribution in your newspaper?* The given response set was: fully agree, partly agree, partly disagree, and fully disagree. The table focuses on respondents answering *fully agree* or *partly agree*. The number of respondents was 63 journalists and 17 chief editors; in total 80 respondents. The significance tests relate to Kendall's tau-c. * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.00$

Source: *Midsized Newspaper Survey 2009*

When the respondents' opinions on these statements are compared to each other, the analysis finds some significant correlation: those journalists that tend to highlight the contributions coming from increased audience interaction (such as a broadened news coverage, increased amount of local news, higher demands on accuracy, and increased awareness of the audience's needs) also are inclined to agree that such contributions from the audience are affecting journalism in a positive direction (Table 4). These journalists not only view their audience as consumers of news but also as sources of information and thus embrace the increased focus on audience interactivity as an important contribution to professional journalism.

Again, the findings indicate the presence of a rather clear gap within the journalistic corps as one part of the corps regards audience interaction as an advantage for journalism while the other part perceives this kind of participation to be an obstacle for professional journalism. This divide is partly explained by an organizational factor such as position but, apart from that, there are no clear indications on what kind of factors actually determine the perceptions of journalists in this matter. When including factors such as gender, age, professional identity, workplace (evening tabloids versus quality newspapers), and publishing platform (working with online publishing on daily basis versus on weekly basis) there are no further significant results found.

Table 4. Bivariate correlations on perceived impact from audience interaction, 2009 (Tau-b)

Online audience contributions:	Help us cover areas we do not find the time to cover ourselves	Increases the amount of local news in our newspaper	Increases demand on accuracy in journalism	Have a positive impact on journalism	Make me more aware of the audience's needs
Help us cover areas we do not find the time to cover ourselves	-				
Increases the amount of local news in our newspaper	.40**	-			
Increases demand on accuracy in journalism	.19*	.27*	-		
Have a positive impact on journalism	.27**	.39**	.25*	-	
Make me more aware of the audience's needs	.26**	.24*	.45**	.40**	-

Notes: The number of respondents was 80. The significant tests relate to Kendall's tau-b. * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Source: *Midsized Newspaper Survey 2009*

One factor that proves to be important, however, is the degree of audience orientation that is expressed by the journalists. Here the SJS 2011 survey is accounted for again and audience orientation is measured by the single statement "Audience adaptation makes journalism better." Journalists who agree (fully or partly) with this statement are considered to be more audience orientated while journalists who disagree (fully or partly) with the statement are considered as less audience orientated. About one third of the media professionals fall under the category of audience orientated journalists,

while the other two-thirds could be described as non-audience orientated journalists. Perhaps not too surprisingly, the results reveal some strong linkages between audience orientation and journalists' perception of audience interaction (Table 5). Journalists who tend to orient themselves toward the audience are more inclined to agree with the statement that audience interaction makes news more interesting (tau-c .22). Furthermore, these journalists are less likely to perceive audience interaction as a threat to journalistic integrity (tau-c -.18).

Table 5. Perceptions of audience interaction after degree of audience orientation, 2011 (Percentage)

	Readers should always have the opportunity to comment on news articles	Reader-comments make news more interesting	Reader-comments usually hold low quality	Increased audience interaction is a threat to journalism autonomy
All journalists	50 %	70 %	81 %	56 %
Audience adaption makes journalism better:				
Agrees	50 %	84 %***	82 %	40 %***
Disagrees	47 %	63 %	81 %	65 %

Notes: The question about audience orientation was worded: *What is your opinion about the following statements?* The given response was: fully agree, partly agree, partly disagree, and fully disagree. The question about audience interaction was worded: *What is your opinion on the following statements about audience interaction in online newspapers?* The given response set was: fully agree, partly agree, partly disagree, and fully disagree. The table focuses on respondents answering *fully agree* or *partly agree* to this latter question. The number of respondents that were considered audience orientated was 155 and non-audience orientated 336; in total 553 respondents. The significance tests relate to Kendall's tau-c. *** $p < 0.00$

Source: SJS 2011

7.

CONCLUSIONS

The question of audience interaction is in many aspects complex by nature. Journalists have long perceived themselves as fundamental to the democratic role of informing the public and providing an arena for public opinion and that perception is also a keystone in a broadly shared culture of journalism. The efforts from newspapers to engage readers by providing opportunities for interaction are clearly in line with this assignment as journalism from a normative perspective must be founded in matters that are relevant from an audience's perspective. At the same time, those efforts are at odds with professional ideals like independence and scrutiny. Thus there is a certain duality in the expectations and ideals bound to professional journalism, a duality that also is visible in how journalists perceive audience interaction as a phenomenon.

In their study, Paulussen and Ugille (2008) found that journalists often perceive that the major trait that distinguishes professional media workers from the non-professionals is skills in gatekeeping. To some extent, this view is also reflected in the present study of Swedish newspaper journalists. According to media practitioners, the audience's participation is undoubtedly important to the newspaper. However, it appears to have little to do about professional journalism. The process of gate-keeping, news selection, and reporting are still held in tight reins by the professionals. In other words, the media professionals still retain power over journalism.

However, journalists also recognize, at least to some extent, the complementary value of audience interaction. This kind of participation is often perceived to be a tool for broadening news coverage, especially at the local level, and it also stresses the importance of maintaining high controls for the credibility of sources as well as the accuracy of factual information. As the core of almost all Swedish newspapers is found within local news, reporting the use of audience interaction must therefore be considered important from a professional perspective. In times of economic crises and staff cuts, these kinds of participatory activities may in fact help journalists to maintain broader news coverage.

Regardless of how valuable such audience interaction may be, Swedish journalists are still concerned about the present quality of the contributions from the audience. In this aspect, Swedish journalists express perceptions similar to their associates in other democratic countries (i.e. Singer & Ashman, 2009; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008). It is often suggested that this quality dimension is explained by shortcomings among the participators; however, part of the explanation should also be sought in terms of what kind of participatory forms the audience is offered by the newspapers. In fact, these kinds of participatory forms are most often limited as the media organizations chose to set the frames not only for the content but also for the control infrastructure and the production of interactive audience content (c.f. Larsson, 2012; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2010). The audience is mostly empowered to create popular culture-oriented content and personal/everyday life-oriented content rather than news/informational content (Larsson, 2012; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2010) which has further implications for the form and the quality of audience contributions. If new participatory tools were to be developed, or the present forms were to be refined, the contributions from the audience could possibly increase in quality and thus improve its benefits and importance to professional journalism. The opportunity to increase quality in the audience's contributions can in fact be an incentive for newspapers to not only provide readers with easy-to-use and cheap software tools but also to guide and educate the audience on how to make contributions that are of such

sufficient professional quality that they could be published in the news section. The opportunity to have a piece published in the news section may indeed also provide the audience with an additional incentive to make better quality contributions.

8. REFERENCES

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