Doctor of Media and Communication Studies

Audience Participation in Public Service Media. From a media-centric to a society-centric approach

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Abstract

Digitization and the move to the Internet provide new opportunities beyond radio and television for public broadcasters. This shift is reflected by the shift in terminology from public service “broadcasting” to public service “media.” New types of audience involvement—for example, adding social media to programs or the ability to upload content online—are linked to the achievement of societal objectives such as increasing the diversity of media content and enabling media users to become more involved in politics. As such, audience participation and the related promise of audience emancipation has begun to play the leading role in the new democrative narrative of public service media (PSM).

Despite the benefits of this new trend, the implementation of audience participation in practice appears to be challenging for public broadcasters, especially in terms of achieving societal objectives. No means to follow-up on audience input and a lack of expectation management cause issues for audience members, which include frustration and feelings of inefficacy. Moreover, the actual motivations, thresholds, and even benefits for audience members in the move from passive consumers to active citizens are rarely considered in PSM policy and strategy. As a result, the intentions of public broadcasters for audience participation often seem to remain media-centric (i.e., the intention is to keep audiences engaged with media rather than encouraging them to become active participants in society).

Following these observations, the aim of this PhD is to critically investigate the dominant assumption in PSM scholarship that more audience participation is always better. This goal is reflected in the central research question: “Is audience participation actually key to the achievement of PSM? If so, which criteria must be met before implementing audience participation in specific PSM projects, evolving towards more meaningful, society-centric participation?” To this end, the research: (1) discusses, conceptualizes, and operationalizes the concept of audience participation in a PSM context; (2) analyzes whether and how public broadcasters have transposed this, so far largely rhetorical, concept in practice; and (3) investigates how participating and non-participating media users, as well as media producers evaluate participatory opportunities.

To confront assumptions in PSM theory and policy about audience participation with concrete experiences, we adopt case studies from public broadcasters in Flanders, the Netherlands, and France. This case study approach permits a multilevel investigation of how audience participation is adopted in the policy, production, and reception of specific PSM programs. The case studies are based on a goal–means tree analysis, a type of document analysis to detect goals and means in PSM policy and strategy texts. In addition, we employ a triangulation of field research techniques such as focus groups and in-depth interviews with media users, as well as conducting expert interviews with media producers.
In the results section, we identify three key takeaways for audience participation in PSM. In the conclusion, we connect these takeaways to potential pathways forward toward more meaningful, society-centric audience participation. First, assumptions about audience participation in PSM policy and strategy can be traced back to three myths already present in PSM theory, which we aspire to demystify. Second, both participating and non-participating media users tend to evaluate audience participation in a positive light when it contributes to societal goals, while the audience participation in the studied programs often fails to go beyond media-centric objectives. Finally, audience participation in the content creation stage seems to be most problematic when it comes to achieving the societal objective for audience participation most acknowledged by media users, i.e., fostering diversity. This is because in this stage professional pragmatics of media producers are at play, which widens the participation gap between those who can and those who cannot participate. As a recommendation, the idea of two-directional participation away from media production is explored, i.e., instead of always expecting media users to participate, we recommend encouraging stronger collaboration between media producers and media users in society.