



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Social Media + Society*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Almgren, S., Olsson, T. (2015)

'Let's Get Them Involved' . . . to Some Extent: Analyzing Online News Participation.

Social Media + Society, 1(2): 1-11

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2056305115621934>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Open Access

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:hj:diva-28675>

If citing this paper, use the reference:

Almgren, S. & Olsson, T. (2015) '*Let's get them involved*'... to some extent: Analyzing online news participation. Special issue of *Social Media and Society*, 1(2), 1-11. doi: 10.1177/2056305115621934

**'Let's get them involved'... to some extent:
Analyzing online news participation**

Susanne M Almgren

Jönköping University, Sweden

Tobias Olsson

Lund University, Sweden

Abstract

The development of social media applications, such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter, has offered new participatory opportunities for everyday media users. This article contributes to research by looking into one specific aspect of the increasingly more participatory media ecology – the news comment feature. Drawing on a quantitative content analysis of 1100 news pieces, as well as spaces for user comments, the article reveals both how this emerging public space is shaped by the media company and, later, appropriated by their participating users.

Our analysis reveals, for instance, that the online newspaper prefers to allow users to comment on lightweight news, such as sports and entertainment. The users, however, prefer to post comments on news covering changes in proximity space, politics and health care, while also clearly ignoring the most available news pieces (sport and entertainment). In the concluding section, the discrepancy in preferences is discussed.

Keywords

Participation, user-generated content, social media, news comments, content analysis

Introduction

The development of social media applications, such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter, has offered new participatory opportunities for everyday media users (cf. Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). In some respects, this development also marks a transformation of public space: The people who we have become used to being referred to as 'audiences' during the broadcasting era, when TV and radio were the dominant media forms, or as 'readers' during the print era can currently take on the role as participating co-creators of media content.

To clarify, this is not to suggest in any way that there has been a straightforward, unproblematic transformation of users into participants. The power relation between producers and users is still an unequal one, in which the former often have the upper hand (Olsson, 2013). Research has also made obvious that users' leeway to participate is offered primarily within frames, or even business models, that create monetary value from users' participatory practices (Fuchs, 2013). Keeping these notes of caution in mind, it is nevertheless fair to claim that the contemporary media landscape allows for new forms of co-existence between producer- and user-generated content.

For traditional media companies, this transformation has entailed both opportunities and challenges (cf. Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Lewis, 2012). User-generated content, i.e., content produced by participating users (readers, listeners, viewers), has always played a part in media production. However, the current situation, with new participatory opportunities for everyday media users, makes user-generated content a much more salient feature for media companies to both relate to and handle. It becomes an issue for them to address both on a policy level (how to think it over, how to frame it, how to approach the actual user contributions, etc.) and in concrete everyday production activities.

One concrete challenge is that the inflow of user-generated content currently comes in different shapes. In terms of categories, in the era of more participatory media, user-generated content can take the shape of

traditional formats, such as letters to the editor and pictures sent to the editorial office, as well as formats unique to the online environment, such as readers' comments on online articles, Facebook shares, linked blog postings and tweeted news. Hence, there is both a great amount and a great variety of content to consider.

This article contributes to research into how established media companies handle the new, more participatory media ecology (Olsson, 2010) by offering an empirical analysis of how a Swedish online newspaper, owned by a traditional newspaper company, both enables and constrains users' online participation. It also looks into how these constraints become appropriated by everyday users, i.e., how users respond to these conditions in terms of participation. However, rather than aiming for all of the above-mentioned participatory practices, we specifically analyze the online newspaper's application of the article comment function.

The purpose of this article is to develop and offer a methodological approach to online news comments, rather than to present wide-ranging empirically generalizable results. Our purpose brings forth the following questions. Within the frames of our case study of *Helsingborgs Dagblad* (www.hd.se): How are users *allowed* to post or prevented from posting user comments about news across different news categories? How do users *prefer* to post user comments about news across different news categories? Moreover, how do opportunities to participate through posting user comments relate to users participatory preferences across news categories? By letting the convergence of these questions infuse the design of the study, it offers a methodological take for studying participation and its tenets in a setting framed by producers.

The participatory turn: Critical reflections and points of departure

When users participate online, it does not happen in a neutral space, insulated from external influence. Quite the opposite, participatory practices—such as online news commenting—generally take place in

spaces that have been structured by various producers. Hence, the stance taken in this article is that the connection between producers and users is of great importance to look into. This argument is informed by current research on participatory media (Jenkins, 2006; Burgess & Green, 2009; Olsson, 2010; Carpentier, 2011), and we also conceive of the case study itself as a contribution to a more general, critical debate on contemporary conditions for mediated participation.

The Internet is by no means the first medium in history to have offered participatory potential. Both recent and earlier (media) history offer examples of actual participatory media practices. These include, for instance, letters to the editor in early Swedish newspapers (Lundell, 2002) and radio and TV phone-in shows (Carpentier, 2005). The Internet, however, certainly has put participatory media features high on the research agenda. Ever since it became a subject of academic debates in the mid-1990s, the Internet has been involved in theoretical reflections (and speculations) concerning its potential to contribute to a more participatory media world. The Internet's interactive character and, hence, the ways in which it is open for user-involvement rather quickly inspired reflections on, for instance, users' potential political involvement (Olsson, 2006) and how the new medium could contribute to a more vibrant public sphere (Poster, 1995). The fact that these early, often hopeful projections were also put to critical tests by empirical research did not, however, do much to hinder the production of similarly hopeful projections concerning the new, 'more participatory' Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). Instead, Tim O'Reilly's initial reflections on an improved, more 'user-friendly' and 'interactive' Web 2.0 almost immediately inspired exhilarated theorization regarding new participatory opportunities for everyday media users. To Henry Jenkins, Web 2.0 has come to mean a re-configuration of the relationship between producers and consumers to a point where they might be seen as 'participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules' (Jenkins, 2006: 3). This point has also been underscored by, for instance, Chris Anderson, who perceives 'democratised tools of production and distribution' in the web (2009: 84), and

Clay Shirky, to whom the improved web means an increased ability ‘to share, to cooperate [...], and to take collective action’ (Shirky, 2008: 20-21).

This line of theorizing has recently been scrutinized from various points of academic departure. From the point of view offered by critical political economy, the above-mentioned theorists of a ‘media ecology of participation’ (Olsson, 2010) have been criticized for their inability to include how users’ participatory opportunities are circumscribed by and inscribed into economic power relations. This is a point made obvious by, for instance, Des Freedman, who writes the following: ‘[F]ar from signalling a democratisation of media production and distribution “prosumption” is all too often incorporated within a system of commodity exchange controlled by existing elites’ (Freedman, 2012: 88). Christian Fuchs made similar arguments, but points more specifically to the problems that are connected with the fact that most participatory spaces are offered to users by corporate social media:

If there are for example asymmetries in terms of visibility and attention, then it is questionable to argue that corporate social media are truly participatory. It is therefore not enough to stress enabling and limiting potentials of the Internet, but one rather needs to analyse the actual distribution of advantages and disadvantages (Fuchs, 2013: 26-27).

Critical reflections such as these are highly useful for efforts to grasp the emerging, potentially more participatory media reality (see also van Dijck, 2013). We largely share their view of contemporary media. Meanwhile, the points are also quite general and overarching and, hence, are not always helpful in efforts to understand actual everyday participatory activities. In essence, they do not offer concrete analytical entry points into understanding everyday practices related to online participatory activities. Our

ambition in this article is concrete and related to actual practices. As such, it does not in any way relativize the significance of approaches that map and analyze overarching, structural conditions for online participation. We are, however, more concerned here with the participatory opportunities that are actually offered to everyday users and how users negotiate with these conditions and turn some of them into participatory practices.

When connecting the participatory opportunities offered (in a specific online context, such as www.hd.se) with users' *negotiations* (Hall, 1980; Woolgar, 1996) with them, we draw mainly on Peter Dahlgren's theoretical notion of *civic culture* (Dahlgren, 2009). More specifically, we are inspired by his concepts of *spaces* for and *practices* related to participation. We conceive of the news comment feature as an online *space* for potential participation. It uses Web 2.0-technology (cf. Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; O'Reilly, 2005) to invite users to participate. It is, however, also a restricted space, produced and made available to users under conditions provided by an online news provider. In our view, when users enter this space, they negotiate with the participatory opportunities. They reject some of them (choose not to comment), turn some of them into participatory practices (by commenting) and might also miss the opportunity to participate in some cases (they lack the opportunity to comment). We grasp one instance of this connection between spaces and practices—and what we refer to as negotiations—by looking very specifically into what news users are offered the opportunity to comment on and how they respond to those opportunities in terms of commenting.

User comments as a participatory practice: Reflections from research

Relating to previous research in this area, the article connects two strands of studies that previous research has tended to treat as separate fields. On the one hand, the article draws on research into how media organizations and their professionals make sense of and work with online user comments—the *'producer*

side of the story.' An important part of this strand of research has been concerned with analyzing how these producer ideas and practices materialize into actual participatory opportunities for users. On the other hand, the article is also informed by previous research concerned with analyzing how users have appropriated these participatory opportunities, for instance, who the contributing users are and what characterizes the users' contributions—the *'prod-user side of the story'*. Our combination of these two strands of research is informed by our conviction that, without a reliable picture of the conditions for participation, it is much less meaningful to discuss actual participatory practices among users. Hence, these two strands need to be analytically connected, and this is also our main methodological goal.

The producer side of the story

Concerning the producer side of the story, extant research has paid attention to both (media) organizational considerations regarding user participation and its technological features. Focusing on organizational considerations, a number of studies have looked into how media professionals, such as journalists and editors, perceive and make sense of the users' participatory opportunities. In this context, it is worth noting the contributions of Braun and Gillespie (2011), Harrison (2010), Hedman (2009), Hermida & Thurman (2008), Lewis (2012), Singer and Ashman (2009), Singer (2010), and Thurman (2008), who have analyzed media professionals' views on the significance of user participation. These studies have noted the importance of incorporating professional, ethical codes and norms into efforts to grasp how professional journalists and editors perceive user-generated content. In a similar vein, Viscovi and Gustafsson's (2013) analysis of interviews with journalists shows, quite convincingly, how professional culture fosters journalistic hesitance towards content provided by users. Such content is considered 'impure' by professional journalistic standards. Despite the existence of general professional norms and standards, however, Buskqvist (2007) shows that different organizations vary in terms of offering participatory opportunities in a way that is related to varying organizational interests.

Another thread of research into the producer side of participation has shown less interest in organizational issues and professional standards and has focused on technological possibilities and conditions for user participation as they materialize online. In connection with the more general debate on conditions for participation (cf. Gillespie, 2010; Carpentier, 2011; Olsson & Svensson, 2012), these studies have looked into what technological opportunities are offered to the users to participate and the ways in which these opportunities shape and steer user participation. For instance, through website analysis, Hermida and Thurman (2008: 345) have identified nine different 'generic formats' for participation. The generic formats vary in terms of the extent to which they offer the users participatory freedom. On the one end of the scale of generic formats, users are only allowed to choose among a set of options within an already set formula. On the other end of the scale of formats, users are trusted with total freedom to both produce and publish their own material. In a similar vein, Domingo et al. (2008) have developed a theoretical model that accounts for qualitative degrees of difference in user participation. They further argue that from this theoretical vantage point, contemporary news media offer rather limited freedom for users' participatory practices (cf. Cleary & Bloom, 2011; Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Örnebring, 2008).

Summing up, it is fair to say that research on the producer side of the story has made important contributions to our knowledge of what the opportunities for user participation in news media look like and how they are shaped. It has also offered important insights into how organizational and professional practices create hesitation regarding making user-generated content available and distribute influence to the users, through the features admitted. Still, these insights are rather incomplete without a firmer grip on how the participatory opportunities offered are appropriated among users.

The prod-user side of the story

On the *prod-user* (here we borrow a concept from media researcher Axel Bruns (Bruns, 2008)) side of the story, research has so far been divided into, on the one hand, studies that are mainly concerned with the content that participating users produce and, on the other hand, the very users who are contributing content. In the former case, research has mapped and analyzed the quality of discourse or different types of framing in user comments (Singer, 2009; Paskin, 2010; Diakopolous & Naaman, 2011; Freund, 2011; Nagar, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011; Douai & Nofal, 2012; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012). The notions of quality, or ways to study framing in user comments, varies across studies. They do, however, share a specific interest in the characteristics of online conversations and, occasionally, share an interest in how they vary across contexts. Another theme has been to look into how comments are posted across news and news characteristics. More concretely, these studies have typically analyzed differences between news categories, graphic design and the spatial distance to news events (Abdul-Mageed, 2008; Tsagkias, Weerkamp & de Rijke, 2009; Weber, 2013).

Another path of research on the prod-user side of news comments includes studies aiming at mapping and analyzing the participating users themselves. These studies have typically mapped users' demographic profiles (Bergström, 2008). Participating users are more often men than women. They are more educated than the average person. They also often have an interest in politics. Recent studies have confirmed these results, but have also added some additional nuance (Nagar, 2011; Freund, 2011). They have noted that the users commenting on news are middle-aged rather than young and generally have a higher level of education. Among young Finns, for instance, the practice of interacting with online news sites has been quite modest, despite prominent access to ICT and high levels of news consumption via traditional media (Hujanen & Pietikäinen, 2004). In another study, a sample of survey respondents recruited through user comments on online news had higher income levels than survey respondents recruited from Internet users in general (Nagar, 2011).

Knowledge of (prod-)users' participatory practices and the profile of participating users does not, however, make complete sense without insights into what participatory opportunities they are being offered. This is also the reason why we find it necessary to integrate these two approaches of research concerned with user-generated content and users' participatory practices: to understand the extent to which users participate and how they participate, it is crucial to also consider the extent to which they are actually invited to do so.

Design and methods

To integrate research concerned with users' participatory practices with an approach that accounts for their actual opportunities to participate, this study uses a design that combines two subsequent steps of quantitative content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 1980; Neuendorf, 2002). The news items constitute the units of analysis and the analytical connection between the two steps of the study. The coding scheme for the news categories emerged from a precedent inductive test coding. All news items between two dates meeting the criteriaⁱ were included. In this study, the notion of news categories refers to how each news item focuses on specific topics or issues. Reliability tests were conducted on all three variables (comment feature adjacent to article (0=no, 1=yes), number of comments (ratio), and news categories (nominal)). No value fell below Krippendorff's $\alpha = .821$, which exceeds critical valuesⁱⁱ.

The two subsequent steps of the study enables questions such as whether the users have the same opportunities to post comments on news covering, for instance, politics and health care, or whether the users prefer to post comments on news covering issues from sports to the economy. Not all news items are available for users to post comments on; this restriction is accounted for in the first step of the study. In a process similar to gatekeeping (White, 1950), although open for analysis here, the occurrence of news items that are both available and unavailable for user comments makes it possible to discern the degree to which different news categories are available for user comments. In the second step of the

study, the news items unavailable for comments are filtered out. This step makes it possible to study which news categories the users tend to prefer to comment on and which news categories they tend to ignore. By comparing (1) how users are allowed to post comments to various extents on different news categories, to (2) how users prefer to post comments across different news categories to various extents, it becomes possible to (3) study to what extent users are offered opportunities to participate in the ways they prefer.

Altogether, the empirical material comprises 1100 news items collected from the local online news site of *Helsingborgs Dagblad* (www.hd.se). The Swedish newspaper business only has few major newspapers focusing on national and international news coverage, while the major share of the newspapers focus on local and regional news, considering the place of publication (big city vs. rural area) (Sundin, 2011). The place of publication for the paper is the city of Helsingborg in southern Sweden. Helsingborg is one of the ten largest cities in Sweden, with a population of 132,989 (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2014). *Helsingborgs Dagblad* is of principal interest because it has the largest circulation of all Swedish newspapers outside Sweden's three largest cities (Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö). Circulation for the daily edition of the paper in 2010 was 75,900 copies, which can be compared to the circulation of Sweden's largest national morning paper, *Dagens Nyheter* (292,300), or the largest evening tabloid, *Aftonbladet* (310,900) (Sundin, 2011). Previous studies on visiting statistics have indicated that the web edition has a large number of daily visitors compared to other Swedish online news publications (Hedman, 2009).

The news items published on *hd.se* were included in the analysis if they had links or teasers of any size on the initial page linking to a full text news item, although this criterion was restricted to a depth of one link. On Swedish online news sites, it is a common practice, although not a universal practice, to limit users' commenting practice to three days after the publication date of the news item. In the first step of the quantitative content analysis, all news items were coded into one of 14 news categories. These

categories were as follows: 1) *politics*, 2) *economy*, 3) *accidents*, 4) *crime*, 5) *education and childcare*, 6) *working life*, 7) *sports and club activities*, 8) *public administration*, 9) *changes in proximity space*, 10) *environment and outdoor life*, 11) *health care*, 12) *entertainment and art*, 13) *human rights, legal security and democracy*, and 14) *other*. When the news items that lack the user comment feature were filtered out in the second step of the study, 842 news items remained.

Results

Most news items (76.5%) were available for users to post comments. However, the degree to which users were allowed to post comments varied between news categories in several ways. These differences are reported both in figure 1, as percentages of the whole sample (N=1100), and in table 1, as frequencies and percentages separated within news categories.

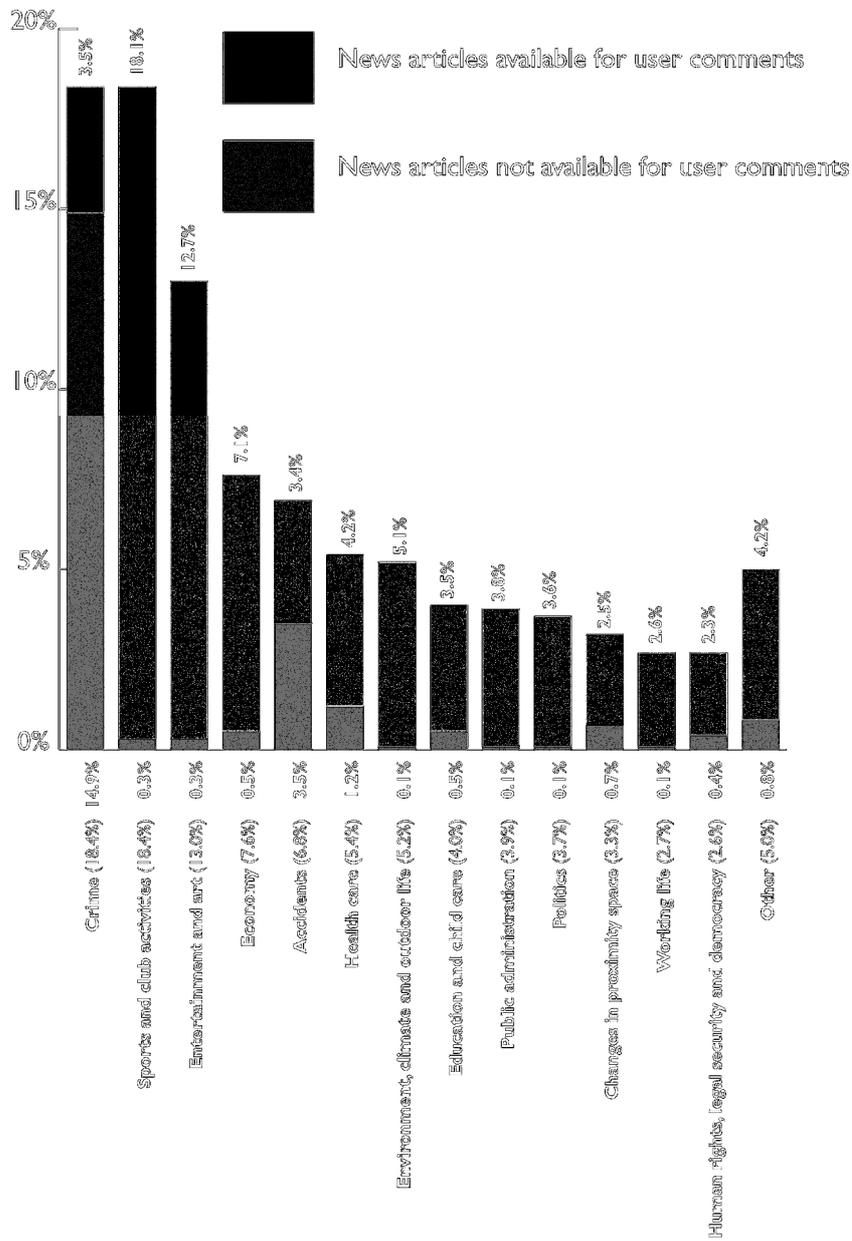


Figure 1. Gatekeeping restrictions: News categories and opportunities to post comments, in percentages (N=1100 news items).

Note: Figure 1 displays the news items (N=1100) distributed across news categories, separated within each bar according to whether they have the user comment feature available (dark grey) or not (light grey). The share of news items that have the user comment feature is displayed as a percentage above the bars. The share of news items that do not have the user comment feature is displayed as a percentage below the bars in the chart. Bars constituted by a larger share of the light grey color are thus more restricted.

When reviewing the results above, two types of restrictions appear that need to be clarified separately. The first one relates to the selection and presentation of news, gatekeeping, and, consequently, how different types of news are being made available for participatory practices to a varying extent. In this study, this element is illustrated by news being distributed across different news categories represented by the total height of the bars in figure 1 (both the light grey and the dark grey sections). Upon first viewing the height of the bars, it might seem as if the users' best opportunities to post comments are connected to the three news categories *crime, sports and club activities, and art and entertainment*.

However, the second type of restriction, which we can refer to as *spacekeeping*, concerns how certain news is presented without the user comment feature being made available, which means that news items within different news categories also allow for users to post comments to a varying extent. This element can be discerned partially through the ratio of the two colors within each bar in figure 1, but is illustrated in greater detail in table 1 below, which provides the percentages for each news category.

A large amount of news covering crime does not necessarily imply extensive participatory space if the major share of the news covering crime prevents users from posting comments. Additionally, it is also insufficient to view restrictions within each news category without considering the scarcity of certain news. When both of these restricting principles are considered, it becomes clear that users' opportunities

to participate by posting comments are in fact most pronounced in news covering (1) *sports and club activities*, (2) *entertainment and art*, and (3) *the economy*.

Table 1. Spacekeeping restrictions: Allowing comments across news categories, frequencies and percentages (N=1100).

	News items restricted from user comments		News items allowing user comments		f total	% total
	f	%	f	%		
Sports and club activities	3	1.5	199	98.5	202	100
Environment, climate and outdoor life	1	1.8	56	98.2	57	100
Entertainment and art	3	2.1	140	97.9	143	100
Public administration	1	2.3	42	97.7	43	100
Politics	1	2.4	40	97.6	41	100
Working life	1	3.3	29	96.7	30	100
Economy	5	6.0	78	94.0	83	100
Education and childcare	6	13.7	38	86.3	44	100
Human rights, legal security and democracy	4	13.8	25	86.2	29	100
Health care	13	22.0	46	78.0	59	100
Changes in proximity space	8	22.2	28	77.8	36	100
Accidents	38	50.7	37	49.3	75	100
Crime	164	81.2	38	18.8	202	100
Other	10	17.9	46	82.1	56	100
Total	258		842		1100	

Note: To what extent are users allowed to post comments across different news categories? News items are separated into the different news categories depending on whether the news item had the user comment feature available or not (yes=1, no=0).

The participatory opportunities are most extensive for news on *sports and club activities*. The news category *sports and club activities* constitutes more than 18.4% of the total number of news items. Within the news category *sports and club activities*, 98.5% of news items allow comments.

News on *entertainment and art* also constitutes a large share (13%) of the total amount of news, and within the news category *entertainment and art*, 97.9% of items allow users to comment. News items covering the *economy* constitute 7.6% of the total amount of news, and within the news category *economy*, 94% of the news items allowed comments.

News items within the news categories *environment, climate and outdoor life* and *public administration* also allow comments to a large extent (98.2% and 97.7%, respectively), but these news items are much rarer (5.2% and 3.9% of total news, respectively). Regarding *politics* and *working life*, the situation is similar. Although a high number of the news items within these categories allow comments (97.6% and 96.7%, respectively), they are rare (3.7% and 2.7% of total news, respectively). Other news, also restricted by the scarcity of certain news categories (the gatekeeping restriction), and items concerning *human rights, legal security and democracy* and *changes in proximity space* represent only a negligible portion of the total news, even before considering what share actually allows comments.

The *spacekeeping* restriction, referring to news that does not have the feature for posting comments, is especially salient within the news categories covering (1) *crime*, (2) *accidents* and, to a lesser degree, (3) *health care*. *Crime* is the most restricted news category. The news category *crime* constitutes 18.4% of the total amount of news, but the vast majority of news items within the *crime* category do not allow comments (81.2%). Only 18.8% of news items on crime allow comments. A similar pattern, but not equally strong, appears for news on *accidents*. *Accidents* are the second most restricted news category. While news items on accidents constitutes 6.8% of the total amount of news, of the news on accidents, only about half of the stories (49.3%) allow comments.

Drawing on these data, three different patterns directed towards users' participatory opportunities emerge. First, there is a type of news that has a prominent position as to both the amount of news available and a generous allowance for comments. Here, we refer to these items as lightweight news (containing *sports*

and club activities and *entertainment and art*), as opposed hard news, such as news regarding public affairs, yet this term is not synonymous with soft news. For instance, the news categories of *sports and club activities* and *entertainment and art* constitute more than 30% of the news that allowed users to post comments. This finding can be viewed as though there were some sort of promotional activity regarding participation specifically directed towards this news. When compared to news categories such as *politics*, *economy*, *crime and accidents*, where between 3.5% and 7.1% of the news allowed comments, it becomes clear that the participatory opportunities are steered away from harder news in favor of lighter news categories. Hence, rather than opening up a space for online deliberation concerning issues of quite obvious and immediate public interest, such as political issues or economic developments, the space for user participation that news comments provide is geared towards lighter news segments. This finding relates to the second pattern: there is a type of news that is restricted primarily because stories in this category are relatively rare. Although this phenomenon appears on a descending scale (see figure 1), it especially concerns the news categories of *human rights*, *legal security and democracy*, and *working life*. In this way, the choices of selecting and presenting news also ingrain participatory restrictions.

Third, there is a type of news, restricted by the absence of opportunities to post comments adjacent to news items. Our data indicate that professional codes and standards are influential in the steering of users' participatory opportunities. This finding is mainly revealed by figure 1, which shows that the amount of restricted (from comments) news items is most accentuated within the news categories *crime* and *accidents*. This finding is related to professional norms and regulations in journalism, concerning libel and individual privacy, which in the Nordic context works to prevent publication of texts revealing circumstances related to victims and perpetrators. Hence, the existing journalistic values system also influences what news is made available for user comments. Another part of the explanation as to why these news items are closed for comments relates to the professional objectivity value. Looked upon in

this light, the hesitance to allow user comments on news covering accidents is best interpreted as cautiousness regarding the risk of stirring up conflicts.

Given these conditions, how do the users respond to the participatory opportunities to comment on news?

In the second step of the study, we focus on how users prefer to post comments across different news categories. Of the 842 news items that were open for users to post comments, almost two-thirds (62%) did not receive a single user comment. This is an important fact in itself because it reveals that a good deal more than half of the news items do not inspire any comments. The overall pattern is that the major part of the news items receives very few or no user comments, while occasionally news items appear that receive substantially larger amounts of user comments. The results on how users respond to the participatory opportunities to comment on news will be presented by displaying how the news items and the posted comments were distributed across the different news categories and the number of comments per news item in the different news categories (see figure 2 and table 2).

The news categories that users prioritize commenting on are (1) *changes in the physical space*, (2) *politics* and (3) *health care*. The most commented on news category was *changes in the physical space*; 12.2% of all comments posted concerned this news category, although its news items only constituted a small share (3.3%) of the total news items open for comments. Consequently, news on *changes in the physical space* had the highest mean ($M = 11.2$) for comments per news item among all news categories. Because this online news site has a local affiliation, these news pieces concern events taking place in the citizens' everyday environment. More specifically, this news covers events, or courses of events, that seem to have some type of encumbering effect, but notably, the effect is not spectacular. For instance, the news items sometimes cover local construction plans and associated complications, such as complaints or appeals from citizens. They address changing perceptions of safety in local public spaces and look into local traffic arrangements or new installations of decorations in local public places. The second most

commented news category was *politics*; 4.8% of the news items fall within the news category *politics*, while 16.1% of the posted comments were posted adjacent to a news item covering *politics*. The mean (M) describing the number of posted comments per news item was 10.4 for *politics*. The third most commented on news category was *health care*. News items in the news category *health care* constituted 5.5% of the news allowing comments. However, this news category received 13.2% of all comments posted ($M = 7.4$).

The users show a strong tendency to ignore news covering *sports and club activities* and *entertainment and art*. Almost a quarter of all news items that allowed comments (23.6%) covered the news category *sports and club activities*. Nevertheless, these news items only received 10.2% of the total number of posted comments ($M = 1.3$). The news category *entertainment and art* represented 16.6% of the news items that allowed comments, but these only received 2.8% of the comments posted ($M = 0.5$). Other news categories that users also tended to ignore included the *economy* ($M = 2.1$) and *accidents* ($M = 1.2$), although this news was not represented in the news nearly as well as *sport and club activities* and *entertainment and art*.

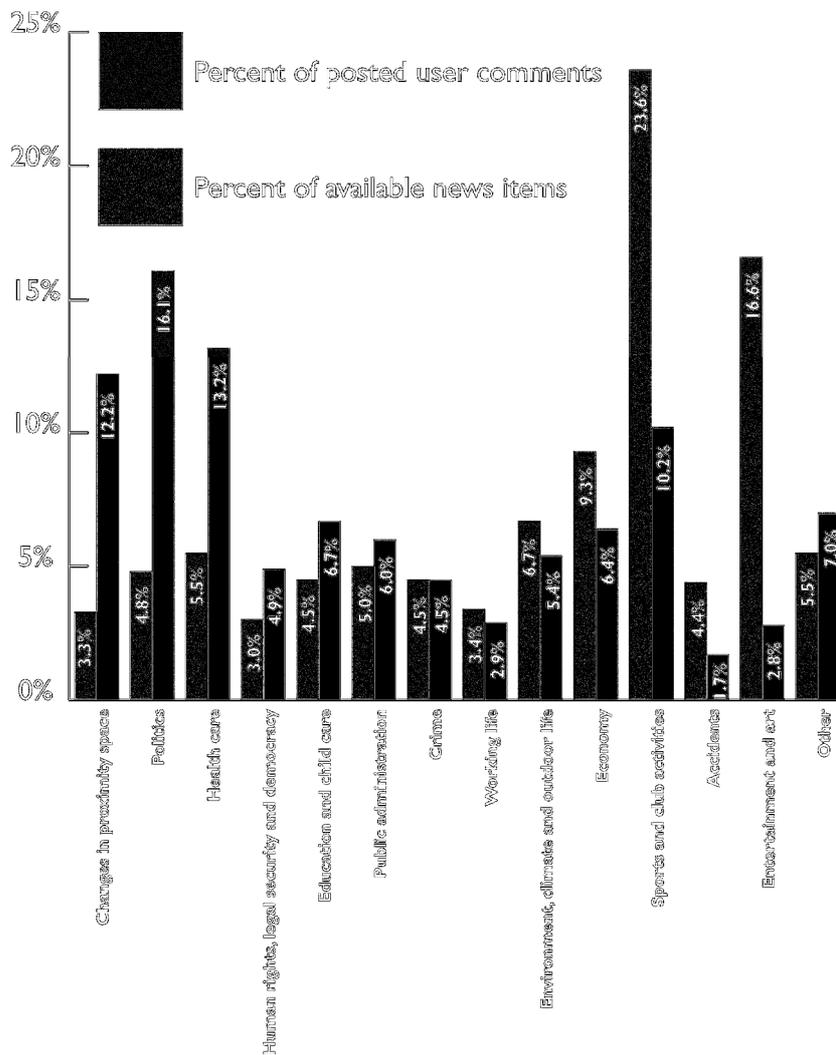


Figure 2. Comparing user preferences for posting comments (N=2572) across news categories to news items available (N=842), in percentages.

Note: The ratio between the extent to which news items are open to user comments and the users' preferences in posting comments are displayed by the two bars accompanying each news category in the table. The dark grey bars represent the share of news items, and the light grey bars represent the share of comments. Adjacent to the news categories where the light grey bars are highest, larger shares of user comments are posted than the share of news items. Adjacent to the news categories where the dark grey bars are highest, the users post a smaller share of comments than the share of open news items.

Table 2. User preferences for posting comments across news categories, in percentages, frequencies and means for news items (N=842) and comments (N=2572).

News categories	f news items	f user comments	M (comments per news item)	SD
Changes in proximity space	28	315	11.2	12.3
Politics	40	414	10.4	25.1
Health care	46	340	7.4	16.9
Human rights, legal security and democracy	25	126	5.0	10.3
Education and childcare	38	173	4.6	17.8
Public administration	42	154	3.7	5.5
Crime	38	116	3.1	7.5
Working life	29	74	2.6	5.0
Environment, climate and outdoor life	56	139	2.5	5.2
Economy	78	165	2.1	4.5
Sports and club activities	199	262	1.3	3.1
Accidents	37	44	1.2	5.5
Entertainment and art	140	73	0.5	2.1
Other	46	180	3.9	11.2
Total	842	2575	3.1	9.7

Note: The table displays measures across news categories: (1) frequencies of news items allowing comments, (2) user comments, (3) means (the number of user comments per news item) and (4) standard deviations. News items (N=842) open for user comments (N=2575).

Conclusions

This article has offered different types of contributions. It is to a certain extent a methodological contribution because the study's design offers a way to study mediated participation with reference to how producers condition users' participatory practices. However, it is also an empirical and theoretical contribution in that the results indicate how a media organization sets limits on users to prevent them from engaging in the ways they prefer. The latter point is an important reminder for scholars with an interest in mediated participation. The article extends extant research on how users are allowed to participate, related to technological features for user-generated content and professional views on the

value of user contributions (cf. Domingo, et al., 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Lewis, 2012; Singer, 2010; Thurman, 2008; Viscovi & Gustafsson, 2012) by making an analytical connection between users' preferences for engaging and how producers prioritize ways in which users' influence should be allowed.

The results and our analysis point towards a sometimes paradoxical relationship between what news users are allowed and encouraged to comment on and what news they are actually interested in commenting on. The media organization, in this case *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, produces news and provides content on its website in a manner that mainly steers users' participatory practices towards news categories such as *entertainment and art* or *sports and club activities*—what we have referred to as lightweight news. The steering of users' opportunities to participate has two distinct but interrelated components. It is, on the one hand, related to a large overall volume of lightweight news—that is, the news categories make up a large share of the total number of news pieces. On the other hand, the steering is also a consequence of the fact that large shares of these news items are also made available for users to post comments. Drawing on insights from these data, it is reasonable to argue that the media organization seems to perceive lightweight news areas to be 'safe' in terms of user participation and, hence, does not hesitate to open them up as a space for user participation.

What is interesting, however—at least if it is a real ambition for the newspaper to provide a space for user participation—is that the users' participatory preferences are very different from the opportunities that they are being offered. Rather than having an interest in lightweight news, which is the participatory direction the media organization mainly suggests to them, they are primarily interested in commenting on news concerning *changes in proximity space, politics* and *health care*. What these categories have in common is that they address real world issues with real world consequences for the readers. These preferences are made obvious by our data, but are only met by the media organization to some extent.

There are, of course, numerous plausible explanations for this imbalance between what participatory opportunities users are offered and the users' preferences. It most certainly has to do with editorial resources and what type of news the newspaper prefers to produce. Nevertheless, it is also difficult not to interpret it as at least partially related to an editorial preference for steering user participation towards some areas rather than others. Looked at the issue in this light, it seems reasonable to suggest that the media organization (*Helsingborgs Dagblad*) is more comfortable offering users participatory space concerning lightweight news rather than harder news. The latter could potentially stir up conflicts and heated debates, which could be difficult for the newspaper to manage. As a consequence, it appears safer to offer participatory opportunities regarding, for instance, cultural events rather than obviously political topics.

There is no doubt a latent user participatory potential here for the newspaper to further exploit. It is, however, also important to remember that commenting on news online is still a fairly new practice. Both *producers* and *prod-users* have to get used to this practice and find the appropriate formats. Despite the fact that many news items receive very few comments or none at all, the overall increase of participatory opportunities and practices—which this study exemplifies—marks a remarkable change compared to what the situation was like slightly more than a decade ago. A new space for user participation has been opened, and it will continue to develop and change over the years to come. To us, as media researchers who have an interest in the media as a potential space for participation, it is wise to continue to follow how this space is developing.

Our view of how to follow the development of this space for participation has been presented throughout this article, and it includes paying attention to what user opportunities are offered and how the users take advantage of these opportunities. Such an approach enables analyses of participatory practices in context—more precisely, an ability to look into how the participatory space is being negotiated by users.

Drawing further on this line of thought, we will continue developing our approach to become both broader and more problematizing. Our next step is to scale up the quantitative approach by studying eight Swedish newspapers' online editions: What news items are users offered online? What news items are users allowed to comment on? Departing from this overall map of participatory opportunities, we will pick out a variety of online newspapers for further (mainly qualitative) inquiries regarding the online news comments and the participating users.

Apart from an interest in analyzing news comments, our approach is also informed by a conviction that this participatory feature also offers more overarching insights into social media. To us, social media is an umbrella term for various applications in symbiotic relationships with Web 2.0 (constituting the 'ideological and technological platform' enabling 'the evolution of [s]ocial media') and user-generated content ('the sum of all ways in which people make use of [s]ocial media') (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). From such a point of theoretical departure, it is not only social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter that make up 'social media', but the notion also includes collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, virtual game worlds and virtual social worlds as well as online news comments. Analyzing this function offers valuable insights into how social media become parts of the reshaping of public space.

As already stated, the Internet is by no means the first medium in the history of media to offer participatory opportunities to its users (cf. Lundell, 2002; Carpentier, 2005), nor does it alone hold the promise (or threat) of a transforming public space. Nevertheless, the Internet's special affordances—and to an increasing extent, its so-called Web 2.0-versions (Jenkins, 2006)—make it a technological platform that is particularly suitable for offering users participatory space. Hence, it is vital for research to follow how these spaces are shaped by media producers and later negotiated with and shaped (or not shaped) into participatory practices among users.

References

- Abdul-Mageed, M. M. (2008). Online News Sites and Journalism 2.0: Reader Comments on Al Jazeera Arabic. *TripleC*, 6(2), 59-76. Retrieved from <http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC>
- Anderson, C. (2009). *The longer long tail : how endless choice is creating unlimited demand*. London: Random House Business.
- Berelson, B. (1952). *Content analysis in communication research*. Glencoe: Free Press.
- Bergström, A. (2008). The Reluctant Audience: Online Participation in the Swedish Journalistic Context. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 5(2), 60-80. Retrieved from <http://www.westminster.ac.uk/>
- Braun, J. & Gillespie, T. (2011). Hosting the public discourse, hosting the public. *Journalism Practice*, 5(4), 383-398. doi: 10.1080/17512786.2011.557560
- Bruns, A. (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2009). *YouTube : Online video and participatory culture* (Digital media and society series). Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity.
- Buskqvist, U. (2007). *Medborgarnas röster. Studier av Internet som politisk offentlighet*. [The voices of the citizens: Studies of the Internet as political public sphere]. Örebro: Universitetsbiblioteket.
- Carpentier, N. (2005). Identity, contingency and rigidity. The (counter-)hegemonic constructions of the identity of the media professional. *Journalism*, 6(2), 199-219. doi: 10.1177/1464884905051008

- Carpentier, N. (2011). *Media and participation : a site of ideological-democratic struggle*. Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Cleary, J., & Bloom, T. (2011). Gatekeeping at the Portal: An Analysis of Local Television Websites' User-Generated Content. *Electronic News*, 5, 93-111. doi: 10.1177/1931243111408389
- Dahlgren, P. (2009). *Media and political engagement : Citizens, communication, and democracy*. New York ; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Diakopolous, N., & Naaman, M. (2011). Towards Quality Discourse in Online News Comments. *Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work, CSCW* (pp. 133-142). ACM.
- Dijk van, J. (2013). Social Media Platforms as Producers. In T. Olsson (Ed.), *Producing the Internet* (pp. 45-62). Gothenburg: Nordicom.
- Domingo, D., Quandt, T., Heinonen, A., Paulussen, S., Singer, J. B., & Vujnovic, M. (2008). Participatory Journalism Practices in the Media and Beyond . *Journalism Practice*, 2(3), 326-342. doi: 10.1080/17512780802281065
- Douai, A., & Nofal, H. K. (2012). Commenting in the Online Arab Public Sphere: Debating the Swiss Minaret Ban and the "Ground Zero Mosque" Online. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3), 266-282. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01573.x
- Freedman, D. (2012). Web 2.0 and the death of the blockbuster economy. In J. Curran, N. Fenton, & D. Freedman (Eds.), *Misunderstanding the Internet* (pp. 69-94). New York: Routledge.

- Freund, E. (2011). *'Discuss This Article!' Participatory Uses of Comment Sections on SPIEGEL ONLINE: A Content Analysis*. London: Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Fuchs, C. (2013). Social Media and Capitalism. In T. Olsson (Ed.), *Producing the Internet. Critical Perspectives of Social Media* (pp. 25-44). Gothenburg: Nordicom.
- Gillespie, T. (2012). The politics of platforms. *New Media and Society*, 12(3), 347-364.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.) *Culture, Media, Language* (pp. 128-138). Bedford: Routledge & the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. University of Birmingham.
- Harrison, J. (2010). User-generated content and gatekeeping at the BBC hub. *Journalism Studies*, 11(2), 243-256. doi: 10.1177/1461444809342738
- Hayes, A. F., & Krippendorff, K. (2007). Answering the Call for a Standard Reliability Measure for Coding Data. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 1(1), 77-89
- Hedman, U. (2009). *Läsarmedverkan: lönande logiskt lockbete*. [Readers' contributions: Profitable logical bait: The online newspapers' user generated content from an editorial management perspective]. Institutionen för Journalistik och Masskommunikation. Göteborgs Universitet.
- Hermida, A., & Thurman, N. (2008). A Clash of Cultures . *Journalism Practice*, 2(3), 343-356. doi: 10.1080/17512780802054538

Hujanen, J., & Pietikäinen, S. (2004). Interactive uses of journalism: crossing between technological potential and young people's news-using practices. *New Media and Society*, 6(3), 383-401. doi: 10.1177/1461444804042521

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture : where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 53, 59-68. doi: 10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003

Krippendorff, K. (1980) *Content analysis: an introduction to its methodology*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Krippendorff, K. (2004) Reliability in Content Analysis: Some Common Misconceptions and Recommendations. *Human Communication Research*, 30(3), 411-433. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2958.2004.tb00738.x

Lewis, S. C. (2012). The tension between professional control and open participation. Journalism and its boundaries. *Information, Communication and Society*, 15(6), 836-866. doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2012.674150

Lundell, P. (2002). *Pressen i provinsen : från medborgerliga samtal till modern opinionsbildning 1750-1850*. [The press in the provinces : from civic conversation to modern moulding of public opinion, 1750-1850]. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.

McCluskey, M., & Hmielowski, J. (2012). Opinion expression during social conflict: Comparing online reader comments and letters to the editor. *Journalism*, 13(3), 303-319. doi: 10.1177/1464884911421696

- Nagar, N. (2011). *The Loud Public: The Case of User Comments in Online News Media*. ProQuest Dissertations Database.
<http://dissexpress.umi.com/dxweb/results.html?QryTxt=&By=nagar&Title=The+loud+public&pubnum=3460834>
- Neuendorf, K.A. (2002) *The content analysis: guidebook*. London: Sage.
- Olsson, T. (2006). Appropriating civic information and communication technology: a critical study of Swedish ICT policy visions. *New Media and Society*, 8(4), 611-627. doi: 10.1177/1461444806065659
- Olsson, T. (2010). From the Ecology of Broadcasting to the Ecology of Participation: Critical Reflections. *Nordicom Review*, 31, 95-104.
- Olsson, T. (2013). *Producing the Internet*. Gothenburg: Nordicom.
- Olsson, T., & Svensson, A. (2012). Producing prod-users: Conditional participation in a web 2.0 consumer community. *Javnost - The Public*, 19(3), 41-58.
doi:10.1080/13183222.2012.11009090
- O'Reilly, T. (2005, 09 30). *What Is Web 2.0*. Retrieved 03 05, 2013, from O'Reilly:
<http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>
- Paskin, D. (2010). Say what?: An analysis of reader comments in bestselling American newspapers. *Journal of International Communication*, 16(2), 67-83. doi: 10.1080/13216597.2010.9674769
- Poster, M. (1995). *The second media age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Ruiz, C., Domingo, D., Lluís Micó, J., Díaz-Noci, J., Meso, K., & Masip, P. (2011). Public Sphere 2.0? The Democratic Qualities of Citizen Debates in Online Newspapers. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 16(4), 463–487. doi: 10.1177/1940161211415849
- Shirky, C. (2009). *Here comes everybody : the power of organizing without organizations* . New York: Penguin Books.
- Singer, J. B. (2009, June). Separate Spaces : Discourse About the 2007 Scottish Elections on a National Newspaper Web Site. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 14, 477. doi: 10.1177/1940161209336659
- Singer, J. B. (2010). Quality control. Perceived effects of user-generated content on newsroom norms, values and routines. *Journalism Practice*, 4(2), 127-142. doi: 10.1080/17512780903391979
- Singer, J. B., & Ashman, I. (2009). "Comment is Free, but Facts Are Sacred": User-generated Content and Ethical Constructs at the Guardian. *Journal of mass Media Ethics*, 24(1), 3-21. doi: 10.1080/08900520802644345
- Statistiska centralbyrån. [Statistics Sweden]. (2014, 03 13). *Befolkningsstatistik. Folkmängd i riket, län och kommuner efter kön och ålder 31 december 2013*. Retrieved 07 28, 2014, from SCB Statistiska centralbyrån (Statistics Sweden): http://www.scb.se/sv_/Hitta-statistik/Statistik-efter-amne/Befolkning/Befolkningens-sammansattning/Befolkningsstatistik/25788/25795/Helarsstatistik---Kommun-lan-och-riket/159277/
- Sundin, S. (2011). *Den svenska mediemarknaden*. [The Swedish media market 2011].Göteborg: Nordicom.

- Thurman, N. J. (2008, February). Forums for citizen journalists? Adoption of user generated content initiatives by online news media. *New Media & Society*, *10*(1), 139-157. doi: 10.1177/1461444807085325
- Tsagkias, M., Weerkamp, W., & de Rijke, M. (2009). Predicting the volume of comments on online news stories. *Proceedings of the ACM Eighteenth International Conference on Information and Knowledge Management* (pp. 1765-1768). Hong Kong, China.: ACM.
- Weber, P. (2013, July 8). Discussions in the comments section: Factors influencing participation and interactivity in online newspapers' reader comments. *New Media & Society*, *16*(6), 941-957. doi: 10.1177/1461444813495165
- White, D. M. (1950). "The 'Gatekeeper' : A Case Study in the Selection of News". *Journalism Quarterly*, *27*, 383-390.
- Viscovi, D., & Gustafsson, M. (2012). Dirty Work: Why Journalists Shun Reader Comments. In T. Olsson (Ed.), *Producing the Internet*. Göteborg: Nordicom.
- Woolgar, S. (1996) Technologies as cultural artefacts. In W. Dutton (ed.) *Information and Communication Technologies: Visions and Realities* (pp. 97-102). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Örnebring, H. (2008). The Consumer as Producer - of what? User generated content in The Sun (UK) and Aftonbladet (Sweden). *Journalism Studies*, *9*(5), 771-785. doi: 10.1080/14616700802207789

ⁱ Online news presents specific methodological challenges. The rationale behind the sampling is to aid validity by having hard copied material that can be double-checked, for example, concerning time of publication and news categories (a three-day limit and criteria for handling blurred genres). The coding and repeated coding procedures were conducted with one coder. The repeated coding was performed on approximately 10% of the material ($n = 113$ news items).

ⁱⁱ The Krippendorff alpha values were calculated with KALPHA in SPSS (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007; Krippendorff, 2004).