



Methodological proposal for the analysis of user participation mechanisms in online media

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of an analysis of user participation mechanisms, particularly those based in Web 2.0 technologies and applications, based on a sample of fourteen relevant Spanish online media, including the websites of newspapers, radio stations, and television channels. This analysis was conducted in October and November 2010 as part of the research subproject *La evolución de los cibermedios en el marco de la convergencia digital. Tecnología y distribución* (The evolution of online media in the context of digital convergence. Technology and distribution). The study is based on a taxonomy of the different user participation mechanisms, which distinguishes between those that are integrated within the media's news sections and those that are independent spaces. The analysis also examines the form in which these mechanisms are managed by the media in function of the role they are assigned. Finally, the study aims to compare the different online media and to show examples and trends in the field of user participation.

Keywords: technologies; Web 2.0; online media; audience participation; user-generated content.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Approach of the Analysis. 3. Results and conclusions. 4. References. 5. Notes.

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1. Introduction

As the research on the history and technological changes of the media has shown, audiences have always used diverse mechanisms not only to receive messages but also to produce their own content and disseminate it. These mechanisms have evolved in line with the audiences and the information technologies, firstly in analogue and later in digital platforms (Boczkowski, 2006). But it is in the context of network communication, particularly with the development of tools originally associated with the so-called Web 2.0 or social web

(O'Reilly, 2005), when users have acquired greater possibilities for participation, at least potentially.

Recent studies in this field (Domingo et al., 2008; Zamith, 2008; and García-de-Torres et al., 2009) have confirmed the end of an era in which the online media were characterised by the incorporation of formulas of communicative interaction that were inherited from their printed versions and were typically tied to the news sections and certain dialogic genres (like online interviews, forums, chats, and surveys) and limited the participation of users in terms of topics and the roles they could exercise through their contributions.

With the rise of the blogosphere [1], and more recently of social networking, most press companies became aware and took advantage of the potential and attractiveness of these and other social media tools to develop formulas able to shape independent spaces for collective participation, beyond the news sections. Whether they are sections, by way of virtual communities, or make use of applications such as Facebook and Youtube, the brand of the medium is maintained, which helps expanding its online identity (Sánchez, 2010a: 87-111).

The possible customised integration of the content generated from these applications into the platforms where their online activity is centralised (that is, their websites), and vice versa, gives rise to new forms of publishing and access, in scalable, flexible, and distributed ways, in what some authors call cloud journalism (Fondevila-i-Gascón, 2010).

From the technical point of view, the characteristics of the Content Management Systems (CMS) –which constitute the technological basis of the online media and the applications oriented to social networking and the publication of content, following the classification of Cobo and Pardo (2007: 63)- facilitate the development of this participation and its management by the media. The complexity is determined by the requirements involved in the management of the information generated through these mechanisms, since, following Piscitelli (2005: 152), “what we need in order to create intelligence is not only connectivity (which overflows in the web), but also, and especially, organisation: organised connectivity”.

Its impact, in this regard, is such that it affects the process of content production and the structure of the newsrooms, in which new professional profiles have emerged, such as the “social media editor”, the “community manager” and the “blog administrators” (Crucianelli, 2010). These new professional profiles are increasingly more valued and have a crucial role as screeners and promoters of the content generated by users [2].

Beyond the potential risks that the media seem to be willing to take [3] this is a chance to improve. Obviously, improving is only possible when there is an effective management of such formulas: of their brand image, their configuration by broadcasters that are closer to the

audiences, and its focus on young users: the “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001; Pisani, 2006; and Piscitelli, 2009) for whom these technologies are part of their lives.

2. Approach of the analysis

2.1. Objectives and hypotheses

In this context of intensive and extensive use of technologies that give more power to the audiences and even allow them to assume the roles traditionally assigned to the news professionals, we should wonder whether, in fact, the degree of interactivity in online media promotes the development of a more participatory journalism.

To answer this question, in regards to the technologies employed, we studied such mechanisms based on their defining characteristics and the functions that the online media seem to assign them for a possible collaborative construction of today’s agenda when, beyond these tools, the content generated by users has considerable visibility and relevance.

The use of certain technologies 2.0 by the online media also facilitates users’ interaction with the content generated by them and users’ consumption of products according to their preferences (Salaverría, 2005, 34) through subscription tools based on systems of social and intelligent organisation of information (through syndication or folksonomies [4]). However, this study is limited to the analysis of formulas of communicative interactivity, i.e. those that promote users’ expression and dialogue, and formulas that enable the inclusion of user-generated content (UGC), i.e. news produced by users, as a form of citizen participation in the professional online media (Paulussen and Ugille, 2008: 254) [5].

Hence, this study uses the term technologies of participation to generally refer to these mechanisms and is based on the idea that an online medium will be more interactive when it provides “a repertoire of options to provide better conditions for the public expression and debate of ideas” and “when it increases the promotion of readers’ active and critical participation in the construction of reality” (Rost, 2006: 235-6).

This study was undertaken as part of the research sub-project *La evolución de los cibermedios en el marco de la convergencia digital. Tecnología y distribución* (The evolution of online media in the context of digital convergence. Technology and distribution) [6] during October and November 2010. The analysis is based on a sample of fourteen representative online media, which include the websites of newspapers, radio stations and television channels [7].

This work does not intend to measure the degree of use of these tools or the number of users engaged in every medium as participatory subjects, which are issues that would require the application of other methodologies. This is an exploratory analysis based on the

development of a taxonomy of formulas (as described below) whose purpose is to determine the trends in the use of such tools. To achieve this objective, we investigated such aspects as the type of tools that have greater presence, the place they occupy in the online media, the functions that the online media seem to assign to these tools and, in short, the general role of users' participation in relation to the production of news and non-news content.

This study has taken as a reference the results obtained from an exploratory pilot test study conducted on the website *sur.es*, which is the digital edition of Malaga's most important newspaper. This website is an innovative and "technological" model, which follows the classification of García-de-Torres et al. (2008), because it incorporated participation tools 2.0 much earlier than other online media, and its characteristics place it closer to the idea of Interactive Digital Journalism proposed by Rost (2006). The website is also an example of comprehensive integration and in accordance with its need for social web mechanisms and other traditional mechanisms, which have been improved through technology, to enable a high level of user participation in the production of content and in other aspects.

Participation mechanisms are present practically throughout this online medium, beyond the spaces dedicated specifically to participation. In addition -and in a clear sign of the context of convergence that we are living- such participation in *sur.es* has a reflection in the print edition, which shows some of its online results (Sánchez, 2010b).

This study, however, is based on the idea that not all media have to reach such a high level of development but that this level will vary depending on contextual factors or the nature -more or less advanced or appropriate- of the employed technologies and the way they are managed in each case.

In addition, we start from the hypothesis that, regardless of the individual peculiarities, the possibilities for participation in non-news sections are, in general, wider than in the production of news sections, whose contents will continue to be produced by professionals, and where the roles of the user will be limited.

We expect to find a greater range of mechanisms geared to the generation of content, either to the interaction over the content published by other users or the communication between users, as sections not directly linked to the news sections of the medium, and often oriented more towards entertainment than towards current affairs.

2.2. Classification criteria for participation mechanisms

Among the pioneers, the empirical analysis of Rost (2006), which was conducted during the same period of this study, offers a taxonomy that contains basically Web 1.0 formulas and communicative interactivity options intertwined in the medium's own content manager [8]. These options are similar to the interactivity points detected by Zamith (2008), which already

include, however, some social web options like spaces for the publication of readers’ stories or blogs [9].

Focused on the incorporation of web 2.0 technologies and tools, Domingo et al. (2008) group them, around the same time, into three main blocks according to their potential for use (“News production-related spaces”, “Commentary and debate spaces”, and “Social networking features”) and, above all, include options related, beyond the tools themselves, to the way in which they are managed by the medium.

Criteria to identify and classify the models of communicative interaction in the online media	
According to the stage of communication in which users participate	Models to participate in content production
	Models to participate in content distribution (and reception)
According to the evolution of these formulas and more or less advanced model of communication	Conventional models of participation
	New models for online participation acquired from the Web 2.0, during a more recent stage
According to the origin of the modes of communication, integrated in the online media	Participation mechanisms based on interpersonal communication models
	Mixed communication models
According to the number of actors involved in the communication generated in the online media	One-to-one interaction models
	One-to-many interaction models
	Many-to-many interaction models
According to the type of actors involved in the interactive communication, i.e. who can the user interact with through using the different tools	User-Media/press company
	User-journalist
	User-user
	User-celebrity/social actor
According to the time in which the interactive communication occurs	Synchronous tools
	Asynchronous tools

Table 1. Criteria to identify and classify the models of communicative interaction in the online media. Source: authors’ creation.

In a similar way and using part of these results, García-de-Torres et al. (2008: 211) developed, through a study of online media from different countries, a basic taxonomy that is developed in a subsequent investigation (op. cit. 2009), centred in the control mechanisms that regulate the involvement and visibility, and in the opportunities of the content generated through citizen journalism channels built in the online media. Our study takes into consideration this taxonomy [10].

However, the constant evolution of participation technology has made it necessary, as a prelude to the content analysis, to perform a priori observation on the online media to adapt, to the present moment and to the Spanish case, the criteria and variables employed in these and earlier studies. This work concluded with the establishment, firstly, of a series of

criteria to identify and classify from a theoretical perspective all the possible formulas for communicative interaction, as shown in the table below. Secondly, and based on the previous, we created an updated taxonomy of the possible participation mechanisms

Based on the previous, we established two large blocks of variables and criteria for the analysis of participation technologies in the online media according to the proposed objectives. These large blocks were based on two aspects: firstly on the general form acquired by the participation and the identification of the mechanisms used in each online medium according to the aforementioned taxonomy (general criteria), and, secondly, on the individual analysis of each of the mechanisms identified in each case (specific criteria) [11].

The objective is to determine, following Rost's proposal (2006: 435-ss), not only whether the online medium makes use of the technological advances to offer friendly and simple tools to encourage participation; but also whether it: offers relevant reputation and reliability systems; intervenes as moderator; advises its users on the correct use of such options; or recognises when this participation occurs.

This article presents the results obtained in the first phase, after the analysis of the first part of the sampled online media. The sample will be subject to an in-depth analysis –if not of all of the media, at least of the most important cases. The criteria and indicators used in this observation, which was conducted during October and November 2010, are detailed below.

2.1. Typology and identifying features of participation mechanisms

2.1.1. Taxonomy of online media's participation mechanisms

As starting point, we identified the available types of participation mechanisms and created a more or less comprehensive catalogue of the possible options for participation in the online media. This catalogue was designed according to the results of the recent empirical research works that were mentioned above [12].

This catalogue contains a total of 24 possible formulas, which can be grouped, as shown in the table below, into three large blocks according to their main function, i.e. what their configuration allows the user to do [13].

These blocks also correspond to two of the stages of the process of communication which, in our view, they affect fundamentally.

Taxonomy of participation mechanisms used in the online media		
Stage of content production	Tools for expression and communication (like rates, comments and debate)	Emails or e-contact forms
		Discussion forums
		Comments on the news provided by the medium
		Chats between readers
		Letters from readers, or letters to the online director
		Questions to experts
		Surveys
		Lists of users
		Ranking of news
		Correction of news
		Comments on multimedia sections (like videos and photos) posted by the medium
		Comments or other mechanisms of communicative interaction in journalistic blogs
		Mechanisms of expression and communication in social networks and other channels external to the medium
		Comments or other mechanisms of communicative interaction (like rating and evaluation) on content published by other users
		Tools for content generation by users
Invitations to send leads or ideas for stories (of the type “tell us your story”)		
Invitations to send pictures, video or audio		
Invitations to visit or participate in social networks		
Space given to users to post on blogs		
“I-journalist” type sections		
Stage of content distribution (and reception)	Tools for content dissemination, recommendation and retrieval [14]	Sending of news provided by the medium to other users
		Sharing and publishing of news provided by the medium
		Add/bookmark news provided by the medium
		Share/publish content published by other users

Table 2. Criteria to identify and classify the models of communicative interaction in the online media. Source: authors’ creation.

Thus, the tools that are related to production, firstly, are those tools created for expression and communication, among which we include both those aimed at direct communication with the medium for the dissemination of ideas, information or opinions (emails or contact forms), and those that foster personal and community relationships (like those typical of the Web 2.0, such as social networks and micro-blogging, and conventional formulas like surveys, debate forums or chats, which are more oriented towards the interaction than to the generation of content).

Secondly, we include tools focused on the generation of content by the user (like texts, images, sounds, videos, and presentations), like i-journalist type tools or blog-based platforms, which are built into the medium's websites.

The distribution would correspond to a third set of tools for the dissemination and recommendation of content. In this field the user acts as news selector for other users. This occurs when, for example, the user sends or shares news online, in a process we understand as communicative interactivity.

As we can see, these participation tools include those that are typical of the first years of the online media as well as those that come from a more recent (and presumably more advanced) process of communication produced by the social web.

2.1.2. Mechanisms' identifying features and assigned functions

Our analysis also considered a series of criteria which, according to the identifying features of the participation mechanisms and the functions assigned to them by the medium, will be taken as the basis for a later in-depth analysis in this regard. As we will see later, in the end we will define the global involvement of the different online media.

Regarding the form acquired by these mechanisms in the online medium, we considered, on the one hand, those that tend to be participation options intertwined with content generated by the medium and other users (for example, the comments systems) [15]; and, on the other hand, those that may or not constitute independent participation sections or spaces whose contents contain, in turn, these options (for example, online media that give their readers space to publish blogs with activated comments systems).

While we believe it is relevant to distinguish the latter type of mechanisms, from a technological perspective, into those that are built in the medium's own website (or are integrated into it) and those that are built with Web 2.0 tools like Youtube or Facebook and are presented as external participation channels.

Secondly, according to the type and scope of content on which participation is projected and, hence, the expected use of mechanisms by the audience [16], we followed the

classification proposed by Alonso and Martínez (2003: 276-9) with the modifications proposed by López-García (2005: 86).

On the one hand, we would find tools to participate on information, i.e. on the set of journalistic content and the so-called “information of knowledge” (López-García, 2005: 84-5). On the other hand, we would have those that, on the contrary, are either orientated to participate on information services (service journalism), management (e-commerce) or infomediation (access to other contents), or are not associated to any specific content but usually confined to various models of interpersonal or mixed communication (debate forums, chat rooms, email, virtual communities), whose role is usually equivalent to those of contact with the medium or community-creation, as mentioned above.

2.2. Relevance granted to participation mechanisms

In order to assess the relevance given by the online media to user participation, we analysed issues related to the format, location, connectivity, and ease of location and identification of the different mechanisms enabled by the online medium, by attending several aspects, which are set out below.

2.2.1. Presence and visibility in the medium’s website’s homepage

In order to identify the participation mechanisms to which the online media grant greater importance, we identified, firstly, the mechanisms that are visible and accessible in their homepages. We checked whether the homepage shows a link to spaces related to participation or networking; as well as the place it occupies, considering the positions within the header or the main menu as the most prominent places. We also checked whether the homepage shows links to its own community or social network and, if so, whether it is related to a single mechanism or a wider set of tools. Finally, we checked whether there are other types of participation mechanisms that are visible and accessible in the homepage, and identified their characteristics.

We also took into account whether there was a certain hierarchy in the location and form of such mechanisms; i.e. whether the mechanisms in the homepage were given equal or different emphases, from the visual point of view.

2.2.2. Presence and visibility in the news sections

This section focuses on the options incorporated inside the news sections, as well as on their features. We considered such criteria as the presence of participation bars alongside the news items, as well as the participation mechanisms it includes; and the social tools used for that.

The analysis also established whether the news stories incorporated comments systems; and whether they were more or less complex (that is, whether they only allow adding comments or, on the contrary, as it happens in *sur.es*, whether they give the possibility to the user to show support or rejection towards the comments made by other users, or even denounce those they deem inappropriate. The analysis of the inner news pages was completed by checking whether other mechanisms were accessible from these pages and, if so, their position. For this analysis we applied basic principles of design, such as size, shape, and contrast.

2.2.3. Features, access and visibility of participation spaces with independent identity

Regarding the autonomous participation spaces, we firstly established the mechanisms that are intertwined as independent participation pages or sections into the medium (e.g. readers' blogs channel), as well as their names (like "I have a blog") and the participation options they incorporated (like the ability to comment on the blogs of readers, for example) [17].

Moreover, and in connection with the previous issues, it was considered relevant to study the mode of presentation and connection of these spaces in the news sections of the medium (e.g. icons, text links or banners) as well as the form of access to these mechanisms (whether it can be done from the participation section, the homepage, a friendly URL, or RSS), assessing whether there is a single or several access modes for the reader, or even without the need to do so through the medium's homepage. Finally, we established whether the medium's news sections contain not only such mechanisms but also some results generated by the participation of users (for example, readers' posts in blogs).

In the case of participation mechanisms built as external media channels (e.g., users' video channels in Youtube, or social network in Facebook) we established which mechanisms acquired this form and which tools and names they used, as well as the participation options they incorporated, i.e. the way in which the user can participate with them.

Regarding the visibility of these external participation channels in the websites, we applied the same patterns of analysis used for the autonomous spaces built in the medium. The only variation in this case –and considering the inverse connection (from outside the medium) as a fundamental formula to make the internal participation mechanisms visible and generate traffic of users from these open spaces-, is that we established whether there were links or other forms to access them.

2.3. Overall assessment of the participation formulas in the online media

As a summary of the study, and by way of an exploratory examination for the future analysis of the variety of user participation mechanisms and their management by the medium, we have established a set of criteria that allows the assessment, holistically and according to our

hypothesis, of users' level of participation in the production of news and non-news content in online media.

Regarding the first aspect, we consider that the level of participation afforded by online media to users in news production is non-existent where they do not have participation tools focused on the development of this type of content. Meanwhile, the level of participation is low when there are only external tools primarily focused on content dissemination, recommendation or retrieval [18]. Finally, the level of participation is medium when the tools allow users to perform actions that can be considered to be collateral or complementary to the news (rating, comments, etc.); and high when the user participates, through “i-journalist” type tools, in news production.

Several levels were also established according to the level of user participation afforded by the medium in the provision of non-news content. Thus, the level of participation of an online medium will be non-existent when there is no participation tools focused on other uses; “low” when there are only external tools; “medium” when the medium has implemented tools (blogs, forums, picture or video sites, etc.) but it does not intervene in the participation; and “high” when the medium interacts with the users involved with those mechanisms, either constantly (in “communities”) or more sporadic (like in photography and video contests).

3. Results and conclusions

3.1. Widespread incorporation of participation mechanisms on contents provided by the medium

Regarding the results about the types of implemented mechanisms (see table 3) and their identifying features, it is surprising, firstly, that all the analysed online media's websites invite their users to visit their social networks, usually through an advertisement in the form of banner or hyperlink, which are built over external tools like Facebook or Twitter.

However, according to their configuration, the mechanisms are mostly channels through which the online media disseminate their contents and where the user has, at most, the opportunity to comment on them or redistribute them. An example of this is the fact that practically none of the Facebook pages allows the posting of photos or videos, and there are cases where the Facebook pages do not even allow the posting of comments. In fact, “expression and communication mechanisms in social networks and other external channels”, which suggests the use that the medium aims to make of these tools, only exist in 9 of the 14 media with social networks.

The exceptions are Vocento's websites *elcorreo.com* or *sur.es*, which own communities of users with multiple options for participation in connection with other spaces.

Regarding the incorporation of mechanisms for expression and communication on the contents of the news sections, the systems for news commenting and ranking, which are characteristic mechanisms of the most recent phase of cyber-journalism, constitute the majority tendency. Both are present in 10 of the 14 analysed cases.

The first of mechanism, which originated in the blogosphere, allows the user to interact with other readers and even the medium's journalists, in a more or less complex way, as it is discussed later, depending on their design. While the second mechanism, which is based on the interactivity of the user with content and consists on giving a positive or negative votes to certain information with a simple click, comes from a sort of reputation system through which the user community acts as filter or selector of relevant or true news for other potential users.

A similar position (incorporated in 10 of the 14 analysed media) is occupied by the mechanisms for the dissemination, recommendation and retrieval of news. Some of these options exist virtually since the origins of the cyber-journalism (such as the sending of news, by way of recommendation, via email to other users, usually through an online form, which persists in 12 of the 14 cases), while others were developed in the so-called social web, which connects news with the most widely used external applications.

There is a large number of websites that incorporate publish and share icons next to the news so that users can share them with members of their social networks, as it is the case with Facebook's "Share" or "Like" or Twitter's "Tweet", which are actually links connected with these applications. When the user clicks them they open an application that, after identification by the corresponding social network, posts the news story to their profiles and, therefore, makes it visible to their contacts.

Similar mechanisms are the option to publish, also through automatic code embedded links or systems, in other external spaces such as users' blogs.

They are, in short, mechanisms that allow the online promotion of the medium's content in other sites and, therefore, also acquire a character of reliable metrics and reputation systems, since users are the ones that share or publish them and present them as relevant and credible information to their peers, through these sites.

On the other hand, most online media have mechanisms to add or bookmark news items, which are similar to the traditional "bookmark as favourite" option (provided by browser or personalised newspapers), which facilitate the storage, indexing, and subsequent recovery (from external applications) of the news users find interesting.

Options as news sharing or posting are in fact links to these external applications, in this case to social aggregators or bookmarkers like Delicious, and are often also included in

the participation bars located next to the news. Although these options are designed, a priori, for individual use, the nature of these social bookmarkers also allows subsequent interaction with other users.

The opposite occurs with the option fix or correct news (a mechanism that only appears in 5 of the 14 analysed media), which allows users to interact with the medium, and makes possible for them to practically become an editor. The reader can notify -usually via e-mail or an e-form- the detected spelling or grammatical errors and imprecisions. We believe these notifications can contribute to the improvement of information.

Thirdly, apart from the mechanisms related news, the tendency to incorporate comments or other communicative mechanisms on news blogs is predominant. Thus, 10 of 14 analysed cases contain blogs that are run by the medium's journalists or contributors, who allow user comments in each post. They may even incorporate participation bars that are similar to the ones used in news sections and allow their evaluation and sharing, among other options.

3.2. Coexistence of conventional communication mechanisms

Regarding the expression and communication mechanisms that, like the previous ones, are not directly linked to the content provided by the medium, it is striking that most of them, far from constituting a recent development, practically exist since the beginning of the cyber-journalism.

This is the case with emails and e-forms (identified in 10 out 14 cases), which are used as vías for readers to make direct and agile contact with the editors (of the news company), writers (when a complete list of contacts is provided) or authors of all or some of the news published by the medium, depending on the case. The form of the contacts information varies according to its location, although it is general located on a separate page (like "directory" or "about us" sections) and tends to be corporate addresses, or personal emails located next to the name of the author of a given news story.

Often, the list of emails offered by the medium includes one to receive letters for the director. However, the analysis of the media incorporating spaces for users' letters shows that the same letters are used in the printed version, so this is rather a mechanism which, thanks to the potential of network communication, is used only to facilitate the sending of letters.

The analysis showed a significant use in certain cases of emails and e-forms as ways to receive ideas or multimedia content that end up been published in certain participative sections (of the type "tell us your story", which is present in only 4 of the 11 analysed media), or as a form of technical support or assistance in the use of these mechanisms. These

formulas bring users closer to the news production process and, at the same time, place the medium and its writers in a closer and more direct and personal position, at least theoretically, with them.

In addition to these mechanisms, discussion forums remain largely (in 11 out of 14 media) as spaces where readers can comment and discuss current issues and subjects of entertainment. In certain media these forums have moderators who manage the flow of messages.

A representative example is the case of *lavanguardia.es*, which shows an intense work of moderation by the forums' creators. Moderation includes such aspects as making sure that: the limits of a topic are respected, the net-etiquette rules are followed, commercial messages are not posted, and certain languages are not used.

Other conventional mechanisms such as surveys on current affairs are also present in a large part of the online media (9 of 14), probably for being faster and less ponderous alternative ways of expression for users.

The treatment given by each online medium to surveys differs significantly from one medium to another. For some media, surveys are nothing more than a mere question formulated with few answering options (sometimes only two), as in the case of *vilaweb.cat*. However, other media, like *elpais.com* and *lavanguardia.es*, show special interest for this mechanism, through the inclusion of "surveys" in the "participation" section -which in turn is located in the homepage-, an event log, and the thematic organisation of surveys.

In certain cases (in 3 media), surveys coexist with more advanced mechanisms such as lists of users that, like in *sur.es*, comprise a hybrid between forums and traditional surveys. The lists represent another step in the sense that, unlike the surveys where the medium chooses the topic, the question and the answer choices, in the lists users are who select the surveys.

Chats between users persist in a minority of media (in 5 of 14), as external non-thematic channels (and even built on external tools, like Ozú, in the case of Vocento). Most chats are currently oriented towards current-events content and rather focused on users' socialisation and interaction.

3.3. Scarce presence of content-generation tools for users

The minor presence of mechanisms for the generation of content by users is relevant. The most common one is the online interview (present in 9 of 14 cases), which almost always occurs in the form of chat or video chat through which a guest personality is interviewed live by users. The online interview can be considered as a content-generation tool in so far as its result tends to end up published, in a section of the medium, as a file ordered by thematically

or chronologically, so that it can be watched by those who did not participate in the live dialogue.

Type of mechanism	N° of Media	% of Media
Invitations to visit/participate in social networks	14	100%
Sending of news provided by the medium to other users	12	86%
Discussion forums	11	79%
Emails or contact forms	10	71%
Rating of news	10	71%
Comments or other mechanisms of communicative interaction in news blogs	10	71%
Share/publish news provided by the medium	10	71%
Add/bookmark news provided by the medium	10	71%
Surveys	9	64%
Mechanisms of expression and communication in social networks and other external websites	9	64%
Online interviews	9	64%
Comments on news provided by the medium	8	57%
Invitations to send pictures, video or audio	6	43%
Space given to users to post on blogs	6	43%
Chats between readers	5	36%
Fix/rectify news	5	36%
Comments on multimedia sections (like videos and photos) provided by the medium	5	36%
Share/publish content published by other users	5	36%
Invitations to send leads or ideas for stories (of the type “tell us your story”).	4	29%
Sections of the type “I-journalist”	4	29%
Comments or other mechanisms of communicative interaction (like rating and ranking) on content published by other users	4	29%
Questions to experts	4	29%
Letters from readers, or letters to the online director	3	21%
Lists of users	3	21%

Table 3. Typology of participation mechanisms according to their location in the analysed cases. Source: Authors’ creation.

Other relevant content-generation mechanisms are the invitations to users to send photos, videos or audio as well as the spaces assigned to users to post on blogs. Both are present, however, in less than half of the sampled media (6 of 14).

While the second mechanism allows users to create content in their own personal spaces, directly and without the medium’s intervention, the photos, videos or audio sent by users, usually via email or e-forms, almost always require the medium’s approval for publication; either because the medium acts as receiver and publishes contents only after

having filtered and selected them, and because, although contents can be uploaded by users, they require the medium's approval to become visible.

One of the most representative examples of the sending of pictures, video or audio is found in those online media in which this mechanism becomes the centre of participation. This is the case with the “click!” section of *diariodenavarra.es*, where all the sections –like sports, traditions and events- have the sending of pictures as the main element.

Sections or spaces of the type “i-journalist” (from which several mechanisms are connected and in which user generated content is published more or less regularly) have also a low presence: in only 4 of the 14 sampled media.

It is important to mention that even in some media where these mechanisms are present their use is far from what one might expect. This is the case of the “Yo periodista” (“I journalist”) of *elpais.com* that has experienced a remarkable change since its creation: before it was an independent section with several categories, but now is a mere link that gives users the possibility to send the contents they consider news worthy to the news editors.

So far we have examined the essential features of the different types of mechanisms, but how are they and their results presented in the online media? Are they located and configured in a way that facilitates their location by the user? In what forms are they connected with the rest of the contents provided by the media? Is there a connection between the different mechanisms?

3.4. Tendency to rank and unite participation mechanisms on the homepage

The results of the analysis lead us to affirm that, far from granting equal importance, from the point of view of location and appearance, to all the enabled participation mechanisms, there is a visual hierarchy that indicates what are the most important.

First, not all mechanisms are visible in the homepage; and second, those that appear in it do not have, in the majority of cases (9 of 14), the same form.

The oldest or most-used participatory spaces in each medium are directly accessible in certain cases (like in *sur.es*, *elcorreo.com*, *elpais.com*, and *lavanguardia.es*) through any of the main menus in the homepage. Frequently, such menus incorporate a link to sections devoted to participation which acts as central element and gateway to the various enabled mechanisms. Thus, with the exception of the portals of *Canal Sur*, *La información*, *Diario de Navarra*, *RTVE* and *El mundo*, all analysed media have participation links that remain fixed in the main menus while users navigate through their websites.

The channels built on external social networks like Facebook or Twitter, generally, have a significant presence in the homepage of the analysed online media [19]. This presence is normally shown through banners, which invite the user to join these networks but do not include the outcome of the external activity. Although there are exceptions, as in *20minutos.es*, which integrates a gadget that shows the activity of users in relation to the contents of the medium on Facebook.



Figure 1. Part of the homepage of *20minutos.es*, which shows a module reporting on the activity of its Facebook followers and inviting users, through icons, to visit this and other social networks. The middle part also shows another mechanism for participation: questions to experts.

It is important to note once again the cases of *elcorreo.com* and *sur.es* whose homepages, unlike the rest of the other analysed media, have a fixed link to “community” sections which include a comprehensive set of tools [20]. At the bottom there is a grey bar that allows users to register or sign in its own social network, and shows the browsing activity of users in the website. The bottom half of the main column, under the heading “Tu haces SUR” (“You make SUR [the name of the medium]”), not only to introduces and encourages the use of the mechanisms available, but also (and this is the most interesting aspect) shows the content generated by users through them.



Figure 2. On the left: current appearance of *sur.es* homepage after its complete redesign in September 2009. It includes, in the top, a noticeable space dedicated to “Tu haces SUR” as well as links to *Participa* (Participate), *Blogs* and external social networks, and a grey bar, in the bottom, which is connected to the community of users.

However, as we mentioned when analysing the case of *sur.es*, this space occupies a secondary place in comparison to the news content produced by the medium, which is located at the top of the homepage. The contents produced by users are placed at the top of

the homepage only in exceptional cases, when they have importance in relation to the current agenda.

In this sense, and in relation to the mechanisms that act on news production, the home page usually only displays the comments about the news. The comments shown are in some cases of all the news, and in others, only of the main ones; but always appear in a similar way: through a hyperlinked text that appears under the news items and announces the number of comments received and allows access to them.

3.5. Similarities between mechanisms for the expression and retrieval of news content

What happens inside the news sections? It is striking that all of the analysed online media incorporate what can be termed as a participation bar alongside the news. This bar includes several icons with links to external web applications that allow users to add, bookmark or share news. In the latter case, when news can be shared, a good and general practice is to offer not one, but several options to do so (i.e. the social media of more standardised use). The results indicate that, according to this order, the most used are Facebook (in 11 of 14 media), Twitter (in 10), Menéame (in 8), and, to a lesser extent, Tuenti (in 7) [21].



Figure 3. Details of participation bar in elpais.com, which presents other mechanisms such as comments about news.

On the other hand, regarding the inclusion of comments systems, when they are enabled they are usually placed under the news they refer to, independently from the aforementioned bar. Although depending on the configuration of the tools in which they are based (usually the same manager), comments may appear directly and immediately online or may require publication approval by the medium.

The analysis shows that almost all media tend to use the first policy. To control this policy, and as shown by the results to the question about the options integrated by these comments systems in those media that incorporate them in all news (8 of 14 cases), some media include more complex comments mechanisms that, apart from merely allowing users to write comments, also allow users to vote for or against the comments made by other users

(as it is the case of *lavanguardia.es*) and even flag them as inappropriate or undertake other actions (again, *sur.es* and *elcorreo.com*).

Moreover, in almost half of cases (6 of 14), other mechanisms can be used from inside the news pages, via links, primarily for ranking or sending them to other users. Certain media (*sur.es*, *elcorreo.com* and *elmundo.es*) give users the option to rectify the news. Even *lainformacion.com* goes far beyond, because it allows users to interact in the medium with their social networks' accounts, as well as to send news to their contacts from external applications such as Google, Yahoo, and FriendFeed. Users can also attach pictures and even subscribe to the thread of comments generated by the news story or to receive email notifications if their comments generate responses. Another relevant aspect in *lainformacion.com* is that all of the news items have a box showing the presence of *lainformacion.com* on Facebook and indicate the number of people that like the website.

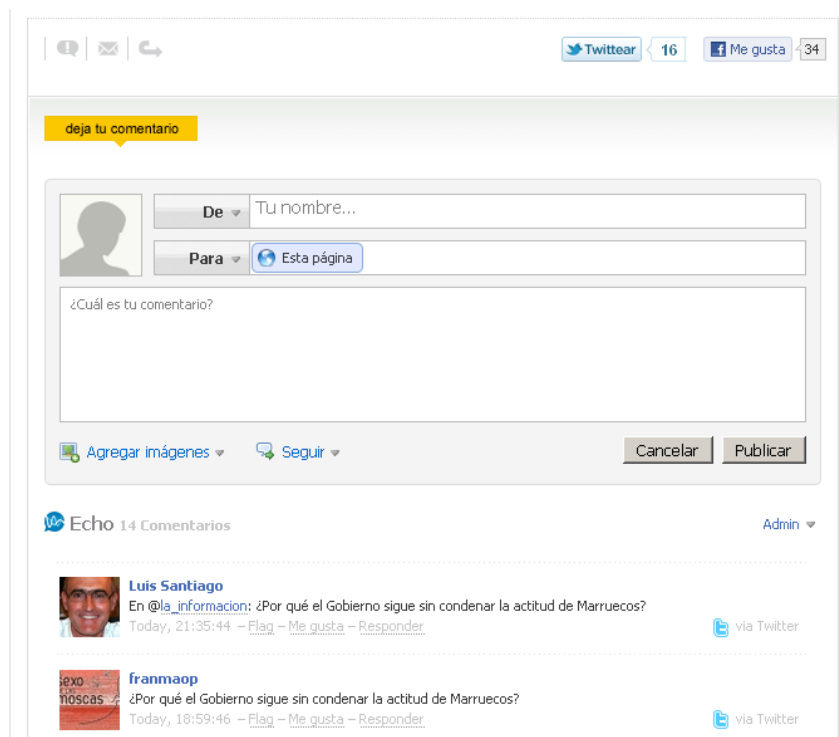


Figure 4. News comments system connected with social networks in *lainformacion.com*

And in any case, we can affirm that in practically all of the analysed media (13 of 14) the participation mechanisms are configured and placed in ways that facilitate their location by users.

3.6. Access and connection to autonomous participation spaces

Are the internal and external independent participation mechanisms offered in the media sufficiently visible and accessible? With exceptions, homepages only show, at best, such

mechanisms and hyperlinks icons, banners or texts, but never the results they generate. In which other ways can users have access to these mechanisms?

According to the results, the news sections do not show, in general, these mechanisms and neither there is, in any case, a friendly URL, i.e. a simple address enabling direct access to them without having to navigate through the website. Generally, the participative sections of the online media can neither be accessed through the social networks and other external websites.

It is the links to the participation sections, which are part of the contents menu in a large part of the analysed online media, the ones that act as gateways to the various participation mechanisms. As mentioned before, most of these mechanisms seem to take the form of independent sections or categories.



Figure 5. Interface of *sur.es*'s *Pulso* user community, which is accessible from the bottom bar, which shows the different participation mechanisms and the content generated by users.

The content generated by users through these tools is, thus, united in these participation sections, forming a sort of mash-up [22], a service of added value, but, in any case, is external and differentiated from the news content and other options offered by the media.



Figure 6. Participation sections of sur.es and lavozdegalicia.es. It is important to note that despite both media are owned by Vocento, the development of users' participation is significantly lower in the second case.

3.7. By way of conclusion: overall evaluation of user participation in the online media

The results about the overall evaluation of the level of users' participation are divided into two parts: participation in the production of news and non-news contents.

Online Media	Level of user participation in news production	Level of user participation in non-news content
<i>20 Minutos</i>	Medium	High
<i>Cadena Ser</i>	Medium	Low
<i>Canal Sur</i>	Non-existent	Low
<i>Diario de Navarra</i>	Medium	Medium
<i>El Correo</i>	High	High
<i>elmundo.es</i>	Medium	Low
<i>elpais.com</i>	Medium	High
<i>La Información</i>	Medium	Medium
<i>lavanguardia.es</i>	Medium	High
<i>La Voz de Galicia</i>	Medium	Medium
<i>RTVE</i>	Medium	Medium
<i>sur.es</i>	High	High
<i>Telecinco</i>	Medium	Medium
<i>Vilaweb.cat</i>	Medium	Medium

Table 3. Summary of results about the overall evaluation of user participation in the analysed media [23].

It is important to note that the apparent overall conclusion is that the participation mechanisms implemented by the medium are not focused on encouraging users to produce news content. This type of content continues to be the prerogative of the professional journalists working in the medium. In fact, of the sample of fourteen online media, only two -*elcorreo.com* and *sur.es*- stand out above the rest at both levels.

However, although they reached a “high” rating in terms of giving users the possibility to produce news content, the truth is that such participation is far from being real news production like the one undertaken by journalists.

In these and the rest of online media that reached a medium level of participation in relation to news production, the user acquires, to some extent, roles traditionally associated with the digital journalist in relation to news content: of interviewer, for example, when participating in a video chat interview; of commentator, when sharing personal views or evaluations in news, blogs or social networks operated by the medium; and even of publisher, when, for example, voting for certain news and getting them to appear in a ranking or when supervising news through correction tools.

However, user’s ability to contribute to the medium as news author or co-author, or as reporter that collects written, visual or audiovisual information, or as chronicler or editor that produces and presents information to other users, is restricted to non-news content, through mechanisms configured outside the medium’s current news sections.

This happens, for example, with *elcorreo.com*, which has spaces, like “i-journalist”, “blogs from correspondents”, “People from Bilbao in the world” and “Your plans”, which allow the user to exercise such participatory functions. These mechanisms mix entertainment content with current affairs, although the former type of content is predominant.

With regards to the overall evaluation of users’ participation in non-news contents, the results show that this is the dominant trend in the online media, well above the participation in news content. Thus, the initial hypothesis is confirmed.

While in terms of news production there are online media with a non-existent level of participation (*Canal Sur*) and the level of the majority is medium -in his case, mainly due to the inclusion of participation bars and comments and rating systems associated with the news-, we have not detected any medium that does not have participation mechanisms in other aspects.

Only three of the fourteen analysed media reached a low level of user participation, i.e. they only have external tools implemented on non-news content, while six media show a medium level, i.e. they have implemented tools for participation but only among users.

But undoubtedly, the most important thing is the fact that five media -*20minutos.es*, *elcorreo.com*, *elpais.com*, *lavanguardia.es* and *sur.es*- have a high level of participation in this sense.

In other words, they have built stable mechanisms, normally, as autonomous spaces within the same medium, and have united them into sections of participation which, regardless of their main purpose (like, publishing photos through users’ photo channels, which is one of the most common), also integrate different tools for the dissemination of content or the interaction between users (like sharing, sending, evaluating, or commenting on content posted by other users) as well as more sporadic participation options (such as photography competitions).

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5. Notes

[1] Term used to refer, in the context of network communication, to the world of blogs as a community or social network (see Orihuela, 2006).

[2] For this author, the social media editor is in charge of managing the content of the medium's social networks, moderating comments and monitoring users' posts. In coordination with this role, the community manager is “the editor responsible for publishing the materials sent by audiences: photos and videos, but also opinion columns, articles, etc.” While the blog administrator is responsible for (professional or personal) blogs that are part of the medium's community.

[3] This has been pointed out by directives of media companies like Sur, when questioned by researches examining their process of convergence (see Cabrera et al., 2010).

[4] Folksonomy comes from the German word *volk*, which means people, and its literal meaning is “democratic classification”. Folksonomy is a type of collaborative indexing of online content, through tags created by users, in order to facilitate the search, navigation and location of such content.

[5] The description made by García et al. (2009) of this term is explanatory in this sense.

[6] Project financed by Spain's Ministry of Science and Technology (code CS02009-13713-C05-02) and coordinated by professor M. Ángeles Cabrera, of the University of Malaga. The project's main objective is the knowledge and analysis of technologies that allow the effective production, dissemination, and reception of journalistic content within the context of digital convergence.

[7] In particular, *elpais.com*; *elmundo.es*; *20minutos.es*; *sur.es*; *lavanguardia.es*; *lavozdegalicia.es*; *elcorreodigital.com*; *diariodenavarra.es*; *cadenaser.com*; *rtve.es*; *canalsur.es*; *telecinco.es*; *vilaweb.cat*; and *lainformacion.com*. This sample of online media was selected by the research project of which this work is part, based on their relevance in multimedia convergence in Spain. Various research techniques, such as participant observation and interviews to different media professionals, were used for analysis. This is

the reason why, in order to complement the results obtained before, our study selected the same sample of online media. To achieve the objectives, we considered it was enough to examine a single website from each online medium.

[8] This author proposes a taxonomy which included: “specific and thematic discussion forums; chats for users; online interviews; letters from readers; emails to editors; surveys; most interesting news; most read news; send this news via email (email/e-form); users’ stories; and contacts” (Rost, 2006). The guidelines used by this author for the analysis (theme, expression or communication, level of transcendence, main users, and role acquired by the reader through such participation) are very relevant. Some of these guidelines were used to establish the criteria of our study.

[9] Along with conventional formulas of participation, from the listing proposed by Zamith (2008) include "user comments to the articles not immediately displayed online;" user comments to the articles immediately displayed online; vote in the articles; vote in the articles with reflection in its visibility; blog or wiki open to user participation; "or interactive multimedia and journalistic contents." However, this author just delves into the analysis of the technologies themselves.

[10] To carry out this research, the authors designed a table with a large number of variables (276), related to the presentation form of the tools and their management by the media, based on the study of Domingo et al. (2008). The variables were analysed on three media of each of the countries studied (United States, Portugal, Peru, Venezuela, Spain, Mexico and Argentina), and produced the following taxonomy of mechanisms: “News Stories audience-driven list; Reporter blogs; Comments embedded in Reporter blogs; Comments embedded in news stories; All Staff Blogs are open to comments; Social networking in the stories; Invitation to submit photos; Users can vote on news; Audience-driven forums; Space to publish citizen stories/Citizen Reporter Channel; Invitation to submit videos; Rating comments on articles; Space to publish citizen blogs; Comments embedded in the users’ blogs; Photos can be shared with others; Videos can be shared with others; and Invitation to submit audio” (see García de Torres et al., 2009).

[11] In this sense, we follow a methodology similar to that used by Garcia et al. (2009), who also independently analysed what they called “citizen reporter channel assets”, through the use of a code table with many variables.

[12] See for instance Rost (2006); García-de-Torres et al. (2008: 211); Domingo et al. (2008); Zamith (2008); and García-de-Torres et al. (2009), which have been already cited. Our study also used those other formulas obtained by the researchers in the framework of the aforementioned project, as a sort of provisional inventory after an exploratory analysis on the analysed online media.

[13] In this sense, it is possible that the same Web 2.0 tools such as blogs are used by different media with different functions (if the medium simply allows users to post comments, retrieve the contents of a blog written by one of its journalists, or communicate with the author of a blog, we would fundamentally be in the second, third and fourth case, while if it gives space to the blogs of users we would also, and mainly, be in the first case). This will determine their configuration and management.

[14] While the two previous blocks are, respectively, equivalent to the categories of “commentary and debate spaces” and “news production-related spaces” created by Domingo et al. (op. cit), some of the tools of this block belong to the category of “social networking features” described by the same authors.

[15] The objective is to identify what options appear on the information created by the media’s professional journalists (options to comment-on, rate, correct, share, or send the news), usually united in “participation bars” or “interactive menus” (in terms of Rost, op. cit.) next to the news, or intertwined in other ways on the websites without being autonomous spaces.

[16] It is important to emphasise that this criterion refers to the way in which the mechanisms are present in the medium, regardless of the actual use by the audience. It may be the case that the online medium proposes an option for participation in a news section focused on leisure (e.g. a survey on a subject that raises the curiosity of the user), or that a user uses a participation tool integrated in a news story for a different purpose than the one expected by the medium (for example, to post a comment just for fun).

[17] A new analysis card was designed to carry out further studies focused on these more autonomous sections of participation.

[18] By external tools we mean all those web services that, represented by icons, do not belong to the online medium. As explained in *elpais.com*, “these icons facilitate the personal and community management of information. These services allow the user, for example, to classify, share, evaluate, comment or keep the content found on the Internet”. Examples of these external services are: Facebook, Tuenti, Google Buzz, My Yahoo, and so on.

[19] However, this does not mean that all of the online media possess them. For example, it is very striking that an online medium so focused in participation as *lavanguardia.es* does not display links to its external channels on its homepage.

[20] Something that, curiously, does not happen in *La Voz de Galicia* which, in spite of belonging to the same media group, has development less internal participation mechanisms (most options are concentrated in the sending of pictures, of various themes, by users).

[21] There is, in addition, an illustrative fact here, which is characteristic of the evolution of *Vocento*'s online media's participation bar: the incorporation of multiple application icons has been replaced here by the direct inclusion, in recent months, of buttons of the most known options provided by external applications, like Facebook's "Like" button.

[22] They are websites composed, as collages, of portions of different contents and services from various websites, given that they are based on the so-called meta-browsers, which are tools or programs that allow users to combine data from different sources in a single website.

[23] In this analysis we considered a score of 3 as a high level of participation; 2 as a medium level; 1 as a low level; and 0 as a non-existent level. The average score obtained in the analysed cases (2.28) is closer to the medium level of user participation.

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