(Re)connecting with audiences. An overview of audience-inclusion initiatives in European French-speaking local news media

Nathalie Pignard-Cheynel

Academy of Journalism and Media, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Neuchatel, Neuchatel, Switzerland

Laura Amigo

Academy of Journalism and Media, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Neuchatel, Neuchatel, Switzerland

Abstract

This paper explores how local news organizations seek to strengthen their bond with audiences in French-speaking Europe (Belgium, France, and Switzerland). It does so by suggesting a new methodological approach focusing on the different ways in which this bond can be observed, i.e., the "initiatives" implemented by the news organizations. The study identifies 20 types of initiatives undertaken to (re)connect with audiences and presents a model of audience inclusion in news media in line with the literature on modalities of audience participation in news media. The discussion identifies changes in the positioning of local news organizations and journalists towards audiences regarding existing literature on participatory journalism but also on new practices more rooted in engagement, dialogue, and transparency towards audiences.

Keywords

Local news media, participatory journalism, engaged journalism, Europe, initiatives, method, audience inclusion

Corresponding author:

Nathalie Pignard-Cheynel, Academy of Journalism and Media, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Neuchatel, Rue A.-L. Breguet 2, Neuchatel 2000, Switzerland.
Email: nathalie.pignard-cheynel@unine.ch

Introduction

Today, local media are confronted with great challenges, including an economic crisis due to the disruption of their traditional business models (Franklin, 2006) and the growing disaffection of audiences, which can range from disinterest in to mistrust of news and journalists (Knight Foundation, 2019). At the same time, and as part of a response to these challenges, their ongoing digital transition requires them to invest in new dissemination spaces in order to align with changes in audiences' information practices (Jenkins and Nielsen, 2020). What these challenges have in common is the need to rethink the bond with audiences. In recent years, local media's growing interest in audiences (Gulyas and Baines, 2020) has been described as a general movement within the media sector, sometimes called the "audience turn" (Costera Meijer, 2020) and, more broadly, as aligning with the practices accompanying the rise of digital technology and the web 2.0, particularly participatory journalism. However, the challenge today seems to be connecting more with listening to or even empathizing with audiences rather than getting them to participate in news production or relating to them based on monitoring practices. This increasingly involves a redefinition of news media's relationship to audiences, which is even more important for local organizations considering their historical vocation of fostering social ties and building a sense of community (Hess and Waller, 2017). This paper explores that issue by suggesting a new methodological approach and focusing on the European French-speaking area, which remains little studied by scholars in comparison to European Northern countries (Guimerà et al., 2018). Recent studies on European French-speaking local media focused on the emergence of digital-only outlets (e.g., Bousquet et al., 2015), changes facing local media (e.g., Bousquet and Amiel, 2021; Standaert et al., 2020), the democratic role of the local press (e.g., Ballarini, 2012) and the development of solutions journalism (e.g., Amiel and Powers, 2019). Our work is based on a methodology that focuses on the different forms that connections with audiences can take: the various "initiatives" taken by local news organizations. We then consider the different ways in which these initiatives include audiences, in line with the literature on modalities of audience participation in news media.

Literature review

The literature on audience participation and engagement practices in the news-making process is extensive. Although audience inclusion was already present in the pre-digital world (through letters to the editor, participatory radio stations, etc.), it has been amplified by the development of the online press and the permeability of the web participatory culture. Participatory journalism, defined as the overall process of audience engagement in the production of news (Paulussen et al., 2007), developed in the 2000s with the advent of digital devices, the web 2.0 and user generated content (UGC). Several studies have conceptualized the various stages of news production in which audiences may participate (Hermida, 2011; Engelke 2019). As more news organizations seek to implement one or more means of audience participation (Singer et al., 2011), participatory journalism grows in popularity to the point that it starts to become a "participatory imperative" among

professionals. In French-speaking Europe, news media have largely developed this approach since the mid-2000s (Pignard-Cheynel and Noblet, 2010). France is particularly characterized by the creation of major digital-only outlets that have played an important role in the French media landscape and that have, from the outset, proposed an editorial model based on opening up their columns to audiences' contributions (Aubert, 2009).

Some studies on participatory journalism have examined the degrees of audience inclusion in the news-making process. The focus was on the role of audiences, the room for maneuver left to them, and the varying degrees of power they are given to impact the news-making process (Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida, 2011). For instance, research has shown that audiences may influence journalists' content selection through ideas (Domingo et al., 2008), feed productions by submitting UGC (Deuze et al., 2007) or co-create editorial material (Ahva, 2017). In her systematic literature review, Engelke (2019) identifies three stages of audience participation: formation, dissemination, and interpretation.

Scholars have also questioned whether practices like these can be seen as "participatory". Nico Carpentier (2011) analyzes participation using a political theory approach centered around the idea of power; in his seminal work, he defines participation as the ability of citizens to take part in decisions. He therefore distinguishes participation from access (citizens being present in news outlets and being allowed to provide feedback) and interaction (the creation of socio-communicative relationships between journalists and citizens). Extending Carpentier's work but adopting a sociological theory perspective, Kammer (2013) contends – and we agree – that audience participation should be understood as "those actions conducted by audiences that directly and intentionally influence the content of the news websites" (p.116). Based on this definition, Kammer identifies four ideal types of audience participation in the production of online news: information (audiences provide ideas and information), collaboration (audiences undertake journalistic tasks in the production of news), conversation (audiences exchange with other users or with journalists) and meta-communication (audiences reflect about the communication that the news constitutes).

Building on Carpentier's research, Ahva and Wiard (2018) study the democratic potential of audience participation in local media through a model comprising three steps or situations that journalism creates for participation: 1) access, i.e., having visibility; 2) dialogue, i.e., exchange of perspectives and consultation of citizens; and 3) deliberation, i.e., evaluating the impact of audience participation in terms of reflection, action and change. Taking a wider view, Peters and Witschge (2015) advocate for shifting the focus from participation through news to participation in news. They distinguish three levels of participation using interactive tools to measure the scope given to audiences in terms of presence, visibility, interaction, and participation in news production. Elsewhere, Lawrence et al. (2018) contend that engagement practices can be mapped according to how audiences are considered as "mere recipients or reactors" to news or "an active participant" in the news-making process.

At the same time, research also demonstrates that adopting a participatory approach in news media brings with it numerous organizational difficulties and resistance from journalists (Domingo et al., 2008), in particular because "participatory journalism's democratic ideal clashes with professional journalism's core values of objectivity and

autonomy" (Borger et al., 2013: 127). Hence, despite initial enthusiasm, the movement toward participatory journalism ultimately fades, and many news organizations abandon or reduce their participatory features, for example by closing their comment spaces, blogs, etc. Although participatory journalism did not deliver on its promises, news media's interest in audiences did not disappear. Since the end of the 1990s, news media have been paying closer attention to audiences, in what has been described as the "audience turn" in journalism. This is characterized by a "user-based approach" (Costera Meijer, 2020) based on the availability of extremely precise data for monitoring online consumption. This "quantitative turn" (Coddington, 2015) promotes a precise knowledge of audiences (with granularity possible even at the individual level) that is nevertheless limited to digital practices, as well as a quantitative approach to audience analysis. This approach has led to the increasing importance of roles in charge of audience-monitoring activities within European newsrooms (Pignard-Cheynel and Amigo, 2019).

Besides this (quantitative) turn toward audiences, scholars have conceptualized another movement identified in news media seeking greater proximity to audiences. Engaged journalism is considered as "interactive, participatory, or collaborative practices of journalism" that attempt to include audiences in early stages of the news-making process while aiming to foster relationships rather than track audience metrics" (Schmidt and Lawrence 2020: 519). The term "engagement" is seen less instrumental, quantitative, and platform-oriented and carries a more qualitative, personal, and even "civic" meaning, "prompting the public toward civic expression, deliberation, and action" (Lawrence et al., 2018: 1225). Likewise, Lewis et al. (2014) have developed the concept of "reciprocal journalism", understood as "a process of audiences participating with journalists and with each other in creating news and building community around news" (p. 231).

An interesting aspect of this wide range of audience-focused journalistic movements is the pivotal role played by digital technology. Both participatory journalism and the audience turn of recent years have largely been fueled by the possibilities offered by digital tools and platforms and the practices these gave rise to – notably, the more active role played by audiences, who have become potential "produsers" (Bruns, 2008). Loosen and Schmidt (2012), for example, argue that networked digital media facilitate the potential for audience inclusion in news production. On the other hand, Belair-Gagnon et al. (2019) have pointed out that audience engagement is also built outside digital channels. The authors find that offline interactions allow for "building trust and strengthening ties with their community, more so than digital modes of engagement" (p. 558) and are more likely to generate sustained reciprocity. This return to face-to-face interactions can be seen as part of a more general trend toward live, in-person events within the media sector (Larson, 2015).

This literature review is the starting point for our study which aims to offer a current macro view of audience inclusion in the local media sector, based on the actions taken by news organizations – that we call "initiatives"– instead of discourse material.

Our research questions are:

RQ1. What are the types of initiatives that local media undertake to (re)connect with audiences?

RQ2. What are the modalities of audience inclusion in these initiatives, particularly regarding the news-making process?

RQ3. Do these types of initiative and modalities of inclusion indicate changes in the positioning of local media and journalists towards audiences?

Method

This paper is part of a broader research project called LINC (local, innovation, news, community) that was conducted in 2019 and 2020 and looks at how local media understand and practice connection with audiences in three geographical areas of French-speaking Europe: France, Wallonia (Belgium) and French-speaking Switzerland. Instead of taking a comparative approach, the project aims to highlight trends that transcend national or even regional particularities. In this regard, it builds on research that has established the existence of common professional cultures, notably between Switzerland and Belgium (Bonin et al., 2017) and of common traits between different national media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). A significant part of the project consisted of developing a database of initiatives undertaken by local news media to (re)connect with audiences. Since such an empirical approach is unprecedented, we provide details below on how we collected and categorized our data.

Constituting the database

- Criteria for media selection: We defined "local news outlet" as a print, radio, television, or digital-only news organization consisting of at least one professional journalist and providing information of public interest on an area ranging from a given neighborhood to a region. No consideration was given to the type of ownership (public, private, association, etc.) or revenue models implemented (free, advertise-based, membership, etc.). Amateur or community media without professional journalists were not listed. Also, we did not consider media that exceeded our definition of "local" (such as the so-called supra-regional media in Switzerland). National media producing localized content thanks to their regional offices were not considered (for example, the Swiss audio-visual public service). However, we listed the French network of local public service radio stations (France Bleu) because each station works independently. In total, we selected 135 local news outlets or media groups: 18 for Belgium, 80 for France and 37 for Switzerland (Table 1).
- Definition of "initiative": An initiative is an action launched by a news organization inviting audiences to participate in an activity of variable duration (including permanent) in a physical and/or digital space. Initiatives can have an editorial or non-editorial (social, marketing, sales, etc.) purpose. They are publicized on news organizations' websites, broadcasts, social media accounts, etc., usually with a brief description of the initiative, which allowed us to identify them.
- Inventory period: Data collection was done by hand by the team of the LINC project between December 2018 and December 2020, through regular visits to

Table 1. Number of initiatives by local media type and geographical area.

	Belgium	France	Switzerland	Total
Digital-only	0	59	1	**60 (10.9%)**
Print	21	187	120	**328 (59.6%)**
Radio	4	14	43	**61 (11.1%)**
Television	53	28	20	**101 (18.4%)**
Total	**78 (14.2%)**	**288 (52.4%)**	**184 (33.4%)**	**550 (100%)**

Source: Authors.

outlets' websites, monitoring their communication supports, and a crowdsourced form allowing any researcher or media professional to report an initiative to be considered for the database.

The raw database is freely available at https://www.unine.ch/ajm/linc.

Categorizing the initiatives

- Creating metadata for analysis: As a first step, we gathered information on each initiative and transformed it into metadata, including the name and type of the news organization, its country and city, a short description of the initiative specifying its main goal (e.g. to invite audiences to submit material, to obtain financial support for the news organization, to foster solidarity with fellow citizens, etc.), the initiative's starting date, whether or not it was linked to an event, and any hyperlinks providing further information about the initiative.
- Categorization: As a second step, we categorized each of the 550 entries in the database in two different ways based on our two first research questions:
    - 20 types of initiative, based on the main characteristics of the initiatives. The categorization was carried out inductively. We successively grouped the initiatives according to their common features in terms of format and action taken regarding audiences (see Table 2), which were identified based on the descriptions of the initiatives provided by the news outlets;
    - Nine types of audience inclusion in news media, five of which concern the news-making process; these were based on the main role played by audiences in the initiatives. We first proceeded in the same way as with the types of initiatives. However, we also drew on research on participatory practices cited in the literature review to establish a certain number of categories of initiatives related to the news-making process. Hence, we used both an inductive and a more deductive approach to group initiatives. In particular, we built on the idea of a gradation of participation in news production (Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida, 2011; Carpentier, 2011; Kammer, 2013; Peters and Witchge, 2015; Ahva and Wiard, 2018) from the lowest to the highest level of inclusion.

Table 2. Types of initiative.

N°	Type of initiative	Modality of audience inclusion	Total	Description
1	Marketing action	Benefit	13 (2.4%)	Action (bet, contest, game, etc.) with a marketing dimension
2	Subscribers' club	Benefit	12 (2.2%)	Subscribers-only association offering members marketing or commercial benefits (discounts, exclusive offers, previews, etc.)
3	Financial campaign	Financial support	30 (5.5%)	Crowdfunding, subscription, or membership campaign or call for donations for the news outlet
4	Mutual help action	Solidarity	28 (5.1%)	Action fostering mutual aid and solidarity within audiences (e.g., platform promoting social projects or volunteer work, fundraising or donation for a charity or cause, etc.)
5	Thematic conference, debate, or discussion	Sociality	31 (5.6%)	Debate, conference, or more informal exchanges on a theme generally related to current events but not specifically on editorial choices or the news production process
6	Social gathering	Sociality	25 (4.5%)	Online or in-person (festive, cultural, sporting, social) get-together or event
7	News organization guided tour	Observation	14 (2.5%)	Guided tour of the news organization (editorial office, printing house, etc.) that gives audiences some insight into the news-making process
8	Open editorial meeting	Observation	11 (2%)	Editorial meeting open to audiences taking place at the news organization or other premises
9	Behind-the-scenes content	Observation	10 (1.8%)	Content explaining the news-making process or showing the backstage of journalistic work

Table 2. (continued)

N°	Type of initiative	Modality of audience inclusion	Total	Description
10	Journalistic training for audiences	Contribution/ Observation	9 (1.6%)	Journalistic training for audiences (individuals, organizations, etc.), with the possible aim of inviting them to contribute to news production
11	Meeting between journalists and audiences	Dialogue	31 (5.6%)	In-person or online meeting between journalists and audiences in order to discuss editorial choices or current news
12	User generated content	Contribution	137 (24.9%)	Invitation to submit audience-produced material (e.g., text, image, video, sound, drawing, etc.) intended to be published
13	Audiences' upstream contribution	Contribution	110 (20%)	Invitation to audiences to report information or submit ideas, testimonials, or questions on topics to be covered by the editorial staff
14	Poll on current issues	Contribution	20 (3.6%)	Multiple choice question(s) to gather audiences' opinion on topics related to ongoing issues
15	Journalistic production "on the road"	Contribution	14 (2.5)	Journalists working outside of the office, usually on a tour to foster conversations with audiences to cover a particular subject or major event
16	Audiences' reaction	Contribution	9 (1.6%)	Message sent by audiences (e.g., letter, comment, opinion) regarding current issues or news production
17	Readers' panel or survey	Consultation	16 (2.9%)	Reception survey or collection of opinions on the news organization and/or its editorial line and projects
18	Vote on stories	Consultation	7 (1.3%)	Invitation to audiences to express their preferences on stories to cover; the newsroom is supposed to follow the outcome

Table 2. (continued)

N°	Type of initiative	Modality of audience inclusion	Total	Description
19	Co-production of content between journalists and audiences	Co-production	14 (2.5%)	Collaboration between audiences and journalists in the production of content to be published
20	Other	Other	9 (1.6%)	Initiative not falling under any of the other categories

Source: Authors.

Clarifications about the method

If each initiative has been identified as such, those that are part of a strategy undertaken by a larger media group for news outlets are listed only once in the database, with the name of the media group indicated. In addition, each initiative counted as one entry, regardless of its duration or the resources needed to carry it out. Consequently, the most rudimentary initiatives are listed alongside the most highly developed, and the shortest-lived alongside the longest-term.

While our method has allowed us to provide a wide panorama of actions taken by local news media to connect with audiences, it has certain limitations that should be kept in mind when reading the results section. In particular, even if our inventory is intended to be as complete and systematic as possible, we cannot claim that it is exhaustive. First, it is more likely to include recent initiatives, as old ones cannot always be traced using Internet searches. Second, the database is made up of initiatives publicized by news media; more informal practices or actions rarely appear. The database should therefore be considered as a whole and should not be used to measure the degree of involvement of any one news outlet on this issue.

It should also be noted that the initiatives are to be considered as one aspect of the relationship between a news organization and its audiences. This relationship takes shape through long-term processes such as work routines and business models, and thus is related to practices that cannot necessarily be identified from the initiatives (Amigo, 2023; Standaert et al., 2023).

Finally, our methodology is complementary to the dominant modes of data collection in journalism research, namely: interviewing, which produces discursive data about actors' actions and the meanings they ascribe to them; content analysis, which make available various aspects of journalistic production; and newsroom observation, which refers to visible practices in a specific setting (Loosen and Schmidt, 2016: 565). An inventory of initiatives, on the other hand, provides access to the material forms of news media's relationship with audiences, to the actions publicized as a way to get closer to audiences, the goals pursued through them as well as the projected roles for the participants of these actions. Moreover, it allows to describe and count the number of actions

media undertake, authorizing a certain quantitative comparability between periods of time, outlets, types of initiatives, etc.

Results

In this section, we present key statistics for our database before describing in detail the results related to our research questions.

Statistical distribution of initiatives

The database includes a total of 550 initiatives launched by 135 local news outlets or media groups, for an average of 4.3 initiatives per news organization. A median of three initiatives per news organization indicates that a large number of news media took only one initiative ($n = 50$) while a small number took more than 10 initiatives ($n = 12$). As shown in the table below, print media are the most represented in the database: initiatives from these media account for almost 60% of the total, with a slightly larger percentage in Switzerland (65%), whereas in Belgium, TV stations take the lead (68%). Unsurprisingly, France is the most represented region; this is because the number of local media is much higher there than in the two other regions studied. An interesting feature of the database is the significant number of initiatives taken by digital-only outlets in France, reflecting the vitality of this type of media in the local landscape of that country.

Types of initiative

Our first research question sought to determine the concrete initiatives that local media undertake to (re)connect with audiences. A notable outcome of our study was the diversity in types of initiative collected. This led us to inductively create 20 types of initiative, presented in the table below. This categorization was intended to be as simple and factual as possible in order to provide a clear breakdown of the initiatives. The upper section of the table shows initiatives directly related to the news-making process; the lower section of the table, delimited by a thick black line, shows initiatives that are not directly related to the news-making process (e.g., financial, marketing, social or festive initiatives). Within each section, the types of initiative are listed according to their corresponding modality of audience inclusion.

Modalities of audience inclusion

To address our second research question, we coded each entry in the database again, this time focusing on the way in which audiences were included in the initiatives. We identified four modalities not related to the news-making process (25.3% of our database), presented in the upper section of Table 2 and Figure 1. Additionally, we identified five modalities related to the news-making process (72.6% of our database), presented in the lower section of Table 2 and Figure 1 and ranked according to audience's "level of inclusion" (from "lowest" to "highest"). This ranking reflects the degree of influence

audiences have on the news-making process, both concerning the decisions that underlie it (e.g., the choice to cover a topic) and the production of content.

Modalities of audience inclusion not related to the news-making process

- Benefit: 4.5% of the initiatives in our database have a marketing dimension and consider audiences as customers or targets to win over rather than as readers. Audiences are asked to become members of subscribers' clubs (type 2) or take part in marketing actions such as bets, contests, or games (type 1) that grant them commercial or marketing benefits such as discounts, access to special offers, prizes, etc.
- Financial support: 5.5% of initiatives involve audiences providing financial support to the news organization through specific subscription or fundraising campaigns (type 3). In these cases, audiences are given the power to make certain actions possible through their funding. For instance, in 2019, the French newspaper *La Marseillaise* organized a crowdfunding campaign to redesign its website.
- Solidarity: 5.3% of the initiatives invite audiences to take part in actions demonstrating solidarity with their fellow citizens, for example, fundraising and donations after disasters (bad weather, terrorist attacks, etc.) or mutual help groups for neighbors or to promote a local business in distress, grouped under "mutual help action" (type 4). This modality of audience inclusion grew in 2020 with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Sociality: More than 10% of initiatives involve audiences participating in an action unrelated to the news-making process, which involves an opportunity to socialize with other members of the audience and/or with journalists. These events are varied and range from thematic conferences, debates, or discussions (type 5) on non-
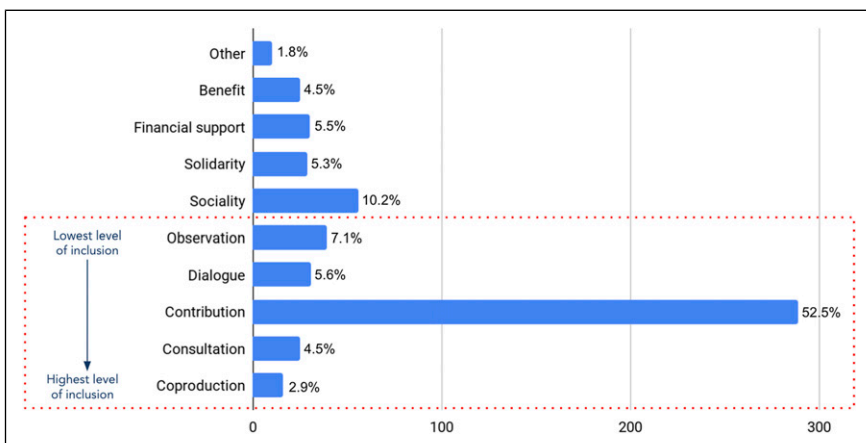

Figure 1. Modalities of audience inclusion. *The red dotted frame indicates the modalities related to the news-making process. Source: Authors.

editorial matters (which distinguishes them from type 11) to social gatherings (type 6), such as an invitation to brew beer with journalists of the French newspaper *L'Union.*

Modalities of audience inclusion related to the news-making process

Observation. The "observation" category represents 7.1% of the overall database and 9.7% of the initiatives related to the news-making process. It corresponds to the lowest degree of audience inclusion, with audiences playing a passive role. We define it as giving audiences the opportunity to observe and/or gain insight into one or more aspects of the news production without giving them the power to change how things are done. This includes two main types of initiatives:

- In-person activities such as open editorial meetings (type 8) or guided tours of a news organization (type 7). This type of activity opens the doors of news media and gives audiences access to moments that they usually don't see.
- Behind-the-scenes content (type 9), that is, content created by editorial staff to explain or justify their editorial choices and journalistic approaches. For example, a section of *Courrier de l'Ouest*'s website lets audiences follow along with the making of reports. These are usually one-off operations, often linked to events such as the launch of a new format, changes in editorial policy or even the news organization's anniversary.

Although this category represents an effort to open the black box of news media, audiences remain in an exclusively passive position, whether as readers of content prepared and published by news media, visitors of news organizations' premises, or attendants of editorial meetings; the initiatives involve neither direct interaction with journalists nor collecting audience members' opinions. Finally, with regard to the literature discussed above, this modality of audience inclusion would not be considered participatory because audiences do not have the power to influence the news production.

Dialogue. The "dialogue" category represents 5.6% of the database and 7.7% of the initiatives related to the news-making process. It consists of initiatives in which audiences are invited to engage in conversation with journalists specifically about editorial content or choices. This usually takes place during in-person meetings or events, and indeed, the type of initiative that comes under this modality is "meeting between journalists and audiences" (type 11). Our database shows that this modality of audience inclusion increased in 2019 and 2020 before dropping off sharply owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, in 2019 many "readers' cafes" were organized by Swiss and French newspapers to foster dialogue between journalists and members of the audience, either on specific topics or current news. Overall, audiences' influence on the news-making process remains limited but nevertheless more present than in the "observation" modality since the dialogue involves an exchange of audience views with journalists or editorial staff on topics related to news production. It is noteworthy that dialogue-based initiatives are to be

distinguished from thematic conferences, debates, or discussions (type 5), which instead focus on a given theme (e.g., chats with experts, conferences on a current issue) but are not specifically intended to fuel news-production. Therefore, there were not considered as regarding the news-making process.

Contribution. This is the largest category in our database, representing more than half (52.5%) of all initiatives and 71.9% of those related to the news-making process. It includes all forms of audience contributions to a news organization's production of content that do not fall under the co-production category. This category has the finest granularity as it includes a wide range of types of contribution, from the simple "raw" testimony to the edited column. These initiatives can be considered as a legacy of participatory journalism in that they rely on audiences' contribution to the news-making process.

Our categorization is thus consistent with literature on participatory journalism that has very early distinguished user generated content (type 12) (e.g. photos, videos, texts) intended to be published, from audiences' "upstream" contributions (type 13) (such as testimonies, questions, ideas) which aim at fueling journalists' work, polls on current issues (type 14) and from audiences' reactions (type 16) on content published by a news organization (e.g. an invitation to share an opinion on a story, or to send letters to the editor). It should be noted that regular calls to submit content for the same editorial section were listed only once in order to avoid inflating the data in this category.

News media can also collect audiences' opinions or input in a more informal way. This is the case for some of the type 15 initiatives ("journalistic productions on the road"), which consists of journalists traveling to areas that are usually not well covered by media to meet with audiences and gather their views or suggestions on certain matters. An interesting finding that emerged from a longitudinal analysis of this category is the increase in calls for contributions concerning specific editorial projects (such as a survey on the housing conditions in a French town) or events with significant impact for audiences (political elections, natural disasters, etc.) and mainly relying on audiences as a source of information, testimony, or expertise. For example, in 2018, reporters from a local TV channel in Belgium traveled around their region to film audience members explaining what they would do if they were elected mayor. This type of initiative was hampered by the restrictive measures implemented in the geographic areas considered due to the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, however, calls for contributions were particularly used during the outbreak of the pandemic. From March 1 to July 31 2020, 110 initiatives related to the Covid-19 situation were launched, 70 of which were calls for contributions; these mostly invited audiences to send in testimonies, questions, drawings or messages to other people (e.g. caregivers, elderly people).

Finally, the initiatives in this category allow audiences to have a moderate (neither weak nor strong) impact on the news-making process, as the contributions are certainly intended for publication, but their integration remains under the sole control of journalists.

Consultation. The "consultation" category represents 4.5% of the database and 6.2% of the initiatives related to the news-making process. It consists of initiatives in which audiences are asked to express their preferences on various matters (subjects to be covered, angles of

stories, formats, etc.); in theory, these preferences are supposed to have an impact (variable by case) on the news-making process. This modality of inclusion therefore implies a certain release of editorial control since the audience's opinions are technically binding for journalists. Consultation initiatives involve an "organized" form of feedback (more informal consultation, e.g., arising from discussions with journalists, have been coded as "dialogue"). Two initiative types correspond to this modality:

- Readers' panels (type 17), which are held to collect audiences' opinions on different aspects of the outlet's news production (editorial line, newspaper layout, editorial offers, etc.). Panels are most often managed by the news organization's marketing and sales departments, so their impact on the news-making process is indirect and only loosely involves journalists.
- Vote on stories (type 18): this refers to voting systems set up by news outlets, for example on the choice of subjects to be covered by editorial staff. In France, Nice Matin was one of the first newspapers to systematically submit to audiences a list of topics to cover in their solutions journalism investigations and follow the audience's choice even if it went against the newsroom's wishes.

Consultation initiatives often serve as a compass, helping newsrooms to provide a product that is well adapted to the audiences' expectations and needs.

Co-production. "Co-production" is the least represented modality of audience inclusion, making up only 2.9% of the database and 4% of the initiatives related to the news-making process. In this category, audiences are fully associated with journalists in activities leading to content production (i.e., they are considered a full-fledged actor in the news production and not just a source or a witness). These initiatives (type 19) are sometimes conducted with audiences from under-covered areas (suburbs, rural areas, deprived neighborhoods, etc.) or with young audiences (in line with media literacy philosophy). Audiences have maximal power in the news-making process, as they are directly involved in the production of information up until the final validation and publication of the story.

The low representation of this modality of audience inclusion reflects the difficulties involved with or aversion to implementing this type of initiative within news organizations, which has been documented in the literature (Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008). A closer inspection of this category shows that it is more common among digital-only news media, which place audience engagement at the heart of their editorial model.

Discussion

The method proposed in this paper provides a macro view of initiatives launched over a period of 2 years by local news media in French-speaking Europe to create, maintain or strengthen their connection with audiences. Our inventory of these initiatives indicates a focus on relatively active approaches to engaging audiences, stemming at times from the need or injunction to respond to an "audience demand" identified with varying degrees of

formality, as well as from the wider "audience turn" in journalism (Costera Meijer, 2020). This awareness on the part of local media is consistent with the discourse of practitioners who highlight the issue of connecting with audiences as an important practice or even a strategic priority nowadays, even if the means associated with it vary considerably from one news organization to another (Amigo, 2023; Standaert et al., 2023).

It is particularly interesting to note how this paper's findings fit with the literature on participation in news media, grouped for the past 15 years under the term "participatory journalism" (Singer et al., 2011; Domingo et al., 2008) and more recently under "engaged journalism" (Green-Barber, 2018). Our inventory of initiatives allowed us to develop a more extensive model of audience inclusion in news production, by considering categories that can be found in other studies, as well as by elaborating new modalities of audience inclusion. In particular, our model allowed to characterize an inclusion that goes beyond the audiences' contribution of information to news production to consider modalities more oriented to audiences' capacity to express an opinion (consultation), exchange with journalists (dialogue) or observe – without direct impact – the news-making process (observation). Furthermore, our results show that audience participation is graduated, ranging from the most minimalist forms (having little or no influence on news media's editorial decisions and contents), to the most maximalist forms (involving 'audience' decision-making power).

On the other hand, a striking finding of this paper is that a form of participatory journalism persists in the majority of the initiatives, whether through one-time or thematic calls for contributions, permanent features to send in content, or projects, spaces and editorial sections for publishing UGC. This differs from previous studies discussed in the literature review, which claim that this participatory journalism has been relegated to the margins of editorial spaces and journalists' practices, or become a source of tension and resistance on the part of both journalists and audiences. Our study, on the contrary, not only demonstrates that participatory journalism plays a major role in how local media understand their connection to audiences, but also contradicts the more general discourse regarding the weakening of participatory journalism in news media (e.g., Karlsson et al., 2015). Participatory journalism practices were strongly mobilized during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic. In a context marked by social isolation due to lockdowns, sharp demand for information, and added stress on news media's business models (Newman et al., 2021), many news organizations turned to the classic technique of calls for contributions in order to maintain a connection with audiences – although it should be noted that the emphasis of these calls was on testimonies, uplifting actions to be relayed, or contributions promoting solidarity. This is likely due in part to the fact that this type of initiative requires little upfront investment in terms of resources, while giving journalists access to a continuous flow of content to feed or enrich their productions (whether or not they choose to use it). This is especially the case for permanent features that allow audiences to submit content directly to the editorial team.

However, our results suggest that there is more to the story than just the continuity of participatory journalism over the years. First, there seems to be an evolution toward "targeted" participatory journalism, in which audience contributions are used specifically within more developed editorial projects as important material for journalistic productions

(i.e., they are not simply treated as a flow of content available to journalists). Although our method did not allow us to examine in detail how such initiatives were carried out, their publicized descriptions make clear that the distinction between "amateurs" and journalists remains central and that the collaboration takes place under the control and guidance of the latter. This is one of the characteristics of participatory journalism (Hermida, 2011) that distinguishes it from citizen journalism, in which audiences create information content entirely themselves (Nip, 2006: 217).

The second type of result we found in our study falls into what has been described in the academic literature as a renewal of journalistic practices toward audiences. Confronted with audiences' disaffection and mistrust as well as with a growing demand for explanations of their choices and methods, journalists have embraced a dynamic of proximity and greater transparency towards audiences (Karlsson, 2020). Although our study's perspective is limited to initiatives dating mainly from 2018 to 2020, this trend can be observed in our database particularly in 2019 in the various "observation" and "dialogue" initiatives, which allow audiences to (literally) enter the hitherto closed space of editorial offices. During the same period, we note an increase in dialogue-based initiatives, with the recurrence of formats such as meetings with journalists, particularly via a readers' café. These initiatives are not participatory in the sense of participatory journalism or the ideal of horizontality in content production; rather, they take a pedagogical and dialogical approach to the news-making process and journalistic practice. In this sense, they are closer to engaged journalism, which aims at "building and preserving trusting relationships between journalists and the public" (Green-Barber, 2018). Our results can also be seen as a manifestation of Lewis et al. (2014)'s idea of "reciprocal journalism", which would foster greater trust in news media in the long term.

The dialogue and observation initiatives also highlight another evolution in the relationship between local media and audiences – namely, that many of these initiatives took place in person, at least until the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions precluded this type of encounter. This embrace of direct interactions, even if they involve a small number of individuals, indicates a certain will to move away from digital platforms and tools (and the related constraints) as a means to connect with audiences. Although this approach is not entirely new (see e.g., the public journalism movement of the 1980s), the trend may have been facilitated by a kind of export of the participatory and more horizontal culture of the web to offline journalistic spaces, hence encouraging audiences to collectively participate in the news-making process in a more informal way than through UGC. It also points to newsrooms' need for a stronger physical anchoring: many local news organizations have become distanced from the area they cover (Franklin, 2006) even though proximity to citizens is an essential feature of these organizations (Hess and Waller, 2017). Moreover, this trend aligns with Belair-Gagnon, Nelson and Lewis's (2019) assertion that journalists prefer offline modes of engagement for building trust and strengthening connections with audiences. Also, in line with these authors' research, our results show that these connections are not necessarily related to news production, as illustrated by the initiatives including audiences in events and activities to foster social ties and mutual help. The database also revealed that some news outlets are developing new revenue models as an alternative or complement to the traditional advertisement/sales-based model, in which

audiences play a central role. These new models allow news media to craft editorial projects, improve their working tools, or even keep themselves afloat.

To sum up, this study sheds light on an emerging expression of engaged journalism at the local level in French-speaking Europe. Despite some limitations, our approach allows to characterize audience inclusion in the news-making process outside the only perspective of "contribution" of content by audiences by considering various other modalities (i.e., observation, dialogue, consultation and coproduction). It points to the unfolding of a journalistic practice with a strong and continuous focus on audiences and their expectations and contributions that also seeks to foster a more dialogical, trust-based and horizontal relationship with those audiences. In particular, it highlights a plurality of ways in which audiences are included in the activities of local media, showing that audiences are not only used to feed or even (co-)create news productions, but also to evaluate and orient them, and that they are given varying degrees of decision-making power depending on the initiative and its main purpose.

Conclusion

Our paper has aimed to provide an overview of the ways in which French-speaking European local media build connections with their audiences by creating an inventory of initiatives carried out for this purpose. Our intent was to extend the research carried out over the last 20 years on the integration of audiences into the news-making process, by determining the nature and degree of audiences' inclusion. Of course, our method has allowed us to show only part of the picture; it must be completed by other approaches in order to examine how these initiatives are integrated into the strategic development of the news organizations – or, conversely, if they result in uncoordinated or unsustainable actions.

We believe that the great number of news media considered in our study allowed for an internal validity of our model. We also think that it could be used to characterize news media's relationships with audiences, whether in a synchronic approach (to describe a given situation), diachronic (to highlight developments) or comparative (to underline specificities of given media contexts).

Further research such as this would make it possible to distinguish actions that contribute to a fundamental renewal of local news media from more opportunistic approaches. Interviewing the stakeholders at the origin of these initiatives would also allow us to compare our external analysis (i.e., the categorization and findings presented in this article) with the discourses and views of the professionals involved. This would present an opportunity to go beyond the strict framework of the editorial process and examine more closely initiatives unrelated to the news-making process, which we have touched on in this paper. Indeed, we can suppose that it is also in these economic, marketing and social realms that the renewal of the media's positioning towards audiences is played out.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

ORCID iD

Nathalie Pignard-Cheynel ⬤ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2106-7648

References

Ahva L (2017) How is participation practiced by "in-betweeners" of journalism? *Journalism Practice* 11(2/3): 142–159.

Elliott PW and Wiard V (2018) Participation in local journalism: assessing two approaches through access, dialogue and deliberation. *Sur le journalisme, About journalism, Sobre jornalismo* 7(2): 64–79.

Amiel P and Powers M (2019) A Trojan horse for marketing? Solutions journalism in the French regional press. *European Journal of Communication* 34(3): 233–247.

Amigo L (2023) "Apart but together". Proximity to audiences in times of pandemic: the case of the Italian daily *L'Eco di bergamo*. *Journalism Studies*: 1–22. DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2023. 2193657.

Aubert A (2009) Le paradoxe du journalisme participatif: motivations, compétences et engagements des rédacteurs des nouveaux médias (enquête). *Terrains & travaux* 15: 171–190.

Ballarini L (2012) Pourquoi lire la presse régionale aujourd'hui. *Sciences de la Société* 85: 17–31.

Belair-Gagnon V, Nelson JL and Lewis SC (2019) Audience engagement, reciprocity, and the pursuit of community connectedness in public media journalism. *Journalism Practice* 13(5): 558–575.

Bonin G, Dingerkus F, Dubied A, et al. (2017) Quelle Différence?" Language, culture and nationality as influences on francophone journalists' identity. *Journalism Studies* 18(5): 536–554.

Borger M, van Hoof A, Costera Meijer I, et al. (2013) Constructing participatory journalism as a scholarly object: a genealogical analysis. *Digital Journalism* 1(1): 117–134.

Bousquet F and Amiel P (2021) *La Presse Quotidienne Régionale*. Paris: La Découverte.

Bousquet F, Marty E and Smyrnaios N (2015) Les nouveaux acteurs en ligne de l'information locale vers une relation aux publics renouvelée. *Sur le journalisme, About journalism, Sobre jornalismo* 4(2): 48–61.

Bruns A (2008) *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Carpentier N (2011) The concept of participation. If they have access and interact, do they really participate? *Communication Management Quarterly* 21: 13–36.

Coddington M (2015) Clarifying journalism's quantitative turn. *Digital Journalism* 3(3): 331–348.

Costera Meijer I (2020) Understanding the audience turn in journalism: from quality discourse to innovation discourse as anchoring practices 1995–2020. *Journalism Studies* 21(16): 2326–2342.

Deuze M, Bruns A and Neuberger C (2007) Preparing for an age of participatory news. *Journalism Practice* 1(3): 322–338.

Domingo D, Quandt T, Heinonen A, et al. (2008) Participatory journalism practices in the media and beyond. *Journalism Practice* 2(3): 326–342.

Engelke KM (2019) Online participatory journalism: a systematic literature review. *Media and Communication* 7(4): 31–44.

Franklin B (2006) *Local Journalism and Local Media: Making the Local News*. London, UK: Routledge.

Green-Barber L (2018) Towards a useful typology of engaged journalism. Available at: https://medium.com/the-impact-architects/towards-a-useful-typology-of-engaged-journalism-790c96c4577e.

Guimerà JA, Domingo D and Williams A (2018) Journalisme local en Europe. Introduction. *Sur le journalisme, About journalism, Sobre jornalismo* 7(2): 20–27.

Gulyas A and Baines D (2020) Introduction: demarcating the field of local media and journalism. *The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism*. New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 1–23.

Hallin D and Mancini P (2004) *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. London, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Hess K and Waller L (2017) *Local Journalism in a Digital World*. London, UK: Palgrave.

Hermida A (2011) Mechanisms of participation. In: Singer JB, Hermida A, et al. (eds), *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers*. Malden, MA: WileyBlackwell, pp. 13–33.

Hermida A and Thurman N (2008) A clash of cultures. *Journalism Practice* 2(3): 343–356.

Jenkins J and Nielsen R (2020) Preservation and evolution: local newspapers as ambidextrous organizations. *Journalism* 21(4): 472–488.

Kammer A (2013) Audience participation in the production of online news: towards a typology. *Nordicom Review* 34: 113–126.

Karlsson M (2020) Dispersing the opacity of transparency in journalism on the appeal of different forms of transparency to the general public. *Journalism Studies* 21(13): 1795–1814.

Karlsson M, Bergström A, Clerwall C, et al. (2015) Participatory journalism – the (r)evolution that wasn't. Content and user behavior in Sweden 2007-2013. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20(3): 295–311.

Knight Foundation and Gallup (2019) *State of Public Trust in Local News*. Miami, FL: Knight Foundation and Gallup. Available at: https://knightfoundation.org/reports/state-of-public-trust-in-local-news.

Larson C (2015) Live publishing: the onstage redeployment of journalistic authority. *Media, Culture & Society* 37(3): 440–459.

Lawrence RG, Radcliffe D and Schmidt TR (2018) Practicing engagement. *Journalism Practice* 12(10): 1220–1240.

Lewis S, Holton A and Coddington M (2014) Reciprocal journalism: a concept of mutual exchange between journalists and audiences. *Journalism Practice* 8: 229–241.

Loosen W and Schmidt JH (2012) Re-)Discovering the audience: the relationship between journalism and audience in networked digital media. *Information, Communication & Society* 15(6): 867–887.

Loosen W and Schmidt JH (2016) Multi-method approaches. In: Witschge T, Anderson CW, Domingo D, et al. (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Digital Journalism*. London, UK: Sage, pp. 562–575.

Newman N, Fletcher R, Schulz A, et al. (2021) *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*. Oxford, UK: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Nip J (2006) Exploring the second phase of public journalism. *Journalism Studies* 7(2): 212–236.

Paulussen S, Heinzonen A, Domingo D et al. (2007) Doing it together: citizen participation in the professional news making process. *Observatorio (OBS) Journal* 1(3): 131–154.

Peters C and Witschge T (2015) From grand narratives of democracy to small expectations of participation. *Journalism Practice* 9(1): 19–34.

Pignard-Cheynel N and Amigo L (2019) Le chargé des réseaux socio-numériques au sein des médias: entre logiques gatekeeping, marketing et participative. *Réseaux* 213: 139–172.

Pignard-Cheynel N and Noblet A (2010) L'encadrement des contributions « amateurs » au sein des sites d'information : entre impératifs participatifs. In: Millerand F, Proulx S and Rueff J (eds), *Web social. Mutation de la Communication*. Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, pp. 265–282.

Schmidt T and Lawrence R (2020) Engaged journalism and news work: a sociotechnical analysis of organizational dynamics and professional challenges. *Journalism Practice* 14(5): 518–536.

Singer J, Domingo D, Heinonen A, et al. (2011) *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Standaert O, Pignard-Cheynel N and Amigo L (2023) European French-Speaking Local Media's Relationship With Audiences. A Strategic Challenge Between Diluted and Integrated Organizational Modalities, *Digital Journalism* (forthcoming).

Standaert O, Van Dievoet L, Vanoost M, et al. (2020) La proximité comme spécialisation. Médias locaux et transition numérique en Belgique francophone. Assogba H, *Journalismes Spécialisés à l'ère Numérique*. Québec: Presses Universitaires de Laval, pp. 205–220.

Author biographies

Nathalie Pignard-Cheynel is Full Professor in Digital Journalism and Communication at the Academy of Journalism and Media, University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland). Her work focuses on the evolution of journalism in the digital age, particularly regarding professional practices, new formats, and links to audiences.

Laura Amigo holds a PhD in Journalism and Communication from the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland), where she is a research fellow in journalism (Academy of Journalism and Media). She also teaches communications at the InfoCom Department of the University of Lille (France).