

On the margins of the public media space.

The space for comments on online press articles.

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Abstract

The margins of the media public sphere.

Online discussions in online newspapers

Do online discussions in online newspapers promote the emergence of a sense of civic participation?

What do the Internet readers think about this practical application of the deliberative model? From the point of view of the silent majority (those which rarely publish comments) three critical stands out.

The first one is due to the over-representation of motivated contributors to defend tendentious arguments. The second one concerns the difficult to obtain constructive conclusions. The last critical talk about the negative consequences of the anonymity of contributors. Lack of accountability allows the lack of depth or aggressive interactions.

Criticisms against these devices reveal two points that needed to be resolved if online newspapers want to develop the emergence of a sense of civic participation online. These participatory devices are evaluated in terms of quality of their content, but also in terms of degree of belonging to a "community". Many challenges facing editors who wish to accompany a real sense of citizen participation.

Keywords

Online press, interactivity, interactive device, sociology of media

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For a very long time, the media have granted a space of expression to their readers, listeners and even viewers (Hubé and Olivesi, introduction). In such a way that readers' comments, questions and opinions have long been part of the media space in the sense that these comments contribute to the organization, confrontation and animation of debates between citizens on current affairs or social issues (Quéré, 1995, p. 12).

However, the Internet has made it possible to increase the number of these places for citizen expression while diversifying the participation mechanisms.

These include spaces for commenting on online press articles. These spaces have the particularity of being directly integrated into media sites - compared to news comments posted among friends on digital social networks - and extending the articles and thus the analyses of journalists (or bloggers) published on the newspaper's site. Their particularity is therefore to both deploy new citizen participation mechanisms and encourage direct interaction between journalists and readers. If only by encouraging the latter to react to the publications of the former.

In this context, do the spaces for commenting on press articles contribute, as the introduction to this issue asks, to a "new spirit of participatory democracy"?

Theoretical framework and problems

To date, what do we know about these comment spaces? The literature on this question shows that these devices are places of expression that are of interest to a minority of readers who wish to express their opinions, even aggressively. Even if it means doing so with the indifference of the journalists and editorial offices that host such spaces.

Taking into account the published opinions and the motivations of the main participants, how are these comment spaces perceived by readers? Despite the international literature on the content of commentaries and the motivations of commentators, no analysis has been made of how the majority of Internet users perceive these comment spaces.

After indicating the research questions, we will explain some theoretical underpinnings and outline the methodology of the empirical survey. We will then present and explain the results before drawing some conclusions about this part of the public media space made up of these comment spaces.

Research questions and theoretical framework

The objective of this work is to understand the impact of this particular device on the behaviours of the interactors. Thus, how do these devices promote the participation of one part of the population rather than another? How do design, layout, and the number of characters allowed weigh on published comments (Blondiaux, Fourniau, 2011). The device is understood here as "everything that has, in one way or another, the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control and ensure the gestures, conduct, opinions and speech of living beings" (Agamben, 2007).

The study of the impact of the device will focus on those who participate as well as those who remain at the door of this space. In a word: rather than focusing on those who participate, the focus here will be on those who do not participate actively. To all those who read these comments but do not comment on them themselves, to all those who comment once and do not come back, or to those who never or almost never comment. In short, to that part of the citizenry that represents the vast majority of readers and about half of the contributors to these comment spaces.

These questions on the devices as an angle of analysis of participatory processes in the contemporary media space do not imply focusing only on the form of debates, the modalities of speaking, the journalistic management of comments. They do not imply that we should not spare understanding the motivations of the participants. On the contrary. It is a question of understanding the motivations for use or non-use of the Internet users/readers. More precisely here, it is a question of understanding the elements judged -consciously- to be rewarding or not in the use of these devices by citizens. From this perspective - which is in line with the scientific objectives formulated by the so-called uses and rewards movement - this survey focuses on the reasons, motivations and conscious interpretations of the actors for participating or remaining outside.

This way of questioning the margins of the public media space is interesting insofar as several motivations can be envisaged. Indeed, among the positive (rewards) or negative (fears) motivations noted in the scientific literature to explain the visit of a site by Internet users, Korgaonkar and Wolin note: the motivation of social escape, the desire for more information, control through interactivity, socialization, economic comparison of products, concerns related to the security of transactions, the confidentiality of private information (1999). In these comment spaces, all motivations are of course not conceivable. Nevertheless, hypothetically, the motivations for non-use can be diverse. One of the interests of this research is to note which explanations are the most important here.

In a second stage of this research, it will be a matter of illuminating these results with more general explanations. This research mainly explores factors related to material and organizational arrangements: how do they make positive or critical interactions acceptable. It is not a question of considering that Internet users abstract from existing social logics, that the willingness to take an interest in and give an opinion on political or social issues does not also depend on social dispositions (Michon, 2003) or on gender-differentiated educational issues (Mossuz-Laveau, 1993). Simply, this work takes the side of putting at the centre of its analysis the question of interactive devices and the capacity of social actors to adjust to these media devices as well as to different situations of social life.

This is all the more so since the actions and motivations questioned here are largely conscious since they are practices - posting a sentence, reading answers - that require concentration, an intentional cognitive effort (Mitchelstein, 2011). This characteristic - that they are verbalized and therefore largely

conscious actions - is important when it comes to understanding the behaviour of silent readers or transient commentators.

Investigation Protocol

In order to study the logic of action and the motivations of Internet users who participate little or not at all in these systems, a survey was carried out among 115 Internet users. The panel of respondents was made up of students in their first or third year of information and communication studies. This choice does not presuppose that this age group is particularly active or inactive online, nor that these students are representative of the entire student population. As with other studies based on such a panel, "this is therefore not a statistically representative sample of the student population studying in France, but a singular group of men and women [qualitatively] reflecting a perception rooted in contemporary social reality" (Dacheux and Prado-Sanchez, 2015, p. 208). With this clarification, however, that the results revealed by these in-depth responses corroborate and deepen the findings of statistical surveys - notably the analyses carried out on the content of several dozen American press sites - carried out elsewhere. In such a way that, as with the letters from readers studied by Aurélie Aubert, although this panel is not representative in socio-cultural or gender distribution terms, "the concerns of these groups will nevertheless overlap with more general issues that concern the entire population" (Aubert, 2009, p. 72).

The questionnaire, submitted in writing, consists of twelve questions submitted after a visual presentation of an online commentary device (an article from an online newspaper accompanied by comments from Internet users/readers). This is to ensure that each respondent knows what type of media device the questions asked refer to.

The first questions question their practices: do you comment on online news? If so, on which sites (press, social networks, portals, etc.)? Do you comment specifically on major media sites (never, rarely, 2/3 times a month, regularly)? These questions aim to gradually introduce the subject of the survey and determine the profile of respondents: non-readers, readers/non-participants, readers/weak participants, readers/commentators.

The second part of the survey then aims to identify the motivations and expectations, in other words, what drives the action and choices (Vilatte, J.C., 2007, p. 9) of these different types of Internet users. To this end, the second and most important part of the questionnaire administered is based on open-ended questions. The first objective is to understand the reasons for their behaviours and not to make hasty judgements, nor to reduce these behaviours to a few key variables (Kaufmann, 1996, p. 48-50). The results obtained have also shown a second advantage of this procedure: by not forcing each respondent to give an answer that does not entirely correspond to him or her, these questionnaires have revealed explanations and motivations that had not been anticipated (Vilatte, J.C., 2007, p.17).

In total, 102 of the 115 questionnaires collected identified categories of "weak respondents or non-commentators" and were able to shed light on the motivations of the silent majority of Internet users.

Results, explanations and discussions

The principles of these participatory media mechanisms

On a "technical" level, online commenting systems offer all the conditions favourable to citizen exchange. Speaking can take place at any time, from anywhere, from any identity (real or fictitious). Moreover, it is undeniable that these spaces for commentary are seen - by participants - as spaces for expression (Mitchelstein, 2011).

How are these comments perceived by their readers? As such, they may receive positive feedback. This is, moreover, the case, among the interviewees, of all those who - in line with the participatory democracy project moreover - consider that "these comment spaces remain an improvement because it is important that citizens react to the various pieces of information, even if these actors remain hidden" (Margot). In the same way, several people see in the publication of these opinions a practical application of the democracy of ideas, based on the principle that the confrontation of different opinions makes it possible to nourish reflection on a subject, starting with their own ("I read the comments to get an idea of what people think about the subject of the article, and internally I wonder whether I agree with them or not and why", Anouk; "sometimes I am satisfied with the information developed because it is an additional source of information", Amélie).

From this point of view, these spaces of expression constitute an undeniable opening. Generally speaking, online discussions allow exchanges between people from different social backgrounds, from wider geographical horizons than offline (Stromer-Galley, 2003). In the same vein, it has been found that ideological self-connectedness is less frequent online than in everyday interactions because of the multiplicity of websites on which Internet users navigate and the possibility of interacting with people with ideas and life experiences that are different from their own (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010 cited by Wojcik, 2011).

Minimal investment justified by comments that were mostly considered aggressive

This investment¹ - Comments mostly considered aggressive.

However, it must be said that this interpretation is extremely minority among the responses collected. The most frequently cited reaction (36 out of 102 responses considered here) is the following: it consists in deploring the aggressiveness of the debaters in these participatory spaces. This perception on the part of the silent readers or weak commentators questioned here is so strong that it is essential to examine the reasons given:

"Some people are more there to disrespect others. This is because it is easier to insult people behind the computer screen. And it's often a debate where everyone repeats themselves, so it doesn't lead to much. I think that disrespect on the internet is a real problem that is only increasing" (Delphine).

"Online comments often allow people to express their hatred. This kind of debate doesn't really matter to me, I prefer to just follow the news" (Gaétan).

"A lot of people can easily become aggressive if our opinions differ from theirs" (Roxane). (Roxane). "I feel that behind their screens, people have an easy time criticizing" (Marine).

"I don't necessarily want to take part in sometimes virulent debates" (Sylvia).

"The comments are usually conflicting. When you read them, you can see the animosity. However, the purpose of a comment is to give your opinion, not to be judged on what you say" (Léa).

These reactions lead to three types of readings.

The first, already classic in the sociology of information technology and communication, notes a correspondence between anonymous behaviour (the one without a name) and inconsistent behaviour. This is, for example, what Axel Lefebvre noted in the early 2000s about forums: "the participants feel safe from any relationship other than a written one, this feeling of security easily transforms into a feeling of impunity [...]. What is more, it is also accountability, i.e., the very link between a fact and its author, that is often called into question" (2002). Lack of accountability facilitates lack of depth and even aggression.

What must be understood more precisely is that anonymity does not have the same impact depending on the media context. In the physical public space as studied by Erving Goffman, anonymity is possible. Everyone can access the public space without having to give their name. But this status does not necessarily imply the rise of a feeling and behaviour of disempowerment. On the contrary, it does. Erving Goffman shows how the fact of being "under the gaze of others", of being "observed by others", even while remaining anonymous (in a café, in the street), modulates our behaviour. Interaction with other anonymous people is made possible by the use of concepts such as "tact" and "mastery of one's impressions" (Goffman, 1973), all of which are language and body skills expected of people who "engage in an anonymous space requiring acceptance of the indeterminacy of others" (Cardon D. Heurtin J.-P., Lemieux C., 1995, p. 6).

Whereas in the space of these anonymous online comments, the behaviour of others is not subject to the same scrutiny and judgment. Finally, it is not anonymity per se that explains these behaviours, but the contexts in which these anonymous behaviours occur. In such a way that the difference between the two "statuses" - anonymous in the presence versus anonymous at a distance - is clear.

In a second reading, we must question the acceptable forms of criticism, forms that are not respected here from the point of view of non-participating Internet users. As places for exchanging opinions and judging current events, these spaces for commentary are similar to the regime of opinion described by Dominique Cardon, Jean-Philippe Heurtin and Cyril Lemieux. Based on the praxeological analysis of the construction of opinion by Louis Quéré (1990), these three authors indicate that, in the opinion regime, interactions are limited by two rules: The distanced commitment is in fact deployed between the need for each speaker to express his or her "I" and the normative requirement to which it is subject to leave open the possibility for others to express their "I" in turn - that is to say, to endow the space for taking positions with a polyphonic character" (Cardon, Heurtin and Lemieux, 1995, p. 11-12). In other words: it is not too much of an investment in a system of opinion that is being criticized. Conversely, someone who does not invest enough in the "I" is not playing by the rules of the game. It is the fact of denying his interlocutors the possibility of expressing their "I" in a "peremptory" tone, a dogmatic behaviour, not very open to discussion, that will be reproached (Ibid., p. 12). This behaviour is easier to maintain in a context of remote anonymous utterance.

Third reading, which is less common, is just as important. This aggressiveness - whether or not it is indeed characteristic of the majority of comment spaces - is in any case felt as such. On the one hand, however, it justifies the lack of participation of readers who do not want to face uncontrollable aggressiveness.

At the same time, this aggressiveness focuses attention. This is what we remember most. The issue of aggression is, for example, at the centre of disagreements between proponents and opponents of digital communication technologies because of the potential spillover effects of these aggressive postures (Anderson et al., 2014). But this is also the case for transient participants, those who post few comments before leaving.

It is impossible to understand to what extent this behaviour of at least some of the debaters weighs on the judgement of all these devices without taking into account the following mechanism: in the construction of a positive self-image we are sensitive to negative criticism (positive criticism is also very important, but it plays a role in confirming the value we give to our ideas, etc.). (Positive criticism is also very important, but it plays a role in confirming the value we place on our ideas, etc.: André, 2005). It is a form of protection of self-esteem. This self-esteem depends largely on the way others look at us. Any favourable evaluation by others improves self-esteem (André, 2005, p. 27). Conversely, any criticism can have a negative impact on it.

These three reasons explain why aggressive comments polarize attention so much. Why they are considered so striking by many readers and why they justify staying out of these participatory spaces.

Endless debates".

All the more so since, correlatively, these spaces are widely evaluated as producing not debates but "dialogues of the deaf" (30 open responses out of the 102 considered here).

"We find many interesting debates (especially on the most serious sites) but overall, the debates simply reflect the anger of Internet users, which often leads to dialogues of the deaf" (Antoine).

"In general, everyone speaks for themselves without any real debate" (Tatiana).

"I don't comment because debates between Internet users often become violent and completely sterile" (Ludovic).

"For me, adding my opinion would not lead to anything because people don't "listen to each other. They have a strong opinion and they won't change their opinion because so-and-so has posted an argument against it. I often find the debates between interposed comments hollow or endless" (Fanny).

"Everyone wants to impose his or her thought. So there is no real exchange" (Camille).

"I advocate a peaceful society and therefore to go into these debates would be tantamount to going into conflict. This explains in large part my refusal to comment on certain articles" (Dominique).

"I don't see the point of starting this kind of debate with other Internet users because this kind of online debate through comments rarely leads to constructive conclusions" (Antoine).

It should be noted that the expectations underlying the majority opinions expressed are in line with the definition of debate established in linguistics. To speak of debate is to consider that everyone recognizes the need for the other person's voice in the construction of public opinion (Charaudeau

and Ghiglione, 1997, p 30). It also means accepting the idea of co-constructing a conclusion (if not unanimous, at least a majority one) at the end of a debate. A conclusion that differs from the opinions initially expressed because of the arguments and reasoning developed. A co-construction, perceived by the readers as an enrichment of the opinions, impossible here for lack of a debate leader. A moderator whose role would not be limited to giving the floor or forbidding comments that go beyond the legal framework. But also to facilitate interactivity between participants and to implement a synthesis. The lack of journalistic management of the debates organized by press sites on political and social issues undoubtedly complicates the smooth running of these participatory citizen spaces.

Judgements deemed to be deficient.

The third most divided opinion is also negative. Half of the feedback concerns the partial or incomplete nature of the arguments published (if these two criticisms are taken into account, 45 respondents address these subjects on their own).

It would be possible to see only a reproach of lack of objectivity or neutrality from readers confronted with opinions contrary to their own. And indeed, online debates do not escape the dissemination of opinions based on ideological preferences or assumed moral values. But, in fact, this is the rule. One only has to look at letters from readers in terms of the arguments they put forward to see how many values already underpinned what was published in the newspapers. The intellectualization of arguments explains why these values are not necessarily claimed as such. But they are evident in the choice of words chosen to support his ideas. For example, readers mobilizing against the construction of an airport requiring the relocation of military cemeteries of soldiers who died in the First World War. They justify their refusal of the work on the grounds of the "respect" due to the dead, the "duty to remember" at the foundation of a society or the preservation of "heritage" (Doury, 2010, p. 5).

Just as it is difficult to conceal one's values when defending one's opinions, it is difficult - even in a public space based on the idea of reasons - to ignore one's emotions. If only because emotions are a filter that connects us to our environment. That they are a basis for our judgment (Paperman, 1992). That they are also a source of motivation to speak or act (a citizen who feels nothing in the face of an event will not be prompted to react or act).

Thus, being confronted with opinions based on values or even emotions that are different from one's own is not unique to these online spaces of debate. Moreover, it has been found that debaters filter the published arguments on their own. Since they are - compared to everyday life - more often confronted online with people who disagree with them, they tend to pay more attention to opinions with which they agree on their own (Blom, Carpenter and Bowe, 2001).

To explain the recurrence of this third type of criticism, therefore, other parameters need to be taken into account. Since it is less the subjectivity of the published arguments than their deficient nature that is regretted.

"I would prefer to discuss with someone who knows enough about the subject (politics, economics) to exchange our points of view and come up with something constructive"
(Camille).

"Some people don't know what they're talking about, have unsubstantiated and unthought-out comments, in a purely contradictory spirit" (Julie).

"Often it's banalities that come out: 'Racism sucks,' for example. In other cases, some are interesting but few readers understand it. From my point of view, there is a lot of misunderstanding between these commentators" (Pauline).

"Some comments are useful; people argue and express their point of view. But others are totally useless. Some comment but have nothing to say on the subject in question" (Tatiana).

"I am rather dissatisfied with these comments overall. They are often the place where conspiracy theories, unfounded and/or poorly argued criticisms flourish. It is also often in these spaces that one can find racist, sexist, extremist comments... I give little credit to these ideas and prefer to content myself with just reading the articles" (Anaëlle).

The list of arguments that readers regret having read ranges from superficial information to tendentious opinions. It is not possible to fully illuminate these reactions without understanding why these online devices facilitate the expression of such opinions. The work carried out by the sociologist Gérard Bronner on the rise of opinions defending conspiracy theories, conspiracy theories, or - on another level - the defenders of online astrological predictions is this enlightening subject. He notes that websites and forums offer new places to promote such opinions.

However, it is not easy for editors to prevent the expression of such positions. The study carried out by Amandine Degand and Mathieu Simonson on the moderation systems set up by online newspaper sites shows this. This work lists all the rules posted by the sites: prohibition of attacks on honour, modesty and privacy; prohibition of copyright infringements; prohibition of advertising and proselytism. The last prohibition concerns the prohibition of off-topic or incomprehensible messages (2011). This is potentially the one that offers the most scope for influencing the content of comments. But, in fact, "the moderation of off-topic comments is a matter of debate... To avoid [problems], moderators try not to be too intransigent on the relevance of comments" (2011, pp. 61-62).

Therefore, access to these spaces of expression is easy, subject to registration (with an avatar, a valid email address and, more exceptionally, a subscriber account). This is within the legal limits of freedom of expression and the rules of moderation applied flexibly.

Yet, explains Gérard Brunner, on subjects such as attacks (twin towers in the United States, Charlie Hebdo in France), citizens convinced by "official" explanations of the facts given by governments and the media are not the most motivated to "defend" these online versions. Whereas social actors supporting "alternative theories" are much more motivated to take advantage of the spaces of expression that have emerged with the Internet to support their convictions (Bronner, 2013). To put it another way, these comment spaces are open to defenders of minority theses, like other media before them, but in tenfold proportions. This overactivity of a limited number of highly committed commentators facilitates, potentially, bias. For example, the instrumentalization of these debates by active and determined minorities (Himmelboim et al., 2009, p. 786). However, in the face of this risk of "hijacking and radicalization of the debate", the media do not have simple - inexpensive - solutions. The difficulty is not legal. Legally, they can, for example, impose a ban on all advertising, partisan or commercial. For Amandine Degand and Mathieu Simonson, the difficulty lies in the necessary means available to multimedia editors. They are not sufficiently well equipped to identify users who would

like to confiscate the debates (2011, p 61). This risk of confiscation is real. It is even proven from the point of view of the Internet users questioned.

Discussion

These three characteristics relating to the organisation of these participatory spaces (the remote anonymity of participants), their arrangements (no moderators), and the modalities of participation (no selection, but moderation of contributions either before or after the event) must be taken into account. To do this, the impact of the project must be measured. There are many consequences.

Few commentators.

The first consequence is the most visible. The majority of commentators remain few. Admittedly, it has been observed from the first online forums that the number of participants is proportionally lower than the number of readers. But in the case of comments on online press articles, the ratio is particularly low. Especially because many commentators only post one message. Single comments (only one participation) are in the majority.

Undeniably plays on the wish not to be confronted with aggressive participants :

"I may also be reluctant to communicate my opinions in various areas on the web because it is very often misinterpreted" (Antoine).

"I don't want to share my opinions with people other than my circle of acquaintances. I don't want to be judged in today's society. Because people often misinterpret or misinterpret too quickly the opinions that we can give" (Tom).

"I prefer to keep my point of view to myself, I don't want to create a debate on the subject that would force me to respond. I prefer to debate with people I know, my entourage. When physical integrity is at stake, it forces moderation and listening on the part of both parties" (Maxime).

"Often, when we comment, other users come to contradict us, sometimes violently, this is a bit disheartening because we don't comment to be scolded or dismissed" (François).

But, at the same time, other motivations put forward among the responses collected provide additional explanations limiting citizens' participation in society's debates in these media spaces.

A first reflex would be to see it as a sign of indifference ("I watch the news online with the aim of informing and not participating", Marine) or a lack of motivation ("I do not participate out of laziness because I have to create a profile on the website and I do not want to participate in insulting debates ..."). (Bastien).

But this would be to overlook two types of factors whose weight - and significance in terms of understanding the functioning of the public media space - is much greater. Social factors on the one hand, and factors specific to online debate devices on the other.

The first factors are indeed a matter of social self-censorship. Even if this is not the main angle of analysis retained for this research, it is fundamental to remember that the network of networks does not abstract from pre-existing social logics. In particular, the logics of political self-censorship unveiled almost 40 years ago by Daniel Gaxie. An unequal feeling to express oneself publicly on political or societal subjects, which can be explained by the fact that "certain social agents are invested with political authority, that is, with a socially recognized (and prescribed) aptitude that they are socially willing to accumulate political knowledge that contributes in return to legitimizing their statutory right to pronounce on political problems" (1978, pp. 240-258). Unless we adopt a very "mediacentric" point of view and attach too much importance to the intrinsic characteristics of these discussion forums as effective participatory mechanisms, we must take into account the fact that an Internet user is all the more likely to want to give his or her opinion online if he or she feels socially legitimate to do so. This lack of self-confidence in one's own legitimacy to defend one's opinion online can be expressed either directly (I don't feel legitimate), or in a latent way when the argument of the lack of interest, of the uselessness of one's opinion is put forward:

"I don't comment because either I don't know enough about the subject to allow me to judge" (Amandine).

"I never or almost never post comments online because I do not feel that I have the necessary knowledge or legitimacy to be able to express an opinion of sufficient quality compared to what professional journalists can offer" (Thomas).

"I don't necessarily have an opinion to give on the news, no legitimacy to broadcast it if I have an opinion" (Lucile).

"Most of the time, I don't feel that I have a strong enough or well-argued enough opinion to write a comment that could add something more to those already posted. I would rather observe a debate than participate in it" (Audrey).

"I don't necessarily have the right arguments to judge a situation, so my comments wouldn't necessarily be useful" (Silya).

"I don't like to give my opinion publicly on social networks or other media. In my opinion, it is a private order or at least I expose it to my friends, my family, orally, but on the net with a written trace" (Fatima).

Among all the factors of social and political self-censorship identified in the literature, this panel, which is predominantly female, particularly illustrates one: the feeling of political incompetence, which is more widespread among women than men. Numerous surveys attest to the fact that women are more likely to allow themselves to express themselves politically within the family than in discussions between colleagues or friends, having internalized a feeling of lesser political competence than men.

Thus, even though they are readers who could express themselves anonymously, i.e. without the judgment of their friendly neighbours, neighbourhood or professional circle, these social self-censorships persist well. An entourage that, through insidious remarks or implicit judgements, could discourage those who are considered "out of place" when it comes to talking in the media space about "health", "euthanasia" or "back to school". This self-censorship shows how, from this point of view, the

seemingly totally open nature of online participatory devices could be misleading, obscuring the complexity of the - non-technical - factors necessary for the wider application of the idea of "participatory democracy".

Nevertheless, alongside these social factors, there are also explanations relating to the system, which this work seeks to question.

On the one hand, this is the case of those who do not want to leave a trace of their political opinions online, as a precautionary principle ("I don't like to give my opinion on the internet because everything is archived and can be used against us" (Léo). A reflex that testifies, here as elsewhere, to the growing awareness of a growing part of Internet users - especially young Internet users - of the personal issues concerning digital identity, of the use that could be made of it later on (in one's personal and professional life). In particular, information about their political opinion, as shown by a survey of 2000 people in which only 14% of the Internet users questioned had already put their political opinion online. This is a lower percentage than private or even intimate data such as sexual or religious orientation, an indication of the importance given to the fact that a majority of Internet users do not "cyber-publicize" information deemed as "personal" or "sensitive" as their political ideas (Ifop, 2010). While paradoxically, contemporary democracy is based on the idea that decisions are nourished by the public reflections of all the actors concerned, including ordinary citizens;

On the other hand, this is the case for those who see these spaces for comment as a "cold" participatory mechanism. The characteristics of distance communication, which are advantageous for all those who wish to master their expression through writing, weigh up their sentences and words before writing, etc., are not so for others. Written communication, which is more restricted and in this sense easier to master, cannot rely on the intonation of the voice, the silences, the micro-gestures of the face and the gaze which - in face-to-face interactions - help us to defend our ideas, to interpret those of others and, basically, to strengthen the relational dimension of the discussion. The regrets expressed here in hollow indicate then how much, for these social actors, in the "exchange of ideas" "exchange" takes precedence. Expectations that are met by on-set television and radio debates compared to the remote exchanges organized in these commentary spaces.

In addition to these reasons for dissatisfaction, preference is also given to the reactions of people we know personally, to feedback from people whose opinion counts in our eyes. If only to check whether we share - or not - the same ideas about the world, the same values.

"Because of lack of time or interest I prefer to comment with "real" people around me" (Roxanne).

"I just read the news. My goal is to keep myself informed. As for commenting or discussing, I prefer to debate with family or friends" (Julie).

"I only communicate with people I know. I don't want to communicate with people I don't know" (Kangxi).

"I keep my opinion to myself and share it with those close to me. I am not interested in "talking" with strangers" (Pauline).

"The other comments published under the articles are from people I don't know and I prefer to comment on a subject with a person face-to-face or to know people

beforehand because on the internet you can pretend to be whoever you want"
(clemency).

"I have my own ideas, I prefer to share them with my friends in person rather than allow others to judge me" (Clara).

"I much prefer to defend my opinions orally, which offers more possibilities" (Anouk).

An expectation that cannot be met by people with whom one does not share moments - professional or private - of daily life. As if the quality and the pleasure found in the exchanged contents were inseparable from the qualities attributed to the interlocutors, to their personal qualities here. That's why the practice of news commentary on social networks receives more positive feedback than on online news sites. This factor sheds light on the fact (Table 1, next page) that most respondents rarely comment on online news and when they do, it is most often on Facebook or Twitter. In other words, in online spaces of expression that they share with people they know (Facebook's "friends" in particular, those vague acquaintances or real friends with whom they have agreed to interact).

At this stage of this work, it turns out that trying to find out the motivations of the majority of readers means understanding why their reasons for not reading these comments - and even more so for participating - outweigh their reasons for contributing. These results, in turn, shed new light on the established motivations of active commentators. The latter are sensitive to the possibility of expressing critical analysis or opinion. But why does this calculation of the advantages/disadvantages lead only a minority of readers of newspaper articles to read the comments as well? What is the incentive to go beyond the dissatisfactions - aggressiveness, lack of dialogue - noted here? On controversial subjects, some participants prove to be highly motivated to express a minority point of view. What about the readers?

A numerical analysis of the answers given to a second set of questions - closed questions - shows the following. The most frequent readers of the online press are readers who, all else being equal, are more frequently interested in political news and also read more frequently the comments made by other readers (Table 1).

Respondents who:	Rarely read online news: 24	Occasionally read online news: 56	Frequently read online news 22
In general, do you talk about politics?			
Never	2	0	1
Rarely	4	0	0
A little	10	29	12
Often	7	18	6
Very often	1	0	3
Do you comment on the online news?			

Never	18	36	10
Rarely	4	16	9
From time to time	1	3	3
Frequently	1	1	0
		when they comment it's on social networks (15), Twitter accounts (7), media sites (2), portals (1)	And when they comment it's on social networks (8), Twitter accounts 3, media sites (3)

Table 1: Correlation between interest in online commentary and interest in political news, online reading of the press

If the differences are not disproportionate between those who rarely or frequently read online news, they are real. Weak readers are proportionately less interested in political news than others. Six (2+4) respondents out of 24 (25%) do not talk or talk only a little bit about politics. Whereas this is the case for 1 regular reader out of 22. Similarly, it is among the former that we find the greatest number of readers who never comment (75% for the former, 45% for the latter). However, the degree of interest in politics is a factor over which the media have no direct control. A factor for which, in any case, a response given on the devices cannot have an immediate impact.

A negative perception that extends to the newspapers.

In the mid-2000s, media interactivity was considered unavoidable. Both because the online version of traditional press sites had to face competition from new media players playing the "card" of journalistic and relational novelty (e.g. Rue.89, which boasts information with three voices: journalists, experts, readers). But also so as not to be blamed by their readers (Noblet and Pignard-Cheyne, 2010).

Ten years later, this is an unavoidable imperative with the increased development of the social web and competition from non-media companies (blogs, wikis). And all the more so since digital social networking sites (the American Facebook or its Chinese equivalent Renren) are no longer just used to connect people but, increasingly, to disseminate, share and therefore discuss media content (press articles, photographs, videos). As one word sums up this response: "today we can see the opinions and comments of others on the news, on social networks" (Florian).

Most online media then find themselves faced with the following paradox. They can't help but offer these comment spaces, at the risk of giving the image of closed media, of editorial offices refusing to communicate with their readers. At the risk, above all, of leaving non-media competitors with the essential part of this social activity, which consists of talking about the news around you. A long-standing practice that is increasingly taking place online. But on the other hand, they find themselves -

for reasons of economic fragility (lack of staff) as much as for lack of journalistic appeal for the exercise - unable to provide appropriate editorial animation.

It is then as if online press sites tolerated these essential comment spaces on their pages because of their low economic costs (little investment).

On television, audience-conscious programmers would not have kept up social debates for so long with so little investment by journalists and so little indifference on the part of viewers. This is not tenable in a television medium where the maintenance of one program is to the detriment of another. This maintenance cannot be justified without meeting a minimum of economic (audience) or editorial requirements (a positive programme for the channel's image).

This solution is possible for online media if the following reasoning is applied: at best these devices satisfy a fraction of the readers. And in the worst case, dissatisfied readers have the freedom not to read these comments. This reasoning is all the easier to "hold" a priori as these comment spaces are not a substitute for articles by journalists. They are in addition to the classic editorial content but do not replace it.

Following such a line of reasoning, however, amounts to an error of judgment. For the third consequence of the negative perception of these participatory mechanisms is certainly less visible. But it is nevertheless crucial. This negative judgement is not without consequences for the online press. When a very active fraction of Internet users polarizes the debate on a controversial subject in a vigorous, even aggressive manner, commentators will focus on the content of the article, criticizing it, notes journalist Suzanne la Barre. But there is evidence that this criticism has an impact on the newspapers that carry it. Which is not insignificant. Indeed, when an American newspaper - the National Journal - decides to remove the comments, the editorial staff finds that the site increases its audience. "The number of page views per visit has increased by more than 10%, the number of unique visitors by 14% and repeat readers by more than 20%. »

Selecting comments, a real alternative?

Does this mean that it is in the online media's interest, under current conditions, to abandon these participatory mechanisms?

Such an outcome would be radical. Yet several newspapers do not hesitate to apply it punctually on subjects deemed particularly difficult to manage (during political, religious news, judicial news...). On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, most Belgian web editorial offices prefer to close the comment spaces rather than having to manage a multiplicity of conflict situations (e.g. protests of deleted remarks: Degand, Simonson, 2011, p. 60). But, in fact, the question is only misplaced. It is not solved. These opinions will continue to be expressed online, but outside the press sites (on other forums, content platforms: *ibid.*) This radical solution would amount to leaving to competition - and especially to social networks - the monopoly of management and the search for financial profitability associated with this social practice.

Is it enough to moderate the comments? Either by the editorial staff itself, or - this is the solution most commonly adopted today - by Internet users? Either by removing - a posteriori - comments reported as inappropriate by other Internet users with regard to the comments charter (such as that of the huffingtonpost.fr: "does not tolerate direct or indirect attacks, insults or insults, nor does it

tolerate deliberate attempts to destabilize, upset, provoke or seek to obtain an emotional reaction from other users"). Either by "classifying" them so as to value only a small part of them. However, in the light of the opinions gathered for this study, none of these methods provides a truly satisfactory solution in the eyes of the majority of readers.

There remains one last possibility: the editorial staff can select the comments disseminated, as suggested by several of the responses collected.

"I am dissatisfied with the information and the debates developed in the comment spaces. Because everyone can express their opinions. People with bad intentions can defend dangerous statements" (Zhou).

"I am dissatisfied because everything is allowed (dear freedom of expression) and this leads to comments that should not be made. Moreover, there are few constructive debates" (Fatima).

What would it mean to move from a system of moderation to an assumed system of selection? The implications of such a change are sufficient to assess the extent to which the principles of "participatory media democracy" would be challenged.

Certainly, when there is no strong discursive framework - tangible rules indicating the expected register of "normal" discursive behaviour, there is no space for robust constructive discussion. These devices attest to this.

However, ensuring a selection of the "most interesting" comments on the grounds of guaranteeing the "quality" of the published comments, to put it plainly, censorship, is not without effect. A study of the methods used to select the letters of Nicolas Hubé's readers reveals the different dimensions of this selection. For "selection is a moment when the audience is defined by the editorial staff, an audience shaped as it imagines itself, as it presents it to its readers and as it seeks to make them react" (Hubé, 2008, p. 101). This selection is based on justifications of form and shape. Of course, it is based on substance whenever the editorial line of the editorial staff is not respected. This selection is all the more effective since it can be established, in a less visible way, by the choice of excerpts rather than an overly visible refusal.

Adopting the principle of selecting comments on the grounds of improving their content would then be tantamount to giving editorial offices control - power - over all comments published on press sites. Whereas, as Aurélie Aubert (2011, p 51) points out, "the Internet space has allowed a detachment of the field of subjectivity from the media field, a detachment of the subjective expression from its previous submission to the constraints of generality specific to speech in the traditional media (Boltanski et al., 1984)". The principle of interactivity has imposed other criteria for the legitimacy of diffusable speech - based on the idea that "information and data are no longer fixed, they no longer belong to anyone and are enriched by circulation. It is [...] the Internet user who, from now on, provides the substance of the Web and chooses its form. He creates and feeds the content. These ideas - as well as those carried by the principles at the foundation of a renewed participatory democracy - would be distorted by the introduction of a comment selection system.

Conclusion

Do the comment spaces support the interpretation that the proliferation of citizen discussion of political news online is fostering the development of a new form of political participation? Is the exchange experienced as a citizen act facilitating the emergence of a sense of citizen participation as defined by Laurence Monnoyer-Smith (2011)? This author - relying on Todd Graham (2009) - believes that we must attach great importance to all the mechanisms that contribute to this register of citizen participation in that they reveal "the mutation of citizenship as experienced by individuals themselves: by discussing politics on social networks, forums of satirical fans, respondents report not only engaging in a political discussion, but also experiencing certain exchanges as a citizen act".

As far as the comment spaces of online press articles are concerned, this research does not validate this interpretation. More specifically, it shows that this part on the margins of the public media space does not satisfy the silent majority of Internet users/readers. The one who, at best, reads and does not participate, at worst ignores these comment spaces. For if the number of readers of comments compared to the number of readers of an article is low, the number of those who take the step of commenting is even more limited. These two observations force us to put the impact of these participatory devices into perspective, even though they are supposed to bring online media closer to their readers and renew the space for society to discuss itself.

What specifically do these criticisms of the public media space teach us? They highlight two types of possible pitfalls of a participatory online media space. Pitfalls that the limits of press site devices highlight.

The first type of pitfall concerns the risks of developing a space for citizen expression with no other requirement, no other objective, than to promote the liberation of speech. The risk, as Pierre Rosanvallon perfectly sums up then, is that of reclaiming this freedom of speech for negative purposes. "The population is obviously better educated and informed nowadays, but places of expression and rationalisation of social life are no less necessary. What constantly threatens a society is the drift into irrationality and the manipulation of demands [...] Populism is nothing but the instrumentalization and distorted recuperation of the sufferings of the social world. Populism is nothing other than the instrumentalization and distorted recuperation of the sufferings of the social world. Only by bringing the social world to life, reflexively, by keeping alive a civic spirit, can this type of pitfall be avoided" (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 342). What is true of political issues is just as true of social issues. This possible danger inherent in participatory mechanisms is based on three criticisms formulated in the responses received. One is the over-representation of contributors motivated to defend opinions deemed to be incomplete or even tendentious. The other concerns the difficulty of co-constructing conclusions due to the lack of management of the debates by the editorial staff beyond a role of moderating the published comments. The last concerns the consequences of the anonymity of contributors. The lack of responsibility allows for a lack of depth, or even aggressiveness.

Thus, without systematically accompanying citizen expression with systematic critical evaluation mechanisms, mechanisms that would go beyond the moderation of comments to encourage the development of opinions co-constructed after discussions, these comment spaces do not avoid this pitfall.

The second type of pitfall is very different. It stems from the preference displayed by many Internet users for discussions with people whose opinions count in their eyes because they know them. This is because their interest in discussions on political or social issues depends - in part - on the qualities attributed to their interlocutors, qualities in terms of skills or personal qualities.

In itself, this constraint specific to online debates, including with strangers, is not an inhibiting factor. This is shown by a comparative analysis of the uses and rewards taken by commentators from press articles and blogs. But blogs offer commentators additional rewards. Rewards that testify on the one hand to the in-depth relationships forged between bloggers and their most loyal readers, and on the other hand to the emergence of communities of Internet users federated - via networks of blogs dealing with the same subjects - around shared interests. It is because of the failure to generate the emergence of similar representations between Internet users and authors (journalists) or even between Internet users alone that these participatory systems cannot escape this criticism, which is essentially about the "coldness" of the exchanges. The development of a feeling of appropriation of these commentary spaces by a majority of Internet users would be decisive in this respect. A logic of appropriation, the levers of which could be based on the empowerment of the Internet users/commentators most motivated to maintain these participatory mechanisms. But also on the development of a feeling of belonging by the majority of Internet users/readers to a "community of readers" brought together by attachment to a title, an editorial line, etc., and by the development of a sense of belonging.

Criticisms of these arrangements reveal, by default, the two facets necessary for the development of a satisfactory participatory media space. These participatory mechanisms are judged by the quality of their content, but also by the degree of belonging to a "community" that the bodies that implement them know how to generate. It is only by responding to these two challenges at the same time that online newspapers can hope to deploy participatory media spaces that truly meet the expectations of their readers. However, we need only recall two trends - the decline in the number of regular readers (who buy the same newspaper every day) for several decades on the one hand, and on the other, the decrease in ten years in the number of pages read per press site visited (between 4 and 5 pages read per title today, OJD figures, 2015), to measure the difficulty of the problems.

These are all challenges that digital newsrooms must take up in order to foster a genuine sense of citizen participation.

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