

# Analyzing the active audience: Reluctant, reactive, fearful, or lazy? Forms and motives of participation in mainstream journalism

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## Abstract

Participation has become a key issue in contemporary journalism studies, yet research on how the participatory space is being appropriated by users is rather limited. This article attempts a methodological contribution by offering a way to analyze participatory journalism in reference to variant participatory affordances enabling different levels of creative effort, control, and editorial permeability. To do so, it understands participation as the active involvement of users, and makes an analytical connection among technological affordances, motivations, and contextual factors. The article offers empirical evidence challenging both cyber-optimist and cyber-pessimist assumptions about participation. Drawing on insights from a web-based survey, it is argued that the ‘reluctant audience’ paradigm may be interpreted in terms of the ‘lazy audience’ and the ‘fearful audience’, which seem to coexist along with the ‘reactive audience’.

## Keywords

Active audience, audience participation, news sharing, participatory journalism, participatory tools, user-generated content/comments, uses and gratifications

## Introduction

Participation has become a key issue in contemporary journalism studies. Both academic and broader industry debates have scrutinized this development under labels such as *participatory journalism* (Singer et al., 2011), *audience material* (Wardle and Williams,

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2010), *open journalism* (Rusbridger, 2012), and *reciprocal journalism* (Lewis et al., 2014). These concepts may vary in particular nuances, but agree on the premise that journalism is witnessing new combinations of professional, participatory, and technological intermediation which have the capacity to erode established sender–receiver relationships and disrupt the monopoly of well-rooted functions of professional journalism, namely, agenda setting, gatekeeping, and framing (Goode, 2009; Peters and Witscghe, 2014). The idea of mediated participation, being part of the long-standing debate between cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists, remains a highly contested field of inquiry. The former argue for the emancipatory effects of Web 2.0 applications (Jenkins, 2006). Following this line of thought, participatory journalism departs from and builds upon a new paradigm of civic power grounded in the promise of increased engagement and participation bringing to the fore new opportunities of opinion formation and deliberation (Dahlgren, 2013). In Manosevitch and Tenemboim’s view (2017), participatory journalism extends the role of media beyond the traditional emphasis on informing citizens, to providing an accessible public space for public debate. The cyber-critics, on the other hand, make a case for the limited potential of change within a hierarchical communication structure where powerful players (journalists, media owners, interest groups, politicians, and advertisers) exert significant influence and structure participation (Van Dijck, 2009). Although it would seem naïve to proclaim that new(er) media will save democracy by enhancing participation, yet, as Dahlgren (2013) notes ‘such civic initiatives are altering the character of journalism and should be seen as a democratic asset’ (p. 160). Although a significant body of research highlights professional practices that tend to normalize the impact of participatory journalism (Karlsson et al., 2015), there is counter evidence showing that journalism has entered a second, more vigorous developmental stage at which journalists are pushed to negotiate their gatekeeping power and take advantage of the sociotechnical capital available (Anderson, 2011). This ongoing power shift (Singer, 2014) affects the conditions and dynamics of user agency and raises questions about the boundaries of journalism (Carlson and Lewis, 2015). Against this background, and starting from the premise that ‘an important prerequisite for deliberation and participation is an engaged public’ (Karlsson et al., 2015: 4), this study seeks to investigate the participatory practices of users within the realm of mainstream journalism. To do so, the article proposes a typology for the analysis of participation in news websites, and engages in empirical research to investigate users’ motivations and contextual factors as predictors for utilizing different participatory tools.

### *Defining participation: From normative theorizations to the lived experiences of users*

Until recently, most attempts to define participation adopted normative accounts echoing utopian and dystopian theorizations. Carpentier’s (2011) well-known AIP model suggests three levels of user agency: access–interaction–participation. As a result of this classification, Carpentier (2011) draws a distinction between participation *through* the media and participation *in* the media. In the first case, the media operates as a sphere which allows citizens to participate in public debates and to deploy their discursive powers by voicing their views. In the second case, the notion of co-decision is central, and participation is exercised through professional and managerial decisions. Carpentier’s conceptualization

can prove fruitful if used as a yardstick to assess participatory performance vis-à-vis implementing a more egalitarian *modus operandi* within journalism. However, the aspiration that participatory journalism can overcome the structural hierarchy of media enterprises and foster egalitarian relations between users and professionals is widely connected to and echoes a utopia.

Voices claiming a more inclusive definition of participation have appeared recently, stressing the notion of *power sharing* as a constitutive element of participation. Dahlgren and Alvares (2013) argue that democratic participation embodies power relations, however weak or remote they may seem. 'Formalized representation and voting embody participation, as do innumerable micro-contexts of citizen input' (p. 49). In a similar vein, Zelizer (2013) criticizes utopian and dystopian dichotomies as emphasizing normative outcomes of full participation versus weak interaction, hence often leading to exclusionary, elitist, and unrepresentative discussions that can 'undermine the capacity of journalism scholars to speak reliably about the world of journalism practice' (p. 469). Studying online content creators, Holton et al. (2013) conclude that users 'care less about their role in the process and more about simply being engaged' (p. 731). According to Lewis (2012) participation is a function of individual agency engaged to address collective concerns, using the mix of motivations and affordances of digital cultures and technologies. Elaborating further on the notion of participation within journalism, Loosen and Schmidt (2012) argue that journalism is a social system comprising two crucial actors: professionals and the audience. Within that system, participation is perceived as 'inclusion' which depends on the performance of the professionals (namely, professional work routines and values that allow participation) and 'inclusion expectations' formed through a combination of situated motivations and previous experiences that shape the degree of participation. A more inclusive perspective of participatory journalism then can shed light not merely on the potential form and scale of participation, but also, quite tellingly, clarify the ways audiences themselves negotiate with and respond to participatory opportunities.

## **Participating in news sites: Motivations and context factors**

User-contribution to news production has been around for far longer than the web itself (e.g. in the form of letters to the editor). Yet the current celebratory tone is justified due to the ease of accessing, creating, and sharing information allowing the 'former audience' to increasingly become co-creators in the news production process (Goode, 2009). This idea of active news consumption has given rise to scholarly work expanding around three interrelated questions: what is the level of participation occurring within news sites, which are the underlying motivations for using different participatory tools, and how do contextual factors affect user contribution in journalism?

## **Uses and gratifications as an exploratory framework for participation**

The uses and gratifications (U&G) perspective is frequently applied as a framework to examine questions of 'how' and 'why' individuals use media to satisfy particular needs (Leung, 2009; Rubin, 2009). Motives are general dispositions that influence people's actions taken to fulfill a need or want (Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000: 179). Motivations

are important in explaining a variety of communication processes, as different motivations often predict distinctive communication choices and behavior (Rubin, 2009). Reviewing the relevant literature, a common practice in U&G research is to rely upon previous studies and modify the survey instrument to fit the particular medium under investigation, and as Sundar and Limperos (2013) note, new media bring along new motivations and gratifications which instigate variations in the traditional frameworks.

Previous studies have shown that user-generated content (UGC) is driven by various motivations and gratifications which influence both the choice of platform and the level of activity. Leung's (2009) research concluded that content generation is significantly linked to recognition, cognitive, social, and entertainment needs. Moreover, he found that people who enjoy recognition gratifications tend to be more active in generating content in blogs, on YouTube, and on Wikipedia. On the other hand, those who primarily receive entertainment gratification are those who enjoy participating in forums. In a similar vein, Mitchelstein (2011) found divergent motivations for audience participation in online newspapers and blogs; whereas participating in blogs was mostly linked to discussion and socialization motives, posting comments in online newspapers was usually associated with self-expression needs. In their study on why to blog, Ekdale et al. (2010) found that the top three motivations for influential political bloggers were to provide an alternative perspective to the mainstream media, to inform people about the most relevant information on topics of interest, and to influence public opinion. Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) found that writing comments in news sites is mostly associated with information-centric and personal identity motives. Chung and Yoo's (2008) study showed that three motivation factors – socialization, entertainment, and information seeking/surveillance – significantly predicted the use of medium interactive features, such as search features, audio and video downloads, or photo galleries, while socialization and entertainment were found to be significant predictors of human/medium interactive features, such as polls and submission of stories and photographs. Analyzing the motivations and inhibitors of writing comments in news sites, Springer et al. (2015) found that commenting is associated with cognitive motives and the desire to interact with the authors of news pieces.

## **Participation levels and context factors affecting participation**

Research referring to the level of participation in news sites designates the 'reluctant audience' paradigm (Karlsson et al., 2015). Analyzing the Swedish audience, Bergström (2008) concluded that people are generally not interested in creating UGC, while the majority of those who actually contribute seem to consider these activities as part of a creative leisure-time, rather than a responsible democratic activity. In addition, she found that systematic creators tend to be those persons who already possess substantial competence about society and political life. Utilizing an online survey focusing on different traits and habits of online newspapers' visitors, Larsson (2011) developed a typology of five visitor types, characterized by the different ways they use and appreciate interactive features. The overall results show low levels of both use and appreciation. In particular, with the exception of *The Prosumer* (referring to a type of visitor who regularly

contributes, chats and comments), most visitors engage in low effort participation, such as polls and sharing to social networks (SNs), but rarely choose to contribute self-authored news texts, blog posts, or pictures from news events. Corroborating this finding, Bergström and Wadbring (2015) noted that although users appreciate the opportunity to comment, yet they deem both the actual practice of commenting as well as other people's comments not very important.

Leung (2009) found that content creators on the web are generally young and financially capable individuals, and that political efficacy is positively related to content creation. Registration rules imposing named (as opposed to anonymous) participation tend to positively influence content creation (Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011) and so does the upper quality of debates in online newspapers (Ruiz et al., 2011). Scholarly work has also focused on news values and themes as factors shaping participation. Weber's (2014) findings indicate that proximity, controversy, and negativity affect participation levels in a positive manner, whereas power (news items associated with powerful persons or institutions) and facticity decrease the amount of participation. Political and controversial stories (Tenenboim and Cohen, 2013) or 'public affairs' news (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2012) are more prominent among the highly commented upon items.

## **Developing a typology for participation in news websites**

A number of different models for participation with variable definitions and focus have been suggested thus far, frequently under the umbrella-term interactivity (see Jensen, 1998; Kioussis, 2002; Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997). Also, a distinction between 'human' and 'medium'-type interactivity has been well established (see Downes and McMillan, 2000; Stromer-Galley, 2004). Working specifically in the field of online journalism, Chung and colleagues (Chung, 2008; Chung and Nah, 2009; Chung and Yoo, 2008) have expanded this typology; while maintaining the broad differentiation between human and medium type features and assuming a continuum between two extremes, they typified a total of 22 interactive features into four broad categories: 'medium', 'medium-human', 'human-medium' and 'human' features. While work in this vein is both useful and instructive, these feature-based approaches are driven by the perspective of media organizations or in other words consider interactivity as an attribute of the medium. The purpose of this study however places the focus on users. For instance, while commenting on a news item and submitting an article fall strongly within 'human' interactivity in Chung et al's typology, from a user's standpoint, the former requires far more effort and can carry different levels of responsibility (e.g. a comment can be anonymous or under a username). In other words, this study as a whole and the following typology concern participatory activities at the 'human-medium' to the 'human'-end of the feature-based tradition.

The study operates on the premise that participation is characterized by three critical attributes, the first being that participation describes the conscious and active involvement of users, that is, – participation is explicit (Allen et al., 2014: 1131) and takes place through technological affordances. These technological affordances are channels that allow for various types of participation (Spyridou and Veglis, 2008). Second, different participatory tools allow for different user-contributions. These contributions can have different

implications upon meaning-making, content diffusion, and conversation opportunities, thus creating the need to distinguish among different forms and levels of participation (Jensen, 1998; McMillan, 2002). Finally, the use of variant participatory tools is triggered by different motivations and requires different levels of creative effort (Jönsson and Örnebring, 2011). The second analytical step was to identify the most prevalent and widespread tools of ‘human’ or ‘human-medium’ participation in news sites, with the relevant literature suggesting the following nine participatory features (see Table 1).

Following a minimalist–maximalist participation operationalization, the typology suggested is based on three continuous dimensions: user control (Jensen, 1998; McMillan, 2002), creative effort required (Jönsson and Örnebring, 2011), and editorial permeability (Peters and Witscghe, 2014). Control is defined as the extent to which the user is allowed to influence or modify the content of the website (Jensen, 1998). Creative effort refers to the workload needed (Vincent and Vickery, 2007) and the amount of material and immaterial resources, such as knowledge, time, and technological competences (Allen et al., 2014: 1135) required in order for the user to engage in varied participatory activities. Finally, editorial permeability refers to the timing of participation; whether user-contributions are invited post hoc (i.e. after the news item is finished), real time, or during the planning stage (Peters and Witscghe, 2014). Although it should be stressed that all dimensions are continuous rather than discrete, and significant variability exists within each category, the nine aforementioned participatory tools can be split into the following categories of participatory activity:

Very low: participating in polls and rating content, which enable little control, require minimal effort, and are invited post hoc.

Low: commenting and participating in discussion forums, which also require some effort, but enable more control over the published content, in the sense that it will either be published wholesale or not, again as a post hoc contribution.

Medium: submitting collaborative content and multimedia at the request of media organizations during the planning stage or during the ongoing process, which requires some effort and enable limited control over the content that will be published.

High: blogging and submitting full articles which require most effort and allow for most control over content as planned and created before publication.

Sharing: the typology treats ‘sharing possibilities’ through SNs as a unique category as sharing does not entail substantial creative effort, rather the contrary, but contributes to and shapes what Singer (2014) has named secondary gatekeeping. Furthermore, social networking sites have been theorized as networked public spaces where users can share, discuss, and contribute to news making, having thus the capacity to disrupt professional structures of meaning-making and dissemination (Marwick and Boyd, 2011).

## Method

While news organizations are wrestling with how to open more direct and sustained pathways for audience participation (Anderson, 2011), less is known about the

**Table 1.** Mainstream participatory tools.

Participatory tool	Description <sup>a</sup>	Relevant work
Content rating	Rating of content using the media organization's designated rating system	Jönsson and Örnebring, 2011
Polls	Topical questions posed by journalists, to which users answer using predetermined responses. These polls provide instant and quantifiable feedback to users	Doudaki and Spyridou, 2015; Jönsson and Örnebring, 2011; Stromer-Galley, 2004
Sharing through social networks	Provision of buttons allowing the sharing of content in various social networks	Doudaki and Spyridou, 2015; Karlsson et al., 2015
Audience footage in the form of audiovisual material	Submission of audiovisual material	Wardle and Williams, 2010
Collaborative content (e.g. contributing interview questions)	Generation of material through the collaboration of users and professionals	Spyridou and Veglis, 2008; Wardle and Williams, 2010
Comments	Comments regarding a news item, typically submitted through a form at the bottom of a webpage	Doudaki and Spyridou, 2015; Singer, 2014; Spyridou and Veglis, 2008; Tenenboim and Cohen, 2013
Discussion forums	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Discussions led by journalists, with topical questions posed by the newsroom in which submissions are fully or reactively moderated</li> <li>b) Places where readers can engage in threaded online conversations or debates</li> </ol>	Doudaki and Spyridou, 2015; Hermida, 2011; Spyridou and Veglis, 2008
Article submission	Submission of textual material	Wardle and Williams, 2010
Citizen blogs	Blogs created by users and hosted within the news website	Hermida, 2011; Spyridou and Veglis, 2008

<sup>a</sup>Adapted from Hermida, 2011; Wardle and Williams, 2010.

motivations and contextual factors driving users to create content within professional journalism. This study therefore, is concerned with self-reported behaviors of participation, and the following questions are posed:

*RQ1:* What is the level of participation occurring within news sites?

*RQ2:* Which participatory features are mostly preferred by users?

*RQ3:* Which type of motivations drive users to participate, and through which participatory tools?

*RQ4?* Which contextual factors affect participatory activity?

## Data collection

The study is based on data collected from *in.gr*, a mainstream news portal owned by a legacy media group (DOL) in Greece. The Greek media system has been a distinctive case of the Polarized Pluralistic model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Since 2010, mainstream media have been in serious trouble as the ongoing crisis has resulted in a dramatic loss of advertising revenue and other subsidies (Siapera et al., 2015). During the crisis mainstream media have promoted a pro-austerity agenda (Doudaki et al., 2016), while credibility and trust levels have dropped significantly (Eurobarometer, 2015). Despite the proliferation of online startups of an alternative character, *In.gr*, the oldest news portal in the country, is the sixth most popular news website in Greece<sup>1</sup> having very positive brand attributes; it is considered the top news site in regard to accuracy and explanation of complex issues (Kalogeropoulos, 2017).

Data were obtained through a web-based survey with participants being recruited through an online advertisement featured on the home page of *in.gr*. Respondents were able to access the survey through a banner-link within a 10-day period in June 2014. This process yielded a total of 767 respondents after cleaning the data for duplicate or incomplete submissions. Although convenience sampling cannot be representative of the general population, sample populations sourced from the Internet may be representative of the population of interest (see Leiner, 2016). The demographics of the participants indicate a non-representative sample of the population with distributions skewed toward being male (70.3%), highly educated (79.5% with tertiary education), younger (45% below 35 years of age), and more affluent (34% with a monthly income higher than the €1500). Although such distributions are to be expected given the traits of Internet users in the country<sup>2</sup> care should be taken not to generalize the findings without caution.

## Key variables

The survey consisted of 30 questions focusing on the actual use of participatory features of media websites in general, and the propensity/likelihood to use the said features provided the item accessed was of particular interest to the user. The measurement of the outcome variable consisted of two questions: 'How often do you use X-feature?' and 'How likely is it that you would use X-feature, when reading an article you are very interested in', with the nine participatory features described previously being examined separately, to be answered on a four-point scale, ranging from 'Very likely' to 'Not likely at all'.

The factors assumed to be predictive of either outcome can be broadly split into five groups:

*Type of news consumed:* participants responded on a five-point scale (from 'Never' to 'Daily') how often they consume news regarding politics, social issues, entertainment-lifestyle, or other specialized content (e.g. sports, education, and technology).

*Possible inhibitors of participatory behavior:* participants indicated their agreement or disagreement on five-point Likert-type scales (from 'Completely Agree' to 'Completely disagree') to the following five statements: having to register with the website to do so, having to provide personal identification information, the news agency being untrustworthy, having insufficient knowledge, and having insufficient time at their disposal.



General attitudes toward politics and the media: respondents were asked to indicate on similar Likert-type scales their sense of self-efficacy regarding politics and generalized mistrust toward the media.

*Demographics:* information on gender, age, education, and income level was requested.

*Motivation for using participatory features:* respondents were asked to indicate their agreement on five-point Likert-type scales regarding statements that explored five types of motivations, a framework adapted from prior U&G studies (Flanagin and Metzger, 2001; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000), as well as research focusing on motivations of content creation (Chung and Yoo, 2008; Ekdale et al., 2010; Fröhlich et al., 2012; Leung, 2009). These five types were:

*Motivation to inform the public discourse:* this type of motivation draws upon instrumental uses with motives belonging in this category referring to the need to express oneself, inform others, and generally contribute to the public discourse to one's ability.

*Socialization motivation:* refers to participation motivated by the need to belong to an online community, create an online persona, or otherwise connect to other users.

*Entertainment motivation:* this category includes motives that express the need to pass the time (pleasantly), have fun, or otherwise entertain oneself.

*Egocentric motivation:* the category encompasses the need for individual gains, at times related to professional growth, such as acquiring fame, money, exhibiting one's skills, or making one's own opinion known.

*Reactionary motivation:* though closely related to motivations pertaining to public discourse, this category emphasizes participation explicitly in order to argue against the mainstream discourse, to support or complain about an issue, or even mobilize others.

The last group (motivations) was measured individually for each different type of participatory behavior.

## Findings

### *Level of participation (RQ1) and most preferred participatory features (RQ2)*

A first noteworthy observation concerns the low rates of respondents who use, or even would use participatory features. For all but one cases, the most populous group of respondents was the one declaring to 'Never' use the participatory features. Regarding activities that require most creative effort and are less amenable to editorial control, this group is also the actual majority of users (see Table 2). The exception here is participating in online polls, a feature typical of low control, effort, and editorial permeability, as the large majority of users either often (41.3%) or daily (3%) makes use of. Overall, media users seem to not take advantage of participatory opportunities offered, neatly falling into the 'reluctant audience' paradigm. A less gloomy picture emerges when examining the responses to the question 'How likely is it that you would use X-feature, when reading an item you are very interested in?'. For participatory features that require very small or very high effort (e.g. rating content or blogging) there is only a slight increase in proportions, while for the participatory affordances requiring low or medium effort, the number of users likely to engage almost doubles for all cases. For most cases, the difference in

responses to the two questions was statistically significant (all  $p$  values for Wilcoxon rank test less than .001,  $-17.11 < Z < -7.93$ ), except for participating in polls ( $Z = -1.87$ ,  $p = .075$ ) and submitting blogs ( $Z = -0.58$ ,  $p = .57$ ). The most blatant example in this case was commenting ( $Z = 17.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with 25.2 percent of the respondents claiming they were likely to comment, compared to 14.7 percent who declared that they 'sometimes' comment, and 17.5 percent claiming to be 'very likely' to comment, compared to 5.5 percent who 'often' or 'daily' comment on articles (see Table 2).

The aforementioned increase, however, is relative and the respondents would still be called reluctant to participate even in cases when they are using an item that is of interest to them. For all participatory activities examined, more than 40 percent of the respondents are unlikely or very unlikely to participate, a number that rises to 70 percent when considering participatory activities requiring more effort. Following Chung and Yoo (2008), a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted in order to examine whether propensity to participate differed between affordances requiring least effort (e.g. taking part in polls) to those requiring most effort (e.g. blogging). Rather unsurprisingly, the omnibus ANOVA revealed that the propensity to participate is highly dependent on the effort required on the part of the user, as well as the level of control exerted over participation by the medium (Wilk's  $\lambda = .36$ ,  $F(3,732) = 223.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a strong effect (partial  $\eta^2 = .63$ ). Respondents were more likely to use features that do not require much time, increased creative effort, or that permit substantial amounts of control, while choosing features that allow for post hoc contribution and require a minimum effort on the part of the user, with all differences between levels of participation being different on a statistically significant level (all Sidak corrected post hoc  $t$ -tests  $p$ -values  $< .001$ ).

### *Relationship between participation, motivation, and contextual factors (RQ3 and RQ4)*

A number of multiple linear regression models were tested independently for each type of participatory activity in order to examine whether different types of motivations affected the propensity to participate after controlling for the effect of other potentially confounding variables (see "Method" section). Considering that responses to the question 'How likely is it that you would use X-feature, when reading an item you are very interested in' better reflect the internal disposition toward participation than 'How often do you use X-feature', it is the former that is used as the outcome variable for the findings reported below.

The clearest and most consistent finding when examining motivation is that people who are more likely to participate are mainly driven by the motivation to inform the public discourse as well as by what was termed reactionary motivation (see Table 3). For all types of activity, the former motivation proved a statistically significant predictor of increased participation, while reactionary motivation also proved to be a significant and powerful predictor for all but two types of activity: submitting multimedia and submitting articles. Information and expression motivations as predictors of participation have been reported before (Chung and Yoo, 2008; Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011), while the reactionary motivation lines up with evidence suggesting that users are drawn to UGC on the ground of persuading or mobilizing others against dominant discourses or interpretations

**Table 2.** Actual use and propensity to use participatory tools.

Participatory affordance	Features	Outcome variable	Response categories (%)			
			Never/very Unlikely	Rarely/ unlikely	Sometimes/ somewhat likely	Often – daily <sup>a</sup> / very likely
Very low	Online polls	Actual use	7.9	13.6	28.8	47.1
		Likelihood of using <sup>b</sup>	6.8	15.8	26.7	47.4
Very low category average	Content rating	Actual use	34.5	22.2	21.9	17.5
		Likelihood of using	22.6	22.4	28.4	22.6
Low	Comments	Actual use	21.2	17.9	25.3	32.3
		Likelihood of using	14.7	19.1	27.5	35
Low category average	Discussion forums	Actual Use	45.2	31.1	14.7	5.5
		Likelihood of using	26	28.2	25.2	17.5
Sharing	Social networks sharing	Actual use	61.3	21.9	8.3	3.6
		Likelihood of using	43.1	30.6	15.9	6.1
Very low category average	Social networks sharing	Actual use	53.2	26.5	11.5	4.6
		Likelihood of using	34.5	29.4	20.6	11.8
Low category average	Social networks sharing	Actual use	44.2	19.9	20.2	11.3
		Likelihood of using	33.1	16.1	18.8	27.5

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Participatory affordance	Features	Outcome variable	Response categories (%)				
			Never/very Unlikely	Rarely/unlikely	Sometimes/somewhat likely	Often – daily <sup>a/</sup> very likely	
Medium	Submit interview questions	Actual use	67.1	18	5.9	4.3	
		Likelihood of using	46.2	27.4	14.2	8	
Medium category average	Submit footage (e.g. video)	Actual use	73.9	14	5.1	2.3	
		Likelihood of using	55.3	25.6	10	4.2	
High	Blogging (within the website)	Actual use	70.5	16	5.5	3.4	
		Likelihood of using	50.8	26.5	12.1	6	
High category average	Submit article	Actual use	71.4	11.7	5.3	6.8	
		Likelihood of using	65.7	17.4	7	5	
High category average		Actual use	72.1	16.1	4.7	2.3	
		Likelihood of using	54.4	26.1	10	4.7	
		Actual use	71.8	13.9	5	4.5	
		Likelihood of using	60	21.8	8.5	4.8	

<sup>a</sup>The response options 'Often' and 'Daily' were pooled to facilitate the examination of this table.

<sup>b</sup>Refers to responses to the question 'How likely is it that you would use X-feature, when reading an item you are very interested in?'

**Table 3.** Relation between participation, motivation, and contextual factors.

Predictor Type	Predictor	Participatory Activity (std. betas)									
		Polls	Content Rating	Content Sharing	Content	Multimedia Submission	Questions Submission	Comments	Forum Participation	Blog	Article Submission
Motivation	Public discourse	0.19 <sup>a</sup>	0.16	0.24	0.17	0.16	0.22	0.21	0.15	0.14	
	Reactionary	0.24	0.22	0.1	0.16	0.16	0.16	0.1	0.1		
	Social			0.19			0.15	0.14	0.12	0.14	
Inhibitors	Ego-related	0.1	0.1								
	Entertainment			NA	0.09		NA		-0.11		
	Real ID requirement				-0.11				-0.13	-0.08	
Attitudes	Registration requirement										
	Mistrust toward media										
	Lack of knowledge										
Demographics	Lack of time										
	Citizens can affect policy		0.07		0.14	0.13	0.09		0.08	0.11	
	News agencies serve own agenda			-0.09	-0.09			-0.08			
Dedicated consumption	Age										
	Gender										
	Education										
Regression	Income										
	Online news consumption										
	Politics and economy										
Specialized content	Society	-0.07	-0.13			-0.08	-0.13	-0.17	-0.09		
	Entertainment and lifestyle					0.15		0.11		0.13	
	Specialized content	.19	.2	.22	.12	.18	.25	.24	.14	.13	

<sup>a</sup>Only standardized betas significant at the  $\alpha = .05$  level included (see Appendix for full list of results).

<sup>b</sup>All regression Fs, statistically significant at the  $\alpha = .001$  level.

of events (Fröhlich et al., 2012), especially in cases of low media trust (Newman et al., 2016), such as the Greek case. Regarding users' choice to 'react' through other affordances but article submissions, this may well be tied to their preference to publish high effort content independently (i.e. in a blog, see Ekdale et al., 2010). In addition, the element of fear may be used as an explanatory factor for the reluctance of users to submit articles containing issue corrections and alternative viewpoints. According to Weber (2014), stories associated with powerful persons or institutions tend to deter the amount of participation, while Mitchelstein (2011) found that users are discouraged to participate in mainstream media due to perceptions of low accreditation of their contributions by professional journalists. Considering these findings, fear of potential editorial discard or fear to express oneself explicitly upon sensitive and controversial issues, may discourage the production of content requiring high effort. Corroborating previous research (Chung and Yoo, 2008; Leung, 2009), socialization motives proved a significant predictor of increased participation through most affordances, namely, sharing, commenting, participating in discussion forums, blogging and submitting articles, but rating content or submitting multimedia material. The findings are in line with arguments that participation is not always news-oriented, but often comprises a social practice of everyday life (Holton et al., 2013).

Entertainment and ego-driven motivations seem to drive participation characterized by low levels of effort, control, and editorial permeability. Users attempting to satisfy egocentric needs are more likely to use features that require the least amount of effort (rating content and participating in polls), which is surprising, given that the activities that allow most creative freedom and enable one to exhibit their work/opinion and claim potential gains are the features at the other end of the effort-spectrum (e.g. submitting multimedia or blogging). Entertainment-related motives only foster the submission of multimedia, while simultaneously being negatively correlated with increased blogging activity. In other words, more need for entertainment means less effortful and disruptive participation.

Moving on to the remaining categories of predictors (*RQ4*), it was found that of the five reasons assumed to affect participation, only the requirement to reveal one's ID proved a significant negative predictor of participation, and even in that case, only for submitting multimedia, articles, and blogging, which are also the cases where one reveals one's thoughts most thoroughly. Users' willingness to reveal their identity when commenting but not in the case of more elaborate contributions may also be attributed to the upper quality of the comments. As *In.gr* has very positive brand attributes, it can be assumed that users engaging in a rational discussion are willing to reveal their ID since participating in a decent debate. Research (Toepfl and Piwoni, 2015) has shown that comments appearing on tabloid news websites contain more emotional statements and have a particularly impolite tone while commenting on non-tabloid sites tends to rely more on counter-argumentation.

Interestingly enough, neither insufficient time nor insufficient knowledge seems to hinder participation to a statistically significant degree. Similarly, being a dedicated consumer of a specific type of news proved not to be a consistent predictor of participation. Only consuming other specialized content (e.g. education) was connected with increased probability to participate in forums, submit questions, or submit articles. The latter seems reasonable in the sense that people are more willing to engage with specialized content,

presumably of personal relevance to them. On the other hand, consuming entertainment/lifestyle-type news was either negatively related to participation in most cases, or unrelated to increased participation, a finding confirming previous research that lightweight news deter participation (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2012; Tenenboim and Cohen, 2013).

Regarding the findings related to attitudinal-type variables examined, an increased sense of political self-efficacy was positively related to activities requiring mid and most effort and enabling increased editorial control on the part of the users, namely, submitting multimedia, questions, articles, and blog posts. This type of evidence confirms previous research (Bergström, 2008), and supports long-established connections between citizen empowerment (Barry and Doherty, 2017), political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), and participatory journalism. More interesting is that neither perceiving the news agency as untrustworthy nor a general perception of the media as promoting their own agenda proved to be an inhibiting factor for participating, as has been previously reported (Chung, 2008). In fact, holding the belief that news organizations have their own agenda was positively associated with rating and commenting, a finding presumably connected with the desire to contradict given interpretations of the relevant news items. As recent evidence has shown, 'participation may also be motivated by a desire to correct what those with low trust see as falsehood or distortion' (Newman et al., 2016: 101).

Finally, regarding the effect of demographic variables, the results showed no effect on participation. This comes in contrast with previous findings which reported that men (Bergström and Wadbring, 2015; Chung and Yoo, 2008), more educated people (Bergström, 2008), and more affluent users (Leung, 2009) tend to participate more. Given though that data were collected through an online survey with demographic distributions being highly skewed, these findings need to be considered with cautiousness. Age, on the other hand, was a statistically significant predictor, but only for some of the activities studied here, with younger users being more likely to share content over SNs, submit multimedia, and participate in forums, a finding in line with research showing that web natives tend to exhibit higher participation in news, especially through SNs (Newman et al., 2016).

## Discussion

Due to Web 2.0 heralding a shift toward a participatory culture, journalism is increasingly discussed through the lens of a participatory paradigm (Singer et al., 2011) that integrates users in the ongoing diffusion, construction, and contestation of news. However, despite ample insights regarding organizational and professional factors affecting participatory journalism (Domingo and Paterson, 2011; Krumsvik, 2018), research on the participatory practices of users is rather limited. This article offers a methodological contribution by suggesting a user-centric conceptualization of participation in reference to nine participatory tools (perceived as mainstream) that enable different levels of participation and call for different levels of creative effort, control, and editorial permeability. The second part of the article is an empirical contribution attempting to complement previous audience studies exploring how users negotiate with and utilize participatory tools within the realm of mainstream journalism. In that context, the

study makes an analytical connection among technological affordances, motivations, and contextual factors. Overall, the study provides empirical evidence challenging the cyber-optimist assumption that the presence of participatory tools necessarily leads to more engaged forms of news media use. This finding joins a growing body of research from a variety of national and cultural contexts (Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004 for Finland; Barnes, 2015 for Australia; Mitchelstein, 2011 for Argentina; Larsson, 2011 for Sweden) sketching the 'reluctant audience' paradigm denoting that a majority of news consumers are uninterested or unwilling to challenge the 'we write, you read' dogma of professional journalism.

In addition, taken together the findings of this study make the following suggestions: First, predictors of news participation differ for variant participatory tools. Second, the motivations for participation do matter as Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) have shown, but in the case of participatory journalism the affordances of the technology, and the effort required have a significant impact on participation: higher levels of creative effort are negatively correlated with participatory activity. Third, polls and share links comprise the most popular participatory tools for users who wish to contribute in the public discourse. Fourth, increased levels of political efficacy and younger demographics seem to affect participation in a positive manner as opposed to interest in lightweight news. Finally, it is suggested that despite socialization motivations being an important predictor of news participation as other studies have demonstrated (Chung and Yoo, 2008; Holton et al., 2013), the motivations to inform the public discourse and counteract the journalistic narratives, are important predictors for participation in the news.

Notwithstanding the overall low participation levels, the findings point to a new paradigm of civic power associated with the expression of views and information and the voicing of alternative issue frames in the networked public sphere(s). Although further research is needed as to the form and attributes of UGC, this development designates a form of power sharing within journalism. However, in order to have a better understanding of the findings, it would be useful to include the culture of consuming news as a parameter for explaining participation. As Roscoe (1999) notes, when consuming news, people tend to consider themselves as audience members on the receiving end of information, a role which diminishes people's interest in producing content themselves. This may be stemming from a deference toward the news items as finished products created by professionals (Larsson, 2011), or the persistence of traditional perceptions of roles in the news-making process (Springer et al., 2015).

Drawing on insights from this study, it is reasonable to argue that the reluctant audience paradigm may also be explained in terms of the 'lazy' audience and the 'fearful' audience, which seem to coexist along with the 'reactive' audience. Following the idea of the 'reluctant' audience referring to low participation levels, the notion of the 'lazy' audience refers to the finding that users tend to avoid participatory features entailing substantial creative effort, while the notion of the 'fearful' audience refers to evidence suggesting that users are reluctant to engage in participatory activity entailing greater exposure of their thoughts and opinion. The latter explanatory assumption has also been supported by Barnes (2015), who argues that a 'shyness toward textual authority' and an accompanying 'lack of confidence' act as barriers to participation. At the same time, we



can discern the ‘reactive’ audience incentivized by the need to counteract mainstream ideas and discourses again using low and mid-effort tools.

To sum up, this article contributes to and complements a body of research upon the practices of audiences within the context of participatory journalism. Although it provides critical results contradicting the assumption of active, reflexive, co-producing users, it also provides evidence supporting the potential of participatory journalism to amplify engagement and participation, thus modestly supporting the optimist school of thought (Dahlgren, 2013; Jenkins, 2006) that sees possibilities and opportunities for civic empowerment within participatory journalism. Finally, the findings supporting the limited and selective audience participation postulate the need to abandon utopian perspectives of participation *in the media* (Carpentier, 2011), but rather engage in more thorough research as to ‘which users tend to be more active creators’, ‘what kind of content are they producing’, and ‘what is the potential impact of that content within professional journalism and within society’. The idea of better understanding audience practices can deepen our knowledge of how people appropriate and relate to participatory media while making sense of the role of the media in people’s lives by avoiding a media-centric perspective (Heikkilä and Ahva, 2015).

Tentative conclusions can be drawn, however, regarding the level and motivations of participation in mainstream journalistic settings, given the non-representativeness of the sample and the lack of diversity as to the source of the data. Also, the regressions reported herein account for 12 percent to 24.6 percent of variance observed, broadly within the range of what has already been reported (see, for example, Chung, 2008), thus suggesting more factors are at play than those employed here. Future research should make efforts to sample from populations from more diverse media organizations and engage in longitudinal research. Also, cross-country comparative research would prove insightful as the peculiarities of the media systems and professional culture bear significant implications on the news consumption culture (Nielsen and Schröder, 2014), affecting the type and frequency of user-contributions in journalism.

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## Notes

1. Source: <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/GR>, accessed, May 2014
2. Source: Eurostat, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/information-society/data/main-tables>

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