"Their two cents worth': Exploring user agency in readers" comments in online news media

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Abstract
This paper explores the assumption that user-generated content in mass media websites gives audiences greater power over influencing news making. Employing a content analysis of readers' comments in various Greek online mass media, the study examines whether commenters assume any of the core journalistic functions regarding news production, in terms of setting the agenda, providing original information, and airing oppositional views on reported issues. From a public sphere perspective, it also examines the degree of diversity of users' opinions within media outlets. The results suggest that whereas users challenge journalistic viewpoints to some extent, this type of audience participation is not likely to render audiences co-producers of news content in significant ways or offer opportunities for cross-cutting political exchanges.

Keywords: user-generated content, participatory journalism, reader comments, audience participation

Introduction

Producing journalistic content with the help of media audiences has a longstanding tradition. Readers' letters to the editor are the most common example of audience participation opportunities offered by the mass media, as an early, pre-digital type of user-generated content (UGC). The popularization of web 2.0 has signaled a new era in audience participation, one that is interactive and allows users to produce and publish their own content online.

These developments have triggered much academic discussion regarding the democratizing potential of user-generated content. Bruns (2007) argues that the introduction of web 2.0 technologies signifies a paradigm shift, where production and usage, giving rise to the novel practice of *produsage*. Within the news production domain, UGC applications promise to involve users in processes of selecting, distributing, prioritizing and interpreting news stories and give them the power to challenge professional media monopoly by setting the agenda, framing the news, and acting as watchdogs of the watchdogs.

As internet users engage more actively in content production and participatory journalism practices, an increasing number of studies focus on the impact of user-generated content production on established journalism (e.g. Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010; Paulussen & Ugile, 2008; Singer et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, few attempts have been made so far to study the actual content produced by users and its implications for giving audience members "greater agency or authority to influence news making" (Hermida, 2011, p. 14).

This paper examines user-generated content in Greek mass media websites. A content analysis of readers' comments is carried out to explore user agency, means as the capacity of readers to assume new roles regarding news production, intervening in processes of gatekeeping traditionally performed by media journalists, and substantially altering the journalist narratives. Our main objective is to develop a better understanding concerning the empirically underexplored area of readers' comments and gain some insights regarding the potential of user-generated content to transform public communication.

From industrial production of symbolic content to "produsage": A power shift?

The emergence of digital interactive technologies has fired up a still ongoing debate about the potential transformation of the role of the audience and the notions of "producer"/"consumer" and "active participant"/"passive recipient". As web 2.0 applications spread broadly and rapidly, what this development signifies for democratic communication in the public sphere emerges as a vexed question. Thus far, two main approaches have been put forth regarding the potential impact of participation opportunities offered to the public online.

The first approach is represented by theorists who have declared a *shift in power* to the benefit of users through the rise of a new "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006), in which the boundaries between production and consumption become blurry and porous. Bruns (2007) argues that the development of blogs, wikis, social networking websites, citizen journalism and other interactive tools and applications signify an *ongoing paradigm shift*, where notions such as "production" need to be conceptualized outside the industrial socio-economic models. What emerges is a hybrid model of "produsage", which is defined as "the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement" (Bruns, 2008). In this process, "the production of ideas takes place in a collaborative, participatory environment which breaks down the boundaries between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge" (Bruns, 2007, p. 2). The outcomes of this process appear in the form of unfinished, editable work, rather than in the form of fixed or complete products of the industrial type.

In the realm of news production, audience participation is becoming a prominent trend, as mass media organizations increasingly incorporate user-generated content applications in their websites, inviting users to create their own blogs, submit videos and pictures, and rate, post or comment on news articles. This

trend is growing fast and is only expected to get stronger over time (Karlsson, 2010b, p. 69; Richardson & Stanyer, 2011). According to many scholars, this participatory shift in news production seems to hold the promise to transform traditional processes of news production, inaugurating new models of journalism. Terms such as 'participatory journalism' (Bowman & Willis, 2003), 'citizen journalism' (Bruns, 2007; Kaufhold, Valenzuela & Zúñiga, 2010; Lewis, Kaufhold & Lasorsa, 2010), 'networked journalism' (Jarvis, 2006) and 'user-generated content' are being used more or less interchangeably to refer to the individuals' active role in the elaboration and distribution of news content (Bowman & Willis, 2003). The new journalism(s) are described as *discursive* and *deliberative* (Bruns, 2007), as professionals and amateurs collaborate to share facts, ideas and perspectives (Jarvis, 2006; Williams, Wardle & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011) and essentially *networked*:

"Journalists […] find themselves integrated into a network in which the distances have collapsed. Physical distances have been erased by a global network that instantaneously delivers information everywhere and anywhere, while social ones have been erased by the inherently open and wholly participatory nature of that network" (Singer et al., 2011, p. 7).

In these participatory journalism cultures, engaging the public is assumed to assist journalists in "telling stories more honestly" (Beckett, 2008). This means that news is no longer a finished project, which claims exclusive access to the truth. Rather, it focuses on the process more than the product (Jarvis, 2006) and is in open dialogue with affected communities, offering different angles from a wide range of sources. Opportunities for audience participation are often seen as a newly acquired *agency* for active audiences that signals a shift in power in favour of social agents (Robinson, 2009), as well as a means for redressing power asymmetries inherent in contemporary mediation processes and for challenging journalists' gatekeeping power and media monopoly in defining social realities (Ansari & Munir, 2010; Örnebring, 2008; Williams et al., 2011). This kind of communicative activity performed by ordinary citizens has the potential to diversify the public sphere, by offering multiple perspectives on issues from a variety of standpoints and subject positions (Karlsson, 2010a; Robinson, 2009; Singer, 2009).

Other theorists, however, do not see the discourse of 'participatory journalism' as an unproblematic framework for examining UGC and remain skeptical regarding the agency attributed to new media users. Carpentier (2011) explicates how the signification of participation is "itself part of the power struggles in society" (p. 25) so that the definition of participation in maximalist or minimalist terms determines whether we talk about a strong form of democratic involvement in decision-making or much weaker forms of involvement. Regarding the relation of audiences to the media, in minimalist participatory forms "media professionals retain strong control over process and outcome, often restricting participation to mainly access and interaction […] instrumentalizing and incorporating the activities of participating non-

professionals" (ibid, p. 26). On the contrary, in maximalist articulations of participation, professional control is restricted and the political nature of media participation is acknowledged.

Critical approaches to participatory journalism in particular draw mainly on four arguments. First, it is argued that corporate-sponsored 'citizen' media allow market forces to structure and condition 'participation' in online content production (van Dijck, 2009; Kperogi, 2011). Mainstream media are seen as steering users' actions, dictating the content they produce and shaping the characteristics of online communities. Kperogi (2011) takes the example of the CNN 'Assignment Desk' to argue that corporate media actually set the agenda for citizen journalists, while categories for organizing user-generated content (such as the "newsiest" category) impose conventional conceptions of what is news upon citizen journalists. Through these mechanisms, not only traditional news values are not being challenged, but they are legitimized through the active consent of participating audiences. Second, user-generated content is seen as a "mine of free labor", as corporate media tend to exploit free creative labor, according to their profit-making logic (van Dijck, 2009; Kperogi, 2011). User-generated content, which is seen by users as a leisure activity, becomes "part of the commodification of work under capitalist system" (Vujnovic et al., 2010, p. 286). In addition, users of UGC sites do not only provide content but predominantly (personal) data, over whose use and distribution have no power (van Dijck, 2009). Third, the discourse of 'user empowerment' through generating content enhances the myth of a digital revolution in journalism and works towards legitimizing capitalism's new forms, by enhancing familiar myths of emancipation and upward mobility (Rebillard & Touboul, 2010). Lastly, the mainstreaming of citizen journalism eventually protects and preserves traditional industrial journalism from the threats of true, oppositional citizen media. Thus, UGC represents an "aggressive hegemonic cooptation of citizen media by corporate media" (Kperogi, 2011).

Empirical studies on user-generated content in mass media websites

The recent growth of online opportunities for audience participation in mainstream media websites has attracted scholars' attention, who have attempted to record and analyze several aspects of this phenomenon. Most studies have so far focused on recording the various types of opportunities for content generation that are available to users, and on analyzing the multiple levels of user participation in content production (e.g. Domingo et al., 2008; Hong, McClung & Park, 2008; Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010; Örnebring, 2008).

The findings of these studies suggest that, although a variety of features for audience participation are available, *no real boundary shift* occurs between journalists and their audiences (Karlsson, 2010b). Users still maintain the roles they already had in traditional media settings, namely the role of (active) recipient

(but not of the news producer), of information source for a specific story or issue (but not of unsolicited content) and of a member of an online community formed around the media outlet (but kept separate from professional journalism and clearly distanced from the newsroom) (Hermida, 2011, p. 27-31). As shown by a study of newspapers in ten different countries in late 2007 and early 2008 (Singer et al., 2011), the two most closed stages of news production are the agenda-setting stage and the information filtering stage (gatekeeping). Journalists tend to tightly limit the agenda-setting capability of citizens, while enabling readers to decide what is news (gatekeeping) is generally taboo for journalists (Hermida, 2011, p. 20-21).

The reasons for this resistance are brought into light by several studies that have looked into the attitudes of editorial and journalistic staff toward user-generated content (Harrison, 2010; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Lewis et al., 2010; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Singer & Ashman, 2009; Singer, 2010; Thurman, 2008). According to these studies, media organizations appear to be characterized by *ambivalence* vis-à-vis 'participatory journalism'. Although they recognize many benefits from utilizing audience input, editors and journalists voice the express need to rescue what they see as core journalistic values (credibility, objectivity, newsworthiness, and autonomy), as well as to avoid legal responsibilities for content nor generated neither controlled by them. Additional factors are the established organizational structures (hierarchy, intra-organizational divisions and institutionalization) that prevent a radical change in professional routines. An exception is Robinson's newsroom study (2010) that records a slow attitudinal shifting in news organizations towards involvement of audiences in decision-making processes, especially among the younger generation of journalists who develop more open relationships to readers and support more liberal policies regarding conduct and content control in online spaces.

The studies reviewed above have explored audience participation either by analyzing interactive features on media websites or through journalists' self-reported accounts. Yet, the actual content and the meanings produced by users on news media online spaces have received significantly less scholarly attention. Singer (2009), based on a content analysis of users' comments in three Scottish newspapers, found that these discursive spaces perform a bridging function, as users from remotely located spaces can come together and get involved in political debates about issues of common interest, while at the same time serve as channels for social interaction and community building.

Other studies examined whether users' comments challenge mass media in their core journalistic functions. For instance, Karlsson (2010a) focused on how users' comments posted on four Swedish newspapers framed news reports related to the swine flu. His findings suggest that users' contributions challenged the dominant media frame, and took a critical stance towards mass media coverage of the issue. Similarly, Robinson (2009) compared how professional and amateur journalists covered the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina in 2006, reporting that in several occasions users challenged the newspapers' version of the story

and expressed anti-media feelings. McCluskey and Hmielowski (2012) found that online reader comments provided a wider range of viewpoints, compared to letters to the editor, in the context of the "Jena Six" incident, a racially charged controversy in the US. In this case, online posts also tended to challenge traditional institutions more often than did the letters to the editors. These findings suggest that users' contributions broaden the public sphere, while they also challenge mass media's role as gatekeepers.

Study objectives and research questions

The review of the relevant literature suggests that the question of how content produced by users contributes to the depiction of the social world is underexplored. This study examines whether UGC expands the public debate to topics and interpretations not originally reported by mainstream media, by conducting a content analysis of users' comments on journalistic articles. We chose to focus on users comments, not only because they are generally the most common and popular form of audience participation (Reich, 2011, p. 97; Williams et al., 2011, p. 88), but also because the other form of high-involvement user activity, the production of news stories, was offered by only a few online Greek media. The study's main objectives are to ascertain whether commenters assume textual agency by performing any of the core journalistic functions regarding news production, that is, (a) setting the news agenda, (b) intervening in the gatekeeping function by providing original, unreported information, and (c) interpretating the news in alternative ways by airing oppositional views on reported issues.

Agenda-setting refers to the emphasis mass media place on certain issues, which is considered as a strong factor affecting the importance media audiences attribute to these issues (Scheufele & Tewsbury, 2007, p. 11). Defining which issues make the (daily) agenda is among the most significant processes in news making, and one of the news production stages that are effectively sealed off from intervention by non-professionals (Hermida, 2011, p. 20-21). In fact, for journalists 'good' comments are the ones that stay on topic and do not stray from the agenda established by the news organization (Robinson, 2010, p. 134, 140). To explore whether readers engage in the agenda-setting process through their commenting activity, we asked whether they raised new issues in their comments, different from the topics that were introduced by the journalistic articles on which they commented. Since Greek online media offer very few opportunities for submitting original news stories (explained in more detail later), we assumed that users might utilize the space provided by the media to render visible issues that concern them and are not made salient by news media. Thus, the first research question is formulated as follows:

RQ1: Do users raise new issues of public concern in their comments, broadening mass media agendas?

Gatekeeping includes "selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and otherwise massaging information to become news" (Shoemaker, Vos & Reese, 2008, p. 73). Established media have been criticized for non-transparent and over-determined selection processes, which cannot be questioned by the public (Goode, 2009), often associated with over-accessing elite sources and casting them the 'primary definers' of issues (Hall et al., 1978). Given that experiences of 'ordinary people' and perspectives 'from below' are typically overlooked in most news reports, we were interested in examining whether commenters used the space offered to them to provide original and unreported in mainstream media information about the issues at hand – or, instead, whether they kept to expressing opinions, complying with the role of the commenter which is assigned to them by the media organization. Thus, the second and third research questions read as follows:

RQ2: Do users provide original, unreported in mainstream media information in their comments, enriching mass media content?

RQ3: Do users express opinions in their comments?

Comments open up public spaces where readers can be involved in the interpretation of news stories and the critical discussion of the issues they broach. As readers' perspectives on a given issue are added to each news report (since comments are typically appended at the end of the news article), they may influence other readers, either by challenging the journalistic article's stance or by offering new perspectives through which the issue can be interpreted and evaluated. In our fourth research question we asked whether users tended to agree or disagree with the stance taken by journalists in their news articles, aiming at measuring the extent to which users challenge journalistic viewpoints.

RQ4: Do users challenge journalistic viewpoints by airing oppositional views?

Lastly, the open discussion of public issues invokes the idea of the democratic public sphere, in which members of the public come together as citizens to deliberate and form opinions, intersubjectively and in an argumentative fashion (Habermas, 1989). Online spaces formed around established media hold potential in this respect, since users come together in their capacity as readers of the news and discussants of issues of public importance, engaging in an essentially civic practice (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 158-159). Although spaces for commenting news articles mostly lack the interactive features found in forums, they remain essentially discursive spaces. A significant element of public discussion is diversity, which allows multiple perspectives to be heard and weighed before an opinion is formed. The existence of online discursive spaces, where citizens can be exposed to opinions different than their own and to a variety of arguments and social experiences, is fundamental to prevent political self-insulation (Sunstein, 2007). That said, our fifth research questions reads:

RQ5: How diverse are users' comments within each news outlet?

Methodology

The Greek online media landscape

The selection of the Greek media system as a case study presents some interesting aspects, as it is a representative example of the countries belonging to the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralism media model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), which is underexplored in the relevant literature. Greek media share with other Southern European countries some major characteristics, such as low newspaper circulation, a tradition of advocacy reporting, high concentration of the press in the hands of few publishers and media cross-ownership, the tendency of media owners to use them as means for exerting pressure on politicians, and limited development of journalism as an autonomous profession (Kontochristou & Terzis, 2007; Papathanassopoulos, 2007, p. 192-194). Unlike almost a decade ago, when the few newspapers that were online mirrored their print versions, with minimal online sophistication and interactivity (Dimitrakopoulou & Siapera, 2005), today most Greek mass media have sophisticated websites, whereas online news portals have mushroomed.

To map the Greek online media landscape regarding its participatory capacity, we recorded the types of audience participation opportunities found in the most prominent Greek newspapers' and news portals' websites, based on newspapers' circulation and Alexa.com rankings. Table 1 summarizes the results of this record, indicating the types of UGC features that are available in each outlet (in January 2011). To assess the extent to which these features allow audiences to be involved in core journalistic functions, we used existing typologies of UGC features to group them into categories (Table 2). An important distinction between different types of UGC is drawn from Örnebring's (2008) typology referring to the level of users' involvement in content generation. Örnebring distinguishes between *customization* (e.g. RSS feed, grade/mark, interface customization), which is considered as 'low user involvement' compared to the actual *content production* (textual, audio, and video, such as blogs, comments, news items)[1]. An additional typology makes the distinction between five news production stages: access/observation (initial information-gathering stage at which source material is generated), selection/filtering (gatekeeping stage at which editorial decisions are made), processing/editing (writing and editing of a story), distribution, and interpretation (Hermida, 2011, p. 18; Domingo et al., 2008)[2].

Table 2 demonstrates how the UGC types found in Greek media websites are categorized according to these typologies. Regarding the websites of Greek traditional newspapers, it is interesting to note that, consistent with findings from other countries (Singer et al., 2011), they display a limited degree of

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[1] Örnebring (2008) classifies direct comment on articles as *customization* features and comments on forums as *production* features (p. 774) – a distinction generally not adopted in other studies.
[2] Although Hermida (2011, p. 18) defines the selection/filtering stage as "the 'gatekeeping' stage when decisions are made about what should be reported or published", we included in this category user recommendation on articles (categories of most read, most popular, most e-mailed, most commented etc. articles). Although it is a weak form of participation, it allows readers to get involved in increasing or decreasing the salience of an issue or journalistic article, in addition to the editorial decisions about the significance of news items.

openness to readers in the stages of most significance for the news production process (access/observation, selection/filtering and processing/editing). Online news websites, on the other hand, tend to provide more opportunities to publics to get involved in the submission of news stories and the news selection processes. However, none of these websites offer any opportunities to the public to step in the writing and editing of a news story.

Table 1. UGC features on Greek news media websites (January 2011)

	1 User news production	2 User recommendation (articles)	3 User evaluation (articles)	4 User recommendation (comments)	5 User evaluation (comments)	6 Online polls	7 Comments	8 Discussion, Forum	9 Share article	TOTAL
ESTABLISHED PRINT NEWSPAPERS										
Adesmeftos Typos		X							X	2/9
Free Sunday		X		X			X			3/9
Real News			X					X	X	3/9
Ethnos						X			X	2/9
Eleftheri Ora		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8/9
Eleftheros Typos	X					X			X	3/9
Eleftherotypia	X	X		X		X	X*	X	X	7/9
Avgi		X							X	2/9
Kathimerini							X*		X	2/9
Naftemporiki		X	X	X			X**		X	5/9
Proto Thema		X	X	X		X	X		X	6/9
Rizospastis									X	1/9
Ta Nea		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	7/9
To Vima						X	X**		X	3/9
To Pontiki		X	X	X			X		X	5/9
Espresso							X		X	2/9
ONLINE NEWS										
Newspost		X	X	X			X		X	5/9
fimotro		X							X	2/9
tromaktiko									X	1/9
zougla	X	X		X	X		X***	X	X	7/9
Newsbeast	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	8/9
TVXS	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	7/9
Newsit	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	7/9
in.gr		X	X		X		X*		X	5/9
news247		X	X		X		X	X	X	6/9
Pathfinder	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	8/9
TOTAL	7/26	18/26	13/26	11/26	7/26	8/26	18/26	9/26	25/26	

Notes
1 *Submit news*
2 *User recommendation for articles (most recently read, most read, most popular, most e-mailed, most shared, most commented)*
3 *User evaluation of articles (rate, like, dislike article)*
4 *User recommendation for comments (most recent, most recently read, most popular)*
5 *User evaluation of comments (rate, like, dislike comment)*
6 *Online polls*
7 *Comment on article*
8 *Threaded discussion, Forum*
9 *Email article, share in social media (Facebook, Twitter, other)*
X*   Commenting available only in selected articles, X**   Commenting available only to subscribers, X*** Commenting available only in users' blog posts

Table 2. Categorization of UGC features on Greek news media websites

	Level of user involvement		Stage of news production				
	Low involvement	High involvement	Access/ Observation	Selection/ Filtering	Processing/ Editing	Distribution	Interpretation
ESTABLISHED PRINT NEWSPAPERS							
Number of newspapers that include at least one feature of each category	All	12/16	2/16	9/16	0/16	15/16	13/16
ONLINE NEWS							
Number of news sites that include at least one feature of each category	All	8/10	5/10	9/10	0/10	10/10	8/10

<u>Notes</u>
- Low involvement features: user recommendation (articles & comments), user evaluation (articles & comments), online polls, share article
- High involvement features: user news production, comments, discussion/forum
- Access/observation: user news production
- Selection/ filtering: user recommendation (articles)
- Processing/ editing: none
- Distribution: share article
- Interpretation: user recommendation (comments), user evaluation (articles & comments), online polls, comment, discussion/forum

Sampling

This study's sample comprises of reader comments attached to 177 news articles, posted on the websites of four Greek newspapers and five news portals. As the structure and the rules of a website have been shown to affect the ways in which users engage in online discussions (Papacharissi, 2009), our sample was drawn from multiple sources in order to capture a general picture of users' comments and avoid biases induced by website-specific characteristics and content biases of the various news outlets.

To sample the websites for the content analysis, we selected all online newspapers that provided readers the opportunity to comment on news stories. The selected websites were chosen on the basis of their popularity among Greek internet users, based on Alexa.com ranking of the 100 most visited websites in Greece. The online news websites that qualified for analysis were the ones that adhered to professional journalistic standards, published news articles written by professional journalists and contained open and visible commenting for all users. Websites that allowed commenting only to subscribers were excluded from the selection process, as were blogs and news aggregating websites which were simply republishing stories from various sources.

The sample of news websites included nine online media: four newspapers and five news portals. *Eleftherotypia* and *Kathimerini* are two daily long-established, quality newspapers in Greece, the former of left-leaning and the latter of conservative political orientation. *Ta Nea*, the best-selling daily newspaper, is published by Lambrakis Publishing Group, one of the most powerful and influential actors in the Greek

media landscape. *Proto Thema* is a conservative, rather sensationalist Sunday newspaper. Regarding the online portals, *in.gr* is a well-established and very popular online news portal that also belongs to Lambrakis Publishing Group and is a typical case of factual and detached style of reporting. The news portals *News247*, *Newsbeast* and *Newsit* figure among the most popular Greek news websites and include a blend of general-interest news and infotainment, owned by well-known journalists or large enterprise groups. *TVXS* represents the alternative media sector in our sample with emphasis on investigative journalism. It is an independent online outlet that does not belong to any large media company and it is funded by online advertising and members' subscriptions, who in turn enjoy some privileges such as advanced commenting status and the right to publish their own news and articles.

To select the news articles for analysis, a random stratified sample of four constructed weeks was selected (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005, p. 112-120), for a five month interval, from October 2010 to February 2011. All websites were examined for the selected days in order to identify news articles that contained users' comments. At this stage emerged the question whether every article including comments should be analyzed or instead articles referring to a particular topic. We opted for the latter option for the following reasons: first, the analysis of texts (news articles and users' comments) referring to the same topic would allow direct comparisons between various online media outlets, since dissimilar topics are often subjected to differential treatment in media coverage. Second, it would provide a sample of conceptual coherence that would allow also framing analysis of the texts (not included in this paper). Two major issues dominated media coverage and public discussion in Greece during this period: the financial crisis and immigration. Considering the former too extensive and diverse, the issue of immigration was selected. Immigration is among public issues that exhibit significant agenda-setting effects on the internet (Roberts, Wanta & Dzwo, 2002) and as a subject that produces rich argumentative data is often selected for textual analysis (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011, p. 986). Furthermore, a series of important immigration-related events[3] occurred in Greece during the selected period, which attracted significant media coverage and triggered a controversial debate on the issue.

Based on the above criteria, 177 immigration-related stories were identified. All articles were published on randomly selected dates and included from 1 to 305 user comments. Overall, the sample included 177 articles and 3513 comments. Data related to both articles and user comments were downloaded and logged to excel files in order to facilitate the coding process.

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[3] These events were:
1. Members of the left-wing party SYRIZA were attacked, while campaigning for the municipal elections, by extreme right-wing groups protesting against the increasing number of immigrants in Aghios Panteleimonas, a neighbourhood close to Athens city centre (October, 2010)
2. Declaration of the government's intention to build a fence on the Greek-Turkish borderline to prevent immigrants from entering the country illegally (December, 2010)
3. The occupation of a law school university building in Athens by 300 immigrants, who protested against government's delay to provide them with work and residence permits (January 2011).

Variables and coding

To firm up coding scheme and definitions, three coders participated in numerous pilot coding sessions, coding articles and comments not included in the sample. The content analysis of the 3513 comments was conducted by three coders, using the single comment as the unit of analysis. Comments were coded according to four variables, which correspond to the first four research questions of the study.

First, to determine whether UGC broadens mass media agendas by raising new issues of public concern (RQ1), comments were coded as raising a new topic when they introduced issues that were not discussed by the journalistic article (hence they were not directly related to immigration). A significant number of comments raising new issues would suggest that users break with the media-defined issue hierarchy and broach issues that are of concern to them. When comments included links to other websites, the main text of the linked website was content analyzed. Comments were coded as "not applicable" in terms of topic change, when the comment did not make sense (incomprehensible), when users commented on the terms of the discussion (metacommunication), communicated with each other about private issues (personal communication), referred to other users, included artistic content (such as poems, songs or links to music videos and movies), or engaged in phatic communication (Jakobson, 1981) (that is, aimed at keeping open channels of communication and maintaining contact between users within the commenting forum). In cases where more than one function were present (e.g. introduction of a new topic and metacommunication), the main one was coded, based on word count.

Second, to explore whether UGC enriches mass media content by providing original, unreported in mainstream media information (RQ2), a variable was introduced that inquired whether comments added original information to the topic in question. Given that mass media have been criticized for heavily relying on a limited range of official sources to communicate the facts, it is assumed that the inclusion of 'ordinary people' in the news production process could yield information usually overlooked or excluded by mass media – for instance, drawn from everyday experiences in the lifeworld (e.g. eyewitness accounts, information from interpersonal sources and communities, alternative media, unofficial online sources etc.). Well-known current facts distributed by mainstream media or information deriving from users' shared cultural heritage (e.g. historical facts, poems) were not coded as original information.

Third, we were interested in investigating whether users engage in commenting activity in order to express an opinion, or their comments are of factual nature, ask questions etc. (RQ3). Comments were coded as expressing opinion when users explicitly expressed support for a particular position or a position was implicitly supported by use of particular wording.

A fourth variable recorded users' attitudes towards immigration, in order to explore whether users tend to challenge journalistic viewpoints (RQ4). Coders coded such attitudes as positive, when users chose to

defend immigrants' rights, negative, when users' comments were directed against immigrants, mixed, when users recognized the validity of arguments both for and against immigrants, or unclear, when users' stance towards the issue was ambiguous or hard to define. Also, to compare journalists' and users' viewpoints, coders were asked to determine whether there was a positive, negative or neutral/mixed/unclear stance towards immigrants in the journalistic article.

To ensure reliability, two coders coded independently all articles and comments. The intercoder agreement scores were 88% for the 'news article stance' variable, 92% for the 'raise new topic' variable, 94% for the 'original information' variable, 95% for the 'expression of opinion' variable and 86% for the 'user comment stance' variable (simple agreement).

Findings and discussion

Our first research question (RQ1) asks whether users broaden the media agenda through their comments, by raising new issues of public concern. As indicated in Table 3, 73% of the users' posts commented on the topic of the original journalistic text. Only few occasions were noted where users chose to discuss a topic different from the one the news article referred to. More specifically, in 9% of the comments new issues were raised. Some of these were indirectly connected to the issue of immigration (e.g. left-wing party politics, the rise of extreme right-wing groups, the globalization of the capitalist system), but other topics were entirely unrelated to immigration, such as the government's decision to take hard austerity measures, the financial crisis or the Greek mass media system.

A finding that bears comment is that in a significant number of comments (18%) users used the public space provided to them not to discuss issues of public concern but rather to refer to personal issues, comment on each others' identity or simply engage in phatic communication. Most often, however, they debated the nature and the rules of the discussion (e.g. lack of argumentation, racist speech) or the actions of the websites' moderators (metacommunication).

Table 3. Analysis of users' comments

Do comments raise new issues?		
	Frequency	Percent
No	2578	73%
Yes	306	9%
N/A	629	18%
Total	*3513*	*100%*
Do comments provide original information?		
No	2780	79%
Yes	104	3%
N/A	629	18%
Total	*3513*	*100%*
Do comments express opinion?		
No	51	2%
Yes	2833	81%
N/A	629	18%
Total	*3513*	*100%*
Which stance do comments take towards immigrants?		
For	522	15%
Against	1411	40%
Mixed	113	3%
Unclear	499	14%
N/A	968	28%
Total	*5315*	*100%*

Our second research question (RQ2) asked whether users' comments enrich mass media content by providing original, unreported in mainstream media information. In the following comment on a news story about the occupation of a university building by immigrant protesters, a reader offers his eyewitness account and discusses some details that had been excluded from mainstream media reports:

"The building, where the immigrants set up their protest, is an old building on Solonos street which is under renovation. The university lectures are not being obstructed in any way… no damage was done in the building. On the contrary, I personally assisted cleaning the building from garbage. We cleaned the toilets and they are fully functional again. We've been working all day long on Saturday. There was no intrusion in the building. Everyone involved knew about the planned protest" (TA NEA, *25/1/2011*).

However, as shown on Table 3, such examples are scarce, since only 3% of the comments in our sample provided readers with additional original information on the issue at hand. These findings provide no evidence of a strong 'citizen journalism' activity in our sample, since users do not tend to utilize the comments' space to publicize original information, drawn from everyday life and social experiences or other sources outside the circuit of journalistic information.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that users occasionally shared information drawn from the mass media or commonly known facts (e.g. historical information), which provided important background information and could facilitate other readers in developing a better understanding of some aspects of the immigration problem. Evidence from political psychology suggests that many people find it hard to understand political news because "the political world depicted by news media, which are the public main sources of current information, often lucks sufficient details to allow audiences to capture the messages' connotations" (Graber, 2001, p. 22). Therefore, although only a few comments include newsworthy information, it is likely that they complement the journalistic product in other significant ways.

Our third research question (RQ3) investigated whether users express their opinions on public issues, through their comments. As expected, Table 3 demonstrates that expressing opinion is the core function of comments (81%). In very few cases (2%) users asked questions or made factual statements in their comments.

The fourth research question (RQ4) asked whether users challenge journalistic opinions by airing oppositional views. Table 4 shows findings for the journalistic article valence towards the immigration issue. Almost one third (36%) of the news articles took a neutral, mixed or unclear stance towards immigrants. Most articles (46%) assumed a positive standpoint, while 18% took a negative stance. Table 5 shows differences between media outlets. The news portals *TVXS* and *Newsbeast* are the two outlets that openly advocate a positive stance towards immigrants. Moving on to users' stance towards immigrants, table 3 shows that most comments (40%) included negative opinions against immigrants, whereas 15% of the comments took a positive stance and about as many were unclear in their position. Only 3% of the comments assumed a mixed position.

Table 4. News article valence towards immigrants

	Frequency	Percent
Positive	82	46%
Negative	32	18%
Neutral/mixed/unclear	63	36%
Total	*177*	*100%*

Table 5. News article valence towards immigrants per outlet

	Positive	Negative	Neutral/mixed/unclear
Eleftherotypia	2	0	0
in.gr	1	0	1
News247	2	1	6
Newsbeast	18	5	8
Newsit	7	4	9
Protothema	9	7	16
TVxs	35	5	9
Ta Nea	5	7	12
Kathimerini	3	3	2

Comparing journalists' and users' stance, it seems that, on the whole, journalists take more often pro-immigrant positions and are, understandably, more neutral in their coverage, whereas users express more often anti-immigrant positions in largely opinionated comments. To get a more accurate picture of the extent to which users challenge journalistic views, we computed, separately for each news article, the number of comments that supported or opposed the stance taken by the journalist in the news article. This analysis was conducted for news articles that expressed either positive or negative opinions (thus neutral articles were excluded) and had more than five comments attached to them, after omitting comments with unclear or no opinion (n=51 news articles). When the majority of the comments (>50%) concurred with the journalistic valence, the article was coded as having mainly supportive comments; when the majority of the comments diverged from the journalistic valence, the article was coded as having mainly oppositional comments. The results in Table 6 show that most news articles (59%, n=30) attracted comments with supportive views, whereas in 41% of the news articles (n=21) the opinions expressed by users opposed the journalist's viewpoint. This finding suggests that in most cases journalists set the tone of the discussion. On the other hand, in a considerable percentage of news articles users openly express their dissent. The news articles that were mostly challenged by readers were articles that expressed a pro-immigrant position.

Table 6. Supportive and oppositional comments regarding journalistic stance

	Supportive comments (>50%)	Oppositional comments (>50%)	Total
News articles with pro-immigrant stance (% of total news articles with pro-immigrant stance)	10 (36%)	18 (64%)	**28**
News articles with anti-immigrant stance (% of total news articles with anti-immigrant stance)	20 (87%)	3 (13%)	**23**
Total (% of total articles)	**30** (59%)	**21** (41%)	**51**

Inter-media differences

Previous research on online media has highlighted the importance of website-specific characteristics for the attitudes and actions of their users. Papacharissi (2009, p. 216) argues that "technology not only in social networking sites but also in other online social spaces functions architecturally, suggesting particular uses or highlighting technological affordances". Similarly, Van Dijck (2009) calls for an approach that accounts "for technologies and site operators-owners as actors who steer user agency" (p. 55). Technological factors – such as anonymity, the degree of moderation, restrictions on the extent or the type of the messages, the threaded structure of discussions – can affect the content provided by the users. Other factors that can steer user participation or shape user communities formed around online media are outlet-specific, namely the political or ideological orientation of the media outlet, its journalistic values (adoption of alternative/participatory or professional journalism), and the type of the outlet (e.g. online-only news portals or traditional media institutions).

Our fifth research question (RQ5) asked how diverse users' comments are within each news media outlet. As users populate online media to get information and discursively crystallize their opinions about public issues, it is essential that a diverse array of facts and viewpoints exists online so that citizens are exposed to cross-cutting political views and exchanges, instead of being entrenched in like-minded enclaves. To assess the degree of diversity of opinions in comments within each media outlet, we computed the percentage of the majority opinion in the total number of comments for outlets that gathered more than 10 comments to the sampled news articles (Table 7). The results show that most media outlets are rather homogeneous regarding users' comments, as more than 75% of the comments adopt a specific position regarding the issue of immigration (mostly an anti-immigration position). The most diverse outlets are the online news portals *in.gr*, *News247* and *TVXS* (69%-71% homogeneity of opinions). The reasons why the online portals *in.gr* and *TVXS*, two outlets of very dissimilar reporting styles and media philosophy, exhibit

the highest diversity are probably different: in the alternative and left-leaning online outlet *TVXS*, posts are often opinionated and ideologically-laden but not monolithical in their political orientation, which results in the discussion frequently becoming an ideological battleground between contrasting opinions; the *in.gr* website, being the most popular news portal in Greece, possibly attracts a wide range of readers and commenters who are likely to hold and express diverse opinions.

Table 7. Diversity of users' comments in media outlets

Media outlet	What stance does the comment take towards immigrants?				Homogeneity of opinions (%)
	For	Against	Mixed	Total	
in.gr	5	18	3	26	**69%**
News247	5	17	2	24	**71%**
Newsbeast	12	107	4	123	87%
Newsit	28	216	14	258	84%
Proto Thema	60	512	21	593	86%
TVXS	353	112	35	500	**71%**
Ta Nea	37	340	21	398	85%
Kathimerini	20	88	10	118	75%

We also examined differences between the media outlets regarding the extent to which users introduce new topics and the stance adopted by commenters towards immigrants (Tables 8 and 9). Two points can be made here, concerning mostly the news portal *TVXS*. First, as shown in Table 8, there is a notable difference between *TVXS* and all other online media regarding the "change of topic" variable. Almost 40% of users' comments attached to *TVXS* articles fall into the 'not applicable' for topic change category, a percentage much higher than in any other medium. The vast majority of those comments were coded as metacommunication function or as references to other users' personality or identity. This difference can be explained with reference to the alternative and participatory media philosophy that distinguishes *TVXS* from all other media outlets of our sample. As noted above, *TXVS* is an independent online outlet that is supported financially by advertising and by members' subscriptions, who in turn enjoy some privileges such as advanced commenting status and the right to publish their own news and articles. Its owners have given particular emphasis on creating a user community of frequent contributors and commenters. Users publish their comments using pseudonyms in a forum-like commenting structure that allows them to reply directly to other users as well as comment on the news article. An interesting case of comments that were coded as

'metacommunication' was found in several articles posted in the alternative news portal *TVXS* during January-February 2011. After the website's moderators erased some users' accounts without justification, users protested this decision by repeatedly posting the words 'no comment' in the discussion threads. The 'no comment' protest in *TVXS* exemplifies how this community of users perceived the commenting space as their own and used their capacity as commenters to challenge a decision of the media owners that was considered unfair and arbitrary. In general, the observation of interactions in the comments section of *TVXS* shows that its users are particularly interested in the rules under which discussion is conducted, highly value diversity and rational argumentation and have a strong sense of belonging regarding the discussion space they are using, as exemplified by their 'no comment' protest described above.

Table 8. Topics raised by users in media outlets

Media outlet		Does the comment raise a new topic?			Total
		No	Yes	N/A	
Eleftherotypia		8	1	0	**9**
	% within media outlet	89%	11%	0%	100%
in.gr		29	1	0	**30**
	% within media outlet	97%	3%	0%	100%
News247		33	0	1	**34**
	% within media outlet	97%	%	3%	100%
Newsbeast		144	3	6	**153**
	% within media outlet	94%	2%	4%	100%
Newsit		345	28	37	**410**
	% within media outlet	84%	7%	9%	100%
Protothema		655	76	55	**786**
	% within media outlet	83%	10%	7%	100%
TVxs		714	167	523	**1404**
	% within media outlet	51%	12%	37%	100%
Ta Nea		499	19	4	**522**
	% within media outlet	96%	4%	1%	100%
Kathimerini		151	11	3	**165**
	% within media outlet	92%	7%	2%	100%
Total		**2578**	**306**	**629**	**3513**
		73%	**9%**	**18%**	**100%**

The second difference, shown on Table 9, concerns the high percentage of comments in *TVXS* that took a positive stance towards immigrants (51%), compared to much more negative attitudes of commentators in other media. The only other media outlet in which negative views do not outweigh positive ones is the long-established newspaper *Eleftherotypia*, which, together with *TVXS*, are the two left-leaning media in our sample. This suggests that user publics formed discursively around online media may exhibit some ideological semblance to the outlet which they choose for commenting on current news and discussing public issues. To a certain extent, this finding is not surprising as it resonates with the Greek political environment, in which media and public discourse is often characterized by polarization and opinionation. Yet, from a public sphere perspective, it raises questions regarding the degree of diversity found in discursive spaces formed around online media and, consequently, their capacity to act as spaces where multiple viewpoints and arguments are presented – instead of 'echo chambers' where already formed opinions are more likely to be reinforced rather than challenged.

Table 9. Users' stance and media outlets

Media outlet		What stance does the comment take towards immigrants?				Total
		For	Against	Mixed	Unclear	
Eleftherotypia		2	1	3	2	**8**
	% within media outlet	25%	13%	38%	25%	100%
in.gr		5	18	3	2	**28**
	% within media outlet	18%	64%	11%	7%	100%
News247		5	17	2	8	**32**
	% within media outlet	16%	53%	6%	25%	100%
Newsbeast		12	107	4	21	**144**
	% within media outlet	8%	74%	3%	15%	100%
Newsit		28	216	14	80	**338**
	% within media outlet	8%	64%	4%	24%	100%
Proto Thema		60	512	21	62	**655**
	% within media outlet	9%	78%	3%	9%	100%
TVxs		353	112	35	193	**693**
	% within media outlet	51%	16%	5%	28%	100%
Ta Nea		37	340	21	98	**496**
	% within media outlet	7%	69%	4%	20%	100%
Kathimerini		20	88	10	33	**151**
	% within media outlet	13%	58%	7%	22%	100%

Total		522	1411	113	499	2545
		21%	55%	4%	20%	100%

 Note: comments coded as 'not applicable' in this variable are omitted from this table.

Conclusions and suggestions for further research

Although user comments on news articles are the most popular and widely used forms of user-generated content within the framework of participatory journalism, they have received limited attention from scholars so far (Reich, 2011, p. 97-98), particularly regarding the meaning produced by users within the new, hybrid texts of most mass media websites. This study has attempted to address this gap, reporting the findings of a content analysis of users' comments in Greek online mass media. Seeking to explore some aspects of user agency in this context, this study examined whether users assumed any of the core journalistic functions regarding news production, that is, (a) setting the news agenda, (b) intervening in the gatekeeping function by providing original, unreported information, (c) challenging journalistic viewpoints by airing oppositional views. It also examined the degree of diversity of opinions within different media outlets.

Our findings suggest low rates of user engagement in raising new issues, as only 9% of the comments departed from the issue set by the news article. Considering that audiences of traditional media rarely had any opportunity to introduce topics into the public debate, the fact that even a small percentage of users assume this role is not insignificant. On the other hand, it seems that journalists tend to steer audience participation, as they effectively tell them *what to discuss about*. As Reich (2011, p. 98) notes, " […] comments leave the journalist in the traditional position of the lead singer, while audience members generally play the minor, faceless and reactive role of the chorus". Similarly, very few users use comments as channels to provide original information about reported news. Rather, users tend to limit themselves in expressing their opinions on public issues, without interfering with the core journalistic functions – confirming previous studies that show that most users have not yet assumed new roles, apart from the ones they had before the emergence of digital media (Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010). It is evident, then, that this type of audience participation is not rendering – at least not yet – audiences co-producers of news content in significant ways.

Where users retain a higher degree of autonomy is the stage of interpretation of news. In a significant number of comments, users tended to challenge journalists' viewpoints and openly express their dissent. The potential implications of this trend for the formation of public opinion are far-reaching, as professional news no longer have a monopoly over the production of meaning for public issues but they blend with

users' perspectives in new, hybrid texts. However, the extent of and the conditions under which such influence can take place – for instance, the degree of perceived reliability of user-generated content compared to journalistic products – should be explored by future research. On the other hand, most news articles received supportive comments from readers, especially when they expressed anti-immigrant positions. Also, although rhetorical aspects of the comments were not systematically analyzed, it was observed that, at least in some media outlets, users expressed themselves in an intense and opinionated manner, often adopting abrasive tone, confirming journalistic concerns about hate speech regarding highly sensitive issues (such as religion and immigration) (Reich, 2011, p. 112; Richardson & Stanyer, 2011). What is more, the commenting spaces in most media outlets of our sample were found to be lacking in diversity of opinions, with more than 75% of the comments advocating the same position.

The present analysis is not without limitations. The first stems from the use of the single comment as the unit of analysis. Although this strategy is often preferred in similar studies, in nominal variables (such as the 'topic change' variable) some information gets lost, as, for example, in cases where users discussed other issues before eventually commenting on the news article. Similarly, as noted above, several comments provided information which could be valuable to other readers' efforts to interpret the news story, although it did not fit the definition of "original news". It is important, then, that future research examines the various ways in which users thematize news stories through their comments. Lastly, the choice to focus on a specific issue (immigration) limits this study's potential for generalization, even in the Greek context, since certain characteristics of user comments may be issue-specific.

As user participation is still at its very beginning and the current growth rates point to a mainstreaming of audience engagement in the coming years, we can identify three areas for future research. First, scholars need to examine more recently introduced forms and means of audience participation, such as sharing news in social networking sites. Second, it is essential that more research is conducted on user discourses, mainly on the ways in which users frame news stories and the relationship of user frames to dominant journalistic frames. Also, it important to examine the multiple modes of expression employed by talking audiences, such as opinionation and argumentation, in order to assess the quality of discussion as users are engaged more and more in production of meaning in the public arenas of online mass media spaces. A last but not least significant area is the potential impact of user-generated content on readers' perceptions of public issues. We need to develop a better understanding of how user-generated content affects public opinion, how readers perceive content generated by fellow readers and whether user-generated information affects the shaping of opinions regarding public issues.

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