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Production perspectives on audience participation in television : on, beyond and behind the screen

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**Production perspectives on audience participation in television:**

Journal:	<i>Convergence</i>
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Keywords:	production study, television production, audience participation, engagement, producers, audience input, audience perspectives, democracy, qualitative content analysis, interviews, media practices, non-fiction
Abstract:	This article adds an empirical production perspective to the widely-discussed concept of audience participation. It studies how audiences are integrated in the production of television and what motivations producers have to do so. Increased opportunities for audiences to produce or contribute to media content may change the way television is produced, as audience perspectives can be more easily integrated. Theoretically, the notions of corporate and political participation are discussed as a basis for a qualitative content analysis, focussing on a range of non-fictional television programmes in Flanders, combined with in-depth interviews with editors-in-chief to study their motivations, looking at audience participation on screen, beyond the screen and behind the screen. Results show that producers mostly integrate the audience in the production process within a corporate understanding of participation, although some producers have integrated political forms of participation as well. However, rather than focussing on participation, a central motivation for producers is to engage the audience.

## Production perspectives on audience participation in television:

### On, beyond and behind the screen

#### Abstract

This article adds an empirical production perspective to the widely-discussed concept of audience participation. It studies how audiences are integrated in the production of television and what motivations producers have to do so. Increased opportunities for audiences to produce or contribute to media content may change the way television is produced, as audience perspectives can be more easily integrated. Theoretically, the notions of corporate and political participation are discussed as a basis for a qualitative content analysis, focussing on a range of non-fictional television programmes in Flanders, combined with in-depth interviews with editors-in-chief to study their motivations, looking at audience participation on screen, beyond the screen and behind the screen. **Results show that producers mostly integrate the audience in the production process within a corporate understanding of participation, although some producers have integrated political forms of participation as well. However, rather than focussing on participation, a central motivation for producers is to engage the audience.**

#### Keywords

Production study, television production, audience participation, engagement, producers, audience input, audience perspectives, democracy, qualitative content analysis, interviews, media practices, non-fiction.

#### Introduction

This article studies how television producers integrate audience participation in their production process, and, in particular, their motivations to do so. Today, people are active on social media and can upload and spread content online through their smartphones. In short: they can produce media content and, potentially, contribute to established media institutions. This development invites attention to the concept of 'audience participation', which is broadly understood as non-professionals taking part in an (otherwise closed) professional environment of media production, such as television (Fish, 2013; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013). The aim of this article, therefore, is

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3 to understand how audience contributions are integrated within television productions and to  
4 understand producers' ideas and motivations behind this.  
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9 We focus on non-fiction broadcast television in Flanders, the Northern, Dutch speaking part of  
10 Belgium, for several reasons. First, the media market in Flanders is relatively small, allowing for  
11 an analysis of the complete range of domestically produced non-fiction programmes, from current  
12 affairs to entertainment programmes, broadcast by both commercial and public broadcasters.  
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14 Second, non-fictional programmes often imply that the way reality is presented is natural and  
15 common sense (Said, 1997). Analysis of the production process of these programmes,  
16 concentrating on the choices of individual producers with regards to audience participation  
17 within the context of production routines (Havens, Lotz, & Tinic, 2009; Mayer, 2009), allows us to  
18 study how programmes are constructed from certain perspectives, which might change when  
19 audiences participate. **Third, while it is an 'old' medium in a digital media landscape, we**  
20 **focus on content produced in established television institutions because the medium**  
21 **remains an important source of information and entertainment for large groups of people,**  
22 **suggesting that the cultural value of broadcast television remains high (Gray and Lotz,**  
23 **2012; Gripsrud, 2010).**  
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37 **We develop the concept of audience participation, following Jenkins, Ford and Green's**  
38 **(2013) distinction between political and corporate participation, and discuss earlier**  
39 **empirical studies into producer perspectives.** Audiences participate at several levels in the  
40 production process that can have potential importance for the way meaning is constructed.  
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42 Therefore, in the analysis, we take into account both the production 'behind the screen', as is  
43 common in production studies; the activities visible 'on screen', i.e. in the TV broadcast itself; and  
44 activities 'beyond the screen' on other platforms such as social media.  
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## 52 **Defining audience participation**

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54 Our starting point is a clear definition of participation, as the concept has been approached in  
55 many different ways, both in its definition and in the way it is seen to be present in media  
56 (Cornwall, 2008; Hayward, 2013). As Livingstone (2013) explains, participation implies taking  
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3 part in something. This emphasises that participation is never a purely individual act but always  
4 part of a larger whole (Livingstone, 2013; Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013). In the context of this  
5 research project, participation means taking part in the production process of television.  
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8 **Specifically, we focus on broadcast television content generated in media institutions by**  
9 **professional media producers (Gray and Lotz, 2012). However, since television today is**  
10 **produced not just for traditional screens and linear broadcast (Strange, 2011), we study**  
11 **participation on, beyond or behind the screen.**  
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18 The *audience* in audience participation refers to non-professionals or amateurs, taking part in a  
19 professional environment of media production (Fish, 2013). **Even though we employ the word**  
20 **audience rather than user, or produser (Bird, 2011), we acknowledge that part of the**  
21 **audience is 'doing' things rather than merely watching, especially when we study**  
22 **participation (Noguera Vivo et al., 2014).** Furthermore, we do not consider the audience to be  
23 one solid entity but a group of many different individuals with varying media behaviour, that  
24 together shape an imaginary television audience (Ang, 1991).  
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33 Before digitisation, definitions of participation were more unified and straightforward. Scholars  
34 within television studies defined participation as ordinary people who participate on screen in  
35 different television genres such as game shows (Syvertsen, 2001), talk shows (Livingstone and  
36 Lunt, 1994) or reality shows (Hill, 2005). In these cases, participants are essential to the genre.  
37 This type of visible participation remains popular on television today. However, the concept has  
38 broadened and is applied to other genres. Digitisation has increased the diversity in the way  
39 audiences can participate and has spread it across digital platforms. This makes it more complex  
40 to define the concept within broadcast television production.  
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49 Following Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) we distinguish between a 'political' and a 'corporate'  
50 conception of participation as a basis to understand the varied ways in which audiences can  
51 participate. They explain that both conceptions are used by scholars from different disciplines to  
52 discuss the digitising media ecology but that it remains hard to determine how exactly they relate  
53 to each other. Both concepts approach and discuss the issue of participation in different ways.  
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5 The *political* conception of participation deals with shifting power relations in media production  
6 and views the audience as citizens who take part in media production. Based on Pateman's 1970  
7 definition, Carpentier and De Cleen (2008) set out a continuum from a minimal degree of political  
8 participation, where power remains with one party, to a maximal one, where power is equally  
9 shared in the production of meaning. The latter, however, can never be completely achieved  
10 according to these authors: as soon as audiences are professionalised and have equal power, they  
11 are cooperating instead of participating in the production of media (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2008).  
12 However, the continuum is useful to point out the range in power to create media content that  
13 comes with participation.  
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23 The *corporate* conception of participation is not concerned with the shifting relation between  
24 audiences and producers, but sees audiences as consumers who react to media content. This  
25 conception of participation is more concerned with the ways in which media companies respond  
26 to consumer desires and activities, and vice versa. (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). For **Willems**  
27 **(2012), when talking about broadcasting companies, participation must be contextualised**  
28 **within the overall corporate logic. Corporate participation seems more 'naturally' suited**  
29 **for commercial media that tend to be more responsive to consumer desires. However,**  
30 **values of public broadcasters such as catering all groups in society and creating public**  
31 **value (Martin and Lowe, 2014), can also be considered as corporate participation.**  
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42 **Importantly, both conceptions are not mutually exclusive: one kind of participatory**  
43 **activity can fit both conceptions of participation. This warrants a focus on producers'**  
44 **motivations or goals for integrating audience activities and input, which can be based on**  
45 **either a more corporate or a more political logic.**  
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### 51 **Producer perspectives on audience participation**

52 **Former empirical studies into producer perspectives have argued that media producers**  
53 **tend to define and approach participation in such a way that it does not question their own**  
54 **professional identity. Producers separate themselves from audiences by explaining that**  
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3 the audience is not sufficiently trained or willing to provide quality input, an argument  
4 they use to retain control over content production. This is what scholars call a 'self-  
5 preserving strategy among media professionals' (Carlsson and Nilsson p.1126) which  
6 allows for maintaining the status quo of established power relations (Janssen, 2009;  
7 Carlsson and Nilsson, 2016; Van Es, 2016). Debates about producers' views on  
8 participation are part of a broader discussion about integrating new (networked)  
9 technologies, mostly social media, in television production. Studies in that area argue that  
10 participation is more for the purpose of promotion and audience engagement while the  
11 nature of production work, organisations' objectives and business models remain  
12 unchanged, which help to keep established power relations between producer and  
13 audience (Ashuri and Frenkel, 2015; Van Es, 2016; Sundet and Ytreberg, 2009). Whether or  
14 not this kind of approach towards participation should and will change is a typical  
15 discussion within the political conception of participation, that many scholars within the  
16 field of participation studies have raised, (a.o. Andrejevic 2009, Deuze 2009, García-Avilés  
17 2012, Hermes 2013, Hartley 2009) but which is not the focus of this article because the  
18 focus is on understanding the perspective of television producers.

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35 Participation varies at different stages of the production process (Janssen, 2009). We  
36 distinguish three stages: behind the screen, on screen and beyond the screen. Research  
37 suggests that *behind the screen*, producers use participation to hear different audience  
38 opinions as a way of feedback or they can use the audience as a source - although both tend  
39 to be done selectively (Ashuri and Frenkel, 2015; Carlsson and Nilsson, 2016). *On screen*, in  
40 the television broadcast, producers appreciate audience participation when it is scripted  
41 participation, mainly as a means of bonding (Janssen, 2009). However, producers also  
42 experience limits to do this, as participation can interrupt narratives (Van Es, 2016). It  
43 seems that producers concluded that wanted to gain more control over the narrative for  
44 Participation *beyond the screen* is mostly established through social media. Producers,  
45 again, value this as a means to enhance bonding with the audience. However, several  
46 studies show that producers are reluctant to draw substantially upon this kind of input as  
47 audiences often respond in critical and non-democratic ways on social media. Therefore,  
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3 **social media use in TV production is more concerned with spreading content created by**  
4 **producers than with dialogue and audience participation (Ashuri and Frenkel, 2015;**  
5 **Carlsson and Nilsson, 2016; Hille and Bakker, 2013). These insights from empirical**  
6 **production studies echo findings from journalism studies, focussing on newspaper and**  
7 **online news production, as several researchers found that journalists work in a production**  
8 **culture where they integrate audience participation in such a way that they can hold on to**  
9 **habits and a professional role as information provider (Paulussen, 2016; Singer et al,**  
10 **2011). In what follows, we focus on television production, in particular on the motivations**  
11 **of TV producers to (not) allow for different kinds of participation in the production of non-**  
12 **fiction genres.**  
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## 24 **Methodology**

25 To understand how producers integrate audience participation and why, this article applies a  
26 television production perspective to understand the production process from within as a cultural  
27 site in which media content is constructed (Caldwell, 2009; Govil, 2013; Havens and Lotz, 2012;  
28 Mayer, 2009; Van Es, 2016). This adds to the current scholarship about participation for three  
29 reasons. First, the studies into participation often look at the production of media in general and  
30 develop a theoretical notion of participation, as argued by Hermes (2013). Even when  
31 participation is approached empirically, findings often are based on a single programme. Hence,  
32 an empirical study focussing on producers' motivations for audience participation across different  
33 television programmes contributes to an understanding of how and why audiences are valued as  
34 participants in production processes. Second, academics often discuss a democratic ideal of  
35 audience participation (Andrejevic, 2009; Carah and Louw, 2015). Adopting a production  
36 perspective allows us to move away from this discussion and, instead, to try and understand  
37 producers' motivations for relating to their audiences in particular ways. Third, these scholars do  
38 not pay specific attention to audience participation in different steps of the production process, on  
39 screen, beyond and behind the screen. Our approach aims for a more holistic view in the sense  
40 that it includes all these moments as parts of the production process in which audiences  
41 potentially play a role.  
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3 A qualitative content analysis and in-depth interviews with editors in chief were combined to do  
4 this. First, the qualitative content analysis, identified and categorised (Julien, 2008) how  
5 audiences are visible on screen and online. The data, collected through the monitoring system  
6 Volicon, included all of the 31 non-fiction television programmes broadcast in one week (in  
7 December 2014) and their online platforms. One episode of each programme was enough to  
8 explore a variety of participatory approaches, as the formats of the programmes did not change  
9 throughout the season. The programmes were broadcast in Flanders by the public broadcasting  
10 company VRT (channels Een and Canvas) or one of the two commercial broadcasting companies  
11 Medialaan (channels VTM and 2BE) and SBS (channels Vier and Vijf).

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21 Analytical categories were based on the different indicators of participation that Hermida et al.  
22 (2011) and Domingo et al. (2008) listed when researching participation in online journalism,  
23 including: comments, forums, citizen blogs, polls, citizen stories, audience driven content  
24 hierarchy, social networking, photo's, video's, amongst others. More indicators were added based  
25 on audience input appearing in the sample, including the distinction between input that was  
26 either substantive, an opinion, or neither. Indicators from Hermida et al. and Domingo et al. that  
27 did not occur in our sample were not listed, for example citizen blogs, citizen stories and audience  
28 driven content hierarchy. This resulted in the categories shown in figure 1.

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42 Second, ten editors-in-chief of the selected programmes were interviewed to explore their  
43 motivations for the ways in which audience input is valued in the production process. The choice  
44 to interview editors-in-chief was based on their prominent position in the production process, as  
45 they are responsible for programme content and format (Kersten, 2007). Editors-in-chief were  
46 selected from across the range of programmes, including those with relatively little, average, and  
47 a lot of audience input on screen and online. In addition, an even spread across genres and  
48 broadcasters was aimed for. Because the channels Een and VTM broadcast many more non-  
49 fictional programmes than the others, more producers from programmes from these channels  
50 were selected. This resulted in the list shown in figure 2:

Figure 2. Interviewees and programmes

Programme	Interviewee	Genre	Channel
Relatively little audience input			
<i>Hoera cultuur! (Celebrate culture!)</i>	Peter Cockx	Current affairs	Canvas
<i>Vind mijn familie (Long lost family)</i>	Maarten Millen	Human interest	VTM
<i>Zijn er nog kroketten? (Do we have left overs?)</i>	Bram Van den Driessche	Quiz	VTM
Average audience input			
<i>Bloot en Speren (And the Rest is history)</i>	Willem Stellamans	Quiz (history)	Vier
<i>Telefacts</i>	Robin Vissenaekens	Current affairs	VTM
<i>Vranckx</i>	Ina Maes	Current affairs	Canvas
<i>Iedereen Beroemd (Everybody famous)</i>	Geert Dewaele	Human interest	Een
Relatively a lot of audience input			
<i>Café Corsari</i>	Ellen Vanhove	Current affairs	Een
<i>De slimste mens ter wereld (The smartest person alive)</i>	Nele de Kimpe	Quiz	Vier
<i>Ook getest op mensen (Also tested on humans)</i>	Isabel Dierkx	Quiz (science)	Een

The interviews were semi-structured in order to discuss certain predetermined subjects while also being able to follow the respondents' train of thought (Ayres, 2008; Machin, 2002). Questions focused on issues such as: which image do producers have of their audience, how do they create this image, what role does the audience play in the production process, and how are they visualised? Questions about the producers' motivations were of central importance, because these provide insights into the perspectives of producers and help them to reflect upon and explain their actions (Lindlof, 1995; O'Reilly, 2009). To avoid steering answers, the concept of participation was consciously avoided during the interview, unless the respondent used the concept him- or herself.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed in order to identify recurring themes and patterns. This included managing, describing, and explaining the data of the interviews and the content analysis (Ritchie, Spencer, & O'Connor, 2003). The data were categorised based on the themes mentioned

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3 by respondents. To prevent the data being discussed out of context, these themes were put in a  
4 thematic chart (Ritchie et al., 2003), in such a way that the data per theme and per interviewee  
5 remain connected. For the same reason, the complete transcripts were taken into account  
6 throughout the study, to situate separate quotes within their context.  
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## 10 11 12 **Analysing audiences on, beyond and behind the screen**

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14 Results are discussed three parts, following the steps in the production process discussed above,  
15 discussing audience participation (1) on screen, (2) beyond the screen, and (3) behind the screen  
16 respectively. As explained in the introduction, on screen audience participation is visible in the  
17 television programme as it is broadcast. Audience participation beyond the screen consists of  
18 audience participation on other platforms such as social media, but also using an app or joining an  
19 event organised by the producers. Participation behind the screen refers to audience participation  
20 in the production process, within the editorial office, which is not necessarily directly visible in on  
21 screen or on platforms beyond the screen. **For each part motivations for and ways of using  
22 audience participation to gain input are discussed, making clear the different approaches  
23 and arguments producers have for audience participation.**  
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### 37 **Audiences on screen**

38 In the sampled week of Flemish television, audience members are visible on screen in  
39 programmes with a studio audience, where they are mostly sitting in the background or just  
40 outside of the frame, paying attention to what is happening 'on stage' and responding by clapping  
41 and laughing. As Stellamans of quiz show *Bloot en Speren* explains: 'The situation is comparable to  
42 an audience in a theatre', which is very common in studio programmes. Van Hove, of talkshow  
43 *Café Corsari* says: 'I think talk shows have always done that, because a viewer expects an audience  
44 response and it creates a pleasant atmosphere'. Most editors-in-chief emphasise the importance  
45 of an audience in the studio to create the right atmosphere. Yet, these studio audiences do not  
46 really do much beyond being there. This has several reasons. Some editors-in-chief have tried  
47 more extensive audience participation but claim it does not work because it is technically difficult  
48 to allow for audience interventions, which slow down the programme. They also find it too risky  
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3 because the audience is not screened beforehand, making them unpredictable. **These reasons**  
4 **suggest a corporate approach towards participation (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013):**  
5 **audiences cannot add much to the production of media content because producers do not**  
6 **want to risk losing control, very similar to what former production studies have found**  
7 **(Janssen, 2009; Carlsson and Nilsson, 2016; Van Es, 2016).**  
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14 There are three programmes, each in different non-news related genres and including  
15 programmes without a 'studio audience', which allow for political participation of the audience as  
16 they can influence the course of the programme. The talent show *Dansdate* allows the audience 'at  
17 home' to vote for the winner of the show. *Fans of Flanders*, a programme geared at expats,  
18 encourages people to push the 'like'-button of a specific Facebook post, which influences the level  
19 of a challenge in the on screen programme. **These are examples of scripted participation**  
20 **(Janssen, 2009)**, i.e. where almost all editorial control remains with the producers. Therefore we  
21 categorize these as minimal forms of participation. In the scientific programme *Ook getest op*  
22 *mensen*, the studio audience participates in scientific tests and the presenter asks the audience 'at  
23 home' to provide questions via Twitter that are answered in the same episode.  
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35 **The latter example seems to provides a clear (but rare) example of more extensive**  
36 **political participation, where the audience gains control to pose questions, yet the**  
37 **intentions of the producers point towards a corporate conception of participation.** They  
38 refer to the station management's request for a programme with a strong feeling of live-ness: "The  
39 TV station asks for a programme broadcast live and wants the viewer to be engaged, and  
40 interactivity is a good way to do that. By engaging them (the audience), they sense a better feeling  
41 of live-ness' (Dierckx, *Ook getest op mensen*). So, audience activity is foremost about creating a  
42 feeling of here and now rather than about obtaining original input. Dierckx emphasises that the  
43 audience input is never really surprising. Editorial control stays firmly with the production team  
44 that prepares and selects the interaction very carefully, together with a scientist specialized in the  
45 topic, so they can guess how the audience will respond and therefore can keep full editorial  
46 control.  
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3 The programmes discussed so far added some audience input, yet there were two instances of  
4 editors-in-chief of human interest programmes explaining that their audience is visible more  
5 'naturally' because the programme is *about* people from the audience. For instance, Maarten  
6 Millen of human-interest programme *Vind mijn familie* states: 'When a programme is produced  
7 without actors, it is about people who are a substitutive part of the audience, so I do not make a  
8 separation between that'. Input from these people is important in the production process, because  
9 their stories are being told: 'They are actually the fuel to produce the programme. The richness  
10 lies not only within our creativity, but also in the surprising stories of people within society', says  
11 Geert Dewaele of human interest programme *Iedereen Beroemd*. **This can be regarded as a form  
12 of political participation as the audience that appears in the programme, influences the  
13 content (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2008).** However, editors-in-chief do not define this as  
14 participation because the producers keep complete editorial control: 'Of course, the producer  
15 himself has the control, but he also has an ethical responsibility and knows what he can tell or not  
16 with integrity. We find it important to make them feel safe. So yes, their voice is authentic and  
17 real, but they do not take part editorially' (Millen, *Vind mijn familie*). **In this case, the audience is  
18 part of the programme as object, but is not participating editorially as subject, which is  
19 essential to the editors-in-chief to regard this as participation.**

### Beyond the screen

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22 **There is a clear separation between the activities of producers and of audience members  
23 beyond the screen, mainly through social media.** Both often use two social media platforms,  
24 Facebook and Twitter, which allow for certain ways to participate online. Producers mostly  
25 provide information: they announce the programme, give details about the content, reveal behind  
26 the scene insights and ask questions. The latter mostly do not imply letting the audience think  
27 about the production choices nor creating interaction between producers and audiences, since  
28 producers hardly react to audience comments. This confirms earlier studies **that found a focus of  
29 producers on spreading content online (Ashuri and Frenkel, 2015; Carlsson and Nilsson,  
30 2016, Hille and Bakker, 2013).** Audience members mainly react to content already produced by  
31 TV producers. The amount of activity is more or less equal across all genres, but online platforms  
32 of news related genres show both opinions and substantive comments, while those of  
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3 entertainment genres are mostly limited to opinions. This occurs especially on the Facebook  
4 pages of television programmes and to a lesser extent in tweets including the name of a television  
5 programme. **These separate roles of producers as providers and audience as reactors**  
6 **suggest that even participation on social media is based in power differences that obstruct**  
7 **more extensive forms of political participation. These separate roles can be explained from**  
8 **a corporate conception of participation, as the audience mainly reacts on producers**  
9 **content to engage with the programme.**  
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18 Further, most editors-in-chief value participation beyond the screen via social media to keep their  
19 programme visible between television broadcasts. 'We do not want people to wait for our next  
20 broadcast on Sunday evening, we use the platforms to let people know what we are working on'  
21 (Vissenaekens, current affairs programme *Telefacts*). This is meant to enlarge the audience, either  
22 to familiarise a bigger audience with the programme, or to attract a bigger audience for the live  
23 broadcasts. In other words, it reacts to and tries to provoke consumer behaviour, and producer  
24 and audience roles are not questioned, in line with a corporate conception of participation. For  
25 the same reasons Stellamans (*Blot en speren*) strengthens the brand of the quiz show with a  
26 weekly social media schedule, making daily postings such as short quizzes, behind the scenes-  
27 movies, an app etcetera. **This confirms earlier findings that participation aims at promotion**  
28 **and engagement, and at fitting in with the organisational structures (Ashuri and Frenkel,**  
29 **2015; Carlsson and Nilsson, 2016; Hille and Bakker, 2013).**  
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42 This year we have spent a lot of time on this, much more than before because the channel asked us to  
43 and because we wanted to. I think in the current media evolution your TV programme has become a  
44 brand that has to be alive. We use different media platforms to strengthen our brand. In the end, this  
45 is to generate as many viewers as possible to watch the programme broadcasted live, purely from an  
46 economic perspective. (Stellamans, *Blot en speren*)  
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52 Most producers use social media within this **corporate logic**, which Stellamans describes as the  
53 '360° policy', using every media platform available to promote the television programme and, in  
54 particular, to encourage audiences into corporate participation, to like and share the content  
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3 provided by the producers. **This confirms Janssen's (2009) and Hermes' (2013) argument**  
4 **that producers mostly use social media to spread their own content as a means to create**  
5 **bonding and engagement and, ultimately, to create a bigger audience.**  
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10 Most editors-in-chief do not consider working on online content as very important. They feel that  
11 the main purpose of their job is to produce a good television programme, broadcast live on  
12 television to a broad audience. Attention to social media as content providers and especially to  
13 corporate participation is limited, since the number of social media users is smaller than that of  
14 broadcast audiences. Some editors-in-chief explain they can continue to produce their  
15 programme the way they do now, without social media. This shows the limited impact social  
16 media have on production, according to editors-in-chief. Yet, since almost every programme is  
17 active on social media, they feel the need to be there and they notice this way of online  
18 engagement works to broaden their audience.  
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29 Moreover, to a number of editors-in-chief, this approach to online media has become very normal,  
30 especially those who are in their thirties, since they have been using social media throughout  
31 their career. They see it as an extra – but small – part of their job, next to producing content for  
32 the television programme. 'When you produce television nowadays, you automatically provide  
33 content for social media as well. However big you implement it, it is just a part of production' (Van  
34 Hove, *Café Corsari*). Sometimes, social media content is not even provided by the production team,  
35 as in the case of human interest programme *Vind mijn familie* and quiz show *Zijn er nog kroketten?*  
36 where the channel manages the social media channels. That way, the production team focuses on  
37 the television programme, which again confirms the limited relevance audience participation via  
38 social media has for producers.  
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50 In contrast, three of the editors-in-chief use and value audience input through social media more  
51 broadly. These are scientific programme *Ook getest op mensen*, human interest programme  
52 *Iedereen Beroemd* and current affairs programme *Vranckx*, all of which are public broadcast  
53 productions. **Because a public broadcaster has different corporate values, these types of**  
54 **participation can also be regarded as corporate participation.** Their editors-in-chief  
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3 distribute their own online content but want input from the audience. They want to use this input  
4 to create a dialogue (*Ook getest op mensen*), offer an online platform for audiences to tell their  
5 own story (*Iedereen beroemd*) and gain original information from audiences to use in the  
6 production (*Vranckx*). Next to online activities, the production team of *Vranckx* has organised a  
7 screening event, including audience discussion. This allowed the producers to connect and engage  
8 with their audience in a new and more active way beyond the screen, which they intend to do  
9 more often in the future (Maes, *Vranckx*).

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18 **These three cases offer participatory opportunities beyond the screen (mostly online).**

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20 **This can be considered as both corporate and political participation because it fits the**  
21 **public broadcasting corporate logic, yet allows audiences to participate in content**

22 **production and online dialogue to a considerable extent.** However, when asked if such  
23 participation beyond the screen influences the content production behind and on screen,  
24 producers argue that audience input offered beyond the screen is often inadequate to use on and  
25 behind the screen for several reasons: either it is not of sufficient quality, producers want to  
26 decide on the look and feel of the programme, or the topics that are discussed in the programme  
27 are regarded unfit for audience participation. Therefore, the audience of these three cases can  
28 participate online to a larger extent than they do on screen and behind the screen.

### 37 38 **Behind the screen**

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40 To most editors-in-chief, it is common-sense not to involve audiences in making production  
41 choices behind the screen. This implies participation which is not visible on screen or beyond the  
42 screen. An editor-in-chief explains: 'We produce TV in a very normal way' (Van der Driessche,  
43 quiz show *Zijn er nog kroketten?*), suggesting that audience participation would be 'abnormal'.  
44 Even editors-in-chief of programmes that show their audience on screen and online more than the  
45 others, suggest they have little contact with their audience in the production process. One of the  
46 editors-in-chief, Van der Driessche, explains that the channel, which they consider as their  
47 customer, simply did not ask them for audience participation and, until that happens, he does not  
48 see the point of integrating audiences. Another editor-in-chief **distances himself from a political**  
49 **conception of participation, explaining his role as a professional as to remain in control.**



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3 For him, audiences do not have the necessary knowledge to produce television: 'We are TV  
4 producers who have certain qualities. This is about directing and about editing and technical  
5 details. It is something not everyone can just enter' (De Waele, human interest programme  
6 *Iedereen beroemd*). These arguments are similar to the ones mentioned about participation on  
7 screen and beyond the screen, and to theories regarding producers' professional role (Carlsson  
8 and Nilsson, 2016; Janssen, 2009; Van Es, 2016).  
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16 In the production process, audience participation on social media rarely is valued as feedback.  
17 Van den Driessche (quiz show *Zijn er nog kroketten?*) explains: 'I still have to meet the first  
18 producer who actually values what people say on Twitter'. The editors-in-chief we interviewed  
19 argue that audiences often post nonsense, especially on Twitter. Stellamans of quiz show *Blot en*  
20 *speren* has stopped reading tweets about his show because too often those few opinions give the  
21 wrong impression about how the majority receives it. **This critical stance is similar to what**  
22 **Carlsson and Nilsson (2016) found and** shows how producers have very different valuations of  
23 audiences online and behind the screen.  
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33 However, most editors-in-chief value feedback given by family, friends and colleagues as a special  
34 part of the audience. Stellamans even organised a so-called 'café test' twice during pre-  
35 production, in which he asked friends, family and colleagues to provide feedback. This allowed the  
36 production team to test how certain ideas come across in front of an audience. **It can be**  
37 **regarded as a combination of both types of participation: political because the audience**  
38 **influences the content production, and corporate because the audience reacts upon**  
39 **content produced by producers and does not change the role of producers and audiences.**  
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46 Current affairs programme *Telefacts* recently started asking a panel of a hundred people from the  
47 audience for feedback on specific items in the production stage: 'This is to get even closer to the  
48 people'. This is mainly from a corporate conception, as they wanted to improve their knowledge  
49 about audience desires. At the time of the interview, it was not yet clear what role this input can  
50 and will play in the production process.  
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57 Next to asking for feedback of a selected group, some editors-in-chief are more positive about the  
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3 idea of participation in the production process, but some have difficulties achieving this. Cockx  
4 (cultural programme *Hoera cultuur!*) tried out different ways of audience participation, for  
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6 instance through contests where people send in material. However, with the exception of a few  
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8 successes, audience members do not respond or do not provide interesting input: 'The idea of  
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10 participation is a good idea and an important task for the public broadcaster, but it just does not  
11  
12 work'. **He refers to a political conception where the audience participates in providing**  
13  
14 **content for the contest.** There are few contests where people send in material, but generally  
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16 audiences do not add more than liking a post, which has little value to Cockx. Another editor-in-  
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18 chief, Millen of human interest programme *Vind mijn familie*, explains he is positive towards a  
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20 more political participatory approach, but he does not know how that would suit his programme.  
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22 He negotiates with the interviewees (whom he perceives as part of the audience) about which  
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24 story to tell, but the production team needs to keep editorial control.

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27 Interestingly, one programme allows limited audiences participate in the production process.  
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29 Current affairs programme *Vranckx* involves its audience, mostly through the online community  
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31 on social media. According to Maes, the programme's editor-in-chief, this is for two reasons, both  
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33 related to engagement. First, an online community is needed to create enough 'buzz' for people to  
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35 feel like they have to watch, since audiences have become more selective in their viewing  
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37 behaviour, **which shows a goal towards corporate participation.** Second, the editor-in-chief  
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39 explains they can no longer work isolated from their audience. 'We now enter a time where the  
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41 audience wants to co-decide and participate' (Maes, *Vranckx*), **which shows a goal towards**  
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43 **political participation.** She is the only editor-in-chief to actually use the word 'participation' to  
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45 articulate its importance in the production of television. In doing this, she refers to both corporate  
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47 and political conceptions of participation. At the same time she refers to the limitations as well: It  
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49 is hard for some of their projects to achieve participation since the team of *Vranckx* often records  
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51 in conflict and war zones. Moreover, it takes a lot of time to select audience input, as Maes  
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53 explains. While *Vranckx* is the only analysed programme where the audience participates  
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55 politically behind the screen, the editors-in-chief do not feel people from the audience can be  
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57 viewed as co-producers or participants because participation is very limited and controlled by  
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59 producers. Based on these arguments, this could be interpreted as a minimal form of political  
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3 participation, but the editors-in-chief will rather discuss this as a way for audiences to engage  
4 with the programme. **This confirms previous studies' findings that producers do not regard**  
5 **audiences as participants in the production process (Ashuri & Frenkel, 2015; Hermes,**  
6 **2013; Janssen, 2009), but rather as engaged audiences.**  
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12 Overall, regarding the conceptualisation of participation, the editors in chief use quite a narrow  
13 concept of participation, referring to more maximal forms of political participation where a clear  
14 shift of control in content production occurs. Therefore, a lot of audience input is not regarded as  
15 participation. Instead of considering the audience as participants, the interviewed editors-in-chief  
16 explain they see how part of the audience is shifting to a more active way of engaging with  
17 television productions, by looking for and selecting the content they want to see. This remains  
18 reception and is limited to a relatively small part of the total audience. However, they expect this  
19 group will grow over the years since young people are used to this way of watching TV, but a large  
20 group of people that watches linear TV will continue to do so. 'I think we still assume that people  
21 sit and watch our show. But we offer something extra for the ones who do not' (Maes, *Vranckx*).  
22 Even though this argument varies in strength between the interviewed editors-in-chief, they all  
23 describe a clear separation between production and reception and they mainly produce for an  
24 audience that watches television in a linear fashion.  
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## 39 **Conclusion**

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41 **Producers' arguments for how to integrate the audience on screen, beyond the screen and behind**  
42 **the screen centrally focus on separate roles for producers and audiences. Therefore, the input of**  
43 **audiences can mostly be identified as what we defined as corporate participation, i.e. participation**  
44 **that leaves control firmly with the producers and organisational structures and business models.**  
45 **It is mostly used as a form of marketing and to enlarge and engage audiences. This is very much in**  
46 **line with the results of earlier empirical production studies (Carlsson and Nilsson, Janssen, 2009;**  
47 **Sundet and Ytreberg, 2009; Van Es, 2016.)**  
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56 **However, analysis of a range of non-fiction genres across different broadcasters showed that some**  
57 **producers (have tried to) apply forms of political participation, be it with a minimal degree of**  
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3 audience control. This adds to earlier empirical studies into motivations of producers towards  
4 corporate participation. We found many different forms of participation, including voting,  
5 providing questions and feedback, being objects in human interest programmes, and interaction  
6 and content production on social media. This is motivated by the need to create a dialogue, to have  
7 audiences tell their own story, to create a feeling of live-ness, or not to work in isolation from the  
8 audience. Note that producers do not always define this as participation but rather consider it as  
9 engaging an active audience. Political participation is integrated most often in public service  
10 broadcasting programmes (*Vranckx, Ook getest op mensen, Iedereen beroemd*), although some  
11 programmes (*Dansdate, Telefacts*) of commercial broadcasters either apply it or are open to the  
12 idea of political participation (*Vind mijn familie*).  
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24 Interestingly, political participation is only applied if it can be categorised as corporate  
25 participation too, within corporate values and organisational structures. Jenkins, Ford and Green  
26 (2013) explained that it remains difficult to find out how the two conceptions are related to each  
27 other. Our results allow for a better understanding of this relationship. It shows that when the  
28 audience can participate in the content production and gain (political) control, this has to fit in the  
29 organisations structures (corporate) and in a clear distinction between producer and audience  
30 (corporate) roles. Hence, the cases where the two are combined are particularly interesting for  
31 further research.  
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42 Even though we can label a number of audience activities as political and corporate forms of  
43 participation in the production process, producers use a different frame of thinking. Producers  
44 think about how audiences can engage themselves, and they provide ways for audiences to do so.  
45 Therefore, we suggest it is important for future empirical research to study how engagement is  
46 both corporately and politically important to producers. This approach allows to include ways of  
47 engaging the audience that do not result in actual participatory practices, which provides a more  
48 complete view of producer perspectives about their audience. To this purpose, we suggest that  
49 empirical methods, such as ethnographic studies into television production processes, which  
50 focus on producers' values, discourses and routines, can provide a valuable inroad to  
51 understanding the ways in which audience input is integrated in television production.  
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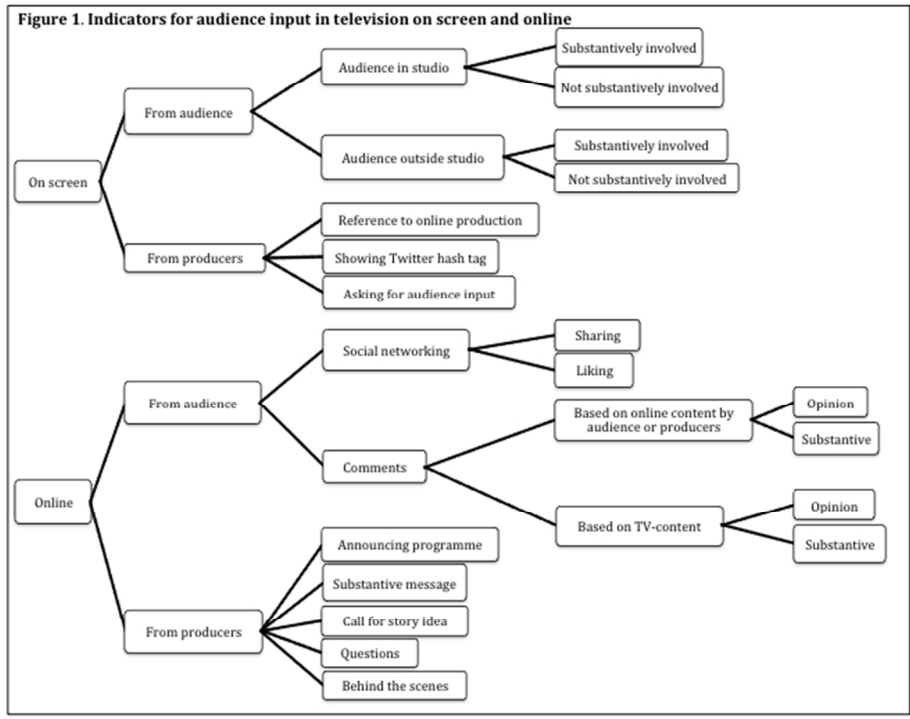
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Indicators for audience input in television on screen and online

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