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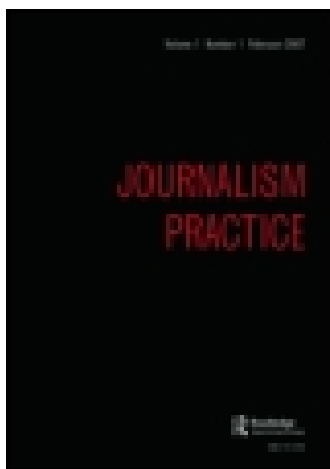
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WHEN NEWS IS EVERYWHERE

Understanding participation, cross-mediality and mobility in journalism from a radical user perspective

Ike Picone, Cédric Courtois, and Steve Paulussen

This article contends that not only journalism but also journalism studies can benefit from a stronger commitment to the public. While the bodies of literature on “popular journalism”, “public journalism” and “citizen/participatory journalism” have, in different contexts and from different angles, made a strong case in favour of a public-oriented approach to journalism, it is remarkable how few of the empirical studies on journalism are based on user research. As the control of media institutions over the news process is in decline, we should take the “news audience” more seriously and try to improve our understanding of (changing) news use patterns. Besides this rather obvious theoretical point, there are also societal and methodological arguments for a more user-oriented take on the study of journalism. Starting from a reflection on the key trends in news use in the digital age—participation, cross-mediality and mobility—this article attempts to show the theoretical and societal relevance of a radical user perspective on journalism and journalism research alike. Furthermore, we look at new methodological opportunities for news user research and elaborate on our arguments by way of an empirical study on changing news practices. The study uses Q-sort methodology to expose the impact a medium’s affordances can have on the way we experience news in a converged and mobile media environment. The article concludes by discussing what the benefits of a radical user perspective can be both for journalism studies as for journalism.

KEYWORDS audience studies; convergence culture; cross-mediality; journalism studies; mobility; news consumption; participation

Introduction

In our current digital news environment, journalistic production is no longer the sole product of professional journalists as “members of various publics make journalism material that intersects, mixes and is distributed to a new heightened degree” (Russell 2011, 1). In this context, news users claim an ever-more important role in the way journalism is shaped. Picard (2010, 20) observes that behind the many shifts in the media sector today lies the fact that the “locus of control over the content [has shifted] from communicators to audiences” and continues stating that this “fundamental power shift in the public communication sphere ... requires all of us concerned with the broader needs of society to alter our ways of thinking about audiences, the role of media and society, and how we seek to develop informed and active citizens”. The changing ways in which media are consumed should therefore be at the core of our understanding of journalism in the digital news environment.

Indeed, as we will argue in this paper, we need to fundamentally incorporate the perspective of the news user in journalism studies and do so by adopting a radical user approach in journalism studies. A radical user perspective should go beyond merely acknowledging the importance of the user within journalism studies, but should consider it to be an intrinsic part of the epistemology of journalism studies. Concretely, this implies rethinking the idea of the user on a conceptual, methodological and normative level.

First, on a conceptual level, we should be wary of approaching the user as an “imagined audience” (Hartley 1987). Our notions of the user should not be shaped by what we think or want the audience to be, but by what we know it to be (Gray 1999). An imagined user, be it theoretically, empirically or politically, will always serve “the needs of the imagining institution” (Hartley 1987, 125). If, as Picard (2010) suggests, we aim to alter our ways of thinking about audiences, we should make sure that new conceptualisations will be informed by how news is actually used, rather than by how journalists—or researchers for that matter—expect it to be. This implies that, as Peters (2012, 704) aptly puts it, “we must certainly begin to speak with audiences, as opposed to just about them”.

Secondly, following from this first point, user research should be considered as a fundamental element of the methodological toolkit that journalism scholars dispose of to understand what the experience of journalism will be in the future. As a research field, journalism studies would benefit from both quantitative and qualitative user studies that are driven by journalistic concerns and focus on the relationship between user and news, rather than the readily available, but market-, media- or technology-oriented consumer insights.

Thirdly, if we acknowledge that, even more than was the case before, journalism is being shaped by the way audiences use news, we should not only incorporate the vision of the user in our understanding of what journalism *is*, but also in what it *should be*. This entails that the radical user perspective we put forward should allow for it to be positioned not as opposed to more political or democratic visions on the role of news in society, but as encompassing the notion of the democratic value of news. It is only by thinking about both at the same time that we can make useful progress in understanding news as the specific kind of valuable information it is. More focus on the user can lead to such understanding, as long as our conceptual and theoretical vision on the audience allows us to grasp the democratic value that users seek in their news use. Underlying this assumption is the belief that users do value news in more than merely functional or consumptive ways (cf. Costera Meijer 2013).

To make the case for a radical user perspective, we begin by critically examining audience-oriented perspectives in journalism studies so far. We will show how various authors have come to defend user-oriented approaches to journalism, but ultimately failed to integrate this user perspective in journalism research itself, as they merely reflected on rather than with the public. Subsequently, we discuss some of the key trends in news use and try to illustrate why these changes make the need for a radical audience turn in our thinking about journalism urgent. Thirdly, to elaborate on our arguments, we revisit a previous study (Courtois, Schröder, and Kobbernagel, [forthcoming](#)) in order to illustrate the kind of nuanced insights that can be obtained when we allow news users to speak about journalism, rather than letting journalists speak about the public. We will also touch upon specific methodological issues raised by this study. Finally, we discuss the implications of our proposed perspective for future research and relate it to the normative dimension of journalism.

The User Perspective in Journalism Studies

Within the discipline of media and communication studies there is a long tradition of audience research (e.g. Nightingale 2011; Alasuutari 1999). Indeed, a good deal of knowledge has been acquired from research on the complex relationship between media and their audiences. On the one hand, effect and reception studies help us to understand how people are influenced by and engage with media content (Potter 2013; Livingstone 1998). On the other hand, the literature comprises a large number of quantitative and qualitative studies on the adoption of media and the various roles and functions they fulfil in people's daily lives (Schröder 1999; Courtois 2012). The literature also documents how media use patterns have evolved with the emergence of digital media technologies that brought about a convergence or "liquification" of once discrete "established categories—such as sending and receiving, producing and consuming, being online or offline" (Deuze 2010, 2; Jenkins 2006).

Given the rich tradition of media audience research, it is remarkable how little attention is paid to it in the scholarly literature on journalism. As Bird (2011, 489) says, "[w]e know surprisingly little about audiences for news". The focus on the production side of the news process has left journalism scholarship somewhat ignorant of the fact that "the fate of 'the media' is indeed closely tied to the fate of 'the audience'" (Coudry 2011, 214). Considering that journalism's "first loyalty is to citizens", as solemnly stated by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007), one might expect to find citizens at the core of journalism studies, but this is not the case. Journalism scholars still tend to regard the audience in similar ways as many media practitioners do: as a group of passive spectators consuming and processing the news *after* it is published (Hermida et al. 2011). This is not a new observation. Both journalism and journalism studies have been criticised before for this dominant notion of the public as a monolithic mass of passive consumers rather than a heterogeneous community of active citizens (see also Carpentier 2011).

The first move towards a more public-oriented approach to journalism was made at the beginning of the 1990s. Under the influence of the cultural turn in the social sciences (Fiske 1989), media scholars began urging a more qualitative and interpretive investigation of journalism that would take the public, and how people give meaning to (news) media, as the focal point of attention (Dahlgren and Sparks 1992). The application of popular culture perspectives to journalism gave rise to a significant body of literature on popular journalism, which challenged the political economy perspectives on the "tabloidisation" or "dumbing down" of the news. However, this resulted in polarised discussions between proponents and opponents of the popularisation of news, which, ironically enough, ultimately reinforced the "binary distinctions" which cultural studies scholars tried to dismiss (Harrington 2008, 268–269). Examples of such dichotomies are those of hard versus soft news, information versus entertainment, reason versus emotion, or consumer demands versus citizens' needs. The main problem with the political economy and cultural studies perspectives on popular journalism is that both discourses concentrate on the production and content of the news. In other words, they deal with the question of how journalists (should) perceive their public—as either active or passive, consumers or citizens, aware or unaware of what they "need to know", etc.—rather than with the question of how the public perceives and uses (popular) journalism. With regard to the latter question, some authors have already shown that from an audience perspective the theoretical distinction between quality and popular news proves insufficient to grasp the complexity of news users' behaviour (Costera Meijer 2007; Schröder and Larsen 2010).

Another scholarly debate that emerged at the end of the twentieth century, parallel but not linked to the debate over popular news, was the one over “public journalism”. The basic idea of “public journalism” was that in order to combat the crisis of the press (i.e. a declining audience and an increasing lack of public trust), journalism had to reconnect with citizens and try to re-emphasise its democratic role in society by involving the audience more actively in the news process (Rosen 1999). Despite its efforts to put the “public” (again) at the centre of “journalism”, some critics, like Schudson (1998, 137), pointed out that the movement did ultimately not succeed in removing “the control over the news from journalists” in favour of the public.

With the rise of the internet, however, some authors believed that “public journalism” would enter a “second phase” (Nip 2006), in which the control over the news would become more balanced between journalists and users (Paulussen et al. 2007). The emergence of citizen journalism and the adoption of user-generated content in mainstream media have received much attention within journalism studies. A major conclusion that can be drawn from the literature on “participatory journalism” is that professional journalists are increasingly coming to terms with the idea of a more active and responsive public, without giving up their gatekeeping role (Singer et al. 2011). Nevertheless, the literature on “participatory journalism” can be criticised for being too much focused on the production side. While researchers applied methods of content analysis, newsroom ethnography and in-depth interviews to examine how (professional) journalists deal with user-generated content and audience participation in the news, very few studies paid attention to the users themselves (see Borger et al. 2013). One exception is a study by Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, and Wardle (2010), who conducted a series of focus groups to examine audience views on the value of user contributions to the news. Their study shows that users differentiate between types of user-generated content to assess its authenticity and value: factual content such as amateur footage is, for instance, valued higher than audience comments. Further, a few studies have paid attention to users’ motivations to participate in the news (see the section on ‘Participation in News Use’ below), but overall, the number of user studies on citizen and participatory journalism remains very scarce compared to the production studies.

In sum, journalism research primarily focuses on the production and content of the news rather than on its consumption and reception. Several authors have argued for a more public-oriented approach to journalism before, but most of them stopped short of integrating this user perspective in journalism *studies*. Even when the notion of the (inter) active user was introduced to journalism studies through monikers like “the produser” (Bruns 2008), “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen 2006) and many others, studies focusing on these “lead users of news participation” (Picone 2011) seemed coherent with studying changes and innovation in the news production process and its impact on traditional, professional forms of news production. While this was perhaps defensible in times when journalists were still in charge of the news process, it has become very hard in today’s participatory and convergent media environment to conceptualise journalism “without” its public. Understanding news use patterns is critical to understanding contemporary journalism and the role it can play in a networked society. In the next section, we look at how these news use patterns are changing in a digital media context and what it implies for our conceptualisation of news audiences.

Key Trends in News Use

Change is a keyword in all reports published in the past decade on news consumption. Generally speaking, the fundamental change is that audiences are shifting from traditional to digital media platforms. If we take a closer look at the annual trend reports on (digital) news consumption, such as the Pew Research Center's "State of the News Media" reports in the United States (www.stateofthemediamedia.org), the "Digital News Reports" of The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ, www.digitalnewsreport.org) or—specifically for Flanders (Belgium)—the iMinds Digimeter reports (www.digimeter.be), we can identify at least three key developments.

First of all, the latest reports emphasise the growth of news consumption via mobile devices, particularly tablet computers and smartphones. Not only does this render users more flexible to access the news whenever and wherever they want. The use of mobile devices also results in a further convergence of media practices, since people increasingly cross and mix multiple media as they continuously travel back and forth between social networking sites, aggregator sites, legacy media sites, and so on. The RISJ Digital News Report, based on a survey in six European countries, the United States, Brazil and Japan, reveals "continuing shifts in how, when, and where people access the news, with digital patterns becoming more entrenched—particularly amongst the younger half of the population. Audiences increasingly want news on any device, in any format, and at any time of day" (Newman and Levy 2013, 9). Next to the increased mobility and cross-mediality, a third fundamental shift in news use is that it is becoming more and more participatory—or "social"—in nature. Below, we will look a little deeper into each of these three trends. We start with a discussion on participation and then move on to reflect on the increased cross-mediality and mobility in news use.

Participation in News Use

According to Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013, 2), we witness the emergence of "a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of pre-constructed messages, but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined". Although media scholars are sometimes inclined to overstate the internet "revolution", it is widely acknowledged that with the rise of digital online media, the news process has become more interactive and more open to users (Singer et al. 2011). In today's digital media environment, users have indeed many options to participate in the creation, sharing and interpretation of news, information and opinions. Former distinctions between producers and consumers have become more fluid and the relationship between them more equally balanced and horizontal (Bruns 2008; Castells 2007). The RISJ Digital News Report shows that, despite significant international differences, the number of digital media users who share news through their online social networks, like or rate news stories, or post occasional comments keeps growing (Newman and Levy 2013).

Nevertheless, some authors stay sceptical about the kind and quality of users' participation in the news process. According to Carpentier (2011), for instance, it is important to differentiate between "participation" and mere "interaction". The simple fact that digital technologies have increased possibilities for users to interact and engage with media content does not automatically mean that they are also motivated and empowered enough to become involved in the process of media production ("participation *in* media")

or to employ media to increase their voice in public debate (“participation *through* media”). In other words, whilst in the digital age people “*can* interact and *can* create their own content ... which they could do only to a limited extent in an earlier era” (Jönsson and Örnebring 2011, 141), we must be careful of overstating the impact of this growing audience activity on journalism and on democracy in general.

Further research is needed to enhance our understanding of how and to what extent the growing user involvement in the news process is changing our notions of “news” (e.g. in terms of credibility, pluralism and value) and “the audience”, and what this means for both the economic viability and the democratic role of journalism in the networked society. Again, these questions should be approached not only from a production perspective, but also, and especially, from the user’s point of view. In this respect, we can refer to Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2010), who propose an integrative research agenda that aims to bridge the gap between research focusing on media features (for instance, the participatory options on news sites) and studies on users’ news-related social practices. Besides this, the authors also argue that online news consumption research would benefit from giving up the “artificial differentiation among print, broadcast, and online news consumption” (1088), which brings us to a second fundamental shift in news use.

Cross-mediality in News Use

In 2010, the annual State of the News Media report of the Pew Research Center stated that “the American news consumer is increasingly becoming a grazer, across both online and offline platforms. On a typical day, nearly half of Americans now get news from four to six different platforms—from online to television to print and more” (Pew Research Center 2010). Other studies confirm that users increasingly build their own personal repertoires of media channels through which they follow and access the news. In a digital news environment characterised by information abundance and convergence, users seem more and more likely to spread their news consumption over multiple platforms, hence creating their own “personal information space” (Deuze 2007, 30–33). As argued by Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (2007, 190–191), “the particular constellation of media on which one individual draws may be quite different than another’s”. One could even argue that there are virtually as many media constellations as there are media users (Schrøder and Larsen 2010).

News use thus becomes extremely fragmented and personalised. The personalisation of people’s media repertoires has, next to the expansion of available media, also been hastened by the dematerialisation of content from its physical form (Lister et al. 2003, 16). In other words, the traditionally tight relationship between a medium and its content sublimes: audiovisual content, for instance, is no longer exclusively related to the television set, but can also be consumed in different socio-spatial contexts through a wide range of other devices such as laptops, tablet computers or smartphones (Courtois, De Marez, and Verdegem 2013). More fundamentally, users’ increased control over what content they want to use through which media channels implies that they become more demanding. In the digital age, people expect media content, and thus also the news, to be tailored to their personal needs and convenience. For journalism, then, the challenge is to understand, from an audience viewpoint, “how news and information creates value in [people’s] lives” (Picard 2010, 20). Therefore, the fundamental question regarding news use in a cross-media environment is: what media do people deem “valuable” (Costera Meijer

2013) or “worthwhile” (Schrøder and Larsen 2010) enough to be included within the particular, personalised media repertoire on which they draw for their daily news?

Mobility in News Use

As said above, news is also becoming more mobile. The fact that people increasingly tend to consume journalism anywhere and anytime of day reminds Peters of the importance of spatiality in our daily experiences of journalism:

News consumption is not just something we do, it is something we *do in a particular place* ... if we “think spatially” about our own habits and perceptions of media use, including news consumption, we quickly realise that such practices help structure and give meaning to the social spaces of everyday life ... Accordingly, if journalism is to succeed in the future, it is crucial we understand where—and through what media—audiences consume news. (Peters 2012, 698, emphasis in original)

While this engagement with “space” is largely absent in journalism scholarship, as Peters (2012) shows, we can, again, find relevant clues in media audience theory, particularly within the literature on the domestication of media (Livingstone 2003). Dahlgren (2001, 37) notices that in the 1990s, “the humanities and social sciences have become increasingly sensitive to the spatial dimensions of social and cultural processes: the where is catching up in importance with the what, the who, the why, and the how”. Indeed, audience researchers began taking into account the spatial *context*—both in terms of “place” and “social space”—of media consumption. This strand of research, also referred to as the ethnographic turn in audience studies, can be considered a response to the media-centrism in audience research and an attempt to move “further away from the medium itself in search of the local sites of cultural meaning-making which shape people’s orientation to the media” (Livingstone 2003, 344). Today, with digital media consumption becoming more and more mobile, these “local sites of cultural meaning-making” seem to be changing. Media practices that once were bound to take place at shared domestic spaces, like watching television, can now be experienced on the go, in the intimacy of one’s own room or with friends, and so on (cf. Courtois, De Marez, and Verdegem 2013). As media use, including news use, becomes mobile and ubiquitous, we also need to become more aware of the “mobilities”—or the “where” and “when”—of people’s media experiences: domestic and non-domestic; private and public; leisure- and work-related; sedentary, mobile and nomadic; isolated and connected, etc. (see also, in a broader context, Urry 2007 and Schmitz Weiss 2014).

Looking at Journalism from a Radical User Perspective: A Q-sort Study on Cross-media News Use

Our next step is to look at the insights generated by a previous study that adopts a user perspective. We concisely present one of our studies—a comparative news use study described in detail in Courtois, Schrøder, and Kobbernagel (*forthcoming*)—for which this perspective was applied, especially focusing on the assumptions, mechanics and the kind of knowledge the study generated. We will focus on the uniqueness of the discernments the approach has to offer and also elaborate on the new methodological possibilities it enables. By doing so, we try to shed light on the social use of news as a “situated action” (Suchman 1987) undertaken by news users. The study discussed here approaches user

activity as a social practice embedded into users' everyday activities or, in other words, as an experience seen through the eyes of the news users themselves.

The study draws upon Q-methodology, which entails a hands-on method to approach audience members' personally constructed media repertoires. More specifically, it fully acknowledges the individualised, constructive practice of composing a personal diet, consisting of multiple types of news media. In today's media environment, users are increasingly confronted with the available access to various interacting platforms that stretch far beyond the traditional media silos of television, radio and print. Boundaries between media forms are blurring into non-existence. It is apparent that now, more than ever, audiences are confronted with a broad pallet of choices in composing a media diet, or repertoires (Hasebrink and Popp 2006). In fact, audiences have always been confronted with multiple options, albeit that the number of options has become virtually unlimited. As such, audiences are inherently crossing media, although media research does not necessarily include this notion in its conceptual and operational models. Of course, it remains relevant to study individual modes of media consumption, albeit that the over-viewing picture is at least equally important (Schröder 2011). Keeping this overview poses the fundamental challenge to media researchers of how to determine users' combinations of media outlets, and especially the reasons for these specific combinations. In this respect, we wish to point to an especially relevant line of mixed-method research we have been involved in, drawing on Q-methodology. In this particular case, we especially refer to a comparative research project of two compatible news use studies, performed in Denmark (2009, $N = 35$; Schröder and Kobbernagel 2010) and Belgium's Northern region (2011, $N = 32$; Courtois, Schröder, and Kobbernagel, *forthcoming*). The initial Danish study immediately followed a more classic survey approach that provoked a need for a more in-depth interaction with news consumers.

The Q framework, which perhaps needs some introduction, invites participants in the course of a semi-structured interview to map out and discuss their personal news media repertoires. This technique, described at length by McKeown and Thomas (1988), has gained considerable momentum in audience research in the past few years (Davis and Michelle 2011). In these particular news studies, a predefined set of 25 new media outlets were presented on cards that need to be sorted on a normally distributed grid, following a specific dimension, i.e. "plays a role in my life" versus "does not play a role in my life" (see Table 1 for the so-called Q-sample). This entails an operationalisation of the multi-dimensional notion of worthwhileness (Schröder and Larsen 2010; Courtois, Schröder, and Kobbernagel, *forthcoming*), which is a multi-dimensional concept that decomposes in factors including the worth of spending time and money, next to the participatory potential, technological appeal, public connection, enticing content, situational fit and normative pressures. During this exercise, participants are invited to think aloud, disclosing their personal constructions of individual news media, while arranging them in the broader perspective of a cross-medial landscape.

This results in a raw data matrix cross-tabulating participants and news media regarding the value the individual participants address to such an outlet. Next, methods of quantitative data reduction—usually principal component analysis—are applied to distil patterns from the raw data. It is these patterns that are of special interest. They reflect participants with a common set of preferred news media. The Q-task is preferably embedded in a larger interview that probes into daily practices and circumstances, the personal value addressed to news consumption and the specific incorporation of news

TABLE 1

The communal Q-sample items used in the Danish and Flemish study

Q sample items	
1. Prime-time Danish TV news	14. Local free weeklies
2. 24-hour TV news	15. Professional magazines
3. "Serious" current affairs programmes on Danish TV	16. Family and women's magazines
4. "Entertaining" current affairs programmes on Danish TV	17. Magazines about lifestyle, health, culture
5. News and current affairs on international TV channels	18. News on Danish newspapers' and TV channels' websites
6. Radio news (mornings before 9 am)	19. News on other Danish websites
7. Radio news (after 9 am)	20. Blogs with news on the internet
8. Radio current affairs	21. Social net media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)
9. National mainstream newspapers	22. News on international news media websites
10. National specialised newspapers	23. International news sites not produced by media
11. Free daily newspapers	24. Text-TV news
12. Tabloid newspapers	25. News on mobile phones and other handheld media
13. Local/regional dailies	

Source: Schröder and Kobbernagel (2010).

media in everyday life. As such, the quantitatively derived patterns serve as guiding principles in further qualitative data analysis. In short, the Q news studies provide a glimpse into the dynamics and rationales for engaging with multiple news media, clarifying their interactions and (in)compatible appropriations. Moreover, due to the emphasis on the ability of participants to reflect aloud, and to share constructions of news media repertoires in everyday circumstances, it furnishes user-centred insight in the constructions of news media.

In the aforementioned Danish and Belgian studies, this led to seven and eight types of repertoires, respectively, both juxtaposing traditionally oriented and more new, online media-oriented patterns, next to apparent preferences for light, general and background-laden news types.

In the Danish study, the following types of news consumers were found: (1) *the traditional, versatile news consumers* with a preference for national newspapers, prime-time television news, morning radio news and online services; (2) *popular culture-oriented digital news consumers*, who are tied to Web services (i.e. social media and news sites); (3) *background-oriented digital news consumers* with a similar profile as the previous type, albeit with a disposition to indulge in serious current affairs programmes and international television news; (4) *the light newspaper readers* who are, in contrast to others, prone to engage with tabloid newspapers and free newspapers; (5) *the heavy newspaper readers* with a strong print tendency towards national newspapers, specialised newspapers, next to local weeklies and free newspapers; (6) *the news update addicts* who are tied to 24-hour news and text television updates; and (7) *the regional omnivorous news consumers* that, contrary to others, address high value to regional dailies, combined with a diverse remainder of news choices.

In the Flemish case, hybrid forms mixing traditional and online media emerged, next to the selective prominence of both social and mobile media. Still, the latter two are most likely attributable to the time lapse between the studies, during which both types of news sources have gained substantial ground. The distinguished news consumption repertoires are: (1) *the traditional mainstream consumers*, following the flow of morning radio news, tabloid newspaper and prime-time television news; (2) *the hybrid light news consumers*, combining news websites with magazines and prime-time television news; (3) *the traditional background news consumers* with a preference for traditional media forms such as newspapers, radio and television (i.e. current affairs programmes); (4) *the mobile, light news consumers* who predominantly draw on mobile applications, supplemented by free dailies and lifestyle magazines; (5) *the online, social background news consumer* tied to social media as news sources, extended by news website and prime-time television; (6) *the mobile mainstream news consumers*, who are again tied to mobile applications, yet combined with a higher preference for current affairs on television, text news and news website; (7) *the hybrid background news consumers*, inclined to consume national specialised newspapers, followed by news websites and current affairs programmes; and (8) *the online, social light news consumers* who focus on social media, combined with family and women's magazines' news websites.

As such Q reveals fine-grained, latent repertoire structures shared by participants that allow for further qualitative analysis. In this particular case, it evoked the rationales that turn to the routine nature of news outlet selections, fitting morning routines, haphazard news checking during the day, and more elaborate and deepening information during the evening. This largely feeds back to the original conceptual news worthwhile-ness dimensions. More specifically, participants emphasise their situations and their practical constraints (social, spatial, temporal, i.e. listening to the radio at work in a forklift, browsing a smartphone news app in between administrative tasks, watching the television news in the evening together with the family), quality assumptions and assessments of the contributions (i.e. specific newspaper titles), technological affordances and the supporting skills (i.e. the ability to operate devices proficiently and understand their dynamics). Very similar to digital ethnography, the Q-methodology allows for an understanding of practices as they are embedded in the specific context of the mundane. It offers to focus on actual practices and what they are worth for the participant, rather than engaging in normative debate about what practices are valuable (although social norm is likely to persist as a factor).

All things considered, the Q-based audience research has the benefit of transparent data collection and analysis. It entails a clear, almost standardised procedure to engage in this kind of research, thus even affording cross-national comparisons. Still, there are several caveats that have harvested substantial criticism, including the methodological assumption the predefined sorting grid is under pressure, as well as the issue of recruitment that tends to affect the results and the potential for generalising the diversity in patterns (Courtois, Schröder, and Kobbernagel, [forthcoming](#)). The common prerequisite of Q-methodology imposing participants to sort the items (i.e. news media) on a Bell-shaped distributed grid, rather than a free sort, is often criticised. Moreover, the results and conclusions are highly dependent on the scope of news media that are included and how these forms are interpreted. Nevertheless, if the emphasis is put on Q as a tool to guide deepening qualitative analysis, focusing on patterns within a pool of participants, the merits are considerable.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has tried to make the case for a radical user perspective in journalism studies as a way to deepen our understanding of a factor becoming increasingly important in how journalism is shaped: the news users themselves. If indeed, as Carey (2007, 12) has stated, “the ‘public’ is the god term of journalism”, then journalism studies should devote a particular attention to news users. We would like to conclude this article by addressing how this perspective cannot only be important for journalism studies, but by extension also for journalism as such.

Adopting a radical user perspective in journalism studies implies the acknowledgement of the fact that our thinking about and study of journalism cannot be fruitful if the news user is not taken into account on the conceptual, methodological and normative level. As argued in this article, the need to do so has only become more pressing since the advent of digital and mobile technologies and the changes they brought about in news use in terms of participation, cross-mediality and mobility. The increased adoption of content-producing or -distributing activities by large parts of the audience has introduced a “productive” dimension in our thinking about the audience (Picone 2011). A “consumptive” dimension should equally be introduced in our thinking about media and journalistic production. In the same way as we cannot understand how people experience journalism by merely looking at the way they consult news, we can no longer understand the ongoing changes in journalism by solely looking at professional practice in the newsroom.

Relating this back to the study presented, the empirical results may, for instance, show that staying informed about what happens still largely remains a routine activity tied to well-known forms of delivery, even if users have an abundant window media and source options at their disposal. Although substantial audience proportions are diversifying towards online media, many others stick to more traditional consumption patterns, emphasising the need for approaches—like Q—that are able to grasp this audience diversification. This implies that news stories, how well written and publicly relevant they may be, will always be articulated to the specific individuals’ situation and possible socio-spatial constraints. Such insights offer more tangible ways for journalists to conceive possible new forms of telling stories to their audience while at the same time allow journalists and academics alike to break free from the often normative misconceptions about what kind of news people want and how they experience it in their daily life practices.

In relation to the latter sentence, we are convinced that a radical user perspective will also help journalism scholarship move further away from the all too normative dichotomy between quality and popular journalism. It is exactly by adopting a more nuanced conceptualisation of the user that we can understand that news use is not solely driven by popular demand and news users’ expectations about journalism are much more complex and ambiguous than what is often assumed—even though, we would quickly add, not *too* complex and ambiguous to study. A news story can be very much worthwhile to people because of its civic value too. Similarly, when it comes to the often little added value of user contributions to the news, both journalists and news users might share the same frustration about the unused democratic potential of user-generated content. The general idea here is that journalistic and user interests are not bound to be oppositional, nor is the common ground between both necessarily limited to the offering and consumption of popular news (cf. Costera Meijer 2013). (Certain) journalists and (certain)

news users may very well share a series of civic goals ranging from offering grounded information to trying to solve issues or achieve social change on certain topics.

In conclusion, we hope to have shown that it is useful to give both journalists and news users an equal place in our thinking about what journalism should be. In line with Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2010), the proposed radical user perspective may contribute to a more integrated theory of journalism that overcomes the dichotomy between “productive” and “consumptive” approaches that continues to blur our further understanding of what form journalism takes—and should take—in the digital age. As such, the user perspective put forward in this article is radical in means much more than in scope. The user perspective has found its way into journalism studies before, but has never come on equal terms with the content- or production-focused approaches. Hence, in order to achieve an integrated theory of journalism we appeal for a more intensive focus on the user, one that must result in providing journalism studies with the much needed concepts to grasp the social relevance as well as the socially and spatially more complex (mobile) news use.

Of course, the proposed perspective is not without issues. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) notice that convergence has led to the circulation of cultural material being more participatory but at the same time messier. As “audiences are making their presence felt by actively shaping media flows” (2), these media flows become much more complex, intertwining private and public messages, professional and collaborative information production, interpersonal and mass-communication, etc. It is quite a dare to single out the social logics and cultural practices emerging in such a “messy” media environment. Still, exactly in understanding those logics and practices lies the answer on the role journalism can keep on playing in our society. This calls upon journalism studies to take these evolutions into account: as journalism will be shaped by the interaction of both news users and journalists, so should journalism studies engage in both production-oriented and user-oriented research.

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