

The wisdom of the crowds

VALUABLE
JOURNALISM AND
THE SEARCH FOR
QUALITY FROM
A NEWS USER'S
PERSPECTIVE



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Quality is a central theme for both journalists and journalism scholars. That is understandable as quality is the hallmark for public programmes and, obviously, for quality journalism.

Within the university, the emphasis is on analysing the quality of texts, programmes and the conditions under which the news was produced. Audience research seems to be underappreciated, perhaps because professionals and academics tend to see the quality perspective as incompatible with the audience perspective – taking the audiences' needs into account would automatically result in a loss of quality.

Or, as Buijs wrote: "As soon as editors only deliver what the audience wants, a further discussion on quality would be superfluous" (2008: 38). Many reporters consider the increasing focus on the audience as one of the causes of the decline of quality journalism.

As BBC presenter Jeremy Paxman (2007) said: "Let's spend less time measuring audiences and more time enlightening them."

This article goes against this tide and shows why audience research is still of fundamental importance for the quality of both journalism academia and professional practice.

This is a plea to research the quality of journalism from the perspective of the user: the reader, listener and viewer of journalistic texts and programmes.

Two interrelated societal developments make it more urgent than ever to take the audience seriously. First of all,



academics and professionals need to realise that the audience has changed.

The news user is more confident and is no longer satisfied with what is offered but puts further demands on journalism.

Secondly, other news media (news websites, Twitter, journalism blogs, etc.) provide people with more opportunities to consume news.

Fixed viewing, reading and listening habits are changing. People no longer buy a newspaper at a certain age or watch the daily eight o'clock news. Instead of news on fixed times and in tightly directed formats today's audience expects constant updates, a broader selection of topics and a greater variety in design.

One can take the users' perspective seriously, without it automatically leading to a further trivialisation of news.

In fact, if you listen to the audience it becomes clear that they request an extension of the democratic task of journalism.

The news user becomes more selective

For a long time journalists thought about the audience as a simple grey mass of people keen on thrills and superficial entertainment.

This view is found throughout a book about the future of quality journalism by Oosterbaan and Wansink (2008: 173) in which they advocate a "paternalistic relationship" to the audience: "Self-consciously apply the perspective that journalists, because of their knowledge and training, know what the most important developments in a society are."

A paternalistic view like this is problematic since it assumes that journalists are primarily "transmitters" of news and the audience a "receiver" of news.

This hierarchical communication model does little justice to the complex relationships that have arisen during the last decade between professionals and citizens (McQuail 2005).

Technological developments, including the improving accessibility of audiovisual equipment, have facilitated the "empowerment of the individual" (Boswijk et al 2005: 45). With the introduction of new communication technologies and the expansion, digitalisation and convergence of news

offerings, people can now decide for themselves what they want to watch, when they want to watch it and where (Uricchio 2004).

Illustrative is the reading habit of Dutch TV presenter Anita Witzier (47): "I sometimes read *NRC Next*, sometimes *de Volkskrant*. It varies. Sometimes I have a subscription. I also buy *Trouw*. I like variety".

The emancipated news user demands a more equal position in the journalistic process. As a result, the traditional top-down pattern in which public broadcasters try to edify their audience is broken.

The audience, not the channel, decides what they want to watch or listen to. So how can journalism attend to a more selective audience? There are two approaches to take:

Participation: make better use of the knowledge and expertise of the audience

The Dutch are increasingly better educated and information is increasingly more accessible (CBS 2009). Journalists are losing their monopoly on knowledge.

They might be aware of general social trends but individual citizens are always quicker and better informed than the journalist (Gillmor 2004). News users take pleasure in sharing their knowledge with journalists but journalists are often – under the guise of independence – reluctant.

Newsmakers hesitate to trust and rely on proficient citizens, especially in giving them the final say (Domingo et al 2008; Hermida and Thurman 2008; O'Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Ryfe 2009). Few realise that their reluctant attitude towards "expert citizens" can unintentionally lead to a loss of trust in the press.

It's not just the expert citizen that is not optimally used as a source – viewers, readers and listeners together, in a mass, often know more than one journalist (however well-informed that journalist is) (Leadbeater 2008).

This "wisdom of the crowds" is barely used as a news source (Patterson and Domingo 2008). A senior journalist from a news website explains: "Look, we used to be the experts. Of course, maybe if you add all the people together they might have been more knowledgeable – but people did not come together. Now with the Internet they do... and the network is more professional than the newsroom can ever be. Journalists can no longer afford to think that they know what is best and how the world works."

Twitter is currently one of the few communication tools that journalists use to scout the "wisdom of the crowds" by checking valuable information with followers.

The quality of journalism can be increased if media learn how to benefit more efficiently from the expertise of citizens (both as experts and a mass) by letting them participate in the journalistic process.

More research into the dynamics between professional journalistic autonomy and the use of expert citizens will show the consequences it can have for media houses and their routines.

Representation: to better represent the audience

A second reason for journalists to start taking their audience more seriously is that a portion of it is dissatisfied with the way they are represented or **not** represented in the news. According to Haagoort (chairman of the Dutch public broadcaster), young people, immigrants and the "socially disappointed" (like extreme right-wing voters) avoid the public broadcasting service (*Trouw* 16 October 2008).

Especially the socially disappointed complain that they get no or little representation from public service broadcasters and quality newspapers. Couldry et al (2007) suggest that the number of people who feel ignored by journalists is increasing.

Why should these people follow the news if it systematically ignores their issues and perspectives? Journalists defend themselves by claiming that they do regularly pay attention to right-wing PVV party leader Wilders. Do they need to give this man and his "despicable body of thought" an even bigger stage?

Recent research revealed that there is no apparent reason for PVV-voters to be disappointed in the news coverage of their party (Costera Meijer 2009a). A search query in the Dutch LexisNexis news database on newspaper coverage about "Wilders", "PVV" or "Wilders AND PVV" finds nearly 7 000 articles between 1 January 2009 and 1 August 2009.

Research into news coverage at Amsterdam regional TV station AT5 can however explain the continuing dissatisfaction with the right-wing voters (Costera Meijer, 2008, 2010). This research looked into the station's social significance for Amsterdam citizens and revealed that its audience has other demands on journalism than just a need for accurate information.



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Besides reports on major events from home and abroad the audience also requires that the media tells the “rest of the world” the essence of their own issues and perspectives. In short, they expect quality media to give an accurate representation of themselves.

People want to understand the world but also want to be understood by the world! The press currently addresses this desire insufficiently – therefore the search term “PVV voter” showed only 107 articles during that same period of time.

Even more remarkable is that only eight newspaper articles actually let a PVV voter speak (*Trouw*, *de Volkskrant*, *Reformatisch Dagblad*, *Parool*).

This means that media let the voice of PVV party leader Wilders enter the Dutch living room while the mood inside the living room is only sporadically covered in the news.

An extension of the democratic mandate of journalism

On the one hand citizens have knowledge and expertise that news organisations should make use of. On the other hand citizens ask for a more accurate representation of themselves.

Both the demand for more participation and better representation point out a public need to expand the democratic mandate of journalism.

These changes in the relationship between news and the news user support a claim for a different organisation and understanding of news.

Firstly, and everyone agrees to this, journalism needs to provide accurate information – this is a prerequisite for a proper functioning democracy (Dahlgren 1995).

Additionally, the audience does not want to be neglected in the journalistic process.

The latter requires a certain democratisation of media houses.

How can they make it as easy as possible for users to create new or additional information to assist media houses (Drok 2007; Nip 2006)?

The asymmetric distribution of attention for politicians like PVV party leader Wilders and the issues his supporters raise illustrate the importance of correct and proportional representation as a third democratic dimension.

In order to better reflect the concerns and experiences of ordinary people the democratic duty of quality journalism requires an extension.

New journalistic genres and different news values

To live up to the fact that quality journalism gets its audience involved in a democratic society, the news needs to actually be read, heard or viewed by as many people as possible.

However, the viewing, listening and readership figures of all news media (except the Internet) are going down (Dutch Commission for the Media, 2008).

A third explanation, besides a lack of representation and a lack of participatory opportunities, is that the definition of journalistic quality and the news experience are no longer synchronised; meaning that quality journalism does no longer stand for a high quality experience (Costera Meijer 2006; Schroeder and Phillips 2005).

In addition, Blanken and Deuze (2007) argue that the current values within the journalistic quality paradigm are not on par with the emergence of new journalism practices.

Put together the two additional democratic repertoires that the audience demands of quality journalism and it might also point towards new quality formulas and values.

How can media take a more selective news taste into consideration?

Facilitating participation with a different tone and new formulas

News users might differ from each other by age, schooling or cultural background but if they all had to describe quality media they use the same words as its creators: informative, thorough, reliable, factual, in-depth, fair, complete, clear, objective and authoritative (Costera Meijer 2009b).



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But there are other qualities that determine if people will actually read the newspaper or watch a specific TV programme like: excitement, recognition and representation, the use of different perspectives, adventure (there has to be something to experience) and a story told from an insider’s viewpoint (Costera Meijer 2009b).

Young people expect journalists to stay on top of the news and to jump in the middle of it for a “participatory” news experience (bodysnatching) (Lewis et al 2005).

However, Heider et al (2005) conclude that only 35% of respondents find speed very important, compared to almost two thirds (59%) of journalists. Women, migrants and the less-educated have a preference for “slow” news with more emphasis on everyday life and less for incidents.

Glasser (2000: 28) emphasises a third aspect of “news participation”: “Without narrative news loses its expressive power; and without the power of expression news fails to engage readers as participants in the process of understanding.”

Johnson (2005) suggests that a more participatory-focused journalism can perhaps learn from interactive and speculative formulas of popular programmes such as *Idols*.

Getting a better representation from a wider news selection and news content

News users however emphasise that a more open or participatory style of journalism must not take precedence over trustworthiness (Heider et al 2005).

According to Luyendijk (2006), a critical and impartial news gathering style is an excellent combination with a more empathetic and curious attitude of the journalist.

However, Ryfe (2009) is sceptical about the willingness of news media to change their news selection and news presentation to become more representative and thus “democratic”.

As long as journalists attach news value to certain news moments like press conferences or to news frames like the conflict model, he finds it unlikely that they will take the knowledge and everyday issues of people seriously.

That would require a profound change in the culture of news.

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