

Doctor of Media and Communication Studies: Journalism

Quelles Nouvelles de Bruxelles? Analyse des dynamiques collectives d'un écosystème médiatique local

Victor Wiard

Supervisors: prof. David Domingo, PhD (ULB) en prof. Ike Picone, PhD (VUB)

Summary

The objective of this research is to analyze the practices of actors participating in the production of local news in Brussels' media ecosystem to question the concept of "participatory journalism". To do this, the study takes a novel perspective to look at online news production processes considering them not as the result of a professional practice, but of social practice that not only includes professional journalists, but also bloggers, politicians, activists, whistleblowers, or citizens. After having provided an overview of the existing news websites, actor-network theory is used to analyze two cases (or controversies) in order to understand the configuration of the networks formed by the actors interacting over the time. The empirical part of the thesis therefore includes online monitoring to detect content producers (N=295) and controversies (N=2), and the analysis of these through a review of news items produced (N=388), semi-structured interviews (N=23) and online and offline ethnography, with participant observation in one of the cases. This way, the thesis aims to enrich the debates in the sociology of journalism in three ways: (1) by adopting an ecosystemic approach rarely used in the discipline, (2) by reproblematising the concepts of "participation" and "participatory journalism", and (3) empirical data on the local Brussels context, little explored here.

The online monitoring phase enabled a categorization of the websites producing online news based on formal similarities of three distinct types of producers: episodic producers, thematic producers, and intensive producers. The formal analysis of these shows that there are few participatory mechanisms online, which contradicts some of the existing literature on the issue. Indeed, most of the websites analyzed are limited to offering access to the community of practice via a contact page or allow people to react to public issues directly by commenting on the website, or on social networks. A small number of sites, however, offer access to news production by allowing you to submit ideas or even complete news items.

The analysis of controversies shows that there is a diversity of players involved in online local news production which are strongly connected online. However, "legacy" media and professional journalists remain the main producers of information daily; they occupy a hegemonic place in the Brussels' media ecosystem. All these actors participate in the local ecosystem, although at different levels, to gain the attention of the public. Politicians appeal to "legacy" media through press releases and conferences, as well as other online news producers and social media. Activists have similar practices which they combine with the organization of public events. Citizens also participate in this ecosystem, but in a more indirect way, by circulating content or being invited to participate by public figures (politicians or activists) via events, petitions, and other happenings.

The combination of the use of the ANT and the ADD model allows for an analytical approach of the actors involved in an ecosystem while giving the researcher the opportunity to think about his position in the actors-networks studied as well as his influence on them.

