

**Anna Tereszkievicz**

**Jagiellonian University in Krakow**

# **I Report, We Have Our Say. An Analysis of User-Created Content on Participatory News Websites**

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## **Streszczenie**

Celem niniejszego badania jest analiza treści materiałów tworzonych przez użytkowników Internetu oraz przedstawianych na stronach dziennikarstwa uczestniczącego należących do portali publicznych kanałów informacyjnych. Uczestnictwo internautów w tworzeniu treści na publicznych stronach informacyjnych jest nowym trendem związanym z przemianami społecznymi oraz technologicznymi, które umożliwiają użytkownikom pełnienie roli nadawcy komunikatów medialnych. Autorka zakłada, iż wolność kontrybucji materiałów prowadzić będzie do różnorodności stylistycznej oraz heterogeniczności tematycznej treści. W rezultacie, treści będzie charakteryzować odmienna wartość informacyjna oraz efekt komunikacyjny. Analiza wskazuje na trzy podstawowe cele komunikacyjne realizowane przez użytkowników ww. portali, czyli rozpowszechnianie informacji oraz relacji z wydarzeń na świecie, prezentowanie własnej osoby i zainteresowań oraz wyrażanie opinii. Badanie wskazuje także na zachodzące obecnie przemiany w dyskursie publicznym oraz medialnym.

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## **1. Introduction**

The development of the web has given rise to changes in interpersonal communication, leading to the birth of mediated synchronous and asynchronous forms of contact, with which variation in language is associated, and to the development of new means of expression (cf. Herring 2001, Crystal 2010). Moreover, the progress of the web has brought about profound changes in the genre landscape by causing alterations in the existing genre-forms and leading to the birth of new genres and text-types (cf. Crowston and Williams 2000).

The evolution of the web has brought about changes also in the role that internet users play. The most visible changes concern the nature and level of interactivity and the degree of users' participation in the creation of website content. Interactivity and participation has evolved from the basic level of navigational interactivity, i.e., where the user navigates through a webpage by means of hyperlinks, through functional interactivity, in which limited participation in content addition to the site is allowed, e.g., commenting on the website content, to adaptive interactivity comprising the users' involvement in the creation of materials online (Deuze 2003: 214). Nowadays, users have the possibility to participate in the production of content and may freely create and publish materials online:

Using the Internet and its communications technologies – chiefly perhaps the Web – implies not longer simply active but silent interpretation (...): it implies also the active expression and communication of views, values, beliefs, ideas, knowledge and creativity. (Bruns 2008: 15)

Due to extensive interactive possibilities and active participatory practices new internet culture is perceived as the *culture of participation* (e.g., Lister *et al.* 2009).

## 2. Mainstream citizen journalism platforms

The scope of the evolution in user activity online has brought about changes in the sphere of communication between the media and the receivers of media broadcasts, as well as in the approach of the mainstream mass-media to user-created content (cf. Hermida and Thurman 2008, Reich 2008). The major reaction of many news publishers was to open their gates for user-created materials and increase the level of interaction with the receivers. As a result, many websites of news publishers (e.g., CNN, Fox News, BBC) have introduced specially designed sections of user-created content where the users are invited to send their reports, pictures and videos, some of which are incorporated into official broadcasts and published on a wider scale. As Howe (2006) observes, these possibilities help the users feel that they are a part of the mainstream media system.

The aim of the following study has been to analyze user-created sections of mainstream news-media sites with respect to their functional aspects and discourse properties of user-contributions in particular. Thus, the goal is to investigate whether the platforms perform the function of citizen-journalism websites, which focus on the provision of information, or if they are exploited for other purposes as well. The view that I have taken here is that due to the

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freedom of contributing, the platforms would serve the users other purposes, going beyond the provision of information. In addition, it can naturally be expected that the *discourse of user-contributions* would differ from that of the journalist news stories available on official websites. The openness of the sites is likely to lead to a considerable individualization in the stylistic layer of the contributions. To review the validity of the hypotheses, I have studied the type of content that users create as well as their stylistic value. The material for the analysis encompasses user-contributed content drawn from 254 CNN *iReports*, 54 Fox News *uReports*, and 89 users' contributions on the BBC *Have Your Say* website collected in March 2011.

### 3. Professional versus citizen-created content

In order to assess the validity of the hypothesis proclaiming a difference between journalists' and users' contributions it would be useful to compare the messages sent by the users with news stories published on official channels. For the sake of the comparison, two stories focusing on the same event are presented below. Example (1) is a fragment of a typical news article published by the BBC *News*, while example (2) is a fragment from a user-contribution on the BBC *Have Your Say* platform. Both articles concern the earthquake which took place in Japan in 2011.

- (1) Japan's most powerful earthquake since records began has struck the north-east coast, triggering a massive tsunami. Cars, ships and buildings were swept away by a wall of water after the 8.9-magnitude tremor, which struck about 400km (250 miles) north-east of Tokyo. A state of emergency has been declared at a nuclear power plant, where pressure has exceeded normal levels. Officials say 350 people are dead and about 500 missing, but it is feared the final death toll will be much higher.
- (2) My family home in Ishinomaki was flooded and my car too, in over a metre of water after the earthquake caused a tsunami. I'm originally from Otley in West Yorkshire, but live here with my Japanese wife. The last few days we spent sleeping in our car, the weeks before with friends at their home. I went up to the top of a hill, which overlooks our town and the whole place has disappeared – it is total devastation. You can just see a big square where a huge building used to be.

A comprehensive comparison is beyond the scope of this paper, but even this short juxtaposition of the two types of reports affords a general view on the issue and points to marked differences in the functional and discourse layers of the contributions.

The *mainstream report* complies with the typical journalistic requirements of objectivity and neutrality characterizing news articles (Stein *et al.* 2006). We can see emphasis on informative content, attention to detail, and precision. The report, following the conventions of standard written language, is relatively formal. Formality and neutrality are enhanced by the use of passive voice and reported speech, which allow for the achievement of a neutral and depersonalized depiction of the scene of events.

By contrast, the *user-contributed message* reflects an entirely different approach towards reporting. The basic, most visible distinction is that between a global and a local perspective. The first report focuses on the event itself and shows the readers how the region was affected by the earthquake, whereas the second focuses on the life of an individual at the heart of the events. Prominence is given here to the personal situation of the reporter, his experiences and feelings. While the first report could also be written by a journalist present at the scene of events, the perspective of an insider is more noticeable in the second report. Such perspective is clearly reflected in the language of the report – personalized, subjective and more informal. The report assumes the shape of a personal story, a narrative from the scene of events.

The two reports, thus represent two distinct manners and styles of informing about the same event. The reports, though clearly distinct and highlighting different aspects of the state of affairs, are in a way complementary to each other, as they show two distinct sides of the same event, thus giving the readers a broader and multi-dimensional view on the situation.

It can be stated that the publication of user-created content on official mainstream news websites reflects a change in journalistic practices. Traditionally, the accounts of the participants of events were incorporated into journalists' articles as a way of authenticating and enriching the reports (Wojtak 2004). Today, user-created reports have become separate, individualized and autonomous broadcasts. The presence of such content on official websites of publishing companies clearly points to the current changes in the public discourse, in the news providing habits and in the aforementioned relationship between the users and the news-providers.

In the following sections, further aspects of user-created messages are presented, focusing on the major purposes and the most conspicuous discourse features of user-contributions.

#### **4. Purpose and discourse features of citizen-created content**

On the basis of the analyzed material, it may be stated that user-created sections on mainstream media sites are not devoted solely to journalism and re-

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porting. The motives which induce the users to contribute content seem to be more diversified, going beyond information provision and involving also self-disclosure and self-expression. Specifically, the following purposes may be identified: dissemination of information, reporting on events, personal storytelling, expression of opinions and attitudes, and self-presentation.

#### 4.1. Dissemination of news and reports on events

The first rationale for contribution is reporting on events and the dissemination of information. Due to the affordances of the news sites, their popularity, currency, and global reach, the users perceive such pages as a suitable medium for the distribution of news of various types. The materials analyzed show that the users above all point to the events which have not been presented in the media either due to their local character or due to their limited value from the point of view of broadcasters (cf. Rettberg 2010). Thus, the authors of the posts wish to draw attention of other viewers to local affairs of various types, to affairs which otherwise would not be covered by the mainstream media. Moreover, the users provide information on the events already presented by mass media. The materials are supposed to supplement the information already given or present it from a different perspective, specifically from the perspective of the people directly involved in the events.

As stated above, informative posts presented by immediate witnesses of events give authentic accounts from the scene of the events and are created with the purpose of sharing with the public one's experiences associated with the event described. This approach towards structuring the messages increases the realism of the accounts, as they are no longer purely factual reports, but descriptions in which concrete individuals are involved and their lives shown. The accounts of experiences are presented in the form of first person singular and plural narratives, each of which has a different communicative and informative value.

Reports in the form of first person plural narratives are used to indicate the author's involvement with the people affected, to underline a sense of belonging to the community, and mark the author's participation in the events described. The use of 'we', instead of 'I', helps emphasize the fact that such perspective is shared by other people, that the author does not refer to his/her individual perceptions, but describes events affecting larger communities, as illustrated in (3) from the *Have Your Say* platform:<sup>1</sup>

- (3) We hear bombing from time to time. The banks are open but they have no cash to give out. There are long queues at the station. Some of the

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<sup>1</sup> All the examples are quoted in their original form, i.e., errors have not been corrected.

supermarkets are open but not like normal. We are waiting and we don't know what we are waiting for.

The use of 'we' in (3) evidently marks the speaker's solidarity with other people, but it also emphasizes the directness of the report. The use of 'we' can be also taken to mark contrast with 'you', i.e., the people and/or readers remaining outside the zone of the conflict or tragedy which affected the community in question. The reports of this kind assume the form of a fragmented narrative, where the account of events is broken down into short, telegraphic, one-sentence items of information. The content is limited to a dry, simple description of the conditions in the place where particular events take place. The account of events is frequently not cohesive, describing varied, unrelated scenes. Yet, such manner of description gives us a sense of immediacy and adds to the dramatic effect which the reports produce.

First person singular narration gives a somewhat narrower perspective and a more restricted scope of description. As Biber claims (1988: 225), the use of the first person singular pronoun signals personal focus and emphasizes personal involvement. Such accounts do not describe collective feelings of a particular community or family, but portray actions reflecting rather an individual perception of the events. Consequently, their informative value is comparatively lower. What is more, the narratives are resonant with evocative statements of personal feelings and emotions triggered by the events which the users report on, as the following examples from the *Have Your Say* website illustrate:

- (4) The trouble broke out on Wednesday, and I first noticed it when on my way out, I found I couldn't get the public transport. I started walking and got to my fiancée's family's house where I have stayed ever since. I took a walk on Thursday morning and to my great surprise I saw a chain of heavy loaded cars with pro-Ouattara guys.
- (5) The earthquake was the scariest experience. I remember seeing a big crack in the road open up and fling cars everywhere.

Such statements of emotion undoubtedly enhance the impressive value of the posts and influence the way they are perceived by the readers. The use of short, simple sentences additionally increases the affective value of the statements and gives the impression of unplanned discourse.

In the posts in the form of personalized accounts of events, a degree of self-disclosure can be noticed. In such contributions, the authors concentrate on the influence of the events on their private lives. The posts are marked by a considerable degree of personal involvement, as the authors focus on the

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exposure of personal experiences associated with the events, as illustrated in (6) from the *Have Your Say* website:

- (6) I'm a US citizen living in Japan and I have just been told that US citizens are being evacuated. I would like to leave, as I am concerned about the radiation, but I am divorced with a six-year-old son. If I leave I might lose my right to see him.

Thus, the readers are given moving accounts of personal life-stories or the revelation of intimate details from the authors' lives instead of a publication concerning new information from the scene of specific events.

A further property which distinguishes user- from journalist-reports is their explicit commentative function. While in journalistic reports the reporters rarely express their personal opinions openly (Wojtak 2004), user-contributed reports are supplemented by personal commentaries of the authors concerning the events in question. In this way, the authors do not only describe the events, but analyze and overtly evaluate them. Clearly, the authors do not see their role as restricted to mere reporting, but exercise their right to act as interpreters of events, which can be seen in the post below, which is from the *Have Your Say* platform:

- (7) I think the French forces should focus on helping their people, while the UN should help the citizens of the Ivory Coast. I don't think the UN is doing enough.

The reports show that the authors wish to contribute their knowledge and interpretation of events. The informative potential of the reports is in this way enhanced by an expressive function they perform. In this way, the authors wish to add their voice to a discussion of political and social problems, submitting proposals for measures to be taken to solve the problems in question. The readers, on the other hand, may thus obtain a view of a person directly involved in the events, and do not have to rely only on the interpretation of mainstream reporters or journalists.

Information provision in the shape of such personal narratives departs from journalistic conventions. Clearly, these posts are not designed to function as objective news. Provision of information is in these cases dominated by the expression of emotions and attitudes. Though reporting on the events, the posts are closer in form to intimate life-stories. However, this is where their strong point seems to lie – in the personalized, authentic and intimate content that they reveal. An account of events presented by an average person at the center of the events adds a human touch to the basic and factual description

of the events provided by mainstream media. Thus, as Rettberg (2010: 95) observes, we may have the basic and factual knowledge of the events gained from official publications, but reading such personalized accounts of events may show us a diametrically different side of the events and may be a more affecting experience.

#### 4.2. Expression of opinions and commenting

The portals also serve users as a platform for the expression of personal views, attitudes and judgments in general and for presenting commentaries to mainstream media broadcasts. The web pages explicitly encourage the users to express their opinions; therefore, it is not surprising that the sites are abundant in the users' statements of opinion concerning politics, social life and human rights. Owing to the popularity and global reach of the sites, they offer the users a wider audience, and thus more chances for their voices to be heard than if they were transmitted on a blog or homepage, which may not be discovered in the multitude of other websites. In contrast to the above-mentioned comments, these contributions function as independent units, not associated with reports on events.

The expressive function encompasses the presentation of extensive statements of subjective opinions as well as short comments to news and events broadcast by the mass media. The most frequent statements of opinion involve the expression of attitudinal stance, i.e., presentation of personal preferences and moral judgments (Biber and Finegan 1989). The discourse of such contributions is characterized by expressiveness, exemplification and persuasiveness. The authors articulate their views explicitly, resorting to a variety of lexical and discourse resources. Below, the most frequent of such devices are discussed.

By the use of the first person pronoun (example (8) from the *Have Your Say* website), the authors underline that they express their personal stand on the issue in question. The use of such forms makes the expression of opinion more emphatic and straightforward. Evidently less frequent are comments in which the authors express their stance in an indirect way, e.g., as in (9), which comes from *iReport*.

- (8) I am against the entry of any foreign group forces into Libya and any other forms of occupation. But I support limited air strikes to protect innocent life.
- (9) One cannot help but be proud of New York for passing marriage equality. It was the courageous thing to do.

In messages such as (9), the authors do not mark the opinion as a personal one, but point to their universal character. As illustrated above, the use of the



generic pronoun 'one' serves to emphasize that such opinion is shared by other people, the whole message thus being more persuasive in character.

The contributors openly suggest steps which need to be taken to improve social and political life. Interestingly, such messages are often presented in the first person plural form ('we'), which is to underline the sense of a community in which specific actions need to be taken for the common good. Predominantly, in such messages modal verbs expressing deontic modality are used (Palmer 1987), as illustrated in (10), which is from the *Have Your Say* website, and in (11) from the *iReport* platform:

- (10) There is no other way that the government can find a way of borrowing money unless these cuts are made. I think these measures are likely to force Greece to restructure its economy. We need to be more competitive and investor-friendly.
- (11) These power hungry men and women must be removed from power and our country must regain fiscal sanity. We cannot and must not allow our country to be destroyed by greed and corruption.

The users express their opinions with an explicit aim of spreading political and social awareness among other users, trying to trigger a debate concerning various themes, and suggesting specific actions which should be taken to deal with particular political problems. This approach is emphasized by the use of imperative forms, which serve different purposes. First person plural imperative form marks the need to pursuit a common aim for the whole community, while second person imperative forms serve mainly to express criticism of other people's actions, which can be seen in the following examples from *iReport*, respectively:

- (12) Lets stand together across the world and show our support for ALL fallen Police Officers. Let's be sure to wear something BLUE EVERY SATURDAY to Honor & Respect someone who gave their Life in order for many others to be safe.
- (13) Stop telling American Citizens that we aren't in danger, with over 100 nuclear reactors in this country, we ARE in danger. Issue the tablets in the States to the people that are supposed to get them, why haven't they been issued them as of yet?

On the discourse level, the posts differ in the degree of emotiveness and exemplification. An increased level of expressiveness may be observed in the examples below, which also reflect emotional responses and judgments, but they contrast with the above-mentioned attitudinal posts in being consider-

ably more forceful and emotive. The expressive tone of the messages above is achieved by exclamations, rhetorical questions and interjections, which underline the orality of the discourse. Reference to concrete examples and situations from every-day life helps the authors enhance the vividness of their statements and convince the readers that the problems they point to are real:

- (14) So an hour ago the phone rings and the news that half a paycheck is all we will receive on the 15th. My husband has served in the Air Force for 10 years and still counting and now we are trying to figure out how 700 dollars will last till Congress figures the budget out. That is a picture of my 3 kids. How will I supply all the needs for them without money in the bank?

In this message, from *iReport*, the user criticizes the so-called shutdown policy introduced by the US Congress by pointing to the immediate impact of this policy on her family's everyday life. She does not evaluate the policy in general or political terms, nor does she consider its influence on the state, but she shows the consequences of the law on an average family of a soldier.

A high number of the authors resort to the use of rhetorical questions in expressing opinions. Previous research devoted to rhetorical strategies on *iReport* proved that rhetorical questions constitute a regular means of expressing opinions on this web page (Tereszkiewicz 2011). The following study has proved their presence also on *uReport* and *Have Your Say*. The frequency of rhetorical questions shows that they are perceived as successful tools not only to express opinions and judgments, but also to influence other readers' views and raise their awareness of particular problems:

- (15) What more needs to be said? We can die for our country, but we aren't worth it to be paid? Death is free, but it costs to provide for our families. We are only being paid half a paycheck, and for a lot of us, our rent is more than our paychecks. But when you talk about we may not see a paycheck for a whole month, how do you make a week's pay stretch? How do you cover rent, groceries, lights, water, phone, car insurance, day care, gas and medical insurance?

In example (15), which comes from the *iReport* website, the author condemns the introduced regulation by appealing to the value of life and to patriotism. He tries to point out that the law questions the value of one's sacrifice for the nation and concedes that serving the country needs not be recognized and appreciated. We can see a smooth change in his argumentation – the user begins by voicing the fundamental need for respecting the value of life and

then moves on to discussing the problems of everyday existence in order to show more concrete and tangible negative effects of the legal act in question. The message also exemplifies the above-mentioned use of ‘we’ as an expression of identification with a specific community. Here, the difference between ‘we’ and ‘you’ is clearly used to contrast two opposing groups – the people affected by the new policy and the government. The enumeration in the final line of the post additionally emphasizes the criticism of the salary cuts.

The use of the above-described means of stance-taking **serves as means of expressing opinions, judgments, emotional persuasion and appealing to the readers’ approach towards various problems**, contributes to a deeply rhetorical nature of the contributions and points to their evidently persuasive function.

### 4.3. Self-presentation

Previous investigation of *iReport* messages (Tereszkiewicz 2011) showed that self-presentation constitutes a dominant reason for contributing content to this platform. The following research demonstrates that the other websites are used as platforms for self-presentation as well. Among all the posts analyzed, more than 30% focused on personal information concerning current activities or experiences of their authors. In this way, with regard to their functional value, the portals move closer to more *personally-oriented genres*, such as blogs, homepages or social-networking sites, whose major function is self-presentation and up-dating on the life of the authors.

Self-presentation posts assume the form of detailed autobiographical narratives, the discourse of which is marked by high personalization, subjectivity, and emotiveness. The users focusing on self-presentation, rather than information, exploit the websites to give an account of their everyday experiences. In such contributions textual messages are accompanied by personal photographs of various kinds, which highlights their personalized nature. Self-presentation encompasses different aspects of the authors’ lives, involving also the revelation of childhood memories, interests and passions. The posts below, which come from *Have Your Say* and *iReport*, respectively, reflect this approach:

- (16) I won my Blue Peter badge for making and sending a card to Janet Ellis after her parachuting accident. (...) When I was 12, I visited the Blue Peter garden for the day as part of a Press Pack competition, as I wrote an article about my experience of India, which got printed in Fast Forward magazine.
- (17) As a child in my native Argentina, I grew up under the shadow and influence of my grandfather who was a meteorologist, and amateur archaeologist. I was surrounded by historical artifacts and heard many an exciting

tale; (...) I saw the first Indiana Jones movie, and loved it. 30 years later, I live in New England, and am now even more enamored with recovering and touching history.

Here, the authors present their memories and personal stories. In this case, it is difficult to see any explicit reason for such contributions but for self-presentation and the need to share one's adventures and the enthusiasm for pursuing one's hobby with other readers. The authors fully concentrate on their experiences, and do not seem to have any further aims in mind. The posts do not have much, or even any, informative value for the audience.

A different approach to self-disclosure can be illustrated in the next post, in which the user gives an account of his personal problems, associated with job loss. In this instance, self-disclosure seems to serve other purposes than only sharing one's feelings with the audience:

(18) I was fired from my job as a Juvenile Justice Specialist (Correctional Officer) for defending myself from an assault. An inmate that was illegally out of his cell and told to go back after being caught, got mad and started a disturbance on the unit. (...) But I was fired. the reason given was that I violated an inmates rights, failure to report an unusual incident. this all happens to be coincidental with the fact that I am the only African American to be qualified for a Supervisor's position.

The author of this message, which was published on *iReport*, gives a detailed account of the event which led to his being fired. This post, analogously to the above-mentioned messages, reveals a strong need for sharing personal experiences with others. Still, in this case we may say that the author presents his story with the purpose of raising the issue of unjust and unexpected treatment he fell victim to, as well as the issue of prejudice and inequality of African-American workers in the workplace mentioned and in general.

The messages in the form of extended personal life-stories constitute a significant share of all the contributions. Clearly, the majority of self-disclosing contributions cannot be regarded as instances of journalism, pointing rather to the author's need for self-disclosure.

## 5. Conclusions

It is worth noting that the platforms are governed by different regulations, involving a higher degree of gate-keeping on the *Have Your Say* website, and a greater freedom of publishing given to *iReport* and *uReport* users. However, thematic content of user-contributions shows that regardless of publish-

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ing regulations the authors treat the websites as a means to achieve a variety of communicative purposes. The posts show clearly that the websites do not function solely as *citizen-journalism* platforms, but also platforms for personal narratives and self-fulfillment.

The messages point to the advent of new reporting practices. It turns out that citizen contributions focusing on the dissemination of news in contrast to mainstream reporting have their own social objectives. Many authors are not concerned with presenting, checking, discovering new facts, or pursuing truth, i.e., traditional journalist practices, but rather with sharing emotions and personal stories. The contributions confirm that “the key difference between traditional and citizen-journalism is the difference between ‘covering’ and ‘sharing’” (Bentley 2008: 13). We may say that reporting gains a different value and a more personal touch here. Instead of covering a story, “users share a bit of their own lives” (Bentley 2008: 13).

Due to different publishing regulations, differences can be observed between the messages with respect to stylistic value, *iReport* and *uReport* posts being noticeably more informal and expressive in tone. Still, features of discourse characteristic to all the websites can also be identified. The focus on personalized reports is clearly reflected in the stylistic layer of the contributions on all the analyzed websites. To other common features belongs an increased level of self-reference and subjectivity. The contributions, deeply rhetorical in character, evidently show that the authors wish not only to express opinions but also to give vent to their emotions and influence the opinions of other people (cf. also Tereszkievicz (in print)). Discourse is characterized by authenticity and exemplification, as the authors focus on intimate experiences.

The introduction of participatory sections to mainstream media sites constitutes a new form of user-participation in the creation and contribution of content in mass media. Due to the new practices, profound changes can nowadays be observed in the sphere of public discourse and communication. The new practices and the openness towards the users begin to dissolve the traditional distinction into producers and receivers of information, revolutionize the provision of news and reporting, the relationship between the dissemination of information and self-expression, all of which is reflected in marked changes in media discourses. Self-presentation and expression of opinions is no longer restricted to the confines of a personal blog or homepage, or a commentary to a newspaper article online. As Henry Jenkins (2006) observes, we have faced an end of the era of commercial internet and the advent of a *social web*, in which the users enter into a dialogue with the mass media and execute their right to influence the content and style of the broadcasts. A continuous increase in the number of user-created platforms within mainstream media websites clearly confirms the validity of this observation.

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