



Universitat Ramon Llull

PhD Thesis

Citizens and online media participation:

Attitudes and motivations towards participatory journalism
and other online practices in London and Barcelona

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Abstract

“Citizens and online media participation. Attitudes and motivations towards participatory journalism and other online practices in London and Barcelona”, Jaume Suau Martínez, PhD thesis supervised by Pere Masip Masip, from Blanquerna School of Communications and International Relations, 2015.

The participatory dimension of the new media environment brought a high new number of practices that allow citizens to easily produce and disseminate content. Nevertheless, citizen’s willingness to participate in online environments is normally taken for granted in media and communications research, which tend to approach the subject from a normative perspective influenced by democratic theory. There is a need to better understand why and how citizens prefer to participate online; and in relation to the wide realm of ‘the political’, how this online participation is related to offline participatory practices.

This research approaches the topic of online media participation from the point of view of the citizens and taking as a main object of research the participatory options included in news media websites (participatory journalism). The qualitative part of the thesis is based on focus groups sessions conducted in London and in Barcelona. These focus groups are aimed at researching citizens’ attitudes and motivations towards participation, with a special attention to practices in and through the media, but also to their perceptions about public life and public engagement. By doing so, the research stresses the importance of conducting research about online participation in relation with the offline context of each research participant, rather than studying online media participatory practices in isolation. The quantitative part of this study is based on content analysis of the forms of participation adopted in news media websites, categorised in a study sheet based on the different kinds of interactivity (selective, participative and productive). In this way, citizens’ attitudes and motivations are then compared with the actual adoption of participatory options by news media websites.

Combining practice theory with discourse analysis techniques, the thesis suggests that there does not exist a direct relation with an active offline participation or high level of public engagement and a more active degree of online participation. The relationship might be better conceptualised as dialogical, with both individual and contextual factors playing an important role in determining citizens’

preferences for being participative in online environments. Furthermore, research participants showed how the participatory options provided by news media in their websites are not generally attracting them in big numbers, although the possibility to participate is valued and appreciated. Additionally, research participants' discourses stress the need for a major involvement with news media content, rather than towards a willingness to create their original content and replace professional journalists. Nevertheless, participants' discourses also showed how citizens start to contest the former hegemonies of professional journalists and traditional news media institutions in news' selection and distribution, pointing towards a potential next transformation of the hegemonic central positions of these actors within the public sphere.

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“It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.” J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

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Introduction

- Presentation of the research project

The Internet has been since its origins a medium that has attracted discourses of euphoria, generating a 'grand narrative' about its potentialities and effects on late modern societies. Without wanting to completely delegitimise these first studies on the subject, during the early years of research on the Internet (during the 1990s), according to Barry Wellman, the new medium was perceived as "a bright light shining above everyday concerns, (...) a technological marvel, thought to be bringing a new Enlightenment to transform the world" (Wellman, 2011, p. 18). Following Wellman, these first years of research were commonly characterised by *presentism* (The Internet had started a new world, permanently changing previous scenarios in all societal fields) and *parochialism* (the new medium was studied in isolation, without taking into consideration the context and conditions of the offline world). The early 2000s brought the dot-com boom, implying a certain moderation with regard to predictions about the effects of the Internet, although more than two decades after this first wave of research, the field of Internet studies continues to be influenced by a certain technological euphoria.

In great measure, this is due the 'participatory dimension' of the new media environment (Press & Williams, 2010), which implied a shift towards discourses more focused on collaboration and social interaction (Schäfer, 2011), as well as new formulations of power based on citizens' collective action (Castells, 2010). This 'participatory dimension' is based on recent developments of Web 2.0 (blogs, wikis, social networks), together with new communication technologies that facilitated connectivity and content creation (Wi-Fi, 3G, smart phones). These have been key factors in starting this new wave of online optimism (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2012) based on the idea of online participation, enhancing user-

generated-content and user-user interaction as a way of self-expression. Although in the academic field this new wave of online optimism started in the mid 2000s, it is generally perceived that the 'launching salvo' among the general public was the USA presidential elections of 2008, when Internet-based technologies such as social networks were quickly pointed to as the main actors in Obama's victory (Curran, Fenton & Freedman, 2012).

A recent example of this euphoria based on the 'participatory dimension' of the new media environment has been the different processes of political change that occurred in North Africa and the Middle East between 2010 and 2012, popularly known as the 'Arab Spring'. Bloggers and social networks were highlighted as key factors in mobilizing citizens against their governments, with journalists and researchers soon talking about the 'Twitter' or 'social media revolutions' (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Lotan et al., 2011; Thorsen & Allan, 2014). Despite this narrative that tends to diminish societal and cultural trends, favouring an understanding of the medium, the Internet, as a central agent in citizens' mobilization (Anderson, 2011), a series of studies proved the relatively low level of adoption of the Internet in such countries and the ever-lower adoption of social networks popular in the West, such as Twitter or Facebook¹. Studies conducted after the uprisings argued that rather than being the main internal factor of mobilization, blogs, social networks and cell phones had special relevance in facilitating internal communications and internationally spreading the message (Wilson & Dunn, 2011). This last factor could have contributed to the widespread discourse of the 'social media revolution' among western journalists and academics who attributed high importance to Arab citizens posting in English on social media, following a process of 'bias of convenience' (Hirst, 2012) which diminished complex societal and historical factors in favor of a narrative easier to understand among western audiences.

Similar discourses of technological determinism connected to this myth of the 'digital sublime' (Mosco, 2005) have also been articulated in other recent

¹ It seems that the Internet penetration in Egypt was around 17%, and the number of Facebook users around 5 million out of an overall population of 80 million (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011; Wilson & Dunn, 2011).

revolutionary or political protest events, as in Iran after the 2009 elections or in the different ‘occupy’ movements or the Spanish ‘indignados’². A recent example of how social media are wrongly enhanced as the main (and sometimes unique) factor of mobilization is the recent referendum for independence in Scotland. This event has proved how online trends might not be representative of the overall population: although ‘yes’ campaigners had a much stronger continuous presence on social media during the whole process³, they lost the referendum by a significant difference (55% of Scots voted ‘No’ against 45% who voted ‘Yes’). Consequently, although mobilization in social media is important, it cannot be considered yet as relevant as other societal and cultural factors that influence citizens’ participation and political choices. As Aouragh and Alexander (2011) argue, online and offline participation are better understood as having a dialectical relationship, rather than conceptualised as existing in isolation, and have to be considered and analysed case by case.

As has already been stated, this ‘narrative’ or ‘myth’ about the Internet and online participation draws on a certain conception of technological determinism. That is, a belief that progressive change is the consequence of a new media environment, product of the generalization of new communication technologies (Almirón & Jarque, 2008), tending to disregard or diminish societal and cultural transformations (Press & Williams, 2011). With regard to media studies, the participatory dimension of the new media environment brought interpretations of radical change for traditional news media institutions and professional journalists. The ‘grand narrative’ of online participation predicted the imminent demise of ‘old’ media (Nerone, 2009) and the uncertain future of journalists (Deuze, 2009) in a new scenario dominated by ‘citizen journalism’ (Gilmor, 2004) and active audiences that produce and share content without needing traditional media anymore (Rosen, 2006). Hence, in a new media environment where audiences can

² See for example the special issue of the journal *The Communication Review*, “Twitter Revolutions? Addressing Social Media and Dissent”, num. 14 Issue 3, 2011.

³ By the time of writing this thesis, no academic publication has been written yet about the topic. However, some research centres and social media analytics consultancy companies have conducted some preliminary studies that pointed towards a clear dominance of the ‘Yes’ campaign in social media. See the report made by Talkwalker <http://blog.talkwalker.com/en/yes-or-no-social-media-insights-on-the-scottish-independence-referendum/> and the preliminary findings of the University of Glasgow <http://policyscotland.gla.ac.uk/twitter-analysis/>. Last accessed October 7th 2014.

have the same easiness for content production and distribution as traditional news media (Bruns, 2005; Paulussen, Heinonen, Domingo, & Quandt, 2007), what meaning does the traditional distinction between news producers and consumers then have? (Örnebring, 2008b).

Afraid of being left out of the 2.0 waves, news media soon started to include participatory features on their websites, aimed at allowing some kind of user interaction on their sites. The *Independent*, for example, did not have any form of user participation in 2006, but just two years later it had included most of the participatory tools that were common at this time, such as blogs, comment on news, polls or forums (Thurman & Hermida, 2010; Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Following this trend, previous research has shown how in recent years traditional media websites have been conducting a process of continuously adapting more participatory features, in what has been called 'participatory journalism' (Domingo et al, 2008; Newman, 2009; Thurman & Hermida, 2010; Suau & Masip, 2011; Steensen, 2012).

At the same time, professional journalists have been struggling to adapt to a new scenario (McNair, 2013) in which there are more and more possibilities for audiences to participate, not only on news media websites (Singer et al, 2011; Hermida, 2011; Domingo et al. 2008) but also by producing their own content and freely distributing it to others (Singer, 2005; Villi, 2012; Singer, 2013). Former research has shown that, although journalists tend to accept and even encourage audience participation, they still want to remain as the main actors over the news-production process and its output (M. Borger, van Hoof, & Sanders, 2014; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011a; Wardle & Williams, 2010). However, despite initial predictions, the profession of journalism is still more or less the same: it keeps the same values and role that it had before the widespread adoption of the Internet. It seems that rather than a radical revolution that completely changed news media institutions and professional journalism, we have been facing an evolution (Almiron & Jarque, 2008) that even though important in its effects and consequences, is as yet far from representing an apocalypse for media institutions and professional journalists.

What is common in previous studies on participatory journalism (as well as in other Internet-based research) is a widespread, and sometimes latent position, which assumes that more citizen participation on media websites is always needed, and therefore beneficial not only for the profession of journalism but also for democratic society as a whole. Those websites that allow more participation are celebrated, while those that put limits on it are considered to be out of step with the times. This normative dimension is acknowledged by Borger et al. (2013) in their review of existing literature on participatory journalism. Here, the normative dimension that has dominated previous research on the subject is not only connected to the previously mentioned narrative of online participation, but also to the dominant normative thesis about the democratic function of journalism in society (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). New communication technologies are then considered as having an intrinsically democratic potential. As a consequence, it is expected that news media websites will function as online public spheres, enhancing citizens' debate and participation, reproducing the Habermassian concept of the public sphere in the online world (Papacharissi, 2010).

This broadly adopted normative approach to participatory journalism is however facing a series of quantitative studies that are pointing towards users' passivity in participating in online environments, particularly on news media websites (Guallar, Masip, Peralta, & Suau, 2014). According to Newman and Levy (2013), user participation in the UK and Spanish news media is low: just seven percent (UK) or eight percent (Spain) of citizens have ever commented on a news story. The percentages are lower with regard to practices that require higher levels of involvement: just two percent (UK) or five (Spain) of citizens have sent a picture or a video that they have made to a news website. As far as blogs are concerned, even those published outside news media websites, just one percent (UK) or three percent (Spain) of citizens have written in a blog about political issues⁴. These

⁴ This recent data confirms an existing trend from the first years in which news media websites adopted participatory journalism tools. In one of the first studies on this topic, Neil Thurman found that 'Have Your Say', the most popular tool for debate on the *BBC News* site was only attracting contributions from around 0.05% of the site's daily visitors.

contradictions between academic discourse and citizens' preferences are recognised by Henry Jenkins in one of his seminal studies about online participation (2006). Although Jenkins argues in favour of the potentialities of the new scenario, which might force companies to "renegotiate their relationship to consumers", he also argues that in this moment of transition we have yet to see if "the public is ready to push for greater participation or willing to settle for the same old relations to mass media" (Henry Jenkins, 2006a, p. 234). Jenkins points out how the new media environment and its participatory dimension are not affecting all the areas or fields of the media sphere in the same way. Although citizens are likely to participate in some online environments (fandom sites or social networks to communicate with friends), in others they may lack motivation to do so (news media websites or political websites).

That studies about online participation have tended to show a certain lack of interest in the point of view of the audience is not surprising. According to Gauntlett (2011), media studies have traditionally disregarded citizens' perspectives, preferring to centre the focus on media institutions and media texts rather than on the people who consume media. Following this trend, in Internet-based research the willingness of the audience to get involved in online participatory practices is normally taken for granted (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). According to Borger et al. (2013), this is especially true in studies on participatory journalism, traditionally focused on media's adoption of participatory tools, how these are affecting professional routines and practices or in finding out journalists' point of view about citizen participation. Although some are in favour of deepening research on citizens' attitudes and motivations towards participatory journalism (Borger, Hoof, Costera Meijer, & Sanders, 2013; Carpentier, 2009; Larsson, 2011, 2012b; Thurman, 2008), previous work on this subject is scarce. Moreover, previous research is limited to a few countries (mainly Sweden, Germany and the United States) and it has followed a predominantly quantitative approach ((Gerpott & Wanke, 2004; Heise, Loosen, Reimer, & Schmidt, 2013; Hujanen & Pietikäinen, 2004; Larsson, 2011; McMillan, Hwang, & Lee, 2003)). The main aim of this research is then to help to overcome this gap in research.

Despite the fact that, as has been seen, general media studies suffered from a traditional lack of attention with regard to audiences' attitudes and motivations towards news media and journalism, some recent studies have shed some light on the social dimension of news media: that is, how citizens perceive the role of media in democratic societies and how they choose what to consume and what not to in a media saturated world. These studies profess to grasp the links and connections between citizens' civic or political engagement and their practices of media consumption, without paying special attention to online environments (S. Coleman, Anthony, & Morrison, 2009; Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007; Heikkilä, Kunelius, & Ahva, 2010; Press & Williams, 2010; K. C. Schrøder & Phillips, 2005; Schroder & Phillips, 2007). According to Couldry, these series of studies respond to a need in communication research to move forward from the study of the text (its emission and reception) and the institutions that produce it, towards the study of the "open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media" (Couldry, 2010a, p. 37). Such an approach, strongly connected to practice theory (Bräuchler & Postill, 2010), allows research on media in the social, cultural and political contexts in which citizens make sense of their mediated experiences (Press & Williams, 2010). The aforementioned studies, however, do not pay special attention to the participatory dimension of the new media environment. Acknowledging this gap in research, Livingstone (2013, p. 28) suggested two questions that could connect the new paradigm of studying media in its social, cultural and political contexts with the new practices of online media participation: i) "What modes of participation are offered to people by the media environment?"; ii) "How do people engage with, accede to, negotiate or contest this as they explore and invent new ways of connecting with each other through and around media?".

This study aims to conduct research on participatory journalism according to these basic assumptions introduced in the previous paragraphs. Following this previous argumentation of the questions that will lead future research on citizens' mediated participation, this research will focus its attention on two main issues. Firstly, it will analyse how news media websites in Spain and the United Kingdom are adopting citizen participation on their websites (what is called participatory journalism). Secondly, it will conduct qualitative research (based on focus groups)

on how citizens perceive the participatory options provided by news media. Furthermore, the study will dig deeper, by also analysing other forms of online media participation (such as citizen journalism or practices linked to online social networks) in order to compare the attitudes towards participatory journalism with these other online media participatory practices. By doing so, this research will also try to grasp how research participants construct meaning of online media participatory practices, analysing whether in their discourses they conceive the participatory dimension of the media environment as an instrument to contest the hegemony of traditional news media institutions and professional journalists within the public sphere. Both parts of the research will be tested in two different countries, the United Kingdom (with focus groups in London) and Spain (with focus groups in Barcelona), with the aim of grasping general trends in citizens' attitudes and motivations towards online media participatory practices.

Following the series of studies that purport to research media in their social, political and cultural contexts (Coleman et al., 2009; Couldry et al., 2007; Heikkilä et al., 2010; Press & Williams, 2010; K. C. Schrøder & Phillips, 2005; Schroder & Phillips, 2007), another basic premise of this study is the aim to research online participation connecting it to broad issues of offline participation and civic and political engagement. As Hansen et al. (1998) argue, media should not be considered in isolation: citizens' attitudes and motivations towards media are always the result of processes outside the media sphere. Considering that mass communication is a field of interest, rather than a discipline, it benefits from (and draws on) different approaches and theoretical positions, like for example sociology and political science (Hansen et al. 1998; Deacon et al. 1999), which can aid us in finding this social perspective of media-related practices. Accordingly, this research will pay special attention to researching what I have called the 'level of public engagement' of research participants (see further development of this issue in the following theoretical and methodological chapters of Part I one of this thesis). In this way, the study of participants' attitudes and motivations towards participatory journalism and other online media participatory practices goes hand in hand with the study of participants' engagement with the public world and the

participatory practices that they conduct, connecting off and on line participation (Ardevol et al. 2013; Markham and Baym, 2009; Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004).

The first part of the research (the quantitative study of participatory options in news media websites) is directly aimed at the generalization of findings: 10 high-traffic websites of each country are studied, which can be considered a number sufficient enough to grasp the reality of participatory journalism in Spain and the United Kingdom. The second section of the research is based on a qualitative methodology: focus groups in London and Barcelona. Although special attention has been paid in selecting participants and representing different ages cohorts (see Chapter 4 on methodological issues), generalization suffers from the usual problems of qualitative research (Baym, 2009). Consequently, as already stated, this part of the research is not aimed at establishing comparisons between research participants in the two cities. Rather, the aim will be finding common attitudes and motivations, understanding that common patterns in London and Barcelona may lead to general societal trends in western societies.

- Objectives and hypotheses

The main objectives of this study have already been pointed out in the previous brief presentation of the research project. The main research objectives can be summarised as follows:

Main Research Objective A: To research how citizens perceive online media participation, focusing on their attitudes and motivations towards the different options offered by news media to participate in their websites.

Main Research Objective B: To study through which participatory options news media are adopting citizens' participation. To research if news media are opening their

websites to users' contributions, facilitating citizens' opinion exchange, or restricting participatory formats.

Each of these main research objectives can also be divided into several secondary research objectives that will aid in 'locating' the important issues that this research intends to answer. I include these below, followed by the hypotheses that are formulated in connection with each secondary research objective. Regarding main research objective A, these are:

Secondary Objective A1: To comprehend how citizens understand online media participation in relation with their offline engagement and involvement in public issues.

Secondary Objective A2: To better understand to what extend citizens are participating and which kind of online participatory practices citizens' prefer to conduct in news media websites: practices of selection, interaction or content production.

Secondary Objective A3: To analyse how the participatory dimension of the new media environment has affected the formerly existing hegemonies of traditional media institutions and professional journalists within the public sphere.

Secondary Objective A4: Based on previous research, confirming that news media websites are not attracting most of online participation, studying why citizens prefer to conduct online participatory practices out of news media online environments.

According to these objectives, the following hypotheses have been formulated to be tested during the research:

- **Hypothesis A1:** There do not exist a direct and absolute relation between on and offline participation. The relation is better conceptualised as dialogical.

- **Hypothesis A2:** The options for participation included in news media websites are generally not perceived as interesting, neither as a form to contribute to the news production process nor as a format for public debate.

- **Hypothesis A3:** In what regards citizens' discourses, the hegemony of professional journalists and traditional media institutions as the main actors as producers of news content is generally not under question.

- **Hypothesis A4:** The lack of suitable spaces for participation on news media websites is bringing citizens to other online environments to fulfil their participatory intensities.

Regarding main research objective B, the secondary research objectives which develop it are:

Secondary Objective B1: To analyse which kind of options for participation are more adopted by news media websites, options of selection, interaction or content production.

Secondary Objective B2: To look for differences between kinds of media or between the two countries present in the research.

Secondary Objective B3: To evaluate the existence of different models of participation in news media websites, based on the kind of participatory tools adopted by news media.

According to these objectives, the following hypotheses have been formulated to be tested during the research:

- **Hypothesis B1:** News media generally prefer to continue offering users options of participation that are not directly connected to the news production process.

- **Hypothesis B2:** In what regards participatory journalism, no big differences are expected to find between Catalan and UK news media websites.

- **Hypothesis B3:** The different combinations of tools allows news media websites to develop different models of participation.

The following page shows Table I1, which includes all the main and secondary research objectives and the connected hypotheses.

Table I.1. Conceptual map of research objectives and hypotheses

MAIN RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	Secondary objectives	Hypotheses
<p>A- To research how citizens perceive online media participation, focusing on their attitudes and motivations towards the different options offered by news media to participate in their websites.</p>	<p>A1- To comprehend how citizens understand online media participation in relation with their offline engagement and involvement in public issues.</p>	<p>HA1- There do not exist a direct and absolute relation between on and offline participation. The relation is better conceptualised as dialogical.</p>
	<p>A2- To better understand to what extend citizens are participating and which kind of online participatory practices citizens' prefer to conduct in news media websites: practices of selection, interaction or content production.</p>	<p>HA2- The options for participation included in news media websites are generally not perceived as interesting, neither as a form to contribute to the news production process none as a format for public debate.</p>
	<p>A3- To analyse how the participatory dimension of the new media environment has affected the formerly existing hegemonies of traditional media institutions and professional journalists within the public sphere.</p>	<p>HA3- In what regards citizens' discourses, the hegemony of professional journalists and traditional media institutions as the main actors as producers of news content is generally not under question.</p>
	<p>A4- Based on previous research, confirming that news media websites are not attracting most of online participation, studying why citizens prefer to conduct online participatory practices out of news media online environments.</p>	<p>HA4- The lack of suitable spaces for participation on news media websites is bringing citizens to other online environments to fulfill their participatory intensities.</p>
<p>B- To study through which participatory options news media websites are adopting citizens' participation. To research if news media are opening their websites to users' contributions, facilitating citizens' opinion exchange, or restricting participatory formats.</p>	<p>B1- To analyse which kind of options for participation are more adopted by news media websites, options of selection, interaction or content production.</p>	<p>HB1- News media generally prefer to continue offering users options of participation that are not directly connected to the news production process.</p>
	<p>B2- To look for differences between kinds of media or between the two countries present in the research.</p>	<p>HB2- In what regards participatory journalism, no big differences are expected to find between Catalan and UK news media websites.</p>
	<p>B3- To evaluate the existence of different models of participation in news media websites, based on the kind of participatory tools adopted by news media.</p>	<p>HB3- The different combinations of tools allows news media websites to develop different models of participation.</p>

- Research design

This research is divided into three different sections. Each of these parts includes at least two chapters, which are described in this section to provide greater clarity with regard to the research structure and to the thesis design overall.

Section I includes all the theoretical and methodological issues, establishing the ground on which this study stands. It starts with **Chapter 1**, introducing from a theoretical perspective the current debates in academia around the concept of 'participation'. This introductory chapter presents some of the concepts that will be further analysed in the subsequent chapters of section I. It starts by presenting a common theory of participation (Carpentier, 2011) and follows by explaining how the concept has been treated in the two main fields that are the object of this research: democratic theory and media studies. It will be seen how although there is common ground for a general theory of participation, both fields present some particularities that should be taken into account before deepening the analysis in the chapters that follow. Finally, the chapter ends by focusing on the media sphere and presenting how different conceptualizations of participation might affect the debate about whether or not new communication technologies have brought more participatory opportunities for citizens.

Chapter 2 follows the discussion where it ended in Chapter 1, that is, with the effects of new communication technologies on the media sphere. It starts by introducing the concepts of 'media environment' and 'media regime' (Prior, 2007; Press and Williams, 2010; Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011), core analytical tools in analysing how power and hegemony are distributed within the media sphere. The chapter pays special attention to analysing the participatory dimension of the new media environment and how it may have affected the former hegemonies that have dominated the media sphere in previous media regimes, presenting also how journalists and media institutions have responded to the challenges of this new participatory dimension (in what is generally defined in academia as 'participatory

journalism’). Finally, the chapter ends by reviewing some authors that have developed theories about how new communication technologies might imply societal and cultural change, contributing to the development of new forms of citizenship.

After this central chapter about the new media environment, **Chapter 3** presents how previous research has studied issues of online participation and public engagement in relation to new communication technologies. This chapter acts as a ‘bridge’ that links the more theoretical first two chapters and Chapter 4 which follows after, which is aimed exclusively at presenting the methodology used in this research. Chapter 3 analyses, firstly, how the use of previous research used different theoretical and methodological approaches to study the effects of traditional and new media consumption on citizens’ participation and engagement. Then, practice theory and an approach based on theories of Internet use are introduced as core concepts in overcoming the shortcomings of previous research. Finally, the chapter concludes by presenting how previous research has analysed the concept of political participation and civic engagement, establishing the ground for the typology of forms of public engagement that will be introduced in the next chapter about methodology.

To conclude section I, **Chapter 4** is aimed at explaining the methodology that guides this research. It starts by introducing the overall methodological design, which includes a qualitative part and a quantitative one. It continues by justifying why the focus groups have been chosen as a qualitative methodology to approach citizens’ attitudes and motivations, and why the use of a study sheet was selected for the quantitative part of the research, aimed at the study of the participatory options included on news media websites. With regard to the qualitative part, the chapter explains the design of the focus group sessions and the criteria used to interpret them (discourse theory), as well as how participants’ data have been quantified using the typology of levels of public engagement presented in the chapter. It concludes by presenting the structure of the study sheet, based on the kinds of interactivity that each participatory tool adopted by news media allows: selective, participative or productive interactivity.

After these initial chapters included in section I, **section II** presents the results for the quantitative study: how news media in Catalonia and the United Kingdom are adopting citizen participation. **Chapter 5** is aimed at presenting the results for UK media, while **Chapter 6** does the same for Catalan media. Both chapters follow an identical structure, based on the structure of the study sheet. They start by analysing the different options included under the category of selective interactivity, continuing with the tools under the label of participative interactivity and ending with those considered as productive interactivity. At the end of each chapter, each news media website is analysed according to the number and kinds of tools it adopts, ending the chapter with an individual analysis of the kind of participation allowed by each medium. This analysis shows the general trends in participatory tools in both countries, as well as the possibility of establishing 'models' that identify the different ways in which news media websites are adopting participatory journalism. These models will be explained in the final conclusions chapter.

Following the quantitative part of the research is **section III**, which forms the qualitative study that is the centre of this research project. Section III is formed of two chapters. Firstly, **Chapter 7** introduces the results of the focus group session conducted in London, while **Chapter 8** which follows presents the results of the focus group conducted in Barcelona. Both chapters follow a similar structure. They start with general participants' attitudes and motivations towards civic engagement, participation and news media. This part will lay the foundation for subsequently studying attitudes and motivations towards participatory journalism and other online media participatory practices. As already stated, the aim of this research is to study online participation in its societal and political context. The design of the focus group sessions and the following chapters aimed at explaining their results respond to this aim.

To conclude, **section IV** will present the conclusions of this research. **Chapter 9** will summarise all the findings of the previous chapters and **Chapter 10** introduces a concluding brief discussion in which the findings are placed in the

context of previous research, showing the contributions that this research has made and pointing to further possible future lines of research. The section concludes by presenting a conceptual map that brings together research objectives, hypotheses, conclusions and future perspectives of research on the subject.

SECTION I - THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

CHAPTER 1

Introducing participatory debates in late modernity

In recent years, ‘participation’ has become a common or ‘trendy’ concept that appears in debates involving several different fields, from political science to arts and media studies (Carpentier, 2011). Although some level of citizen participation is normally understood as something positive and necessary in democratic societies, discrepancy exists with regard to the level or intensity of this participation. Different disciplines are debating to what extent existing actors and institutions should allow more citizen participation, how these actors can take into consideration citizens’ needs and preferences in their decision-making processes, and which sectors of society are still unrepresented (Livingstone, 2013). Despite its centrality in present debates, some authors have claimed there is a lack of clarity in academia about the meaning and definition of this core concept (Carpentier & Dahlgren, 2011), that tends to be adapted according to the context or particular field in which is used (Dahlgren, 2013; Pateman, 1970).

In explaining this lack of clarity in definitions around participation, some authors point out the confusion between participatory practices and their conditions of possibility, due to too broad an understanding of the concept (Carpentier & Dahlgren, 2011). As Livingstone (2013) argues, *to participate* is a verb that implies some action and taking part, or being actively involved, in something. Carpentier (2011) established a distinction between access (based on presence), interaction (based on a social-communicative human-human or human-object relationship) and participation, the former two being conditions of possibility of the latter one. According to Carpentier (2011), for a practice to be truly participative it must

involve some level of power in decision-making related processes. Consequently, visiting a museum or gallery, or being politically engaged cannot be considered as true or full participation, as they do not involve any access to power or any control of the decisions that condition this concrete practice.

Theorizing about participation, Carpentier argues that rather than being an academic construct, the term is better defined as a part of a political-ideological struggle that takes place in many societal fields, between minimalist and maximalist discourses which try to limit or enhance the meanings of participation (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2008). The core issue involving these discourses about participation is then the notion of power, and how it is distributed within a particular societal field. Following a Foucauldian approach to the concept of power (understood as an element always present in social relations), Carpentier believes that these power struggles are never restricted to just one concrete field, being consequently similarly repeated in many different contexts. Accordingly, there are debates about the concept of participation that share important similarities in the art world, with participatory art (Bishop, 2012), or in the field of media and communications with new media and audience participation (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013), as well as the long-term debates in political theory between direct participation and political representation (Held, 2006). In all these societal fields, then, the same struggles between discourses related to different distributions of power and access to structures of participation and decision-making processes are present and vividly active (Carpentier, 2011).

The next two parts of this section will be aimed at analysing the different approaches to the concept of participation in the two societal fields to which this research is related: democratic theory and media studies. It will be seen how in these two fields similar debates coexist about the nature and limits of participation, although each field also has some particularities which merit separate analysis. Furthermore, the next two parts will also introduce Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) 'discourse theory' and its basic concepts of power relations, hegemony and access to structures of participation or decision-making processes. This social theory is also adopted in its basic premises by many relevant authors

quoted in this research, such as Carpentier (2011), Dahlgren, (2009 and 2013) or Press and Williams (2010), and is also an important theoretical referent for the construction and analysis of the focus groups that form the qualitative part of this investigation, as will be seen in the last chapter of part one, which will present the methodological issues. The aim of this first section is then to establish a general context for the next sections of this theoretical background chapter and the subsequent chapters that form this thesis.

1.1. Participation in democratic theory

It is perhaps in the field of democratic theory that it is easier to understand and analyse the components of power relations that compose the different approaches or theories related to participation. Following Carole Pateman's classic definition, *full* participation, as a political-democratic theoretical concept, can be understood as all the existing actors in a decision-making process having a similar power position (Pateman, 1970), whereas *partial* participation comprises those processes in which several actors participate and influence each other but where just one of them holds the final power to decide. Different models of democracy have articulated these components of power relations in different ways. Accordingly, one of the main characteristics of David Held's (2006) models of democracy is precisely the way in which these different models articulate citizen participation. Most of Held's models can be divided into two broad groups: a) those that defend a certain notion of direct participation by citizens in the decision-making processes and b) those that try to control this direct democracy, or people's self-government, limiting participation through the figure of political representation, which implies the transmission or delegation of power at different levels.

An example of the latter group is the 'Competitive Elitist' model of democracy, based on the theories of Max Weber (Weber, 1971, 1978) and Joseph Schumpeter (Schumpeter, 1952). According to Held, this model establishes a conception of political life in which there is "little scope for democratic participation and individual or collective development, and where whatever scope existed was

subject to the threat of constant erosion by powerful societal forces” (Held, 1996, p. 125). Participation is then reduced to the election of those individuals who will have the power to rule, and democracy to a *method*, by which citizens can change rulers and legitimate their decisions through periodic elections of competing political elites. On the other hand, an example of a model closer to the first group could be the ‘Participatory Democracy’ model, based on the theories of Carole Pateman (1970, 1985) and C.B. Macpherson (Macpherson, 1977). This model argues for democratization and a process of opening up political institutions, such as parliament and political parties, in order to make them more accountable and responsible. The model focuses strongly on the reformulation and reorganization of political parties, following the principles and procedures of direct democracy, and enhancing new forms of action at the local level, which is considered as a more suitable level to start a new political culture based on citizens’ direct participation and involvement in the regulation of society and state. The ‘Participatory Democracy’ model, however, does not support “the view that the institutions of direct democracy could be extended to all political, social and economic domains (...) and that complete political and social equality could be created through the self-management of all spheres” (Held, 1996, p. 213). Although the model argues for an extension of citizen participation in many societal fields (not just with regard to political institutions), some level of representation is still needed in all these fields, even if submitted to high levels of citizens’ control and accountability.

This balance between participation and representation is one of the dimensions that articulate the distinction between maximalist and minimalist models of democratic participation (Carpentier, 2011). Minimalist models are focused on representation and delegation of power, which implies an understanding of political participation as the election of representatives at the macro-level (state, city or region). Citizens’ involvement is then constricted to the realm of institutionalized politics, and the political sphere becomes the unique sphere that has power in decision-making processes. On the other hand, maximalist models of democratic participation try to balance representation and participation with a clear aim to maximize, or enhance, citizens’ direct involvement in decision-making processes. These models extend participation to other spheres of social and

everyday life, such as family, school, activism or local community, rather than focusing just on institutionalised politics. Political scientist Chantal Mouffe identifies these spheres of the social with the concept of *the political*, in a clear distinction with the notion of traditional politics. According to Mouffe (2001, 2005) *the political* refers to all the spheres of the social that include some conflict of interest, or collective antagonism, whether politics is identified with formalised institutional structures and actors or not

Since her publication together with Ernest Laclau of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), Mouffe's political and social theory, and her particular approach to discourse analysis (discourse theory), has become highly influential for many authors that have applied their theories not just to political science, but also to other disciplines such as media studies and participation (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007; 2008). As Phillips and Jørgensen (2002) pointed out, inspired by Marxism and Structuralism, "the overall idea of discourse theory is that social phenomena are never finished or total. Meaning can never be ultimately fixed and this opens up the way for constant social struggles about definitions of society and identity, with resulting social effects" (2002, p. 24). According to discourse theory all societal phenomena and objects obtain meaning only through discourse, understanding this as a structure in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed in all the spheres of the social (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). However, Laclau and Mouffe break with previous discourse theories in using a broad definition of the text as creator of discourse, and focusing "on the meanings, representations, or ideologies embedded in the text, and not so much on the language of the text" (Carpentier & Spinoy, 2008). The aim of discourse theory then is not to uncover the objective reality, but to explore how different discourses create a particular hegemony through a contingent articulation of power relations (Mouffe, 2013). By doing so, "discourse analysis aims at the deconstruction of the structures that we take for granted; it tries to show that the given organization of the world is the result of political processes with social consequences" (Phillips and Jørgensen, 2002, p. 48).

'Hegemony' is then a key concept in Laclau and Mouffe's theory. It can be found in many spheres of the social struggles that take place between two or more discourses that are trying to become hegemonic: trying to construct the social order in a determined way, excluding all the other possibilities. Discourses are then promoted by different actors that are trying to establish different ways of organizing society, on the basis of different configurations of power relations. The main objective of a discourse that is in this position is to become 'hegemonic', and to be understood in society as something beyond dispute, as the natural order of things. However, as Mouffe points out: "Things could always be otherwise. Every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities" (Mouffe, 2013, p. 131). It is precisely in *the political* where this struggle to ascribe meaning to discourses and organise society take place (Mouffe 2001; 2005).

From a discursive approach, then, debates around the concept of 'participation' acquire a strong political connotation. Drawing from discourse theory, Carpentier understands participation as a 'floating signifier' that takes different meanings in different discursive contexts, being in democratic theory the objective of a societal struggle between different discourses about democratic participation (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007). Each of these discourses attempts to ascribe a particular meaning to 'participation': while maximalist discourses are pushing towards a broad understanding of the term, minimalist discourses are trying to narrow the meanings of 'participation', and therefore limiting participatory opportunities. Consequently, the meanings attributed to 'participation' "are neither neutral nor accidents of history" (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2008, p. 1), being those ideological processes that define the ways in which citizens practice and understand participation and, more generally, life in democracy.

In fact, Carpentier introduces a normative-critical dimension to the concept of participation, considering it as part of the democratic project proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, and consequently, as the object of one of the many political-ideological struggles between actors in society⁵. Participatory debates become, then, a latent

⁵ However, even if Carpentier positions himself as an advocate of enhancing participation in many different societal fields, he also recognises the fact that 'full participation', understood as equal

conflict about “who can become involved in societal decision-making processes, in the definition and resolution of societal problems, in deciding which procedures should be followed, and in the societal debates about these definitions, procedures and resolutions” (Carpentier, 2011: 128). Furthermore, Carpentier argues that part of the actual lack of clarity of the term is due to the fact that minimalist discourses are trying to empty the meaning of participatory practices, labelling as ‘participation’ practices that are in reality mere forms of pseudo-participation. Here we have the examples of the ‘participatory’ museum or gallery, in which the audience can just push a button in order to slightly modify the artwork or make it move in a predetermined way; or a ‘participatory’ process of modifying a neighbourhood in a city, by inviting citizens to an exhibition where the project is on view, although all the details have been already approved and decided. Here, ‘participation’ is understood as ‘seeing’ or ‘receiving information’ about the future project. Carpentier’s aim is, then, to establish a definition between what can be considered as ‘participation’ and what are other practices labelled as ‘participatory’ but that in reality are not sharing power equally among the different actors.

Even if Carpentier argues in favour of a maximalist approach to participation, opening up decision-making processes not only in the political sphere, but also in many other societal spheres, such as the economy, culture or media (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2008), his can be considered a ‘reductive’ approach to the concept of participation, as for a practice to be understood as ‘participatory’ “we need to look at what decision-making processes there are and what kind of power positions people hold” (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 274), even if these decision-making processes can be understood as formal or informal. Consequently, the absence of power in one actor, or a too unbalanced power relation, implies that a concrete

power positions of all the actors, is a democratic utopia. As Mouffe pointed out, struggles for power and agonistic positions are conditions of existence for democracy: “(...) a pluralist democracy contains a paradox, since the very moment of its realization would see its disintegration. It should be conceived as a good that only exists as good as long it cannot be reached. Such a democracy will therefore always be a democracy ‘to come’, as conflict and antagonism are at the same time its conditions of possibility and the condition of impossibility of its full realization” (Mouffe, 1997, p. 8).

practice cannot be considered as ‘participation’, entering then in other categories. In the previous examples, the chance to activate the movement of the artwork is understood by Carpentier as ‘interaction’ (based on social-communicative human-human or human-object relationships), and the possibility for citizens to go to the exhibition that shows the new neighbourhood project as simply ‘access’ (based on presence) to the information⁶.

This approach, by emphasizing the component of power and the actor’s capacity to influence decision-making processes, seems to equal participation with an expression of political agency. Despite the fact that it successfully theorises participation and connects the concept with societal struggles and democratic theory, expanding it to ‘the political’ and avoiding the limitations of the traditional connection between participation and traditional politics, the result is a theory of participation that reduces the concept to practices directly aimed to influence, whether formally or informally, decision-making processes. Consequently, practices more embedded in everyday life contexts, such as public talk (connected with Habermas’ (Habermas, 1989) notion of the public sphere), remain out of the conceptualization of participation. Although Carpentier does not seek to diminish the importance of such practices in democratic life, he prefers to label them as ‘interaction’, or as constitutive of engagement (a prerequisite for participation). However, some other authors disagree, arguing for recognizing public talk as one of the key elements of citizens’ politically meaningful participation: “Political talk (that actually engages with the political) such as in a face-to-face discussion, or in an online forum or on Facebook, would be seen as participation; it is the enhancement of the public sphere, where opinion can take shape” (Dahlgren, 2013:19). Moreover, Henry Jenkins, in an interesting discussion with Nico Carpentier, points out the social and cultural dimensions of participation (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). Jenkins acknowledges the importance of some participatory practices non-established in decision-making processes or power relations contexts, but nevertheless ‘political’ in their aims (or with the potential to be so), such as talking about public issues, inviting someone to a political or civic

⁶ Carpentier’s typology of Access – Interaction – Participation will be more extensively analysed in the next section, when I will focus on issues about media and participation.

association gathering, or even practices such as dissemination or curation of cultural and political content (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

Rosanvallon (2008) follows this broad understanding of democratic participation in his definition of the concept as a complex process that involves three different dimensions between the people and the political sphere: A) Expression: citizens' ability to articulate their voices and discuss the actions of their representatives, implying for example all the range of practices linked with debate and public talk, even if this is face-to-face or online. B) Involvement: the whole range of practices that implies citizens gathering and agreeing collective action to achieve common goals, like the recent assemblies conducted by new social movements, but also more traditional forms of meeting like neighbours' associations or other civically aimed formal or informal groups of citizens. C) Intervention: practices that imply action aimed at influencing or producing a desired result, like for example demonstrations, or other activities such as signing law petitions or campaigning. Rosanvallon points out how some forms of participation included in these dimensions have increased their importance in recent years, at the same time as more traditional forms of political participation (like voting or joining a party) have been losing their central position in democratic life. These new forms of participation can be linked with protest politics or new social movements, aimed not at affecting already existing decision-making processes but at changing the political and economic structures (Stiegler, 2012; Žižek, 2012). At another and less radical level, new forms of participation in 'the political' also emerged in the context of new -isms (such as feminism or ecologism) that appeared in the post-modern phase of development in advanced industrial societies, characterized also by a declining respect for authority and a growing support for democratic and participative values (Inglehart, 1997). These new forms of engagement imply bringing to the public sphere a new set of practices (signing petitions, boycotting, performance actions, pacific resistance, and so on...) that are also linked with lifestyle or new personal identifications that break the previously more political and fixed distinctions of centre-periphery or right-left cleavage (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967).

Recent literature in late modernity (Bauman, 2000, 2005; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991), is summarised by Dahlgren (2009), by pointing out some trends that may affect citizens' engagement and the ways in which they prefer to participate in 'the political'. Dahlgren argues that society is becoming more pluralistic, which implies a fragmentation of shared common public spheres in favour of the aforementioned new personal identifications: gender ethnicity, patterns of media consumption, cultural interests or lifestyles. Consequently, individualism is becoming more pronounced, declining citizens' involvement with previous abstract and ideological -isms, but developing and increasing new forms of extra-parliamentarian political engagement, based on daily life, personal values and single issues. Furthermore, according to Pippa Norris these recent developments involve a complete transformation of the ways in which citizens engage with 'the political': "(...) political activism has been reinvented in recent decades by diversification in the agencies (the collective organizations structuring political activity), the repertoires (the actions commonly used for political expressions) and the targets (the political actors that participants seek to influence)" (Norris, 2002, pp. 215-216).

In some cases, these new forms of engagement bring with them practices related to balanced or unbalanced power relations and decision-making processes (as for example when a feminist group collects signatures or organises a demonstration in favour of changes in the current legislation). In others, this connection is more difficult to establish (as for example when the same feminist group organises a stand in a public square to inform citizens of their activities or, moreover, the simple fact of joining the group or when one of the members tries to convince another citizen to join it). As Carpentier recognises, some of these activities "were still aimed at impacting directly on institutionalised politics, but in other cases their political objectives diverged from the 'traditional' and were aimed at cultural change" (Carpentier, 2011:39). It is precisely in these practices aimed at cultural change or at the social sphere (rather than the political one, such as interpretation, public talk or engagement in civic groups not directly aimed at political issues) where the political and the social move closely. Consequently creating areas in which to establish clear definitions of what is and what is not participation, and

what is and what is not ‘political’, is becoming more and more difficult. As Jenkins pointed out in describing interpretation practices: “Forms of interpretation, which are dialogic and collaborative, involve the formation of collective opinion, motivate cultural production, and can encourage lobbying producers. In such cases, we can make a theoretical distinction between, say, engagement and participation, but both might well be occurring at the same moment for the same people” (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 276).

Despite its difficulty in labelling these practices as participatory (preferring to consider them as ‘interaction’ or ‘engagement’⁷), what Carpentier’s theory of participation, strongly linked with power, can help to shed some light on is the real capability of some actors and practices to influence the decision-making processes, or in other words, to access ‘structures of participation’ (Dahlgren, 2013) that could efficiently channel citizens’ participatory energies from ‘the political’ or ‘the social’ to the decisions structures and relevant actors. According to some authors, citizens suffer a lack of opportunities to effectively conduct public action (Couldry et al., 2007). Furthermore, citizens are also facing what Couldry calls ‘a problem of voice’ (Couldry, 2010b), not with regard to their ability to spread their message, but to their chances of being heard by political representatives and those that hold power in decision-making processes in other societal spheres. As Dahlgren (2013) points out, the problem appears when some public spheres, although they can be active or vivid, are ‘weak’, in the sense that their connections with decision-making processes are limited or inexistent. In these cases, citizen participation, through debate and public talk, or through other forms of more active or direct participation, such as demonstrations or protests, cannot be translated into effective power in the spheres that take real decisions. The realms of ‘the political’ and ‘the social’, key ingredients for a healthy democracy, have then no connections with the realm of institutionalised politics, which necessarily leads to disaffection with traditional institutions, political apathy and citizens’ disconnection.

⁷ Political scientists have created different terminologies and typologies to name these different forms of engagement (social capital, civic engagement, political participation etc.). How previous research has structured these different categories will be presented further on in Chapter 3.

Citizens' disaffection or disconnection with traditional politics or civic life has been a key issue in political science during recent decades, with different studies coming to sometimes divergent conclusions (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Norris, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). As will be seen in Section 3 of Chapter 3 the use of different concepts of study (political participation, civic engagement, social capital etc.) tends to come to different conclusions about the quality or healthiness of late modern democratic societies. Moreover, the introduction of new communication technologies brought even more chaos to an already unclear scenario. As Sonia Livingstone argued, in defining the concept of participation, the question then really becomes 'participation in what?' (Livingstone, 2013). Chapter 3 will continue this discussion, deeply analysing how these previous studies researched the different practices through which citizens connect with 'the political' and 'the social' in meaningful ways for democracy. However, before entering into these debates attention will be paid as to how the concept of participation has been applied in media studies, closing this initial chapter that introduces the main debates about the concept of participation.

1.2. Participation: from democratic theory to media studies

Maximalist models of participation, such as deliberative democracy or the republicanism model, link citizens' political participation with media participation and the democratic function of media (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1963), enhancing citizens' involvement and participation in the media sphere (Tewksburg & Rittenberg, 2012) and highlighting the role of the 'informed citizen', a necessary element for a healthy democracy (Curran, 2011; Dahl, 1998; Dewey, 1923; Keane, 1991; Tocqueville, 1980). Carpentier (2011) introduces some maximalist positions, using examples of Marxist critiques of audience commodification or anarchism-inspired approaches to alternative media with a high component of citizens' direct content production; which is contrasted with the tendency to reproduce hegemonies of the mainstream media. But it is perhaps in relation to the Habermasian concept of the public sphere (Jürgen

Habermas, 1989), strongly connected with deliberative democracy, where it has been more common to see participatory theories that position media as central instruments for public debate and deliberation (Curran et al., 2012). Especially during recent years, when the emergence of new communication technologies brought a certain optimism about their democratic potential to contribute to citizens' involvement and participation in a new digital public sphere (Malina, 1999; Sassi, 2000; Papacharissi, 2002).

On the other hand, elitist theories of democracy tend to diminish the importance of citizens' involvement within the media, adopting minimalist positions with regard to citizen participation in both the political and the media sphere. These authors criticise maximalist positions of participation for their 'unreality' when comparing the ideal citizen behaviour that they assume with real practices in democracy or even the inability of citizens to obtain the necessary knowledge to connect the political issues reported by media (Schumpeter, 1952). Schudson (1998) developed this argument to create the 'monitorial citizen' theory, a reformulation of the 'informed citizen'. Rather than being always informed and paying attention to all the issues, Schudson posits that a citizen should be informed only about those issues that affect him directly, or those public issues that can affect him. According to this theory, a high level of attention or participation in media is irrational, compared with the limited options for participating in or affecting the decision-making process that the normal citizen can exercise in the political sphere (Zaller, 2003). When some important issue occurs, then the media can augment the pressure to advise citizens to increase their level of attention, this being more efficient for citizens than permanent attention or participation. In conclusion, these minimalist positions tend to favour representation rather than direct participation in the political sphere. Accordingly, a high level of participation or citizens' involvement in the media sphere is not considered as necessary by minimalist positions, it being enough for citizens to be represented by professional journalists, who are the professionals in charge of deciding what is and what is not news.

Although it may seem from the previous paragraphs that participatory debates in the media sphere are composed of a simple dichotomy between maximalist and minimalist approaches to participation, the reality is a little more complex. First of all, citizen participation can be understood in many different ways, and those theories that defend a higher democratization of media do not necessarily imply directly involving the audience in the news production process. Secondly, the scenario of media participation has recently been altered by the emergence of new communication technologies, with the subsequent debate about its uniqueness and the new participatory opportunities opened up for citizens in the media sphere.

In his book 'Convergence Culture', Henry Jenkins (2006) explains how, in 2005, Al Gore helped to launch a new cable news network, 'Current', which aimed to give young people a voice and 'democratise' television by allowing citizens to send their own videos and report on the issues they considered most relevant. It was estimated that 25% of the content would come from users and would be aired online, through new communication technologies. Even if the concept of democratization might seem to directly imply an increase in citizen participation, Jenkins questioned the way in which 'Current' was supposed to be more democratic than the previously existing news networks. According to him, this 'democratization' of a medium could be afforded by being more 'democratic' in four different dimensions: 1) in its context: by covering the kind of information that citizens need to receive in order to make their civic choices; 2) in its effects: by mobilizing the sectors of the population that are less engaged with public issues; 3) in its values: by enhancing rationale debate and sense of social contract; or 4) in its process: by expanding access to media production and distribution (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 252).

Jenkins' reflection is useful in the sense that it points out that when debating media and democracy, and therefore, how to 'open' media to citizens (or how to 'democratise' media), citizens' direct participation is just one of the possible dimensions to be considered. In fact, in Jenkins' previous classification, just the fourth dimension implies direct participation embracing new communication technologies (citizens' production of media content), and the third one could be

understood as constitutive of participation as far as it implies involving citizens in the 'rationale debate' (citizens using new media as a public sphere in which to engage in public talk and discussion). The other two dimensions (democratization 'in its context' and 'in its effects'), imply some degree of citizens' involvement, but nevertheless do not imply something new, and can be easily fulfilled without necessarily requiring the adoption of new communication technologies. There are many different ways of involving citizens in the media sphere, and not all of them necessarily involve new communication technologies (Carpentier & Dahlgren, 2011).

Following this argument, public journalism can be considered a good example of how journalists and media institutions tried to engage and connect with citizens before new communication technologies became widespread. Originating in the United States in the mid 1990s (Paulussen et al., 2007), this initiative was aimed at bringing back journalism close to citizens, as an institution that serves the public good, with strong ties with the community and a clear commitment to the values and principles of democracy (Rosen, 1999). Joyce Y.M. Nip (2006) defined public journalism as a part of a global movement worried about the double disconnection between, first, media institutions and the public; and second, citizens and public life. According to Nip, the decrease in newspaper readers could be solved if American citizens could be interested again in public issues. Nip summarises public journalism's objectives as: 1) Connect journalists with their communities 2) Help to transform readers into citizens engaged and connected with public issues 3) To contribute to public deliberation with the aim of finding solutions to citizens' problems.

Moving forward from its theoretical principles, public journalism was adopted as a series of independent initiatives that were intended to bring audiences closer to the news production processes, in several regional and local American newspapers. Friedland and Nichols (2002) showed how these first initiatives were developed in the framework of local and state elections, aimed to give citizens a voice during the election campaigns. Later on, some journalists continued to strengthen links with their communities, through meetings in which the journalists

explained their on-going research to citizens , with the aim of starting a debate in the community regarding how to solve common problems (Charity, 1995). Other mechanisms were the direct involvement of citizens in news production (Nip, 2006) or even to publish a section in the newspaper in which citizens could write and debate public issues (Friedland and Nichols, 2002).

Despite the importance that public journalism had in academia and debates about media and democracy, some authors pointed out its limited relevance in the context of professional journalism. Massey and Haas (2002) argued that the movement had minimal influence on the routines and practices of most American journalists. Although they do not diminish the relevance that some of the initiatives undertaken had, these authors argued that their effects and diffusion were limited to some local and regional cases, involving a low number of citizens. Moreover, even if the debate about how to reinvigorate journalism crossed to Europe, its practical application remained almost restricted to the United States context (Paulussen et al., 2007).

In conclusion, some authors argue that public journalism is now facing a phase of redefinition (Nip, 2006), in which it should try to incorporate the possibilities that new technologies offer for audience participation in order to fulfil its objectives of involving citizens in news production and public issues (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Following previous studies (Heikkilä & Kunelius, 1996; Platon & Deuze, 2003; Rosen, 1995), public journalism might still consider professional journalists as the main actor in the news production process, when perhaps citizens may be asking for a shift in this classic relationship. Consequently, even a way of involving citizens in media production that existed before the widespread adoption of the internet could find in new technologies a new way to redefine itself in order to get to more citizens involved and solve some of the shortcomings of its first manifestation.

The example of public journalism serves to highlight the existence of participatory initiatives connecting media and citizens before the widespread adoption of the internet and online media at the beginning of the twenty first century. Some

authors pointed out the fact that there is a long history of media and participation, and that even nowadays, citizen participation in the media sphere is not restricted to online environments (Carpentier & Dahlgren, 2014; Ekström, Jülich, Lundgren, & Wisselgren, 2011). Although new online media have been normally associated with more citizen participation and a change in the traditional role of audience and journalists (Grossman, 1995; Negroponte, 1996; Nerone, 2009), some authors have argued against these mythologies of novelty and uniqueness that have characterised discourses of new communication technologies, which also imply “processes of amnesia in relation to the societal roles of old media technologies” (Carpentier & Dahlgren, 2014, p. 8). Discourses about online media have tended also to adopt a certain technological determinism (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), especially during the first years of the adoption of the Internet and during a second wave of optimism linked with the emergence of Web 2.0, (Leadbeater, 2008; Tapscott & Williams, 2006) sometimes forgetting that technology on its own does not change social processes nor does it lead to a more democratic culture or structures (Curran et al., 2012; Loader & Mercea, 2012).

However, even if there have always been active media users and initiatives of community media or direct media participation in the news production process, what is really innovative is that new media technologies “now enable vastly more users to experiment with a wider and seemingly more varied range of collaborative creative activities” (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p. 174) through certain technical innovations that “have made it possible recently for users who are relatively unskilled from a technical perspective to interact with the web in ways that had been previously difficult” (Harrison & Barthel, 2009, p. 159). Even if adopting a conservative position in relation to new communication technologies, and without falling into technological determinism, what is nowadays beyond question is that these new technologies are now ‘placed’ in most contexts of everyday life (Press & Williams, 2010), most of them incorporating an intrinsic participative or interactive potential that can be adopted with different intensities by citizens and other actors in society (Jenkins, 2006). The key concept here is the ‘potential’ component of transformation of new communication technologies and online media. As Nick Couldry pointed out, “communication technologies are not

automatically political” (Couldry, 2010b, p. 140), and do not produce per se social, economic and political change without previous social and cultural developments that allow members of society to implement the changes that they already desire (Tewksburg & Rittenberg, 2012). Consequently, technological innovations enable new possibilities for citizen participation, but the final articulation of this participation is contingent, “filtered through the structures and processes of society” (Curran et al., 2012, p. 179).

The example of public journalism serves as a starting point to show the current debates around whether or not new communication technologies have brought new participatory opportunities to the media sphere. Strongly connected with this issue is the question of the nature of this participation: which practices can be labelled as ‘participation’ and which others are better defined using other concepts such as ‘engagement’ or ‘interaction’ (Carpentier, 2011; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). For example, as has been seen, public journalism is a concept that entails a high number of different practices, from a greater involvement of the audience in gathering information about a concrete issue (through, for example, group meetings with local residents) to practices aimed at citizens’ production of original content (Nip, 2006; Paulussen et al., 2007). The emergence and subsequent widespread adoption of online media implied an extension of the previous opportunities for citizen participation in the media sphere, complicating the establishment of a clear definition of the term. Some authors, such as Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b) prefer broad definitions of the term, defining participation as “the social and cultural interactions that occur around media” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 305), also differentiating participation in traditional media from the new participatory opportunities offered by new media. Others, like Nico Carpentier (2011), understand that even accepting the new potentialities of online media, the nature of the participation they offer is not differentiated enough to require a separate typology of participation.

Furthermore, Carpentier’s work (2011) can be understood as an ambitious project based on establishing a similar definition of the concept of ‘participation’ in different fields, such as democratic theory, the media sphere or even the field of

art, as has been seen in the previous introduction to Chapter 1. Carpentier differentiates participation from similar concepts such as ‘access’ or ‘interaction’. Although he recognises the importance of these concepts in participatory processes related to media (‘access’ and ‘interaction’ are for Carpentier “conditions of possibility for participation” (Carpentier, 2011, p. 69)), what differentiates them from participatory practices is the absence of power in decision-making processes. ‘Access’ is then defined as presence (to technology or media content), while ‘interaction’ is identified with socio-communicative relations in the media sphere (Carpentier, 2011, p. 129). In addition, Carpentier’s typology (which he calls the AIP model) also divides participation in the media sphere into two different components of audience activity: participation *in* the media and *through* the media (Carpentier, 2011, p. 67). Participation *in* the media is identified with practices that hold power in different decision-making processes, although the nature of these processes might be diverse in the media sphere, but therefore related to the concept of content production or in the management of media organizations. On the other hand, according to Carpentier, participation *through* media “deals with the opportunities for mediated participation in public debate and for self-representation in the variety of public spaces that characterise the social” (Carpentier, 2011, p. 67). This conceptualization of participation identifies the media as a public sphere (Curran, 1991) where citizens can express their opinions and debate with other citizens about public issues, following and adapting the Habermassian notion of the public sphere (Jürgen Habermas, 1989). However, although Carpentier recognises this component of audience activity and labels it as participation, in much of his subsequent work he tends to identify participation with content production and power in decision-making processes (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013), placing participation *through* media at a second level of importance or as participation with a lower level of intensity.

In fact, online participation has tended to be linked with content creation, especially during the first years of Web 2.0 euphoria, when buzzwords such as ‘collaborative culture’, ‘mass creativity’ or ‘co-creation’ dominated the optimistic discourse on new communication technologies (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009). Some critics of the real value of this content creation have argued against this discourse,

warning of the danger of putting on an equal footing the expertise of amateur and professional content producers in different fields, news media being a relevant example (Keen, 2007). Furthermore, the focus on content production also involved some claims about the actual lower number of citizens that were already creating online content, diminishing the relevance of online participation to around just 13% of the population (Charlene, 2007; Li & Bernhoff, 2008). According to Van Dijck and Nieborg (2009), the optimistic discourse about online participation tends to assimilate the concepts of producers and consumers (Bruns, 2008) of online content, consequently considering all users as active, when the real situation is that most users are just passive consumers, giving rise to 'mass creativity' or mere "consumptive behavior by a different name" (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 861).

More recently, however, online participation has started to acquire different connotations. Practices consisting of the re-dissemination of content, assessment or recommendation of others' contributions, or commenting or grading news items or websites are becoming more popular in social media environments and other online spaces aimed at participants' interaction, rather than original creation. What was before a focus on content production has now moved towards concepts such as social curation (Villi, 2012) or user-generated visibility and secondary gatekeeping (Singer, 2013). Consequently, online participation should probably not be considered as formed exclusively by practices aimed at content production, and the concept needs to take into account the whole range of practices aimed at disseminating, rating and commenting on content. The former dichotomy between producers and consumers suggested by Van Dijck and Nieborg (2009) could be transformed into a more complex matrix of different profiles: Consumers, Sharers, Critics, Editors and Creators (Hayes, 2007). Moreover, as Jenkins et al. (Jenkins et al., 2013) suggest, "users don't adhere permanently to any of these roles and often behave in different ways within various communities" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 157). They argue in favour of a conceptualization of online participation that does not restrict the term to a 'ladder' formed by increasing levels of intensities of participation, but rather understands the complexity of the nature of participation in the digital age as characterised by easy circulation of

content and increasingly networked publics, with different potentialities to participate that can be taken or not for different people at different times. Understood in this broad way, online participation covers a high number of practices, some of them of a direct and intrinsic political or civic nature and others not (Papacharissi, 2010). Consequently, how we define online participation has an important effect in answering questions such as whether this kind of participation brings something new to the media sphere or if the number of citizens participating online is meaningful or relevant compared with those who do it offline.

The next two chapters will continue with the debates already introduced in this first chapter about the nature and definition of the concept of 'participation' in media studies and political theory. Chapter 2 will analyse in more detail the characteristics and implications of the new media environment and its participatory dimension, debating how it has affected professional journalists and media institutions, and how these have tried to apply this new dimension to their online spaces (participatory journalism). Chapter 3 will sum up how previous studies carried out research on political participation, both on and offline, introducing some methodological issues that will then be the basis of the methodology used in this research, explained in Chapter 4. This last chapter four of the theoretical and methodological background will present the particular approach of this research regarding the concept of 'participation'. It will be seen how, although Carpentier's theory was strongly influential, it has been preferred a more 'open' definition of the term, in order to embrace a higher number of practices, both in relation to citizens' participation in the media and the political spheres.

CHAPTER 2

The new media environment

This chapter is based on an analysis of the on-going transformations of the media sphere that are being produced by new communication technologies, and how these are linked to broad cultural and societal change. I will start by explaining the concept of ‘media environment’ (Press & Williams, 2010; Prior, 2007) and the linked concept of ‘media regime’ (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), and how these concepts are connected with power and hegemonies within the media sphere. I will pay special attention to the potentialities of the participatory dimension introduced by the new media environment, as well as to the evolution of audiences and their categorization as ‘passive’ or ‘active’, and how some recent research has pointed out how these new communication technologies could be adopted to develop new forms of citizenship. The body of the chapter, however, is aimed at identifying the transformations brought about by the new media environment, and how these changes have affected the existing hegemonies of the previous media environment; ending with an analysis of how professional journalists and traditional media institutions have tried to organise a response to these transformations, in what is called ‘participatory journalism’, remediating former practices and adapting to the new ‘rules of the game’.

2.1. Media regimes and hegemonic discourses

Markus Prior defined the concept of ‘media environment’ as “the media available to people at a particular place and time and by the properties of these media”

(Prior, 2007, p. 9). Following this approach, but incorporating a social dimension, Press and Williams argued that a media environment consists of “both the specific communications technology in use and the social, political and economic structure within which these technologies are used” (Press & Williams, 2010, p. 8). This definition avoids both technological determinism and minusvaloration of the effects of new communication technologies, arguing for a scenario in which media technologies and social, economic and political dynamics influence each other. Accordingly, the introduction of a new medium implies broad developments that are related to the context in which it evolves and that cannot be explained exclusively on the basis of its technological characteristics (Williams, 1973). Expanding this concept of the media environment, Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) introduce the notion of ‘media regimes’, understood as the “historically specific, relatively stable set of institutions, norms, processes, and actors that shape the expectations and practices of media producers and consumers” (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011, p. 16). If the media environment is a concrete structure or context in which media and society coexist, the media regime is the background of rules, norms and ideology that shape the practices performed within the media environment.

Although they are connected to the nature of the media environment, media regimes are contingent upon it. The established norms and institutions could be determined in other ways, being actual norms that are the result of political struggles between different actors that compete for power and hegemony in many societal fields. In a theory that is strongly connected to discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) understand that those actors that hold power are then able to establish a series of hegemonic discourses around how media should be organised, and how information about politics, culture and economy should be transmitted. The main objective of these actors is that their discourses become ‘hegemonic’ and a particular configuration of power relations established as ‘natural’ (Mouffe, 2013). The result of this process is that, when certain discourses acquire hegemony, citizens tacitly accept “the rules by which information is disseminated as natural and unproblematic” (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011, p. 17), establishing a new media regime.

There exist, however, moments in which media regimes are contested. Cultural, political or technological transformations could lead to “disjunctures” between the current hegemony of the media regime and a changing media environment (McChesney, 2007). In these cases, the new media environment will promote a series of new practices that cannot be easily accommodated within the norms and institutions of the current media regime. These practices will contest the previous hegemonies and actors’ power relations, starting a period of new struggles between different discourses. It is precisely during these periods between media regimes that the previously hegemonic ideas about how to organise the media sphere, the role of media in society or journalists’ status are contested by new discourses that claim to distribute power relations in new ways (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011). According to some authors (Press and Williams, 2010; Jenkins, 2007; Jenkins et al. 2013), we are now in a moment of transition in which there is no certainty about the ‘rules of the game’, it being one of those moments of transition and struggle in which the media environment is changing, “rearranging traditional power relationships as the authority of journalists, public officials, and other political gatekeepers is increasingly challenged by other producers of political and social meaning, including the public itself” (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001, p. 161).

2.2. The Broadcast media regime and the mass audience

According to Williams and Delli Carpini (2011), after the Second World War a media system emerged that was characterised by the rapid expansion of radio and film and the growing importance of television (which in a few years would be the dominant medium). Together with these technological developments, political struggles took the form of debates about the concentration of media ownership and the deregulation of broadcast media markets, with two opposite positions: publicly owned and aimed at educational goals, or privately owned and consequently aimed at profit and commercialization (Curran & Gurevitch, 1991;

Curran & Seaton, 2003)⁸. This media environment of the broadcast era is described by Prior (2007) as a 'low-choice media environment', "characterised by homogeneity of content and limited opportunity to choose between genres" (Prior, 2007, p. 14) and a mass audience that followed a limited number of media. According to Prior, the broadcast-centred media environment offered regular news to most citizens, even to those not especially interested in politics or public issues who during certain hours of the day simply could not avoid news content, if they wanted to watch the television.

This concept of the 'news of the day' is a key factor for the broadcast media regime, as it implies the professionalization of journalists and their central position in the production and distribution of news content. According to Nerone (2013), journalists' professionalization is a response by the news industry to the critics of monopolization and manipulation of public opinion. Professionalization is based on a series of normative norms and ethical values that should be followed during the news-production process (Domingo & Heikkilä, 2012; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). These rules and codes, called 'social responsibility theory', should allow journalists to establish clear definitions between facts and opinion (Keane, 1991) and news and entertainment (Curran, 2011), ensuring that the private media will assume the responsibility to serve the public interest and inform objectively, despite media concentration and commercial interests (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011). Following Nerone, "journalists could be the gatekeepers because the industrial structure of the media had built gates" (Nerone, 2013, p. 448).

Although their centrality to the broadcast media regime was not under discussion, the concrete role of journalists in western democracies from the Second World War to the twenty-first century was a controversial issue, with several discourses

⁸ Especially during the 1980s and 1990s right-wing parties in the United States and Europe tried to legitimize some process of deregulation of the broadcasting media markets (Curran, 2011; Keane, 1991), with more success in the USA rather than in Europe. However, the debate around market models and public service broadcasting is still alive. Recent studies have warned about the consequences for journalism of the processes of media concentration and the financialization of corporate media (Almiron, 2010), while others demonstrate how media systems based on public service contribute to a higher level of information and trust in the news among citizens, compared with market models (Aalberg & Curran, 2012).

connecting media and democracy trying to establish their hegemony (Carpentier, 2007). Following the classical liberal theory of freedom of the press, media and journalists were understood as ‘watchdogs’ that advise citizens when the government’s actions are inefficient or corrupt, or it is over-using the power conferred on it by its citizens (Keen, 1991; Siebert, Peterson and Schram, 1956). In this conception, media are acting as the ‘fourth estate’ of the traditional checks and balances division of power (Entman, 1989). However, the objective of the liberal state was to create a society in which the individual’s rights were respected and citizens could live and trade without fearing abuses from the government or the monarchy. As western democracies evolved, citizens acquired more democratic rights, and liberal states became democratic states (Bobbio, 1987). The ‘watchdog’ role of the media was then not enough to fulfil the needs of this new society. Liberal theory then adopted a second conception of the media “as an agency of information and debate that facilitates the functioning of democracy” (Curran, 1991, p. 127). In a democratic society where the majority of the population can vote, the media define the public agenda, provide information and analyse current events (McCombs, 2004), assuming that “the average citizen could make intelligent and rational judgements on public issues if presented with the facts” (Press & Williams, 2010, p. 70).

Moreover, media and journalists should also act as a ‘mobilizing agent’, encouraging citizens to learn about politics and public affairs and stimulating interest and discussion (Norris, 2000). However, as seen in Section 2 of Chapter 1, elitist theories argued against this conception of journalism connected with the idea of the ‘informed citizen’, due to the inability of citizens to obtain the necessary knowledge to connect the political issues reported by the media (Schumpeter, 1952), developing the concept of the ‘monitorial citizen’, which maintains that a citizen should just be informed by journalists about those issues that affect him directly, or that could even affect the public good (Schudson, 1998).

As has been pointed out, what all these different traditions have in common is the centrality of journalists and media institutions to the news production and distribution processes. Despite some initiatives of public journalism (Nip, 2006;

Paulussen et al., 2007) or alternative and community media (Carpentier, 2011), citizens were perceived mainly as consumers of news content produced by elites of information gatekeepers (Domingo, 2008; Singer, 2010) in a media environment dominated by media institutions that were following processes of ownership concentration (Almiron, 2010). Accordingly, citizens were perceived as a mass audience, a homogeneous community with shared values, political culture and interests, that consequently should receive the same kind of news (Dahlgren, 2010; Sunstein, 2002; Turow, 2006).

Accordingly, audience studies have reflected these considerations about the nature of audiences. Passive configurations of the audience, together with a negative assumption of their nature, dominated the field until the late 80s, when a new branch of studies incorporated some element of activity as to how audiences interact and interpret media texts. In the tradition of the Frankfurt School, audiences were defined as a mass of individuals that do not interpret reality or media texts. Moreover, this mass of individuals could be easily influenced, and even manipulated, by media texts or propaganda, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1949, p. 137) exemplified in their famous quotation, “no independent thinking must be expected from the audience”. Nevertheless, later studies redefined the idea of the mass audience and the influence of media texts, incorporating considerations about the influence of cultural contexts and opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) in what is called the normative paradigm or American School.

A later development of this paradigm was the uses and gratifications model. This model shifted the focus from what effects media have on audiences to how audiences use the media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Hence, the core idea of the uses and gratifications model is that different individuals may use media in different ways, according to their personal interests or motivations. Despite these redefinitions of the concept of the mass audience, this last configuration of the nature of audiences still considers them as something homogenous, implying that there is something “unifying and unitary about how people act” (Marshall, 2004, p. 7). Consequently, the cause-effect relations between media texts and the behavior of this passive audience (a mere consumer of media texts) can be researched and

precisely defined, following the positivism tradition and using empirical research, mainly focused on quantitative methodologies, which try to explain reality as a network of forces independent of human behavior (Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdock, 1999).

The opposite approach to the positivist research tradition in audience research is the interpretative perspective. While positivism understands the world as formed by cause-effect relations, interpretivism “explores the ways that people make sense of their social worlds and how they express these understandings through language, sound, imagery, personal style and social rituals” (Deacon et al., 1999, p. 6). The adoption of this paradigm in audience research led to a new group of studies that redefined the former nature of passive audiences, conducted during the 1980s and 1990s (Fiske, 1991; Morley, 1980). These studies used qualitative methodologies such as group discussions, participant observation or ethnographic methods, to better investigate a “more active and meaning-constructive role for audiences” (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, & Newhold, 1998, p. 261), but also in a “deliberative and conscious rejection of traditional quantitative approaches” (Hansen et al., 1998, p. 259). In one respect, as all intellectual construction is influenced by former ones, this new approach derives from the uses and gratifications model in that it considers the audience as individuals that can receive media effects in different ways. However, according to Morley (1992), the new ethnographic paradigm tried to break with the uses and gratifications approach to individual interpretations and “investigate the extent to which these individual readings are patterned into cultural structures and clusters” (Morley, 1992, p. 54). Elliot (1973) also criticised the uses and gratifications model because it understands the audience as merely an atomised mass of individuals with no relationship to social groups.

The main difference with previous research, hence, is that the ethnographic approach does not ask questions about the effects of the media, but rather its main concern is how audiences interpret and make sense of media texts, which this tradition understands as polysemic for different sections or groups of the audience. Consequently, this new configuration of the audience breaks with the

previous consideration of the mass audience as a homogeneous body, incorporating an element of audience activity. This component of activity would later on be expanded in the new media environment, in which audiences would definitively lose the consideration of 'passive' due to a new participatory dimension in the production and dissemination of media content (Livingstone, 2013), as will be seen in the next section.

2.3. The gestating new media environment

As has already been said at the beginning of this chapter, a media environment consists of "both the specific communications technology in use and the social, political and economic structure within which these technologies are used" (Press & Williams, 2010, p. 8). Accordingly, media technologies and cultural, economic and political dynamics influence each other. In the following paragraphs, I will introduce some of the core characteristics of the gestating new media environment. This part will be useful as a starting point for further analysis on some of the implications of this new media environment: the following sections of this chapter will focus on analysing the contested hegemonies in the media sphere (sections 2.4 and 2.5) and the relationship between societal change in late modern societies and the on-going transformations in the gestating media environment (Section 2.6).

According to Prior (2007), the media environment of the 'broadcast era' had two main characteristics: limited opportunities to choose between different media and homogeneity of content among them. New technologies such as cable TV and the Internet have changed this environment creating more choices for citizens. Prior defines this new scenario as a 'high-choice media environment'. In this new media environment, citizens have more political information available to them than at any time in the past. However, there are also more distractions: "Even a signal that is arguably stronger than ever does not necessarily get through the noise of everyday distractions. The noise has also grown louder and more distracting in recent decades" (Prior, 2007, p. 8). As a result, what makes the difference is

citizens' motivation to be exposed to news or political content. It becomes relatively easy to avoid this kind of content, when in the previous environment it was almost impossible: in the low-choice broadcast environment, access to the media and exposure to news were two things linked together .

Furthermore, the risk of a 'high-choice media environment' is that it creates audience fragmentation and selective exposure, increasing the gaps in political knowledge, and political engagement, between those people who prefer and actively look for news and those who prefer entertainment. Potentially, the new environment could also create better informed citizens, allowing a many-to-many model of communication (Radojkovic & Milojevic, 2011) and converting the 'mass audience' into a 'diffused audience' (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), strongly dispersed and fragmented, but therefore present in many aspects of our everyday lives and with more chances to participate and connect with media: "(...) in contemporary society, everyone becomes an audience all the time. Being a member of an audience is no longer an exceptional event, nor even an everyday event. Rather, it is constitutive of everyday life" (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, pp. 68-69). In the new environment, audiences are not restricted to the household as access to media could be everywhere and the passive audience of the broadcast era is transformed into the active and everyday embedded audience of the new media environment, blurring the line between media and life outside the media (Livingstone, 2005; Press & Williams, 2010) and consequently audiences can be "everywhere and nowhere" (Bird, 2003, p. 3).

Although Prior's study covers the United States only the main points of his theory can easily be adapted to other countries with different political and media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Although much later than the USA, European countries have also increased the number of TV channels available to citizens (Aalberg, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010) and the number of households with Internet connection is now higher in both areas than three quarters of the total number of households in any European country or state in the USA⁹. Although Prior's theory is mainly based

⁹ Official data from http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-12-050/EN/KS-SF-12-050-EN.PDF and <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-569.pdf>

on the higher number of available TV channels, the widespread adoption of the Internet in households and the growing number of smart phones reinforces his main theories about how the media environment influences audiences' behaviour, rather than representing a different scenario that requires a redefinition of the theory. As far as the viability of applying Prior's theory in European countries is concerned, Aalberg et al. (2013) tested it in the European context, arguing that, despite differences in media systems and periods of adoption of new technologies, its main conclusions remain stable, although the influence of individual-level factors in news consumption tends to be more moderate in Europe than in the United States.

Following this argumentation, it should be also taken into account that the Internet and all the technologies directly or indirectly related to it are not the agent of change of this 'high-choice media environment': transformations in the media environment started with the rise of cable and satellite TV, but also with the breakdown of state monopolies in broadcasting¹⁰ (Nerone, 2013). However, these initial transformations of the media environment seemed not to have had the same transcendence as the ones currently on-going. Authors like Rainie and Wellman (2012) consider the 'Internet Revolution' and the 'Mobile Revolution' as key processes in the complete transformation of the media environment. Although the processes of change have been initiated before, the current phase of constant innovation and development of new communication technologies seems to be on a scale not previously seen. Taking for example the Internet, in its first decade of existence (from 1990s to 2001) academic and popular discourse tended to be focused on exalting the potential transformations that the new medium would bring by facilitating access to information and connectivity. In the following decade, however, these discourses looked rather old-fashioned: easy and widely available access to information is now taken for granted. Current discourses about Internet potentialities have shifted and are now focused on collaboration and social interaction (Schäfer, 2011).

¹⁰ For an overview of the different processes of liberalization followed in Europe and the following debates, see Carbonell (2010), Curran & Gurevitch (1991), Curran & Seaton, (2003).

These transformations of the media environment, initiated through an increased offer of broadcast options and followed by new communication technologies, had a strong effect on audiences' behaviour. The mass audience of the old days of the era of broadcast news (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011) is nowadays fragmented into a large number of different media that rather than forming a news industry, form a news ecosystem with many different players and different ways of delivering and meeting the information needs of audiences (Anderson & Mc Collough, 2013)). The idea of a unified public, with a shared political culture and values, that sits down in front of the television to see the news at the same time at the end of the day, is a characteristic of the past media environment that will never return (Sunstein, 2002; Turow, 2006).

In the past, what constituted an audience was citizens reading the newspaper in a cafe, listening to the radio on their way to work or watching the television in the living room at the end of the day with their family. Consuming media was something that could be identified with a particular time frame, even having a sense of ritual (Couldry, 2003; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Nowadays, the situation is quite different. This new nature of media audiences as diffused, but at the same time embedded in everyday lives, is one of the main characteristics of what Schroder et al. called the "multifaceted nature of media audiences" (Schröder, Korsten, Stephen, & Catherine, 2003, p. 4). However, the new media environment has also brought a new dimension with regard to the nature of media audiences. According to Livingstone, "(...) today's media environment is reshaping the opportunity structures by which people (as audiences and as mediated publics) can participate in an increasingly mediatised society" (Livingstone, 2013, p. 24). Without considering in detail at this point whether these new participatory opportunities are meaningful for democracy or not, the fact is that more and more citizens are taking these opportunities to participate in an almost infinite number of practices of commenting, sharing, creating and networking etc., available at any moment and all of them aimed at connecting users to each other and/or with media content (Dahlgren, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2013; Press & Williams, 2010). This new participatory dimension of the nature of audiences, intrinsically incorporates a social or relational component formerly absent in previous definitions of

audiences (Livingstone, 2013), bringing the concept of audiences closer to some of the characteristics formerly attributed to another concept: 'publics' (Livingstone, 2005).

The audience, even in its conception as an active interpreter of media texts, has been traditionally understood as something individual and non-deliberative (Butsch, 2008), absent from the debates around public matters. Audiences, then, were differentiated from the traditional definition of the public, which was seen as a deliberative and interactional entity. As Dahlgren argues, "atomized individuals, consuming media in their homes, do not comprise a public" (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 149). However, this distinction between irreflexive and disengaged audiences and engaged and enlightened publics could also lose any meaning due to the changes in society and the media environment (Livingstone, 2005). The idea of publics has always been connected with media. Habermas (1989) and Tarde (1969) viewed the media (mainly the press) as the sources from which citizens gathered the necessary information about public issues. But the act of media consumption, according to this tradition, was not enough to constitute a public. Publics were formed in other spaces of participation, such as cafes, social clubs or public squares, where citizens met and exercised rational and interactive debate that formed public opinion (Dewey, 1923; Jürgen Habermas, 1989). Consequently, publics and audiences have been understood as different concepts, separated in space and time. However, in a new media environment where media are always part of our everyday life and audiences are becoming more relational and participative, this traditional boundary between audiences and publics starts to blur, as also do the borders between private and public spheres (Zizi Papacharissi, 2010). As some authors have already pointed out, uncertainty dominates the changing new media scenario: "No longer have we clear distinctions between production and reception, between mass and interpersonal communication, or between hitherto distinct forms of media (print, image, music, broadcasting and games, etc.)" (Press & Livingstone, 2006). The Internet is precisely the medium that best represents all these uncertainties and which dramatically highlights the inadequacy of the previous broadcast regime's

discourses in explaining late modern reality and the media sphere (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

As has been seen, the on-going transformations of the media environment are forcing us to reconsider some of the concepts that have guided research and our understanding of society in recent years. However, it is also necessary to understand that some of the concepts of the former media environment are still useful. The new media environment is being built on the base of the previous one, which rather than being replaced, is still alive. Accordingly, even if nowadays the notion of 'active audiences' has incorporated a social and participative dimension (Carpentier, 2011), the 'active' dimension of the audience as interpreter of media texts should not be forgotten (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). Today, the 'active' audience does still interpret media texts, as it did before the transformations of the media environment. Therefore, television, the media that focused research on the interpretations of the active audience, is still an important medium on which citizens spend many hours per day (Livingstone, 2004, 2005). Both dimensions can perfectly coexist in academia, as they do in the daily lives of most citizens even if in this research, focused on the participatory dimension of audiences, rather than on the interpretative one, the concept of 'active audiences' will be used in relation to the concept of online participation.

2.4. Contested hegemonies: the participatory dimension and its challenges for the profession of journalism

According to (McNair, 2011) journalism nowadays is facing an 'existential crisis'. Journalism is a job that only acquired its professional status during the 'Progressive Era'¹¹, and became fully developed and institutionalised during the broadcast media regime, together with a series of norms, rules and values that the hegemonic discourses of this media regime established as 'natural' and as key components of the media sphere (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). The changing

¹¹ The media regime that preceded the 'age of broadcast news', according to Williams and Delli Carpini (2011).

media environment has led to new “disjunctures” (McChesney, 2007) between these hegemonic discourses of the media regime and the on-going cultural, political and technological transformations of the new media environment. Transformations that have not only deeply affected the ways in which news content is produced, distributed and consumed, but that have also affected the professional identity of journalists, attacked by forces “far beyond their control” (McNair, 2013, p. 78), causing an economic, cultural and existential crisis in journalism.

This next section will describe how the new participatory dimension of the new media environment is contesting some of the former hegemonic discourses. However, it should be taken into account that this participatory dimension is not the only actor that is bringing change to the media environment, although in this research, for obvious reasons, it will be the one that receives the most attention. Without disregarding the economic dimension, a key issue highly affecting media institutions and the journalistic profession at the present time, I will briefly focus attention on the cultural dimension, where some transformations are affecting the role of journalism in a democratic society. A relevant example here is the increasing boundaries between information and entertainment. Due to its ‘social’ or ‘cultural’ component, rather than its technological one, this dimension is useful as an example of how the transformations of the new media environment are not just limited to technological developments (McNair, 2013) but also to the normative dimension of journalism (Singer, 1997).

According to Williams and Delli Carpini (2011), the differentiation between news and entertainment is just a social construction, one of the main characteristics of the broadcast regime, like the division between facts and opinion or the idea of the public as merely a consumer audience, who can only be informed through information gatekeepers. Such social constructions “tell us more about the distribution of political power than about the political relevance of different genres” (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001, p. 163). Accordingly, the differentiation between news and entertainment might be understood as a normative definition of what could be considered as ‘serious’ and ‘non-serious’ media content. In a

changing media environment, these hegemonic narratives could become contested and start to lose sense, due to some different processes currently in action. Firstly, following McNair, increasing market competition for citizens' attention derived from a broad adoption of formats aimed at pleasure, leisure and recreation, rather than informative and monitoring traditional journalistic functions, meaning that "the line between what we used to call a tabloid news agenda and one which prioritises 'serious' or 'quality' news has all but disappeared, even if the writing style and registers still diverse greatly" (McNair, 2013, p. 79). Secondly, the differentiation between news and entertainment is also linked with the transformations of media and politics and the convergence between public and private spheres. Celebrity culture and personalization bring politics to spaces where it was absent in the previous media regimes, especially during electoral campaigns, but also in the day to day (Press & Williams, 2010). As an example, the 'new political television' formats identified by (Jones, 2005), such as humorous political talk shows, that bring politics to our everyday lives, in a new format of political entertainment that is now part of our daily media experience. According to this theory, "media are not merely innocuous entertainment, but are reflective of, and constitutive of, cultural conversations about our most intimate values, beliefs, ideals, and confusions" (Press & Williams, 2010, p. 91). Moreover, Curran argues that some entertainment formats (TV series, films, etc.) connect with the democratic life of society in many ways: they become a space where citizens can debate social values, help to define social identities, afford alternative frameworks of understanding and are also a way to reinforce or contest public norms (Curran, 2011, p. 75). Consequently, we must pay attention to some entertainment formats as formats that by themselves could affect citizens' political positions and public engagement (or more widely, what Morley (2006) calls 'cultural citizenship'), reframing previous assumptions that only news media content is relevant for citizens' lives in democracy.

To sum up, the blurring boundary between information and entertainment formats and contents is challenging our previous understanding of the function of journalism and media institutions in a democratic society (Curran, 2011; Press & Williams, 2010). Consequently, it also contests the image of journalists as a

professional elite that hold the monopoly of transmitting information and opinion, maintaining a hegemonic position in the media sphere (McNair, 2013). However, this cultural dimension is not the only one that is affecting the status of media institutions and journalists. The new media environment, especially with the intertwined Internet and mobile 'revolutions' (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), is introducing a new dimension that has grown in importance in recent years: the participatory dimension.

At this point, it is necessary to consider why new communication technologies have this 'participatory' or 'democratic' potential (Papacharissi, 2010) that is leading more and more citizens to perform participatory practices in different online environments, such as social networks, news media websites, blogs or forums or fan sites, to name just a few examples. According to Couldry (2010), new media have facilitated the expression of arguments and opinions to a vast number of people, also facilitating the possibility for these new voices to be heard. Furthermore, new communication technologies have brought the 'mobile revolution' (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), bringing the media sphere to new spaces and facilitating a situation where "almost everyone can be politically active at any moment in time" (Van Deth, 2012, p. 116). According to Tewksburg and Rittenberg (2012) new media have radically lowered the monetary and time costs related to content production. Anyone with access to a computer and the Internet can produce and publish almost any kind of content, from something more elaborate like a home video to a simple comment on a news story or a 140 characters tweet. Moreover, Tewksburg and Rittenberg also point out the likelihood that these online participatory practices could "yield to a satisfying effect" (Tewksburg & Rittenberg, 2012, p. 153): although the Internet does not per se guarantee content producers an audience, anonymous citizens now have more chance of having their voices heard than before (Couldry: 2010). As an example, the almost infinite list of previously anonymous citizens that have acquired some level of popularity by posting their videos on YouTube (Codina, Carandell, & Freixas, 2014). Consequently, the new media environment has profoundly transformed how information can be produced and distributed (Press and Williams, 2010), challenging and bypassing the previously unique gatekeepers (Lowrey, Brozana, &

Mackay, 2008; Singer, 2005) and subverting the distinctions between consumers and producers of information, in a process similar to that in other societal fields (Ritzer, Dean, & Jurgenson, 2012), implying perhaps the need to rethink in the near future the profession of journalism (M. Deuze, 2006).

The growing possibilities for citizens to create and publish different kinds of content online was one of the issues that centred academic debates during the first years of the Internet, characterised by a certain euphoria about the democratic potential of the new technology (Curran et al., 2012). Despite some prophecies about the end of journalism, which claimed that 'old' media were soon going to be entirely replaced by new Internet-centred media created by citizens or alternative media platforms (Martínez, 1997; Negroponte, 1996), traditional media institutions still dominate the media sphere (Mitchell, Kiley, Gottfried, & Guskin, 2014). Although traditional media do not seem to be in danger of disappearing (Nerone, 2009), what is true is that citizens' potential for content production represents a threat to journalists and media institutions, which are facing an uncertain future (M. Deuze, 2006). Some authors have highlighted the potential of the Internet as a communication tool for individual citizens, now able to produce content without the need for traditional media (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). The concept of 'citizen journalism' appeared during this first wave of Internet euphoria: a new form of journalism practised by non-professionals in contrast to traditional journalism practised by professional journalists (Nip, 2006; Thurman & Hermida, 2010). Independence in relation to traditional media seems to be the defining characteristic of the concept of 'citizen journalism', a concept widely applauded in the first years of the twenty-first century with the popularization of blogs and other forms of original content production (Dahlgren, 1996). Accordingly, citizens were starting to be considered both as users and consumers of news and also as potential producers of information, in a new scenario with open gates where professionals and amateurs have the same easiness to publish online any news content they might consider as interesting or newsworthy (Bruns, 2008; Paulussen et al., 2007).

Despite the initial popularity of 'citizen journalism', it seems clear nowadays that the ordinary Internet user, or the amateur news producer, will not entirely replace the professional journalist as the hegemonic source of information, at least not in the short-term (Singer 2011). The fact is that, although their demise has frequently been predicted, professional journalists continue to have control of information production (Singer, 2005; Singer and Ashman, 2009), despite the fact that they are operating in a changing media environment where the distinction between producers and consumers of news is not entirely clear (Örnebring, 2008), and where the 'rules of the game' have not yet been defined (Jenkins, 2006). As Jane B. Singer has argued in talking about journalists' perceptions of users' content production, "according to this point of view of the newsroom, everyone can publish, but not everyone can be a journalist" (Singer, 2010, p.128). It is precisely this differentiation between the professional and the amateur that Keen (2007) tries to defend when he argues against the identification of the concepts of audience and author. This identification is particularly widespread in some optimistic narratives of online participation that have attempted to establish normative academic models about how media and the Internet should be, instead of trying to define how media and journalists are really being challenged, and not substituted, by new communication technologies (Domingo, 2008).

Accordingly, some authors consider journalism and media as an 'expert system' (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2008) that, even in a media environment that facilitates users' content production and publication, will always be differentiated and recognised in comparison with the non-professional content published by amateurs and ordinary citizens. Furthermore, Henry Jenkins (2006) also recognizes that nowadays, those citizens that are making use of the full potential for original content production and publication offered by new technologies are still a minority. Moreover, this minority seems to be more focalised in niche groups such as fandom users or 'political junkies', rather than spread among the whole population. According to Jenkins (2006), the new media environment enables new forms of content production and publication, but it is yet too soon to predict if the majority of users will embrace these new forms or if they will remain as practices carried out by 'elite' or 'heavy' users. To sum up these reflections about users'

production and its challenges for journalists and traditional media institutions, it seems that the new media environment has introduced new potentialities to produce and publish original content. However, most citizens are not yet taking these opportunities, meaning that the activity of content creation tends to be located more in some fields of society rather than in others. Regarding the field of journalism, and despite the lack of research on citizens' motivations for online participation (Carpentier, 2009; Borger et al. 2013), it is not yet clear that a majority of citizens would take the 'lead to authorship' (Rushkoff, 2003) and start to publish their own journalistic content, replacing in this way the traditional actors that have dominated the media sphere. As Van Dijck pointed out, the majority of Internet users do not want to be active daily producers of media content, "the large majority consists still of viewers, readers and listeners, and not viewer-producers, reader-producers or listener-producers" (2009: 618). Nevertheless, 'citizen journalism' and original content production and publication are not the only challenges introduced by the new media environment, as will be seen in the next paragraphs.

First of all, content production should not just be understood in terms of users' content creation of original texts, videos or pictures. Here I find useful the concept introduced by Axel Bruns (2008), 'produsage', which tries to go further than previous concepts such as passive consumption or active production, in order to better describe the processes of user-led and collaborative creation, such as Wikipedia or open source software, and that can even be even applied to 'citizen journalism' projects¹². According to Bruns, 'produsage' is not an attempt to redefine concepts originated in previous media environments, but a concept originated to define practices that have appeared within the new media environment. The concept has four main characteristics: 1) Open participation and communal evaluation. 2) Fluid heterarchy, each citizen participates according to his skills. 3) On-going nature of produsage projects. 4) Common property, no restrictions on intellectual property. In a more recent work, Bruns (2012) reflects

¹² For examples of produsage applied to 'citizen journalism' projects, see the interview that Henry Jenkins had with Axel Bruns in his blog:
http://henryjenkins.org/2008/05/interview_with_axel_bruns.html

also on the importance of the ‘granularity’ of some online environments of Web 2.0. These spaces allow users to participate at different intensities, with users’ ‘production’ becoming a concept that can be applied to a wide range of different actions (like or rate, post or re-share, comment, chat etc.), and consequently able to attract a higher number of users that perhaps do not have the time or the interest in individual original content creation. Furthermore, simply by visiting some websites such as Google or Amazon, Bruns argues that users are in fact producing useful information for other users, who benefit from the data collected by the site from previous visitors.

It is precisely in the aforementioned Web 2.0 environments where the concept of publication has been redefined. Publication of original content is a concept strongly linked with the previous media environment, in which this publication implied high costs of time and economic resources (Tewksburg & Rittenberg, 2012). This concept of content publication also implies a restricted notion of the term, that does not include many other relevant practices such as content curation or dissemination, that have grown in importance with the widespread extension of Web 2.0 environments such social media and social network sites (Jenkins et al. 2013). However, before starting to consider the challenges that these spaces have introduced into the media sphere, it is necessary to define them in order to better understand which new possibilities they represent.

The most common environments associated with the concept of Web 2.0 are ‘social media’ sites. These are normally represented by “new digital media phenomena such as blogs, social networks sites, location-based services, microblogs, photo-and-video-sharing sites, etc., in which ordinary users (i.e. not media professionals) can communicate with each other and create and share content with other users online through their personal networked computers and digital mobile devices” (Bechman & Lomborg, 2013, p. 767). Three main characteristics are basic in defining social media: 1) Communication is de-institutionalised: social media allow users to contribute to and filter the content that they consider relevant, sharing it with audiences of their choice. 2) Users of these sites are intrinsically considered as producers of different kinds of content, depending on the nature of the sites

(photographs, short messages, video, audio, text files etc.) and 3) Communication is interactive and networked, with users constantly shifting from production to reception modes, depending on their will (2013). Some authors consider that the public display of connections is not a defining characteristic of social media sites, this being a crucial and differential feature of social network sites, a particular form of social media (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Donath & Boyd, 2004). Despite these attempts to establish clear differentiations, sometimes the differentiation can become blurred, as these sites, as a good representation of the changing media environment, are normally in constant evolution. A good example is the recent shift in Facebook's policy as they have become more concerned about users' awareness of their own privacy, giving them the chance to personalise their privacy options, such as the level of other users' access to their contacts and other profile information.

Following the differentiation between social media and social network sites (understood as a particular form of social media), (Steinfeld, Ellison, Lampe, & Vitak, 2012) have defined social network sites (SNSs) as "websites that enable users to articulate a network of connections of people with whom they wish to share access to profile information, news, status updates, comments, photos, or other forms of content". Furthermore, (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) define three necessary components of social network sites: 1) A user-constructed public or semi-public profile 2) A set of connections to other users within the system and 3) The ability to view one's own list of connections, as well as the connections made by others in the system. Although these definitions might seem complex and restrictive, the fact is that social media (and consequently, social media sites also) differ in many ways, including not only how the users' profiles are built (which information is required) and represented (what is shown and how; how users make connections with each other (reciprocal vs. asymmetric) and which kind of communication tools are offered on the site (public and/or public messages); but also in the level of customization that the site allows (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Despite the excessive euphoria about the egalitarian and democratic outcomes that social media and social network sites would have on society, that appeared during

the first years of the introduction of these new Internet developments¹³, Loader and Mercea (2012) argue that social media sites do have some potential to transform the hegemonies within the media sphere. This kind of new networked media has the potential to break current power relations in the media sphere, challenging the former monopolies in the media environment that traditional media had in the production and publication of content, allowing citizens to connect with each other and share content without needing traditional media, and consequently challenging the former understandings of audiences as passive consumers of traditional media texts. However, is necessary not to take for granted the “deterministic idea that social media are themselves inherently democratic and that politics is dead” (2012, p. 3) and always to take into consideration the social and cultural contexts in which these technologies are being introduced and developed.

According to Tewksburg and Rittenberg (2012, p. 154), “public involvement with content has a direct effect when citizens’ creation, distribution, exhibition, or curation influences the information that is seen and experienced by others”. Many authors have pointed out the growing number of individual citizens that are taking part in practices of dissemination or distribution of news media content through social media sites (Jenkins et al. 2013), consequently affecting the number of citizens that are receiving news from their audience communities in these online spaces (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012; Newman, Dutton, & Blank, 2012; Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010; Villi, 2012). Tewksburg and Rittenberg (2012, p. 158) call this process of citizens’ involvement in the distribution of civically relevant information ‘information democratization’, as this process is strongly connected to a shift in news consumption: from a model of mass audience to a model based on small, networked communities of audiences that perform ‘social curation’ of content in many different online spaces (Villi, 2012).

¹³ Loader and Mercea (2012) argue that this initial euphoria about Web 2.0 came from its marketing origins. Some of these optimistic positions have already been quoted in previous chapters of this thesis. For a more complete overview of these positions, see Papacharissi, 2010 or Dahlgren, 2013.

Following this argument, Jane B. Singer (2013) identifies three different ways by which users can influence how information flows and disseminates through audiences, becoming what she defines as ‘secondary gatekeepers’ of new content: 1) Assessment of contributions by journalists and other users 2) Communication of the material’s perceived value or quality and 3) Re-dissemination of selected content. Singer (ibid) also recognises that, even if social media sites represent the majority of tools aimed at generating citizens’ own ‘user-generated visibility’, we should not forget other tools such as emails or even options to report abusive comments from other users on news media websites. As Hermida (2012) pointed out, there is in fact nothing new about social curation or content dissemination through social media. All these kinds of practices aimed at recommendation or distribution of news content have been made before, through, for example, face-to-face conversation with friends, even if now new communication technologies allow citizens to perform them on a different scale, enabling citizens to access a high number of contacts in a relatively short period of time, compared with the options they had before the Internet. All these options of ‘secondary-gatekeeping’ allow citizens to challenge the former monopoly enjoyed by journalists as the only gatekeepers of news media content, challenging their own considerations of what is interesting and/or newsworthy with those perspectives of traditional media institutions (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Furthermore, by publishing and disseminating public issues content, citizens are also promoting debate and opinion exchange among their audience communities, in the same way that they are doing when these issues appear in a face-to-face group meeting (Min, 2007).

It is necessary, however, to take into account that the inherent challenges for the existing media environment of this citizens’ secondary-gatekeeping or social curation uses of the Internet, do not intrinsically have positive outcomes. Firstly, as some authors have already reflected, more citizen participation is not always positive in every field of society (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013), and it is yet too soon to know whether the contested hegemonies of traditional journalism in the media sphere will be followed by a new media environment that facilitates the creation of a more informed public (and audience) than in previous environments. Secondly, even if social media might have the potential to disseminate content in an easier

way than before, this content could be of many different natures, and not necessarily connected to public issues or informative content about public affairs. As Tewksburg and Rittenberg argued in talking about the democratic potential of social media: “This is not to say that society necessarily will be better. Much of the public could continue to ignore political content, and opportunities to have a regular, widespread voice could remain relatively rare” (2012, p. 159).

Despite the existence of a lack of qualitative research into citizens’ attitudes and motivations towards online participation and the kind of content they produce or disseminate (Merel Borger et al., 2013; Carpentier, 2009), some researchers point to the direction of citizens being more interested in participatory practices of low intensity (firstly seeing and secondly sharing and distributing) rather than in actively producing new content (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009; Singer et al. 2011; Hermida, 2012; Villi, 2012). According to Villi, most social media users could be identified as ‘submarines of the media sea’, in which “they surface only episodically, but nevertheless they are present” (Villi, 2012, p. 619). Moreover, when they are present and decide to share or recommend public issues content, this generally takes the form of links to traditional media websites, consequently helping traditional media in the dissemination of their own content, rather than challenging their hegemony as the main producers of information in the media sphere (Mitchell, 2014).

Although this has shed some light on citizens’ use of social media, it does not yet confront their motivations for participating or not, nor explain why citizens choose or favour some formats of participation rather than others. In fact, one of the areas in which academia could expand research is precisely the connections between these practices of sharing and commenting on news or public issues content and similar practices of sharing and commenting on content about daily life or mundane activities. Some authors (Jenkins, 2006; Coleman, 2007; Jenkins et al. 2013) have already argued in favour of seeking participatory energies in popular culture, through “those places and spaces where people feel that they are safely and meaningfully engaged” (Stephan Coleman, 2007, p. 31). Social media, as spaces that connect citizens with their contacts, represent ‘safe’ environments embedded

in citizens' daily lives, allowing them (almost) absolute freedom in what they publish, intertwining the private and the public spheres (Papacharissi, 2010). As Ethan Zuckerman argued in his 'cute cat theory of digital activism' (2008) the tools, the platforms and the skills needed for digital activism and for posting something clearly as non-political as a 'cute cat' picture are exactly the same. Although Zuckerman's theory is focused on explaining the difficulties that governments are facing in introducing online censorship, his theory points out how easy it is in social media to conduct political action, and how intertwined these kinds of practices are with others of a more leisure-related nature.

The traditional notion that information can be controlled and selected has been superseded by the open and limitless Internet environment (Singer, 2010). Given that it is impossible to return to the previous scenario, media professionals must adapt to the loss of their traditional gatekeeping role, changing not only the kind of stories they tell but also the way in which they produce the information: the public must be able to participate (Deuze, 2006). This section has shown how the new media environment has contested some of the existing hegemonies in the media sphere. The next section will be aimed at analysing how traditional media has to adapt to new communication technologies and the response by professionals to the challenges of the participatory dimension. As will be seen, the common response of traditional media is a process of 'remediation' (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) in which professional journalists try to adapt formerly existing practices to the new media environment, trying to change as few as possible, instead of implementing innovative and revolutionary practices and new ways to conceptualise the journalist-audience relationship.

2.5. The response of media institutions to the challenges of the participatory dimension: participatory journalism

The participatory dimension of the new media environment created a series of challenges to traditional media institutions, which had to adapt their websites to the increasing options for audience participation that were offered by Internet-

based technologies¹⁴. Formerly abstract concepts such as ‘audiences’ or the ‘public’ suddenly start to have an active and permanent presence, both in the newsroom and on the websites of traditional media (Heinonen, 2011). Neil Thurman and Alfred Hermida (Hermida & Thurman, 2008a; Neil Thurman & Hermida, 2010) argued that during the first years of the 2000s decade there was a certain lack of clarity in academic discourse when it tried to establish a clear definition of this increasing adoption of participatory features by media institutions. Labels such as ‘participatory news’ (Mark Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007), ‘collaborative journalism’ (Bruns, 2005) or ‘open-source journalism’ (Deuze, 2001) were adopted to name the phenomena¹⁵.

However, after more than a decade of evolution in users’ participation in news media websites, ‘participatory journalism’ is the most established and accepted label that academic literature uses to define the different tools or mechanisms adopted by media on their websites in order to allow users participation (Borger et al. 2013). Different authors described ‘participatory journalism’ as the technical, editorial and managerial processes that allow readers’ contributions to be elicited, processed, and published as professional publications (Thurman & Hermida, 2010: 5), or as the different processes implemented on media websites by which “citizens are invited (...) to contribute actively in the processes of news gathering, selection, publication, commentary and public discussion, and all this is accomplished in collaboration and in interaction with professional journalists” (Paulussen, 2007). Accordingly, what differentiates ‘participatory journalism’ from other forms of citizens’ online participation such as ‘citizen journalism’ is that users’ contributions are always “solicited within a frame designed by the professionals” (Nip, 2006).

¹⁴ The challenges brought by the participatory dimension are probably the last ones of a series of challenges that traditional media has had to face in the new media environment. Especially with the broad adoption of the Internet, traditional media institutions have had to create websites in order to be present in the new medium, which has consequently involved changes in the newsroom and in the business models, with media institutions struggling to find ways to charge visitors and deal with new ways of advertising.

¹⁵ Even the label of ‘networked journalism’ was used to define this kind of online participation (Heinrich, 2011; Jarvis, 2006), although more recently this label has taken on a different meaning, as will be seen later (McNair, 2013).

As can be seen, unlike 'citizen journalism', which involves original content production and distribution, the framework of action of 'participatory journalism' is traditional media websites, which adopt several different tools in order to 'channel' users' participation. Accordingly, 'participatory journalism' encompasses all the interactions a member of the public can have in the online environments provided by media. Examples of this kind of participation are features such as comments on the news, sending stories or pictures to the media, or sharing news on social networks using the options provided on media websites. Although the level, or intensity, of participation that each of these contributions requires from users is quite different (Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011b) all of them tend to be included under the same label of 'participatory journalism', in so far as they are forms of citizen participation included in news media websites. Consequently, 'participatory journalism' becomes a label under which the literature identifies highly different forms of participation, from registration options to online debates, or videos or pictures created by users and uploaded to media websites, disregarding the fact that the activity (or the participatory intensity) performed by users is in each case very different.

Attempts to find an established and more narrowed definition of 'participatory journalism' have failed due to the changing nature of the new media environment: since the early years of the 2000s decade, the nature of the participatory tools adopted by news media has changed continuously. One of the earlier studies (Schultz, 1999) shows how in the late 90s, newspaper websites in the USA were still under development, mostly copying onto the website what they were publishing in the printed version, and adopting participatory tools such as chats or forums only. In studies that showed data collected in 2006 (Bivings Group, 2006; Torres, Martínez, & Martínez, 2008) we can start to see an evolution in the options allowed for user participation. The most widely adopted tools at this stage were 'comments on journalists' blogs', 'RSS' and 'most popular news rankings'. There was also a significant difference among levels of adoption between countries such as the USA and Spain, with the United States media adopting more tools than the Spanish ones. In the following years, several studies showed how the nature of the most common tools continued to change, with nowadays 'comment on news',

‘social media tools’ and ‘newsletters’ options being the most common tools, although others that were common on 2006 are still popular, such as ‘RSS’ or ‘most popular news rankings’ (Singer et al., 2011; Suau & Masip, 2014; Thurman & Hermida, 2010). Furthermore, some common tools in the early days of participatory journalism, such as forums or chats, have now almost completely disappeared from traditional news media websites.

Regarding the level of news media’s adoption of participatory tools, research carried out, both national (Jankowski & Selm van, 2000; Masip & Suau, 2014; O’Sullivan, 2005; Oblak, 2005; Paulussen, 2006; N. Thurman, 2008; A. Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011) and transnational (De Keyser & Sehl, 2011; Dimitrova, Connolly-Ahern, Williams, Kaid, & Reid, 2003; Domingo et al., 2008; Fortunati et al., 2009; Örnebring, 2008; Quandt, 2008; Singer et al., 2011; Suau & Masip, 2014) shows that during the last 15 years traditional news websites have rapidly adopted participatory features, in a clear process of continuously opening up their websites to user participation. Moreover, the two years between 2006 and 2008 seem to be in most countries the time when their media made the most radical changes and adopted the most tools, allowing for more user participation¹⁶. Comparing internationally, although these studies reflect different theoretical and methodological approaches, it being consequently difficult to compare the different results, it appears that European online newspapers tend to offer fewer tools for interactivity than their American counterparts (Steensen, 2011).

However, this process of gradually opening the doors to users’ participatory energies was never completed, and journalists from traditional media institutions have always had the last word in decision-making processes and newsroom control (Singer et al, 2011; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). The series of studies conducted by Neil Thurman and Alfred Hermida (Thurman, 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Thurman & Hermida, 2010) show how, although news media websites follow a clear trend of opening up their websites to user participation, this mostly consists of formats based on editing or moderating by journalists prior

¹⁶ Relevant here is the case of the *Independent*, which in 2006 did not have any form of user participation, but which just two years later had included all the participatory tools that were common at that time (Thurman & Hermida, 2010).

to publication, rather than formats that would involve users publishing directly without any previous control. Furthermore, Hermida and Thurman also point out that, although blogs are the kind of participatory tool that became the most popular in the 2005-06 period, news media have adopted the format only and not the philosophy. Most journalists' blogs are in fact opinion articles that enable users' comments (most of them also using previous moderation), without journalists taking part in the debates and conversations. Consequently, Alfred Hermida argues that "participative tools have been adopted more widely as listening devices than as devices for a dialogue between journalists and audiences" (Hermida, 2011, p. 30). In a similar way, international comparative research (Domingo et al. 2008; Singer et al. 2011) shows how news media websites are mainly using participatory options that enable users to act upon journalistic content by commenting on it or rating it, rather than enabling users to create their own content. When these options for original content creation are allowed, they tend to be clearly differentiated from content provided by journalists and with a low newsworthy profile. This led previous studies to conclude that journalists and media institutions were cautiously adopting participatory journalism, while trying to keep their traditional role as professional "gatekeepers" who decide what is and what is not newsworthy.

Nevertheless, and despite these general trends, there still exist great differences between the models of user participation adopted by traditional media. While some media are trying to gather as many users as possible, by adopting a high number of low-intensity participatory tools, others adopt policies or models of high-quality user participation, even if this means fewer users participating on the website (Masip & Suau, 2014). Analysing the 'intensities' of participation, or the 'degree' of user involvement that each 'participatory journalism' tool represents is something relatively new and with little literature on the subject. As Steensen (2013) points out, most of the previous studies on the subject are, in one way or another, based on the concept of 'interactivity', in order to describe the nature of the tools adopted on news media websites. Following Steensen (2013), the most common definition of 'interactivity' on which previous research draws is the one offered by Jensen (Jensen, 1998, p. 201) who defines the term as "a measure of a

media's potential ability to let the user exert an influence on the content and/or form of the mediated communication". As this definition is rather technological, an important part of previous research has tended to focus on the tools and features adopted by media, rather than on the implications for the users, disregarding the social dimension of interactivity (Steensen, 2013). Examples of this trend are some of the studies conducted during the first years of news media's introduction of 'participatory journalism' (Bivings, 2006; Neil Thurman & Hermida, 2010; Neil Thurman & Schifferes, 2012; Torres et al., 2008), in which researchers were focused on describing the actual media's adoption of tools, 'counting' the number of different interactive tools and describing which media were using more of them and which fewer (Boczkowski, 2002). However, some other studies do try to establish some typology in order to structure their research and put some order into the different 'participatory journalism' tools, although the focus continues to be on media institutions or on the tools themselves rather than on the users (Jönson & Örnebring, 2010; Domingo et al, 2008)¹⁷.

Although most of the previous studies were designed to compare the participation options offered by different news media websites in one country, or aimed at international comparative research, taking as an object of research media from different countries, there are also studies aimed at in-depth research of 'participatory journalism' in just one medium, such as the study by Williams, Wardle and Wahl-Jorgensen about user-generated content and BBC journalists' perception of audience participation (2011). Nevertheless, this group of studies aimed at determining the kind and nature of the participatory tools adopted by news media websites, are not the only studies focused on 'participatory journalism'. Previous research has also extensively looked at the media's reasons for offering options to participate on their websites (Rosenstiel & Mitchell, 2011;

¹⁷ This lack of attention to the social dimension of interactivity implies that most studies of participatory journalism do not consider in their typology of tools the different kinds of user involvement. The next chapter on methodology, will further analyse the methodology used in previous studies on participatory journalism and the criteria they used to elaborate their typologies of interactivity. It will also introduce the typology of tools designed for this research, justifying why this research has chosen to elaborate a new typology rather than drawing on one already created in previous research.

Singer et al., 2011) and at journalists' attitudes towards user participation (Neuberger & Nuernbergk 2010; Ruiz et al., 2011)¹⁸.

In fact, since the beginning of research on participatory journalism, high importance and attention have been given to journalists' attitudes and motivations towards the phenomenon. As in the previously mentioned study by Williams, Wardle and Wahl-Jorgensen (2011), a large number of the studies that researched media's adoption of 'participatory journalism' have tended to also include the journalists' perception of audience participation, through in-depth interviews, surveys or ethnographic methodologies (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Thurman & Hermida, 2010; Singer, 2010; Domingo, 2008). Research carried out points to media's economic reasons (audience engagement and fidelization) for the creation of participatory spaces, rather than journalistic motives or those relating to democratic culture (Becker, Clement, & Schaedel, 2010; Rosenstiel & Mitchell, 2011; Shaver & Shaver, 2006; Singer et al., 2011; Vujnovic et al., 2010). Most studies stress that journalists are striving to maintain their status and reinforce their role as gatekeepers as they are concerned about the quality of users' contributions (Chung, 2007; Hermida & Thurman, 2008b; Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010; Pantti & Bakker, 2009; Singer & Ashman, 2009; Williams et al., 2011).

Singer (2010) found that UK journalists saw no special benefits but several dangers in opening up their websites to audience participation: unless it was 'carefully monitored' this participation could 'undermine journalistic norms and values' (Singer, 2010, p. 127). Similarly, Thurman and Hermida (2010) found that editors were adopting participatory tools mainly because they did not want to be left behind, afraid that users would go to other more participative websites. User participation was then understood as the right to comment or give an opinion rather than as a possible source of news or of content creation (Villi, 2012). A point also stressed by Hermida (2011) who argued that professional journalists are reluctant to allow users to produce editorial material, preferring to consider

¹⁸ For a more extensive overview of the range of studies about 'participatory journalism', see Borger et al. 2013.

audiences as a “source of content - particularly eyewitness information”, relevant in cases of breaking news events when journalists have not yet arrived.

To sum up these conclusions, Chung (2007) defines as ‘cautious traditionalists’ the role of traditional media in their process of adoption of audience participation. Although ‘early adopters’ could be found in most newsrooms (Larsson, 2012b) and/or some positive views about the potential of involving audiences (Gillmor 2004; Bowman & Willis 2003), the new participatory dimension had to compete with long established journalistic routines (Domingo, 2008), which represented the existent hegemonies of professional journalists and media institutions. As Hermida has pointed out, journalists are trapped between two worlds, a new media discourse that encourages participatory forms of media production and another that stresses the importance of professional control within journalism and the media sphere. As a consequence, traditional news media are “encouraging users to engage in the new process through multiple tools while at the same time defending the core of news production as the preserve of professionals” (Hermida, 2011, p. 181). In conclusion, journalists and traditional media institutions think that they are facing a dilemma about how to open their websites to audiences, taking part in the participatory dimension of the new media environment, while at the same time they are struggling to protect long held and relatively static principles and hegemony within the media sphere that have been the core of the journalistic profession during the last decades.

According to these positions, traditional media institutions and their journalists followed a trend started by Web 2.0 marketing discourse. This trend consists of conducting a process of ‘appropriation’ of what Jenkins (2006) calls ‘participatory culture’, transforming it into a commercialised narrative aimed to enhance participatory practices that are denaturalised: one of the actors keeps all the power, without sharing it with the other actors involved in the process (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). Participation is then used, as in marketing, to attract attention, and not to involve citizens in the process of news creation or within effective platforms of debate and opinion exchange. Carpentier (2011) refuses to call these practices ‘participation’, arguing that they are in fact just ‘interaction’ with news

content, interaction between the user and something already created or decided. According to the research on participatory journalism formerly quoted in this section, most media institutions are offering low-level participatory options, or are 'remediating' previously existing forms of participation that existed outside news media websites, transforming them into something similar but without the participatory dimension that these forms had before in open and free Internet environments. In this way, the formerly participatory formats are changed, or 'remediated' to become subsumed into the already existing "traditional journalistic norms and practices" (Singer, 2005, p. 173). Relevant examples of this process of 'remediating' previous participatory formats are blogs. Singer (2005) argues that journalists tend not to adapt themselves to the dialogical and conversational nature of the format, embracing new ways of working and behaving with their audiences. Instead, most of those who open blogs use the tool according to pre-established work routines, as platforms for personal opinion, with no relevant exchange with audiences.

These journalists' attitudes and motivations towards 'participatory journalism' differ strongly from scholars' point of view on the subject. In their extensive review of previous literature on participatory journalism, Borger et al. (2013) pointed out that there was a widespread belief in academic circles in the democratic potential of audience participation on news media websites. This general attitude was, firstly, strongly inspired by the technological optimism that characterised the early days of the Internet and the following Web 2.0 euphoria (Curran et al., 2012). Secondly, there exists even nowadays a "broad belief that, theoretically, participatory journalism offers a renewed chance to realise public journalism's goals" (Merel Borger et al., 2013, p. 126). Consequently, 'participatory journalism' is still considered to be a renewed opportunity to achieve the goals supported by 'public journalism', a movement that originated in the US in the 1990's, in response to some concerns about the role played by media in society (Nip, 2006).

Following Borger et al. (2013), research on 'participatory journalism' has been focused on three main normative dimensions that has guided research in the field:

1) Enthusiasm for new democratic opportunities provided by new communication technologies, which were supposed to bring about a new media sphere in which journalism would be transformed into an “egalitarian conversation between professionals and citizens” (Merel Borger et al., 2013, p. 2). 2) Disappointment with professional journalism’s obduracy, for which scholars tend to blame media institutions due to the fact that they “offer participatory opportunities, but not in a way that overthrows the existing journalistic paradigm” (Borger et al., 2013, p. 127). 3) Disappointment with journalists’ economic motives to facilitate participatory journalism, due to the fact that media institutions, rather than being interested in enhancing democratic participation, are embracing audience involvement as, firstly, to build brand community and generate traffic to the website and, secondly, to use “users as contributors of free content to use when and where journalists want” (Borger et al., 2013, p. 127).

Moreover, although they recognise a lack of studies regarding the subject, Borger et al. (2013) point out a fourth normative dimension: disappointment with news users’ passivity. Firstly, regarding the fact that the proportion of users participating in news media websites is relatively small, compared with the overall number of visitors, and secondly due to users’ preferences for participating in order to seek entertainment, rather than obeying democratic considerations (Borger et al., 2013, p. 128). However, Borger et al. (2013) recognise that, in the field of studies about ‘participatory journalism’, there is currently a gap with regard to users’ attitudes and motivations towards participation. Rather than being something specific to ‘participatory journalism’ studies, this can be considered as a general trend in the overall field of media-based research. According to Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2008), the field of journalism research has been dominated by two general trends, which have consequently influenced the research conducted into ‘participatory journalism’. The first of these trends is a clear dominance of normative theories that connect journalism and democracy, attributing clear functions to journalists and media institutions. Secondly, the field has been dominated by studies on news production, professionals’ routines and practices, consequently disregarding the position of the audience, although some relatively recent research has focused attention on

audiences' interpretations of media. Chapter 3 will analyse how previous studies have carried out research into online participation, introducing the particular approach defended by this research. However, before starting with these issues, the following final section of Chapter 2 will analyse how new configurations of citizenship might be strongly connected with some of the recent transformations in the media environment.

2.6. The new media environment and the central position of the self in late modernity: the networked self as a new model of citizenship?

Previously in Chapter 1, which was about participation and democratic theory, I showed how the ways in which individuals civically behave and engage with society have changed in recent years, according to what Inglehart (1997) understands as the post-modern phase of development in advanced industrial societies. In the present section, I will revisit and expand some of the theories about late modernity that pointed out several cultural and social shifts (Bauman, 2000, 2005; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991)¹⁹, with the aim of analysing how these recent trends and changes in society are shaping the way in which technologies in the gestating new media environment are created, interpreted and finally, used. By doing so, I consciously adopt a non-deterministic technological approach, understanding that new communication technologies do not produce per se social and political changes (Couldry, 2010), and that the new affordances allowed by these new technologies are always developed and implemented according to social and cultural trends in late modern societies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Curran et al., 2012; Tewksburg & Rittenberg, 2012). To conclude, I will address some recent theories about a new model of citizenship developed by individuals in late modern democracies (Bennett, 2008; Bennett &

¹⁹ Following Inglehart (1997), I will try to avoid the debates about whether these changes imply a new paradigm (as postmodernist authors argue) or if rather we are facing the last phase of modernity (as late modernity thinkers believe). Despite the interest of such a debate, the important point regarding this thesis is that both groups agree in defining most of the transformations that have affected western societies during the last decades. It is precisely on these transformations that I will focus, consciously avoiding the debate about postmodernity and late modernity, even if in this section I will use the latter term more often than the former one, as most of the authors I will draw on tend to subscribe to late modernity theories.

Seegerberg, 2013), a model that is strongly connected with new communication technologies and the participatory dimension of the new media environment (Papacharissi, 2010; Dahlgren, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

According to Inglehart (1997), behind the rhetoric and intellectual debates of some postmodernist authors such as Derrida, Baudrillard or Lyotard, “an empirically demonstrable cultural shift is taking place” (1997, p.22). This cultural shift is identified with changes in the value system and lifestyle of individuals in post-industrial societies, and is represented in many different areas, from politics to religion but also in broad cultural and sexual and gender trends. While materialist values emphasised economic and physical security, tending to defend hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations, postmodernist societies tend to adopt values that are identified more with individual self-expression and quality of life concerns. Accordingly, postmodernist societies are also characterised by a general “decline of horizontal institutions and rigid social norms, and by the expansion of the realm of individual choice and mass participation” (Inglehart, 1997, p. 30). Relevant sociologists have reflected on this new conception of the self-identity or self-expression in late modern societies, where individuality takes a lead position in defining the subject. Giddens (1991), for example, points out the ‘reflexivity’ of the contemporary self, always ready to change and adapt to the conditions of the ever-changing late modern society. On the other hand, Bauman (2000; 2005) argues that the ‘liquid’ nature of late modernity implies that the subject struggles to adapt to this changing nature. Rather than the empowered subject that can be found in Giddens’ theory, individuality and self-expression of the self in Baumann are also central, but with a permanent condition of ambivalence and uncertainty.

Drawing on these previous theories, Dahlgren (2013) argues for a reconsideration about the ways in which some definitions of the ‘civic subject’ formerly embedded in the ‘intimate realm of life’ (such as gender, sexual orientation, family structure or even medical technologies) have recently become politicised issues, as individuals’ spheres of self-action and decision have been increased, according to the new values that dominate society in late modernity. As a consequence, the boundaries between what is considered public and private are blurring, following,

according to Keane (1995, p. 374), a “long-time modern tendency for public spheres to spread into areas of life previously immune from controversies about power”. In this context, ‘identity politics’ (Melucci, 1996) emerge, substituting the former hegemony of collective action as the main resource for social movements. Moreover, this new ‘civic subject’ is not attracted by former ideologies (or ‘-isms’) and traditional forms of participation; but rather than being politically demobilised, disengaged or disinterested, “this citizen is politically interested in modes that are not easily captured via aggregate measures, such as polls, and has a political appetite that is not satisfied by mass-produced content” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 137).

According to some authors (Fraser, 1992; Keane, 1991), these transformations are forcing a reconsideration of the Habermasian (Jürgen Habermas, 1989) concept of a unified and state-structured public sphere. As society today is becoming more pluralistic and defined around differentiated lines or issues based on subjects’ self-identification (class, ethnicity, media consumption, cultural interests, lifestyle etc.), the concept of the public sphere could be better conceptualised if recognition were given to the existence of several ‘micro-public spheres’, based on communications and everyday life, that configure a “mosaic of different sized, overlapping, and interconnected public spheres” (Keane, 1995, p. 366). Following Fraser (1992), these coexisting multiple public spheres are formed by ‘counterpublics’ with different existing power relations and that represent different subjects’ self-identification groups, in a response to their exclusion from the dominant public spheres. However, according to Dahlgren (2013), this is precisely the main problem that some of these ‘weak’ ‘micro-public spheres’ are facing: their disconnection from the traditional decision-making processes that rule society, which could lead in the long-term to disengagement if individuals’ voices have no chance of being heard (Couldry, 2010). Nevertheless, it is precisely this disconnection from the traditional which forces individuals forming these public spheres, especially those that are more connected with ‘the political’, to look for alternative channels of expression and dissemination of their subject positions and discourses. It is in the context of the new public spaces formed within the new

media environment that civic subjects disconnected from the 'strong' public spheres could find appropriate channels of expression.

The new media environment, but especially the participatory dimension, helped to enhance individuals' spheres of action, creating what some authors consider could be a new mode of citizenship. Although different authors have created several different concepts to conceptualise this new 'digital citizenship' (Bennett's model of the 'actualizing citizen' (Bennett, 2008 and 2013), Papacharissi's 'private sphere' (2010), Dahlgren's 'solo sphere' (2013) or Rainie and Wellman's 'networked individualism', (2012)), all of them share a common starting point, which is the mutual influence that the central values of autonomy, control and self-expression of individuals in late modern societies have in relation to new communication technologies. Rather than being in a causal relationship, recent trends in late modern societies and developments in communication technologies are affecting and shaping each other, contributing to creating something new, still liquid, mutable and uncertain. Consequently, these new models of 'digital citizenship' theorised by some authors are not intended to substitute former conceptualizations of citizenship (Bennett, 2008). Rather, traditional forms of citizenship and the new 'digital' one nowadays coexist, at least until the new media environment stops being something in gestation and starts to acquire a 'solid' form, leaving behind its present 'liquid' and 'changing' nature.

Moreover, according to Bennett (2008 and 2013), the 'dutiful' model of citizenship is still majoritarian in most western democracies. This model is based on a perception of citizenship that sees participation and involvement as a 'duty' of citizens in democracy. Furthermore, participation is perceived as connected with organizations such as political parties, unions or other broad social membership institutions that employ a one-way conventional communication to mobilise supporters. Conversely, Bennett's self-actualizing model of citizenship implies a shift towards a more personalised and individual participation and involvement. Voting and collective action or membership become less important while personalised acts such as volunteering or activism grow in importance. The previous perception of collective action as a 'duty' is transformed into higher

feelings of distrust in traditional institutions, which lead to thin social ties maintained mainly with friends and groups of peers. According to Bennett, self-actualizing citizenship is especially important among younger generations, and is expressed in a very important part (although not uniquely) through new communication technologies, which led some authors to conceptualise models of 'digital citizenship'.

For example, in her theory of the 'private sphere', Zizi Papacharissi (2010) tries to answer the question as to what extent new 'civic uses' of the Internet convey 'the political', through a new 'digital citizenship' that she understands as "civic responsibility enabled by digital technologies" (2010, p. 103). Accepting that the new media environment is creating a new public space, Papacharissi then argues that this does not inevitably enable a new public sphere, as "a virtual space simply enhances discussion" and a "virtual sphere should enhance democracy" (ibid, p. 124). The question then becomes one of whether new communication technologies could foster democracy, promoting rational discourse, equally representing the diversity of different public spheres of different societal actors (Z. Papacharissi, 2002). Following Papacharissi, this new 'public space' is not in reality completely 'public', as what is in the centre of all interactions is the individual. What in reality is enabling new communication technologies, is a private sphere of interaction within which individuals engage socially, through a private media environment located in personal and public spaces that are therefore interconnected, configuring what Papacharissi calls the 'networked self' (Papacharissi, 2011).

The focus on the individual is also present in the work of Rainie and Wellman when they argue that citizens "have become increasingly networked as individuals, rather than embedded in groups. In the world of networked individuals, it is the person who is the focus, not the family, not the work unit, not the neighbourhood, and not the social group" (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p. 6). However, the new media environment is not "a world of autonomous and increasingly isolated individuals" (2012, p. 19), as networked citizens have access to a series of private spheres that allow them to move "among relationships and milieus" in which they "can fashion their own complex identities depending on their passions, beliefs, lifestyles,

professional associations, work interests, hobbies, or any number of other personal characteristics” (2012, p. 15). Similarly, Papacharissi argues that late modernity citizens in the new media environment are alone, but not lonely or isolated, as “within the private sphere, the individual cultivates civic habits that enable him or her to connect with others on the basis of shared social, political and cultural priorities” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 137). According to Papacharissi, what changed with new communication technologies are the spaces that can convey public action and civic engagement. In former media environments, the process of ‘being involved’ or participating in public issues implied necessarily a transition from the personal, or private, to the political, or public. Within the new media environment, ‘civic action’ can be carried out in almost any place, citizenship being associated primarily with autonomy, control and the ability to question authority, and only at a secondary level with the potentiality to perform collective action. Consequently, the private sphere is a sphere of connection and not of isolation, as it “serves primarily to connect the personal to the political, and the self to the polity and society” (Papacharissi, 2010 p. 164).

Dahlgren (2013), although he generally agrees with Papacharissi’s configuration of the ‘private sphere’, preferring to name it ‘solo sphere’, points out the fact that this new ‘digital citizenship’ should be understood more as a “new habitus for online political participation, a new platform for civic agency” (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 63). Accordingly, Dahlgren stresses the fact that this ‘new habitus’ coexists with other more traditional forms of citizenship. Moreover, according to Dahlgren, these ‘old’ forms represent in reality ‘high’ intensities of participation and engagement, the ‘solo sphere’ being a place in which to develop media-centred practices or modes of political engagement of ‘low’ intensity, within a privatised and networked environment where citizens feel they have more control than in other more contested and committed public spheres. Consequently, the ‘solo sphere’ could represent a sphere of everyday engagement, especially used in ‘low’ intensity contexts, while special political and social contexts (such as revolutionary activity or high levels of citizen mobilization due to the consequences of the economic crisis) could set in place other dynamics and foster the adoption by citizens of practices of ‘high’ intensities of engagement and participation.

To conclude, a main issue around these debates is the configuration of power in these individuals' private spheres and its effects in late modernity democracies. According to Papacharissi (2010), the new media environment enables individual citizens to adopt forms of power that they did not hold in conventional representative democratic environments. The new configuration of power that "is afforded by the technological architectures of the power sphere emerges in networked mode, thus establishing the autonomy of each private sphere, as well as the collective power of conjoined private spheres" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 166); citizens' potential for power lying therefore in their ability to connect autonomous private spheres. The new mode of citizenship could then connect like-minded individuals, enabling capabilities to express dissent, alter the agenda of politicians and media and contest former hegemonies. However, as Dahlgren (2013) argues, this does not necessarily mean that networks based on new communication technologies imply a new form of social power that will foster political participation and activism, as (Castells, 2010) seems to assert: the new civic forms of power, instead of enhancing citizens' engagement, could also be used by authoritarian regimes and anti-democratic groups that do not have among their objectives civic participation or citizens' involvement in democracy (Morozov, 2011; van Dijk, 2012).

CHAPTER 3

Researching online participation and public engagement in the new media environment

This chapter is conceived as a 'bridge' between the two previous chapters, Chapters 1 and 2, aimed at presenting the theoretical background of this research, and Chapter 4 which follows after and which introduces the particular methodology used in this study. Chapter 3 analyses in its first section how the use of different theoretical and methodological approaches has brought previous research to different, and even sometimes divergent, conclusions about the effects of traditional and new media consumption on citizen participation and engagement. In order to overcome this shortcoming, Section 2 presents practice theory and different approaches to Internet use as the core concepts on which this research will draw to structure its particular methodological approach on the concept of online participation. To conclude, Section 3 will show how previous research has approached the concepts of political participation and civic engagement, this being the basis of the typology of public engagement that will be presented subsequently in Chapter 4.

3.1. Media effects and political participation

The nature of the effects that new communication technologies have on public engagement, participation and life in democracy is still one of the big unanswered questions in media and communications research. Perhaps because the new media environment is something not yet established, still under construction (Press & Williams, 2010), but also because there does not yet exist a general agreement on

a central issue such as the correlation between news media use and political behaviour. The different positions on this issue have been caricaturised by Kim and Kim (2012) as a "jungle of theories". Consequently, new communication technologies have added to a scenario that was already uncertain before they became widespread, inspiring a high number of both pessimistic and optimistic theories about their effect on citizens, news media and democratic practice.

With regard to 'old' or 'traditional' media, different theories have tried to explain the effects of media consumption on political participation and public or civic engagement. To summarise, a first group of theories, known as 'media malaise' (or 'video malaise', due to their special focus on the effects of television) which argue that mass media consumption, due to the content and format of the information they provide, results in increased political cynicism and apathy, contributing to civic disengagement and ignorance of public affairs (Bourdieu, 1998; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Sartori, 1998). According to these theories, when mass media inform about politics, journalists tend to incorporate a bigger sensationalist component, focusing on scandals, polemics or personal issues (Ornebring, 2003), or presenting the political campaign as a game or competition, with the objective of making it more interesting for the audience (Postman, 1993) Witelbols, 2004). Political issues or ideological debates are not usual in the media market as television coverage tends to personalise, focusing only on political leaders (McAllister, 2007), changing the way in which political campaigns developed before the broadcast era (Meyer, 2002). Accordingly, citizens' inputs about politics or the public world tend to be negative or focused on the personalities of political leaders. The effect on citizens is then disengagement from the political field and an increase in political distrust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

On the other hand, 'cognitive mobilization' theories argue that the combination of an increased amount of political information provided by modern media and higher levels of education in western democracies, meaning a more prepared electorate, may have a good effect on democracy (Dalton, 1996; Inglehart, 1990). For example, informed citizens in the United States, according to Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), tend to participate more in politics than uninformed citizens, being

also more likely to express their own political positions and demonstrate a better knowledge about the candidates. Furthermore, Newton (Newton, 1999) found that attention to media (press and television news) is related to positive indicators of civic engagement in the United Kingdom. According to Van Zoonen (2005), the pessimism of 'media malaise' theories is due to an idealization of a past that never existed, but also a lack of consideration about the recent developments in late modern societies, that changed the ways in which citizens enter in relation with media and politics (Inglehart, 1990; Van Zoonen, 2005). Finally, a new perspective regarding this issue is the one provided by Pippa Norris (2000) and her theory of the 'virtuous circle'. According to Norris, mass media consumption does not have the bad effects that 'media malaise' theories claim. In her study, she argues that attention to news media does not contribute to citizens' apathy or disengagement. Moreover, attention to news acts as a 'virtuous circle': "the most politically knowledgeable, trusting, and participatory are most likely to tune in to public affairs coverage. And those most attentive to coverage of public affairs become more engaged in civic life" (Norris, 2000, p. 317).

With regard to the effects of new communication technologies on public engagement, some authors have argued that these technologies will create a new online community, or public sphere, that will lower the formerly high costs of collective action, empowering citizens' political skills and social capital (Delli Carpini, 2000; Min, 2007; Rheingold, 2002). Moreover, others have argued for the potential benefits of the Internet as a tool that will offer easy access to political information and direct connections between citizens and their representatives, increasing agency, engagement and participation (Esser & de Vreese, 2007), following the 'mobilization effects' tradition. With regard to the effects of new communication technologies on media, some authors predicted the imminent demise of 'old' media (Nerone, 2009), or the uncertain future of journalists (Deuze, 2006) in a new scenario dominated by 'citizen journalism' (Gillmor, 2004) and active audiences that produce and share political content without needing traditional media anymore (Rosen, 2006).

However, some other authors have argued against these claims about the Internet's positive effects on society, claiming that new technologies imply risks of social isolation and addiction (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001). Mobilization effects are also denied by those that claim that the total number of citizens participating and using the Internet for political aims is still low (Hindman, 2009; L. Rainie & Smith, 2012). Moreover, earlier work tended to show that those participating online were already politically active offline, in what are known as 'normalization' theses (Best & Krueger, 2005; Jensen, 2006; Norris, 2001). Consequently, some studies have pointed out that the mobilization effect is more likely to happen among the youngest sectors of the population who, traditionally, have higher levels of disengagement from traditional forms of political participation, and are more willing to look for what they cannot find offline in the online world (M. J. Jensen, Danziger, & Venkatesh, 2007). Finally, some authors, such as Keen (2007), have argued against the narrative of online participation, in which audience and author become one, losing the value of expertise and knowledge in favour of amateur and non-professional content. Despite these alarms about an overwhelming and increasingly participative and politically active audience, recent studies have pointed out that the interest of the audience in participating in media content might still be limited (Bergström, 2008; Heise et al., 2013; Larsson, 2011).

Reviewing the previous literature on the subject, two theoretical issues can be identified that this research needs to take into consideration, in order to conceptualise its structure and map the different methodological positions around the object of research. First of all, it needs to consider the question of how to carry out research into the effects of the Internet, the new media environment being an arena where users can perform an almost infinite number of different kinds of activities. Secondly, it needs to study the issue of what should be considered as political participation, or what the conditions are in order to be considered an active citizen, developing a typology of different forms for what I am going to call 'public engagement'. These two different issues will be analysed in the next two sections of this chapter, aimed at reflecting on different theoretical and methodological approaches, before embarking in the next chapter on a presentation of the particular methodological approach followed by this research.

3.2. Internet effects and participatory practices

Concerning the issue of how Internet activities are researched with regard to their connection and effects on political participation, Hirzalla, Van Zoonen and Ridder (2010) have made some interesting points about how an understanding of Internet use can lead to different research conclusions. They argue that mobilization theses (which, as has been seen, are optimistic with regard to the effects of Internet use on political participation) are normally made from online manifestations in moment specific cases, or case studies, that do not represent the behaviour of ordinary citizens. (as, for example, during the 'Occupy Wall Street' or the Spanish 11-M 'indignados'). On the other hand, normalization theses (that tend to be more pessimistic) are built from general Internet use patterns, and do not differentiate between different kinds of Internet use, getting their conclusions from definitions of user online behaviour that are too broad, mixing in their definitions of online activities that barely have anything in common.

Consequently, according to these authors, mobilization studies tend to show the political potential of the Internet and new communication technologies. Using qualitative research, these studies tend to highlight how easily the Internet can facilitate activities aimed at political purposes, or how it can be used as a political space, or public sphere, where citizens can organise themselves for political participation or exchange different opinions or points of view about public issues. On the other hand, normalization theories, normally based on survey studies or other quantitative methodologies, tend to claim that those people who are already active and engaged are those who are primarily exploiting the Internet's political potential. There are therefore no positive effects on the number of people who participate, because the same inequalities that characterise offline participation are reproduced, and perhaps even increased, in online participation (inequalities regarding material, social and political resources between socio-demographical groups).

Following this idea of differentiating Internet use, some authors (Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009; Zhao, 2006) argue that none of the previously introduced optimistic

or pessimistic scenarios have happened: the Internet might have some positive effects on citizens' engagement, but its positive or negative effects predominantly depend on the specific forms of Internet use that citizens are performing online. Internet use studies can be focused on specific uses of the Internet, such as online news (Nielsen, 2011) or social media in relation to mobilization for demonstrations (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Wollebaek, 2012), but can also be focused on the different effects of Internet use according to the level of users' activity: passive forms such as reading political news or reading users' comments, contrasted with active forms of Internet use such as using social networks for political purposes or blogging (de Zuniga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2013; Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömback, & Nord, 2011; Gil De Zuniga, Puig-I-Abril, & Rojas, 2009; Kruike-meier, van Noort, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2013). According to this position, what citizens are doing online has become too diverse, including and affecting almost every aspect of the offline world, for research to still consider that something such as 'general' Internet effects can be researched. Furthermore, the media environment is still trying to adapt itself to new communication technologies, that rather than being something stable are an area of constant innovation, complicating the processes through which we can research how citizens make sense of them and how they use these new tools in their lives in democracy and their connection with news media (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011; Press and Williams, 2010).

Continuing this previous argumentation, Internet use can be understood as a number of integrative and pre-existent everyday practices that involve the use of new communication technologies, such as shopping, home banking, entertaining, maintaining social networks or getting the news. This list of everyday practices linked with ICTs might be endless and illustrates how deeply these new technologies are embedded in modern life, changing the nature of pre-existent practices and the ways in which citizens behave in their daily lives. Christensen and Ropke (2010) cite the example of the practice of 'maintaining social networks' and how ICTs, especially among young people, have changed the ways in which they establish their peer-group interactions, without differentiating between mediated and non-mediated kinds of interactions. Despite the previous existence

of this practice, new communication technologies have strongly modified it, to the point where it would be difficult to imagine a world in which we need to communicate with our family, friends or with job colleagues without cell phones and computers.

Nick Couldry proposes understanding media as a group of practices that have in common their relation to media (media as practice), decentring media studies from the study of the text or the institutions that produce it, in order to better answer a question highly relevant for the author: 'What are people doing that is related to media?' (Couldry, 2012, p. 35). According to some authors "decentring the text makes it possible to analyse people's media activity in its own terms" (Ardevol, Roig, San Cornelio, Pagès, & Alsina, 2010) opening up the path to a new series of media and communication studies more focused on citizens and their use of media, closely related with their everyday contexts (Bird, 2010). Following Couldry, a practice is defined both by regularity of action and by its social component, that is, 'action oriented to others', being an observable routine activity, with an automatic and unconscious character (Couldry, 2010a, 2012). Couldry also argues that in the context of the digital revolution, the main research question can be transformed into: 'What types of things do people say (think, believe) in relation to media?': "(...) in order to establish what are the new principles by which practices related to media are demarcated, we cannot be guided simply by our instinct as media or social researchers. We must look closely at what people are doing, saying and thinking in relation to media" (Couldry, 2012, p. 40). Practice theory can help us to separate and better understand the different forms of Internet use performed by citizens. It aids us also to put the focus on users' discourses, motivations and attitudes, towards these practices; something especially interesting as this research is focused on participatory practices: a series of practices that imply a higher level of citizens' activity and consciousness when they take part in it.

Focusing on media-related practices that imply participation (media participatory practices), fan culture studies were some of the first to show how citizens have become producers of new media texts, transgressing former distinctions between

media texts, producers and passive audiences (Bird, 2003; Jenkins, 2006a). The development of new communication technologies created new opportunities for fan culture: people with common interests are more likely to meet online and, through collaboration, create their own online spaces and content related to their specific fan cultures.

Furthermore, creating and sharing, spreading the message, have become common practices with the social web (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). Online media participatory practices carried out by fans could therefore represent "a fruitful way to examine everyday life in a media world in which media texts, and discourse about texts, suffuse not only moments of actual media consumption but also people's world views in a broad sense" (Bird, 2010). Some authors have brought this argument to the point of claiming that fan culture online media participatory practices will be adopted in the near future by a majority of citizens in their involvement with politics and public issues (Dahlgren, 2005; Henry Jenkins, 2003). Despite the attraction of such optimistic positions, more research is needed in order to better understand how normal or ordinary citizens use online media participatory practices and what their motivations are for participating (or not), instead of expanding and generalizing conclusions from those groups of citizens that show higher participatory intensities. As Bird has pointed out: "I am not convinced that we all are (or could be) such active media practitioners" (Bird, 2010, p. 91). Instead, the scenario in which to consider citizens' online media participation, related to politics or public issues, is more likely to be as Hujanen and Pietikäinen define it: "an emerging and transforming continuum of possibilities which are taken up by some and bypassed by others, and which have different kinds of meanings for different people at different moments" (Hujanen & Pietikäinen, 2004, p. 399).

There is a need then to contribute to the better understanding of citizens' attitudes and motivations towards online media participation, an area of research that some authors have described as under-researched (Merel Borger et al., 2013; Carpentier, 2009), but with a special importance, as the significance of civic online participation and how it will affect the "ever-evolving" state of journalism and life

in democracy is still unknown (Dahlgren, 2013). Instead of trying to grasp the whole array of participatory practices that can be carried out online, attention will be focused on those practices that can be performed on news media websites, sometimes described under the name of 'participatory journalism' (commenting on news or journalists' blogs, sending user-generated content etc..) (Singer et al., 2011). Additionally, those practices performed on social networks that involve news media content, such as sharing news links or commenting on them with friends or acquaintances will also be considered. Comparing citizens' behaviours and discourses in these two different online environments could lead to interesting results, with regard to how news media are taking up or not, the participatory potential of the new media environment, attracting citizens to or disengaging them from their websites or other online environments where news media are present.

In the conclusions of one of his early studies of participatory journalism, Neil Thurman (2008) pointed out that the most popular location for debate on the BBC News website, 'Have Your Say', was attracting contributions of around 0.05% of the site's daily visitors. Thurman's reflection finished by supporting further work on how audiences were using tools for participatory journalism offered on media websites, and also further research on more general attitudes of citizens and their motivations towards online media participation. Thurman's claim has remained mostly unanswered by the high number of scholars who have researched participatory journalism as they have been more focused on analysing the participatory formats adopted by media or professional journalists' attitudes towards user participation (Borger et al., 2013). However, more recently a number of authors have argued in favour of a return to more audience-focused media studies, as opposed to the dominant research that views online audiences as intrinsically participative (Carpentier, 2009; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013).

In their extensive review of the literature on participatory journalism, Borger et al. (2013) showed that the audience's point of view, the 'social dimension' of journalism, has been mostly disregarded in media studies, except for some research on audiences' interpretations of media texts (Wahl-Jorgensen &

Hanitzsch, 2009). In new media environment-based studies, the perspectives, attitudes and motivations of those that should contribute or participate (the ordinary citizens) are an undeveloped field of research, with a general trend that assumes that citizens are always willing to participate. However, when research has been conducted, researchers have discovered that “news users act differently than scholars hoped” (Borger et al., 2013, p. 128), being mostly uninterested in participating in news media websites and, when they do participate, they mostly do it for fun, seeking entertainment and not serious debate about public issues.

The scarce previous research on the subject found that news website users still see themselves as mainly consumers of news content rather than potentially content producers, preferring to keep more active forms of participation to a minimum (Larsson, 2011), without questioning journalists' predominant role in news production processes (Heise et al., 2013). Even without disregarding the potential of user participation on news media websites, Bergström (2008) pointed out the limited interest of audiences in participating and the fact that most users do not directly perceive participatory journalism features as linked with democratic purposes. However, even if the majority of users do not participate frequently, they do value the presence of participatory features on news media websites, (Sunder, 2000), which could create positive opinions about the news media website (McMillan et al., 2003) and attract more visitors (Gerpott & Wanke, 2004). As Larsson argued, “the transition from news recipients to active participants might take a longer time than was perhaps expected” (2011, p. 1193). In conclusion, most of these previous studies are based on quantitative methodologies (surveys) aimed at identifying general trends in audiences' attitudes and motivations, without comparing them to citizens' offline participation or civic or public engagement. Larsson (2011) pointed out the need for qualitative research on the subject, more likely to dig deeper into citizens' attitudes and motivations, but also for research in other countries, as the previously quoted studies are limited to Sweden, Germany and the United States.

One of the few pieces of research that adopted a qualitative approach to the issue, is the early investigation of Hujanen and Pietikäinen (2004), based on a survey but

also on in-depth interviews with young Finns, conducted during 1999. Although new communication technologies have changed quite considerably during the last 15 years, and as a consequence their results cannot be compared with the present situation, what is most interesting about Hujanen and Pietikäinen is how they approach citizens' attitudes and motivations towards online participation, basing their argument on some concepts from discourse theory. According to the authors, "much of the technological developments thus take place within and through discourse: new technologies are introduced, debated over and signified in language use" (Hujanen & Pietikäinen, 2004, p- 386). Following this approach, discourse theory can be applied as a theoretical tool aimed at better understanding the processes through which new communication technologies are integrated into citizens' everyday lives. As a theoretical tool, the concept of discourse can help us to find out the different perspectives in which participatory journalism is constructed and how citizens make sense of, and apply to their everyday contexts, the participatory opportunities that new communication technologies offer them, by studying "the needs and motivations of people to take up this potential, and the conditions enhancing or limiting these processes" (Hujanen & Pietikäinen, 2004, p-385). Moreover, a discursive approach permits participation to be defined as a "floating signifier", allowing participants of the focus groups in this study to make sense of it freely, without any previous fixation of meaning from the researchers (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007).

Consequently, more research is needed on audiences' attitudes and their motivations for participating in the new media environment, not only in participatory journalism but also in other online media participatory practices such as commenting or distributing through social media sites. Furthermore, it is also necessary to link these attitudes towards online media participatory practices with citizens' willingness to participate in the offline world, their 'connection' with public issues, their perceptions of life in democracy and their engagement and participation (or not) in 'the political', this being precisely the gap in research that this research intends to address.

3.3. Participation, connection and public engagement in late modern democracies

The previous section presented some debates about how to approach Internet-based research and how practice theory can be used to aid researchers in differentiating and classifying different uses of the Internet, avoiding generalizations of 'general' Internet use or Internet effects. The previous section ended by presenting this research approach to the study of online media participatory practices, more specifically participatory journalism and social media practices aimed at sharing and debating news about public issues content. It is the aim of this research to study citizens' attitudes and motivations towards these practices and how this kind of online participation is related to citizens' life in democracy. This next section will put the focus on the second part of the equation, that is, the study of citizens' life in democracy, their engagement and which kinds of offline participation they are adopting, trying to better understand which kind of activities should identify an 'active citizen', or what constitutes meaningful democratic participation in late modern democracies (Livingstone, 2013). As has been seen previously in Chapters 1 and 2, recent trends in late modern societies have challenged what were previously considered established definitions of 'political participation'. Moreover, new communication technologies have introduced a large number of new practices, or have transformed existing ones, making it increasingly difficult to conceptualise and map the different range of activities that citizens can perform and that are meaningful for democracy.

At the beginning of the present chapter, some previous research was presented about Internet effects on political participation and public engagement. To summarise the previous literature, different positions can be located in the 'normalization' thesis, which argues that online participation is more common among those that are already participating offline (Best & Krueger, 2005; Jensen, 2006; Norris, 2001); or in the 'mobilization' thesis, which claims that the Internet has positive effects in reducing the costs of participation, bringing more citizens to collective action, empowering citizens' political skills and social capital (Delli Carpini, 2000; Min, 2007; Rheingold, 2002), and increasing the links between citizens and their representatives (Esser & de Vreese, 2007). To put it simply, the

main question in previous research on Internet and political participation was to know if online participation is (or could be) a new way of engagement used predominantly by those who are already active, or if, conversely, new media technologies can bring non-participative citizens to the public sphere (Anduiza, Jensen, & Jorba, 2012). That is to say, trying to answer the question: 'Who is participating online?', and to determine whether new communication technologies were bringing new citizens to take part in public life.

An important point made by Krueger (B. S. Krueger, 2006) is that the research question about whether Internet use has any effect on the amount of political participation has not been presented adequately. According to Anduiza, Gallego and Cantijoch (2010) this is due to the fact that 'political participation' is a "multi-dimensional concept, in which the boundaries between what constitutes participation and what does not are often unclear" (2010, p. 862), leading researchers to often use different theoretical definitions of 'political participation' or other theoretical definitions of citizens' engagement in society, which has inevitably led to divergent conclusions. While some authors have argued that actions such as sending emails, reading online news or participating in political forums should be considered as political participation (Peretti & Micheletti, 2004), other positions argue that extending the concept that far might perhaps make it less useful as an analytical tool (Van Deth, 2001), preferring instead narrow definitions of online (and offline) political participation, normally conceptually connected to traditional forms of political participation. Despite the fact that they diverge on what to include under the label of 'political participation', what these two perspectives share is a common understanding of a clear division between online and offline participation. As the aim of the research is to determine whether online participation is bringing (or not) new citizens to the public sphere, online participation is conceptualised as a separate practice disconnected from offline participation.

However, some authors argue that we should not limit the study of the Internet as a channel uniquely for participation, limiting the research to those activities citizens are doing online and therefore comparing with what they are doing offline.

Instead, research should go deeper and analyse also the changes that can occur in the intensities of participation and the new dynamics of mobilization introduced by the Internet and other new communication technologies (Anduiza, Cantijoch, & Gallego, 2009; Anduiza et al., 2010), and how these are connected with the new ways in which citizens are engaging with 'the political' (Mouffe, 2001, 2005). Related to this point, it is relevant here to mention the international research conducted by Shakuntala Banaji and David Buckingham (2013) about young online participation in six European countries. Using a general survey and focus groups, they found that the Internet per se does not attract participation, offline issues being what prompts citizens to get involved, with the young mixing online mobilization and offline action, depending on the kind of practice they want to perform, and not the medium itself. Banaji and Buckingham argue in favour of avoiding the binary opposition between online and offline participation, due to the high level of adoption of new communication technologies in citizens' everyday lives, especially among the young. According to the authors, research should avoid the question of whether the Internet can mobilise or not those that were not participating before, arguing instead for a reconfiguration of the focus of study into "how the Internet might engage with other movements and modes of participation within society, and how these movements could use technology in their efforts to social change" (2013, eBook ch.8). Following this theoretical approach, the next paragraphs will summarise previous literature that studied citizens' offline participation, presenting the debates around a supposed crisis of citizen participation and engagement in western democracies. It will be seen how the concept of 'participation' has evolved, and how new theoretical concepts have been created in order to better address recent changes and transformations in late modern societies. These changes need to be taken into account before positioning this research in the field and introducing its approach into the debates about citizen participation and involvement.

According to Peter Dahlgren, "extensive international evidence suggests that the citizens of today's liberal democracies show less involvement in political issues, are less inclined to vote, have less party loyalty, and demonstrate lower levels of participation in civil society than in the past" (Dahlgren, 2007). Following this

argument, recent research presents some trends that could confirm that western countries are facing a crisis in their models of democracies, especially in indicators that reflect traditional forms of political participation, such as a general fall in turnout at elections and a growing mistrust of government and the political process (Pharr & Putnam, 2000). Levels of political trust fell during the 1990s in most western democracies (R. A. Dalton, 1996) and most countries have experienced a general tendency of drop in turnout (Gray & Caul, 2000). Political parties have also suffered from that democratic crisis, party membership has fallen in the last years (Mair, 2001) and also party identification (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000) has declined in western democracies, causing the individualization of political behaviour and the personalization of politics (Mancini, 2011; van Zoonen, 2005). As an example, the general election turnout in the UK in 2001 was the lowest registered since the Second World War (59.4%), causing general alarm (Norris, 2001). Even if in the following elections the number of people who voted increased (61.4% in 2005 and 65.1% in 2010) the general perception is that citizens are increasingly becoming disengaged from the system. In Spain the percentage of turnout shows a low tendency to drop, being 71% in 2011, 73.85% in 2008 and 75.66% in 2004. With regard to the regional parliament elections in Catalonia, the turnout in the last elections was 56.77% (2006) and 59.95% (2010), and a higher 67.76% in 2012²⁰²¹. Despite the higher level of turnout in Spain compared with the UK, Spain is normally considered one of the most politically passive countries in Europe, with a low percentage of unions or party affiliation, little ideological identification with political parties by citizens and generally low levels of interest in politics and association membership (Morales, 2003).

However, recent studies have also demonstrated that, despite these patterns of disconnection from the political world, there are also more optimistic approaches.

²⁰ Data from official sources: <http://www20.gencat.cat/portal/site/governacio>
<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/elections-and-voting/general/>
<http://www.infoelectoral.mir.es>

²¹ This last percentage of turnout in the Catalan elections is clearly influenced by the effects of the economic crisis throughout the whole of Spain but especially because of the particular political context in Catalonia, with a majority of parties in Parliament promoting an independence referendum, facing the opposition of the Spanish government. This vivid context is reflected in the fact that the 2012 Catalan elections were the ones which had the highest turnout in Catalonia since the reestablishment of democracy, after the dictatorship period.

The social capital theory established by Robert Putnam in Italy (Putnam, 1993) and the United States (Putnam, 2000) argues that activities that were common in the 1950s (community groups, voluntary associations, with a strong link to local politics) have been abandoned due to changes in lifestyle, producing, after several years, a decline in social trust and civic engagement. However, some authors think there are other institutions that have a more important role in generating engagement, for example school and family (Coleman, 1988) or the workplace (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). With particular reference to the United States, a recent study pointed out that even if the data shows a drop in turnout, party loyalty and trust in government, the younger generation especially engage and are active in volunteering and in community issues, in a non-traditional way that was not taken into account by Putnam (Zukin et al., 2009). Moreover, according to Hall (1999; 2002) social capital has not declined in Britain, where society could be in fact facing a significant resurgence of group membership and civic engagement during recent decades (Power to the People, 2006).

At this point, it is necessary to shed some light on these apparently contradictory series of studies. According to Pippa Norris (1999) confidence in government and democratic institutions are patterns that vary in different western countries. On the other hand, support for the community and for democracy remains stable. In Norris' opinion, these apparently contradictory behaviours can be understood if we think that citizens are critical in their evaluation of the political system, but not disenchanted with democracy or their community. Accordingly, they decide to engage with the public world in non-traditional ways (Occupying Wall Street or the Spanish 15M 'indignados' -anti-cuts demonstrations- are examples of these non-traditional ways of engaging²²). In a later study, Norris (2002) studies the trends in voter turnout, party membership and voluntary associations,

²² Anti-cuts demonstrations have been common in Spain since May 15th 2011. To some authors, due to the economic crisis, a growing number of Spanish citizens are participating in non-traditional forms of protest, aimed at social, political and legal change (Subirats, 2011; Taibo, 2012), changing the traditional understanding of the Spanish society as demobilized and apathetic (Morales, 2003). Furthermore, Catalonia has recently seen some of the biggest demonstrations in Europe, with 1.5 million citizens demonstrating in Barcelona city centre in 2012 (according to police data), and a similar number in 2013 forming a human chain that crossed the region from North to South. Both demonstrations were in favour of an independence referendum, a sensitive issue that could also incentivize more citizens to participate in non-traditional forms of political participation.

establishing similar conclusions. Norris believes that these traditional forms of engagement with the political world show different evolutions among western countries. Nevertheless, what is common in all countries is a transformation of the forms of engagement, “indicators point more strongly towards the evolution, transformation and reinvention of civic engagement than to its premature death” (Norris, 2002, p. 4). This theory is supported by several authors, who point to recent transformations in late modern societies (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1997)²³ as the reason that explains shifts in the preferred forms of citizen participation (Dahlgren, 2013; Papacharissi, 2010). As a result of these societal changes “the newer forms of extra-parliamentarian political engagement and commitments, with a focus on daily life, personal values, and single issues, offer a counterpoint to the narratives of decline” (Dahlgren, 2007, p. 4).

The previous study of former research on citizen participation in democratic societies shows us how different researchers have applied different conceptualizations of ‘participation’. As has been seen in Chapter 1 this is due to different maximalist or minimalist research approaches to the concept of ‘participation’ (Carpentier, 2011), but also to recent trends and developments in society that are changing the ways in which citizens participate and engage in public life. As Schudson (1998) argues, the roles of citizens in a democratic system is a malleable one, with political, legal and social circumstances influencing how people think about their own civic duties and possibilities for engagement. Before the 70s, studies about political participation were focused mainly on electoral participation, researching voting turnout or party affiliation. After the seminal study of Verba and Nie (1972), political scientists started to broaden the concept of political participation, adopting the following definition: “those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take” (Verba and Nie, 1972, p. 2). This conceptualization of political participation expanded considerably the range of activities considered as ‘meaningful’ participation. However, it still implies that

²³ See Chapters 1 and 2 for a further analysis of transformations and postmaterialist values in late modern societies.

the activities had to be related, even if directly or indirectly, to influence or elect political representatives.

Despite being innovative for its time, Verba and Nie's definition of political participation seems too restrictive nowadays. Some authors, such as Barnes and Kaase (1979) aimed to broaden the concept by establishing the distinction between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' forms of participation. The aim is to 'open' the definition (and consequently the studies about political participation) to practices meaningful for life in democracy but that are not aimed, directly or indirectly, at influencing political representatives. Accordingly, recent studies have applied concepts such as individuals' 'social capital' (Putnam, 1993, 2000) to show how citizens are linked with each other in society. 'Social capital' reflects the importance of practices not formalised or institutionalised, but nevertheless also relevant in the everyday lives of many citizens. Examples of such practices could be joining associations with no 'political' aims, such as a bowling association or a theatre or reading club. Despite the fact that he did not directly use the term 'social capital', the importance for a healthy democracy of these activities that involve citizens' collective meetings and discussions had already been pointed out by Alexis de Tocqueville in his description of nineteenth century society in the United States²⁴. Although Putnam (1993, 2000) uses the term to contribute to the narrative of decline, arguing that citizens in contemporary democracies are linking and connecting with each other less than in the past, studies about social capital have shown the importance of taking into account, in studying citizen participation, practices that are not directly 'political' but nevertheless important in democracy.

Moreover, as we have seen, some authors argue that studies about the decline in social capital in western post-industrial late modern societies (Worms, 2002; Offe & Fuchs, 2002; Hall, 2002) could be pointing to a change in the ways that individuals connect with each other rather than a general apathetic disconnected and demobilised society (Papacharissi, 2010; Norris, 2002). Relevant here is the

²⁴ 'Democracy in America' was published in two different volumes, the first in 1835 and the second in 1840.

previously analysed distinction established by Bennett (2008) between two models of contemporary citizenship. He firstly defines the 'dutiful citizen' model, characterised by a citizen that participates in conventional activities such as voting, following the news, always due to a feeling of obligation, perceiving political participation as a 'duty' towards the whole of society. Secondly, he defines the 'actualizing citizen', a model defined by individuality, instead of collectivity, in which the citizen distrusts traditional forms of participation, preferring to take part in actions linked with personal values, lifestyle or consumption. While the 'dutiful citizen' model represents the model that dominated society for many decades after the Second World War, the 'actualizing citizen' represents a new model of citizenship that is not based on the 'strong ties' described by Putnam, but for decentralised networks and new ways of communication (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013).

If 'social capital' seems to put the focus on activities that are not intrinsically political, but that help to 'connect' citizens with each other, Chantal Mouffe's (2001; 2005) concept of 'the political' reflects all these other spheres of the social, outside of institutionalised structures and actors, which do show some degree of conflict of interest, or collective antagonism, among different actors in society. It is precisely in this sphere of 'the political' where the realm of politics is being transformed and citizens in late modern societies are broadening the limits of what are considered public issues and the ways in which they choose to engage and participate (Dahlgren, 2013). To include these spheres of 'the political' and go further than the concept of 'social capital', some scholars started to conceptualise the concept of 'civic engagement'. According to Adler and Gogging (2005) 'civic engagement' can be understood as "how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future" (2005, p. 241). Although the concept of 'civic engagement' had been given other definitions (Ekman & Amna, 2009), what is relevant here is its contraposition with the traditional concept of 'political participation' and how it can help to conceptualise the new ways in which citizens are getting involved in late modern societies.

First of all, 'engagement' and 'participation' do not have similar meanings: while participation implies a level of action, engagement does not, reflecting more attitudes and personal positions towards the public world. According to Peter Dahlgren, 'engagement' refers to "the subjective states, that is, a mobilised, focused attention on some object. It is in a sense a prerequisite for participation: to participate in politics presupposes some degree of engagement" (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 80). Furthermore, as Coleman (2006) argues, a low degree or complete absence of engagement should not be directly connected with apathy or demobilization, but could also be interpreted as a political position, particularly, against the current state of the system or how democracy works.

Secondly, 'civic' and 'political' are also concepts that point in different directions. While 'political' is reserved for activities connected with traditional forms of political participation (such as voting, joining a union or a party or going to candidates meetings), 'civic' is a much broader concept that covers what is normally understood as 'civil society'. As the previous definition of Adler and Gogging (2005) suggests, it can encompass any activity conducted in relation to other members of society, from joining associations with a particular interest (music, sport, culture) to joining activists groups (NGOs, neighbourhood associations etc.), or campaigning occasionally or joining a demonstration. In fact, civic engagement represents a precondition for political engagement²⁵: "civil society can serve as a training ground that 'grooms' citizens with involvement in non-political associations and networks preparing people for civic political engagement and participation" (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 69).

The concept of 'civic engagement' serves to overcome the shortcomings of the formerly dominant notion of 'political participation', allowing most of the new practices adopted by citizens to be brought into practical research. As Robin Leblanc (1999) argued, traditional political science was too focused on analysing traditional forms of political participation, saying little about citizens' perceptions of their own citizenship. However, 'civic engagement' also has some conceptual

²⁵ Some authors even include all forms of traditional political participation in the concept of 'civic engagement' (Erik and Amna, 2009).

problems. Ben Berger criticized the fact that the concept has been used to name almost everything, “from bowling in leagues to watching political television shows, writing checks to political advocacy groups, and participating in political rallies and marches” (Berger, 2009, p. 335). According to Joakim Ekman and Erik Amna “it is hard not to agree that a term covering everything from helping a neighbour to voting in elections or running for public office in fact entails conceptual stretching” (Ekman & Amna, 2009, p. 5). In the same way as has been seen regarding forms of political participation and the Internet, if the concept is expanded with the aim of covering very different practices, there is a risk that it could become useless as an analytical tool (Van Deth, 2001).

Recently, Ekman and Amna (2009) have made an interesting contribution to these debates about how to conceptualise citizens’ social engagement and political activities, suggesting a new conceptual framework. Arguing that “literature on political participation is in need of theoretical development” (2009, p. 23) due to new forms of political behaviour and citizens’ attitudes, their typology aspires to include concepts such as political participation or civic engagement; but incorporating some new elements that the authors think are relevant in late modern societies, in order to better understand the different ways in which citizens exercise and perceive their citizenship.

First of all, Ekman and Amna (2009), consider it necessary to include forms of disengagement and non-participation, considering these categories as something more than a simple lack of engagement, and consequently conceptualising them as forms of behaviour, in the same way as the other kinds of engagement or participation. Regarding this point, the authors establish a distinction between the passive forms of non-engagement (those citizens that perceive politics or social issues as non-interesting), and the active forms, which includes those citizens that are not just non-interested but also have negative feelings about politics. Their non-participation is not due to apathy or lack of motivation: it reflects in fact a militant position.

Secondly, they suggest a new definition for civic engagement, restricting the term to “activities by ordinary citizens that are intended to influence circumstances in society that are of relevance to others, outside their own family and circle of close friends” (Ekman & Amna, 2009, p. 15). Examples of the activities under this label would be volunteering, actively discussing politics or being active in their local communities. This leads the authors to highlight the activities that imply ‘latent’ forms of participation, such as talking about public issues, perceiving politics as important or belonging to groups with a societal focus, but not directly and usually active in volunteering. These activities are included under a new form of engagement labelled as ‘social involvement’, which is considered as something that precedes both ‘civic’ and ‘political’ activities: “while civic engagement and political participation refers to specific actions, involvement refers to attentiveness to social and political issues” (Ekman & Amna, 2009, p. 19).

Other authors, such as Van Deth, Montero and Westholm (2007) also used a similar conceptualization of ‘involvement’, as citizens’ interest in ‘politics and social affairs’ and citizens’ perceptions of politics as ‘being important’, considering ‘involvement’ as a distinct dimension of democratic participation, together with ‘civic engagement’ and ‘political participation’. Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) used also a similar concept, ‘public connection’, defined as a basic level of “orientation to a public world where matters of shared concern are, or at least, should be addressed”; orientation that in some cases, such as elections, “could be translated into attention” (2007, p. 3). The authors also believe that this “public connection is principally sustained by a convergence in the media people consume” (ibid: 3), being in fact a ‘mediated public connection’. Those citizens, non-active, but socially involved, maintain their connection with public issues mainly through4 media. They are ‘stand-by’ citizens, easy to mobilise if something attracts their attention and they have a sense of some internal or external efficacy (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013).

To conclude, Ekman and Amna (2009) also include in their typology the concept of ‘political participation’, although they divide it between, ‘formal’ and ‘activism’ forms. Formal political participation includes the forms of participation that are

common in previous studies, such as voting, contacting officers, donating money or joining a party Activism, or extra-parliamentarian participation, could either be legal (boycotting, petitions, new social movements, to name a few) or illegal, which implies being involved in practices outside the legal system, such as squatting, violence in demonstrations or civil disobedience. Ekman and Amna's typology (2009), modified by incorporating concepts of other authors analysed in this section and in Section 6 of the second chapter, will be used in this research to elaborate the typology of forms of public engagement used to classify the attitudes and motivations of focus group participants, as will be seen in the next chapter on methodological issues.

CHAPTER 4

Methodological issues

4.1. Overall design

This research approaches the phenomenon of online participation within a double perspective: citizens and media institutions. As has been seen in the introduction, the main research objectives (MRO) are:

Main Research Objective A: To research how citizens perceive online media participation, focusing on their attitudes and motivations towards the different options offered by news media to participate in their websites.

Main Research Objective B: To study through which participatory options news media are adopting citizens' participation. To research if news media are opening their websites to users' contributions, facilitating citizens' opinion exchange, or restricting participatory formats.

Both research objectives study online media participation, but from different perspectives. MRO A aims to study citizens' attitudes and motivations towards the phenomenon, while MRO B is aimed at analysing how news media are adapting their websites to include citizen participation. On the one hand, MRO A is aimed at researching something as complex or diffuse as citizens' perceptions, which requires a methodology able to grasp citizens' own reflexivity, putting into context these attitudes towards online media participation with other broad issues such as

public engagement, offline participation and the role of the media in everyday life. On the other hand, MRO B aims to take a 'picture' of how news media websites are engaging with citizen participation at a particular moment in time. Consequently, different methodologies are needed in order to analyse these two aspects of online media participation. As Hansen et al. (1998) argued, in facing multidimensional phenomena researchers could benefit from a combination of research methods that approach the problem from different angles and perspectives. In order to address main research objective A, the methodology that has been chosen is focus groups research. For research objective B the chosen methodology has been content analysis of news media websites.

In establishing a methodology to answer MRO B, this research drew on previous similar research that studied how online news media adopt user participation (Deborah S. Chung & Nah, 2009; Hermida & Thurman, 2008b; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011b; Larsson, 2012b²⁶). It is generally accepted that the best practice in this kind of research is to conduct content analysis using a study sheet, based on a typology of participatory tools, that allows researchers to better analyse each website and the options for participation that it permits. The last part of this chapter on methodology is aimed at presenting and justifying the typology of the participatory tools used in this study.

More complexity is required in designing a methodology to answer MRO A, as this aspect of online media participation has received less attention from academia (Borger et al., 2013). As authors such as Henry Jenkins or Nico Carpentier have pointed out, the point of view of the users has been traditionally misrepresented in media studies overall, but mainly with regard to studies on online media participation (Carpentier, 2009; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). This research will use a qualitative methodology, focus groups, in order to study citizens' attitudes and motivations towards online media participation. The following sections will be aimed at justifying this particular approach, as well as presenting how the focus

²⁶ See also Palacios & Díaz (2009) for a review of the different methodologies used in researching participatory journalism.

groups were selected and which processes have been followed to interpret the data collected during the focus group sessions.

4.2. A qualitative approach to citizens' perceptions

Audience research has traditionally been a fruitful scenario for discussion about the different quantitative and qualitative methodologies, or as Larsson (2012a) has pointed out, more often between qualitative and quantitative researchers who adopted almost ideological positions. Although recent shifts in the nature of audiences, together with new possibilities for research introduced by new media, have involved some reformulations of the traditional dichotomy of research methodologies (Patriarche et al. 2014), the traditional basic distinction is still useful as a starting point to justify a particular research approach (Vicente-Mariño, 2014). Theories arguing in favour of a combination, or triangulation, of different methodologies in the same research project (Hansen et al., 1998), are still using the basic differences between qualitative and quantitative methodologies to describe how different methodological approaches fill each other's gaps (Jensen & Jankowski, 1993). In a similar way, approaches which try to 'quantify' qualitative methodologies by introducing grades or diagram maps (Schrøder et al., 2003) are also accepting the limitations of a particular methodology, and the need to reformulate it by introducing some characteristics of the other part of the dichotomy.

Consequently, although it is true that it is becoming more complex to establish clear differences between what Larsson (2012) defines as 'more' quantitative methods and their 'more' qualitative equivalents, the basic differentiation between methodological approaches is still commonly accepted in media studies. Broadly, quantitative methodologies in audience research have traditionally been aimed more at generalisation, "quantifying the amount of people receiving a media message" (Vicente-Mariño, 2014: 39), that is, analysing 'what' audiences are doing (Hansen et al., 1998); while qualitative studies tend to be focused more on interpretation, being "committed to achieving a deeper knowledge about the

meaning attributed by individuals to those messages spread by conventional mass media” (Vicente-Mariño, 2014: 39), analysing ‘why’ or ‘how’ audiences are behaving in a particular way (Hansen et al., 1998). Broadening the description out of text-focused audience studies, quantitative methodologies have been more identified in media studies with numerical analysis conducted to illustrate the existing relationships between factors, while qualitative methodologies have tended to “emphasize the description and understanding of the situation behind the factors” (Chen & Hirschheim, 2004, p. 204)

In choosing a specific methodology for studying citizens’ attitudes and motivations towards online media participation, several issues were taken into account. Firstly, the nature of the problem under research (Jensen & Jankowski, 1993) seemed to lead to a more qualitative approach rather than to a quantitative one. Qualitative methodologies are in fact commonly perceived as a better option when analysing complex objects of research, those cases in which the researcher needs to understand and interpret, rather than establish causal relations between factors. Furthermore, qualitative research could be more valuable when some component of reflexivity is needed among research participants (Markham & Couldry, 2007). This process of reflexivity in which research participants should make sense of their own actions and perceptions is more difficult to obtain in a quantitative approach, but easier to produce in dialogical methodologies in which participants are challenged to talk and think about their own attitudes and motivations (Markham & Couldry, 2007)

Secondly, as has been seen in the theoretical background chapter, among the wide range of studies based on new media, users’ motivations have been traditionally an under-researched area. Consequently, the point of view of the audience regarding online media participation has traditionally been disregarded (Carpentier, 2009; Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013; Borger et al., 2013). As some authors maintain (Deacon et al., 1999; Hansen et al., 1998), qualitative approaches tend to be more suitable for starting research in those areas that still have big gaps, where the problems and research questions tend to be less clear and more diffuse. Instead, quantitative research could be more useful when the questions and research

objects are more precisely identified, in order that they can be easily tracked and transformed into quantitative data. This is the case, for example, in extensive research projects that in order to 'place' and identify the problem use in an initial stage a qualitative approach, subsequently using the qualitative data to better plan a second quantitative part of the research, more aimed at generalizing findings (for example, in Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007). Taking into account the existing uncertain scenario, not just regarding the specific research problem about users' attitudes towards online participation, but also with regard to broad issues of audience studies and new media (Carpentier, Schrøder, & Hallett, 2014; Press & Livingstone, 2006), it seemed more appropriate to approach the issue from a qualitative perspective rather than from a quantitative one.

Thirdly, even if scarce, some previous literature on audiences' point of view towards online participation does exist (Heise et al. 2013; Larsson, 2011). This previous research applied a mainly quantitative approach, using surveys to analyse general trends in users' online participation. However, these studies approached the subject without connecting online and offline participation, consequently researching the internet-based participatory practices outside the context of citizens' civic or public engagement. Although interesting in their own approach, the quantitative data tells us more about what users are participating in rather than why or how they are doing it. For the purpose of this research, it seems more relevant to focus the attention on some recent previous studies that researched citizens' sense-making of media consumption and mediated citizenship in their everyday life, strongly drawing on different combinations of qualitative methodologies, such as diaries, focus groups or in-depth interviews (Coleman et al., 2009; Couldry et al., 2007; Heikkilä et al., 2010; Press & Williams, 2010; Schroder & Phillips, 2007). Although these previous studies do not approach the issue of online media participation, they do put media consumption into context with broad issues of public and civic engagement, connecting citizens' attitudes towards media with their attitudes towards the public world, avoiding researching media-related practices in isolation. Furthermore, all of them use different qualitative methodologies to give centrality to citizens' discourses, researching

media-related practices while decentering the text or media institutions as the main traditional objects of research (Couldry, 2010).

Taking into account these three different arguments, this research will apply a qualitative approach to study citizens' attitudes and motivations towards online media participation. This does not mean that a quantitative approach would be not appropriate for this research. As Larsson (Larsson, 2012a) has pointed out, in choosing a research methodology sometimes the nature of the problem under research is an important variable, as are the preferences of the researcher. Following Silverman (2013), I believe that there are no right or wrong methods. Rather, each methodology could show different aspects of the same research object. Accordingly, by taking a quantitative approach this research would probably have benefited from a higher degree of generalizability. Qualitative approaches are more likely to dig deeper into the object of research, analysing its different meanings and implications, interpreting reality. However, due to the necessarily reduced number of research participants, generalizability is always their weakest point. I personally disagree with Baym when he argues that "(...) from a qualitative perspective, particularly a dialogical one, generalizability is neither relevant nor possible" (Baym, 2009, p. 175). Although generalizability could not be the main objective of a qualitative methodology, it should not be simply disregarded. By taking into consideration the selection of the research participants, for example, the researcher can at least improve the degree of generalizability of his research project. For example, in their study of public connection in the United Kingdom, Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) used a reduced number of participants (37) to take part in their qualitative section of the research project, based on diary methodology. Researchers have argued that, despite the reduced number of diarists, their selection according to demographic variables could allow them to generalise some of the identified trends and main findings.

To conclude, in choosing a qualitative approach to study citizens' attitudes and motivations towards online media participation, I am consciously favouring an approach that gives more importance to digging deeper into the research problem,

trying to understand the 'why' and 'how' of audiences' perceptions of on online media participation. This approach puts the focus onto research participants, through motivating their own reflexivity about the issues under study, trying to find general trends and behavioural patterns among research participants. By doing so, I am aware of the limitations of the research project (generalizability), but also of its potentialities, as it approaches the phenomenon through a new lens, trying to fill a gap in the existing literature on online participation. Furthermore, it could also open the gates to further research that could use some of the findings of this study to better plan a research project based on survey research or other quantitative methodologies more aimed at generalizing findings.

Among the different qualitative approaches, this research has chosen focus groups as the methodology used to analyse citizens' attitudes and motivations towards online media participation, rather than other qualitative methodologies such as diaries, in-depth interviews or participant and non-participant observation. The main point here is that focus groups are especially useful in promoting interaction among research participants by encouraging people "to engage with one another, verbally formulate their ideas and draw out the cognitive structures which previously have been articulated" (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 4), while other qualitative methodologies do not include this dialogical and reflexive element. As already introduced, this research needs to promote participants self-reflexivity around the different issues or subjects that form the research project. Online participation, public and civic engagement and the role of media-related practices in everyday life are issues that citizens interpret and understand socially (Schutz, 1967). Participants in this research will need, then, some internal processes of self-reflection to be able to formulate and better express their opinions about these issues.

According to Morgan (1997), focus group discussions stimulate the self-reflection of participants through collective conversation, being a process of non-natural conversation in which participants reflect and show their 'latent thoughts' (Hansen et al., 1998). Kitzinger (1994) also argued that focus groups could reveal dimensions of understanding that often remain untapped by the more

conventional one-to-one interview, while Gamson (1992) pointed out the potential of using focus groups especially to better understand ‘how people construct meanings about public issues’ (Gamson, 1992, p. 191). Moreover, Lunt and Livingstone have argued how focus groups could be used as a simulation of these routine but relatively inaccessible communicative contexts which can help us discover the processes by which meaning is socially constructed through everyday talk” (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996:9).

Among the other qualitative methodologies, ethnographical observation has been considered as the least suitable for the objectives of this research, as it does not promote participants’ self-reflection. In fact, this methodology is more suitable for researching behaviours that take place at a particular moment in time (Morgan, 1997). Despite the fact that online ethnography could be suitable in researching user behaviours in specific online sites such as online forums or social networking sites (Vicente-Mariño, 2014), it does not include this dialogical and self-reflexive component that this research needs. Regarding diaries and interviews, these methodologies do include this component of reflection, but not as strongly as focus groups do. On the one hand, diaries are especially suitable for collecting patterns of media consumption, and could also be used to collect participants’ reflections about these patterns (Vicente-Mariño, 2014). However, this reflection will be individual, without a dialogical component. On the other hand, interviews could promote self-reflection and dialogical conversation about participants’ attitudes and motivations towards a certain topic, but it will always be in the context of an interviewed-interviewee process, without a group component. As Morgan (1997) stated, the point of view of the interviewee becomes more relevant in an individual interview, having then more relevance during the dialogical conversation. When debating complex issues, as this research intends to do, it was decided that group interviews were more likely to produce this component of self-reflection: participants can think about their perceptions when others are talking, challenge each other when debating, and consider issues that might not appear in an individual interview.

4.3. Focus groups, planning and design

According to Morgan (1997) there are four main issues which need to be taken into consideration in planning focus group research: i) Who will participate in the groups? ii) Size of the groups? iii) Total number of groups? iv) How structured will the group be? This section will present the overall planning and design of the focus group sessions, answering these questions and also presenting further developments in analysing and interpreting participants' interventions as well as some issues regarding quantification of the data collected during the sessions.

4.3.1. Participants' selection

In order to minimise the common problem in representativeness and generalizing findings inherent in qualitative research, the selection of participants was made following different methodologies in line with previous research and best practices. According to Morgan (1997), although in focus group research it is hardly difficult to achieve complete generalizability, the objective of minimizing sample bias can be fulfilled by applying criteria of 'theoretically motivated sampling'.

Firstly, following previous research that used focus group methodology (Schroder and Phillips, 2007; Coleman, Anthony and Morrison, 2009), age and level of education were the two main characteristics that structured the gathering of participants. By taking into consideration these main characteristics, this research will ensure that all age groups and levels of education are present in the different focus group sessions. Furthermore, age and educational level were also the selected criteria used to distribute participants among the different focus group sessions. According to some authors (Krueger, 1991; Morgan, 1997) one of the dangers in focus group sessions is that some of the participants could feel uncomfortable and less willing to participate, due to patterns of behaviour or personality. By forming groups of participants with similar characteristics (similar age and similar level of education), together with the active role of the moderator

(Kitzinger, 1994), these problems can be minimised. Special attention has been made in ensuring gender representation regarding the overall of participants both in London and Barcelona.

Secondly, although the main aim of the study is not to compare the participants in London with those in Barcelona, it was decided that the groups of participants would have to be as similar as possible, with regard to sociodemographic characteristics. Harmonizing the processes of gathering participants in the two countries could ensure this. According to Vicente-Mariño (2014), applying different strategies when recruiting participants is a good practice to ensure attracting people with different profiles, avoiding sample bias. This research used, in both countries, the following strategies in order to gather participants for the focus group sessions:

a) Groups of acquaintances: Morgan (1997) argues that organizing sessions in which the participants already know each other ensures that debate and conversation will flow from the first minute. As participants are close, they challenge each other in answering the questions and the moderator's work becomes aimed more at directing the conversation, in order to ensure participants are not skipping the topic, rather than promoting participation among an initially more reluctant and silent group of participants (Kitzinger, 1994). To form groups of acquaintances, first the researcher needs to establish in which categories of age and educational level he is interested. After that, a person who meets these criteria (named the 'anchor') needs to be identified and convinced to come on the appointed day to the place of the focus group session, together with a certain number of friends who also meet the predetermined sociodemographic criteria. Seven focus groups for this research were formed using this method.

b) Groups of strangers: Although groups of acquaintances have some positive characteristics, they could also have negative ones. Principally, according to Morgan (1997), groups of friends are more likely to agree the answers, tending to adapt to each other's responses in order to avoid debate. Furthermore, as friends, they are also likely to have similar opinions about basic things, normally about

politics and ways of considering life in society. In the interests of this research, therefore, it is necessary to widen the range of groups by recruiting participants that do not know each other. In order to do so, the best practice is to publish advertisements in different places (libraries, cafes, online platforms etc.) asking for participants. The advertisement asks those who are interested to send an email with personal information. This information is used by the researcher to distribute interested participants among the focus groups, in order to ensure similarities in age and educational level. Two main points need to be taken into account in forming these groups of participants. Firstly, the need to give some incentive for participation. As the researcher has no link or previous connection with these participants, and in order to avoid attracting only participants with a high level of interest in the topic, it is necessary to attract possible participants with a small incentive (10 euros/pounds was the incentive chosen in this research). Secondly, the percentage of possible participants that will confirm attendance and then not show up at the appointed time will be higher than in groups of acquaintances. Consequently, the researcher must plan for groups with more people than actually needed. Seven groups of this kind were conducted in this research.

During 2013 fourteen focus groups sessions were conducted, six in London (between April and May) and eight in Barcelona (between October and November). Following Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) this research did not plan an exact number of focus groups to be conducted. Rather, the groups were organised until it became clear that additional focus group sessions were not contributing any new information. Before the focus group sessions, a number of four test focus groups were conducted, in order to better test the design of the sessions²⁷. With regard to the number of focus groups, this was similar to the number conducted in similar research about public use of the news (see for example Coleman et al., 2009; Couldry et al., 2007; Press & Williams, 2010; Schroder & Phillips, 2007).

²⁷ As the focus group sessions were conducted in London first, three of the test focus groups were conducted in this city. However, before starting the focus groups in Barcelona, another test focus group in the Catalan language was conducted, to better test the design and questions in this language, as all the previous groups had been conducted in English.

The focus group sessions had between three and seven participants, the groups of acquaintances tending to be smaller in number than the groups of strangers. The relatively small number of participants was the result of a conscious decision on the part of the researcher. As some authors have pointed out (Kalviknes, 2012; Mascheroni, 2013) small groups facilitate participants' engagement in the debates, making it more difficult for those less talkative to 'hide' behind the group. As Morgan (1997) argued, the number of participants is also influenced by the nature and quantity of information that the researcher needs to gather from each participant. In the case of this research, it was necessary that each participant contribute to each question in the focus groups, in order to be able to collect, process and interpret the data of each one of the participants in order to be able to complete the following diagram maps (see below). Regarding the places where the sessions were held, most of the focus groups were conducted using the facilities of Blanquerna School of Communications and International Relations (Barcelona) or at the Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths College (London). At the request of the participants, some of the groups composed of acquaintances were conducted in places closer to their neighbourhoods. In these cases, focus groups were organised in quiet cafes or civic or community centres, with the previous agreement of the manager of the location. The final composition of the focus groups is summarised in Table 4.1 (see next page).

Table 4.1. Focus groups' composition

United Kingdom Focus Groups				
FG	Kind of group	Size	Range of age	Level of studies
1	Acquaintances	3	28-29	Medium
2	Acquaintances	3	29-40	Medium
3	Acquaintances	3	33-36	Low
4	Acquaintances	3	55-59	High
5	Strangers	4	42-50	Medium
6	Strangers	6	25-34	Low-Medium
Catalonia Focus Groups				
FG	Kind of group	Size	Range of age	Level of studies
1	Acquaintances	4	24-27	Low
2	Acquaintances	5	60-76	High
3	Acquaintances	4	55-61	Medium-High
4	Strangers	6	54-68	Low
5	Strangers	5	25-32	Medium
6	Strangers	7	23-33	Medium
7	Strangers	3	56-64	Low-Medium
8	Strangers	3	59-68	Medium

4.3.2. Structure of the focus group sessions

The focus group sessions conducted for this research were semi-structured group interviews, moderated by the researcher. Before starting the debate among the participants, a questionnaire was given to them (see Appendix 2). This questionnaire has a double aim: i) It provides the researcher with some quantitative data about each participant, which can be compared with the qualitative data collected during the sessions. In this way, it is easier to interpret each participant's positions and attitudes towards certain issues, even if he or she remains more silent during some parts of the debate. ii) It focuses the participants and makes them start to reflect on the different issues that will subsequently be introduced during the session.

As can be seen in Appendix 1, the sessions were divided into two different parts, the first one aimed at talking about public issues and offline participation and the second one aimed at discussing online participation. At the beginning of the first part, a list of public issues was shown to the participants, asking them to note on a piece of paper which of the issues on the list interested them the most, or if they had thought about any other issue that was not included on the list. At the beginning of the second part, a picture with an analogy about media and democracy was shown to research participants, asking them to note in one sentence what they thought about the picture. According to Kissinger (1994), these activities could help participants to start thinking and reflecting on a certain topic, rather than starting in a rush with a direct question. The first activity was designed to facilitate the start of the session, encouraging research participants to reflect for a few minutes on public issues before starting to talk about issues of participation and public engagement. The second activity was designed to stop the discussion about public engagement. The test focus groups proved that this first part, more political than the second one, tended to be more polemical, as political issues always showed up. By stopping the discussion and allowing a five minute pause for participants to write their opinions about the image, it becomes easier to start the next part of the focus group. Both images can be seen in Appendix 2.

To structure the different questions and issues raised during the session, a strategy was used which Morgan (1997) defines as a 'funnel' strategy. It involves starting each of the two parts of the session by introducing more general questions or topics, allowing a less structured approach, emphasizing free debate and discussion. After these general questions, the moderator has to move forward and start to control the session more rigidly, using more specific questions and ensuring that all the research participants are having their say in the debate. Appendix 1 presents the full focus group guide, with all the questions introduced during the sessions. It should be taken into account that, as suggested by previous authors (Morgan, 1997; Krueger, 1991; Kitzinger, 1994), as the sessions were semi-structured, sometimes the moderator asked the questions directly, while in other instances, in order not to stop the flow of conversation, addressing the issues in a less strict way was preferred. In these cases, the moderator makes a

particular comment that introduces a new issue, without actually reading the question as it appears in the focus group guide. If the participants then continue the debate around the new issue, the moderator has no further need to introduce the question in a more rigid way. The focus groups sessions have normally lasted for one hour and a half.

4.4. Interpreting the focus group sessions

According to Morgan (1997) there is no common generally accepted methodology to follow in order to gather and interpret data from focus group sessions. Rather, the methodologies and strategies used in analysing the sessions will strongly depend on the nature of the object of study and the overall design of the research. Broadly speaking, there are two main strategies. The first one is aimed at counting the number of times that certain issues or items predicted by the researcher appear during the focus group sessions. This methodology is normally used in highly structured sessions and ensures an easy quantification of the data collected. However, not all the objects of study can be adapted to this methodology. Some research is aimed more at interpretation, testing attitudes and motivations among participants about more diffused concepts, rather than testing participants' behaviours or reactions to certain pre-established and closed concepts and categories. In those cases, the sessions and participants' interventions need to be interpreted according to some criteria previously established by the researcher. This second approach requires less structured sessions, complicating quantification, but moving away from closed questions by allowing research participants more freedom in their answers.

This research will adopt an approach closer to this second strategy, rather than to the first one. First of all, this research will adopt some discourse theory techniques in order to interpret the participants' interventions (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002). As previously described, to research attitudes and motivations requires an extra effort by researchers in order to analyse and interpret participants' interventions. Accordingly, the interpretation of the focus groups needs to draw on, and go hand

in hand with, the theoretical assumptions presented in the theoretical background chapter. As Couldry (2012) pointed out, theory by itself has little meaning or relevance. Its aim should be to identify new research problems and to develop and conduct appropriate research questions and methodologies. Accordingly, the following paragraphs will present the analytical approach to focus groups' interpretation, in line with the developments of previous research on new media, participation, and public engagement, already introduced in former chapters.

Secondly, although attitudes and motivations should be analysed through an interpretative perspective, there is a second level at which these attitudes can be quantified. This second level involves the concept of 'action': that is, when attitudes and motivations towards participatory practices become effective and are performed. As Livingstone (2013) has argued, 'to participate' is a verb that implies some level of action: to participate actively in something. Although it is important to research the attitudes and motivations of research participants towards participatory practices, it is also relevant to include in the analysis if these practices are in fact conducted and the reasons that may lead to inactivity or active engagement: there is a big difference between thinking that participating in a community is something important and effectively conducting this practice. Furthermore, as Ekman and Amnå (2009) have pointed out, the absence of action might also be in itself a consequence of a particular kind of engagement or attitude towards the public world. These gaps and connections between 'attitudes' and 'actions' need to be explored during the focus group sessions. This second level of research will be explained in the last part of this section which looks at focus groups' interpretation.

4.4.1. Discourse theory as an interpretative tool

Previous chapters have already presented the basic philosophical premises of what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) define as 'discourse theory', a particular approach to social constructionist discourse analysis. Although Laclau and Mouffe's work initially referred to the field of political science, several authors have pointed out

its adaptability to other fields of study, such as media studies (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007, 2008; Carpentier & Spinoy, 2008). Moreover, several of the most quoted authors in this research have also used some of the concepts found in the work of Laclau and Mouffe on which to base their theories and research on media and society (this is the case of, to name just a few, Carpentier, 2011, Dahlgren, 2011 and 2013 and Couldry, 2012). More specifically, Carpentier and De Cleen (2007) have argued in favour of discourse theory as a suitable methodological tool on which to base research on citizens' discourses about the media and their place and function in society. Consequently, previous research justifies the use of discourse theory in this research as a methodological instrument by which to analyse the focus group sessions and the research participants' interventions.

However, the intention of this research is not to conduct a discourse analysis based research. Rather, I will draw on discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), but also on the work and interpretation of the different theories of discourse analysis made by Phillips and Jorgensen (2002), to use these theories as a 'toolbox' (Carpentier & Spinoy, 2008) to aid in the interpretation of the focus group sessions and participants' interventions. In this way, some of the methodological tools identified in discourse analysis (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002; Carpentier & Spinoy, 2008) will facilitate digging deeper into the different interpretations about how research participants construct and attribute meanings to participatory practices, and how they connect these practices with media and life in democracy. To conclude, it is necessary to point out that, as Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) argue, Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory is not just an analytical tool for data analysis. Rather, it is a complete package of philosophical premises, a theoretical model of how society is structured (completed in Mouffe's subsequent works – 2000 and 2005), and it provides specific techniques for analysis, although in the case of discourse theory this last point is less structured than in other theories of discourse (mainly, critical discourse analysis and discourse psychology), and further development of other authors is needed (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). Accordingly, this research adopts the 'whole package', as will be seen in the theoretical background chapter which follows, where the concept of participation is approached through the lens of discourse theory and other authors that have

drawn on its premises to build their theories about participation, media and society (Carpentier 2011; Dahlgren, 2011 and 2013; Couldry, 2012; Mouffe, 2000 and 2005).

The starting point in adopting discourse theory as an interpretative tool for the focus group sessions is to identify the concept of participation as a 'floating signifier' (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007). According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985) a 'floating signifier' is an element, or sign, whose meaning has not yet been fixed by a particular discourse. Moreover, 'floating signifiers' are elements that are particularly open to different interpretations of meaning. Consequently, these 'floating signifiers' are the terrain on which different discourses are struggling to become hegemonic, attributing meanings to these signifiers according to their particular interests and ways of understanding society. As Phillips and Jorgensen explain: "that a signifier is floating indicates that one discourse has not succeeded in fixing its meaning and that other discourses are struggling to appropriate it". (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 148). Phillips and Jorgensen extend the concept, including what Fairclough (1992) understands as 'order of discourse': a particular configuration of discourses that compete to fixate meaning within a concrete social field or domain. To summarise, Phillips and Jorgensen argue that "the discourses in play and their relations with one another are what, in sum, constitute the order of discourse" (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 148). The 'floating signifiers' thus become the indicators that denote the existence of a conflict between discourses in a concrete social field or 'order of discourse', with different discourses competing to become hegemonic.

Understanding participation as a 'floating signifier' allows researchers to analyse the different discourses and power relations that are competing to attribute meaning to the concept, enhancing or limiting it, both in the field (or 'order of discourse') of political science and democratic participation, or in the field of journalism and within the media sphere²⁸. However, discourse theory can also be used to move further from this purely theoretical approach, based on analysing the

²⁸ See the following theoretical background chapter for a further development of the different theories about participation in these two fields.

different grand narratives about participation, in favour of a more innovative perspective aimed at stressing the importance of 'ordinary' people and their perspectives and attitudes towards the current debates about participation in society and in the media sphere (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007). Such an approach allows a better understanding of how citizens perceive their life in democracy and how they connect its participatory opportunities with the possibilities for participation offered by the media environment.

Using these basic premises of discourse theory, the focus group sessions will be aimed at testing the following indicators: i) Participatory discourses: How research participants conceive their life in democracy and how they think their levels of participation in public issues and public life should be. ii) Contested hegemonies: the way in which research participants, through mediated participatory practices, try (or not) to contest the existing hegemonies of journalists and media institutions in the media sphere. iii) Common-sense understandings: What are the meanings of participation that are taken for granted by the majority of participants? Which participatory discourses and actors' power positions have become hegemonic and therefore are not contested? iv) Connections within 'orders of discourse': What are the relations established by research participants between participation in democracy and within mediated participation?

4.4.2. Quantification of participatory practices: a typology of public engagement

To complete the interpretative analysis of participants' interventions during the focus group sessions, this research will use diagram maps in order to 'place' each participant according to pre-established categories. As Schrøder (1999) argued, the use of a diagram map can be used to better explain the results of a qualitative study. Some authors have already used it to locate their focus groups in the general positions among the parameters of their research (Morley, 1992). The study of the diagram map, which quantifies the qualitative data collected during the focus group sessions, complements the interpretative part of the research and can be used to compare the parameters of different participants.

Among the different categories that will be used, the central one is the typology of forms of public engagement, which will be compared with participants' levels of media and online engagement in order to better answer the research questions that guide this research. The different categories of media and online engagement will be explained in the chapters aimed at presenting the results of the London and Barcelona focus group sessions. However, the typology of forms of public engagement has a more central position in this research, as well as a higher complexity in its design and composition, it being necessary, therefore, to introduce it in the methodology chapter. The next page introduces the typology of levels of public engagement used in this research.

Table 4.2. Typology of levels of public engagement

Models of Engagement	Levels of public engagement	Associated discourses	Associated participatory practices	Quantification
Non-participation or disengagement	<i>Anti-political</i>	Active disengagement - Perceiving politics as disgusting High distrust of traditional institutions	Ideological non-voting - Anti-political activism Actively avoiding reading news and public talk	-3.5
	<i>Apolitical</i>	Passivity - Lack of motivation for action Lack of ideological identification - Moderate distrust - Politics as non-interesting	Non-action - Voting without regularity Basic level of public talk	-2.5
Social Involvement	<i>Attentive or connected</i>	Interest but lack of action - Special circumstances or political contexts can produce action Interest in public issues and political debates - Perception of engagement with local community as important	Low levels of action - Practices that do not require high or continuous involvement Voting - Moderate public talk	-1.5
	<i>Civically involved</i>	Discourse connected to action - Perceiving involvement and active participation in local community and public issues as important Politics as important but preference to participate in non-political issues	Active in public talk - Participation in NGOs, money charity, volunteering Involvement in local community (school meetings, neighbors associations etc.)	-0.5
Civic participation	<i>Dutiful citizen</i>	Understanding of participation as collective action aimed at general societal or political issues - Participation as a civic duty Preference for participation in issues that represent some level of political conflictuality - Understanding involvement as necessary for democracy	Active in public talk - Participation in collective politically-aimed activities (party meetings, demonstrations etc.) Significant ideological identification (with a political party, union or similar) - Frequent voting	0.5

	Actualizing citizen	Discourse of participation as connected to personal interests, lifestyle and individual or small group action, but aimed at political issues - Preference for a discourse of participation non-aimed at collective goals Distrust on traditional institutions (government, political parties, news media etc.)	Preference for individual forms of participation Public talk performed with friends or other groups of shared interests	1.5
Activism	Legal activists	Discourse of change towards traditional institutions, mainly those linked with traditional politics Participation understood as necessary to transform political structures and hegemonies	Collective forms of action that involve protest: demonstrations, boycotting Collective organization in social movements and other groups aimed at societal and political change	2.5
	Illegal activists	Aggressive discourse of change - Political ideology strongly related with lifestyle and groups of reference (mainly friends who share this ideology) High distrust of traditional institutions - Collective action understood as necessary for change	Non-traditional forms of participation considered illegal (civic disobedience, political violence etc.) Related lifestyle: squatting, association with like-minded people	3.5

The previously introduced typology of levels of public engagement draws on previous work on political participation and civic engagement analysed in section three of the third chapter (Erik & Amna, 2009; Van Deth & Montero, 2007; Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007; Müller & Van Zoonen, 2009; Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Dahlgren, 2009). Nevertheless, it uses as a main reference and basic structure the work of Erik and Amna (2009), especially with regard to their differentiation between the passive forms of non-engagement and the active forms of disengagement. Furthermore, it also uses the work of these two authors to establish the main characteristics of the 'socially involved' and 'activists' models of engagement. Finally, the previous work of Bennett (2009 and 2013), as well as other works introduced in former chapter two have inspired the 'actualizing' and 'dutiful' levels of public engagement.

However, previous literature on political participation has tended to articulate typologies of forms of participation, differentiating between concepts such as 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' forms of political participation, 'social capital' or 'civic engagement' in order to better understand how citizens get involved in democratic societies. Although relevant in its aim to answer the question as to whether citizens are passive or active in late modern democracies, such an approach based on researching participatory practices is generally more suitable in quantitative studies (surveys) where researchers can investigate which are the most common forms of participation and how many citizens perform them. Conversely, a qualitative approach facilitates digging deeper into citizens' attitudes and motivations towards participatory practices, which necessarily requires a typology that takes into consideration other variables, rather than just participatory practices.

Regarding previous studies, this typology is innovative due to the fact that it not only takes into consideration the forms of participation associated with each level of public engagement, but also the discourses associated with them. Accordingly, each level of public engagement represents both a certain attitude towards the public world, involvement and life in democracy, and a list of participatory practices associated with each category (taking into consideration both action and

non-action, especially in the passive forms of engagement). In this way, the participants' interventions in the focus groups and their answers to the questionnaire distributed beforehand can be used to place them in one of these levels of public engagement. Moreover, each level also includes a numerical quantification, which facilitates the configuration of diagram maps to better analyse the participants' behaviour. Once a participant is 'placed' in the level of public engagement that better identifies their interventions in the focus groups and the practices that they conduct, the numerical configuration can be modified by adding plus or minus 0.3 to the value. The addition of a positive value represents a strong identification with the category, while a negative one represents a weaker identification.

In its first levels of public engagement (from 'anti-political' to 'civically involved') the typology represents a 'ladder' of involvement and participation. Each level implies a higher involvement of citizens in public life and also a higher level of action in its associated participatory practices. These practices are not generally associated with political or conflictual issues. However, the next levels of public engagement, rather than continuing the 'ladder' are better conceptualised as different understandings of direct participation in 'the political'. Accordingly, 'dutiful' and 'actualizing' citizens, as well as 'legal' and 'illegal' activists do not show higher levels of involvement and participation, but different ways of manifesting these concepts. While 'dutiful citizens' prefer traditional forms of political participation and are guided by a sense of collective duty, 'actualizing citizens' prefer individual action and tend to be motivated in their action by individual or small-group interests. Furthermore, the two categories of 'activists' are motivated by a discourse of political change, although they differ in the kind of participatory practices conducted and the ways in which they try to formulate this change.

4.5. Quantitative research: study sheet

Main research objective B is aimed to study which participatory options news media are adopting on their websites. As already introduced at the beginning of

this chapter, previous research (Chung & Nah, 2009; Hermida & Thurman, 2008a; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011a; Larsson, 2012b; Suau & Masip, 2014) has shown that the best methodology to adopt regarding this subject is a quantitative one, a content analysis based on a study sheet structured according to a typology of participatory tools, in order to classify the different options of participation and analyse how each medium under research incorporates the participatory opportunities offered by news media on their websites. This section will be aimed, firstly, at introducing the media under study and how the data were collected. Secondly, it will justify the need to create a new typology of participatory tools, instead of using a typology created in previous studies. To conclude, it will present the specific design of the study sheet.

4.5.1. Empirical data

The media chosen for this research represent a selection of the most popular news media in the United Kingdom and Catalonia. It has been chosen news media aimed at general news (not including then media aimed just at sports information, very popular in Spain). A wide range of different media were chosen, to be sure of including a good representation of the most important kinds of online news media: quality newspapers, tabloids, national public broadcaster, and digital news media (pure players). The media selected in the United Kingdom were²⁹: the *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *BBC News*, *Huffington Post UK* and *Yahoo News UK*. In Catalonia the following were selected: *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *20 minutos*, *El País*, *El Mundo*, *Ara*, *El Punt Avui*, *324*, *Vilaweb* and *Nació Digital*³⁰. All of them have leading websites in terms of users' traffic, according to alexa.com and other sources like the Audit Bureau of

²⁹ Although, strictly speaking, this research is based on the websites of these media, and not on their paper editions or TV channels, it was thought preferable to use the name of the brand, instead of the name of the website. I think in this way it makes it clearer to identify each medium and also makes it easier to name them throughout the writing, instead of repeating .com in almost every paragraph.

³⁰ Among the media researched in Catalonia, several of them (*20 minutos*, *El País*, *El Mundo*), are published in Spain (Madrid) but are also followed in Catalonia, where they have different levels of readership and adoption. In this research, the term 'Catalan media' will be used to refer to all of the news media under research in Catalonia, although these three are in fact published from Madrid.

Circulation, for UK media, and the Comscore and OJD Interactiva for Catalan and Spanish news media.

These news media were studied during May and June 2013 and then again during April and May 2014 to check for possible modifications to their websites. The selected media of both countries were analysed in both periods, in order to ensure proper data collection and test possible evolutions. The results presented are those for 2014, with the only exception being some quantitative data for the United Kingdom media that was collected in 2013. Similarly than in previous research (Chung & Nah, 2009; Hermida & Thurman, 2008a; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011a; Larsson, 2012b; Suau & Masip, 2014), the methodology used involved content analysis of news media websites, through the use of a study sheet to gather the different mechanisms of participation in each medium (called tools or features). The information was collected in the form of binary responses (Yes/No, Offered/Not offered), which helped to standardize the responses and their subsequent processing. In some cases, notes were taken in order to better understand some of the tools adopted by each medium.

4.5.2. Overall design of the study sheet

Especially during the first years of research on participatory journalism, most studies on the adoption by news media of participatory tools tend to analyse these tools individually, or have established some kind of basic typology of tools in order to structure their research³¹ (Bivings, 2006; Hermida & Thurman, 2008b; Limia, 2008; Newman, 2009; Rodríguez-Martínez, Codina, & Pedraza-Jiménez, 2012; Thurman, 2008; Thurman & Hermida, 2010). Of special relevance here is the international research conducted by Domingo et al. (2008), comparing how different media in different countries have adopted participatory journalism, using a typology of tools based on how each tool is connected to the news production process. Although interesting in its results, this early research approached the

³¹ See pages former chapter two for a more exhaustive review of previous studies on participatory journalism.

issue of participatory journalism from the point of view of the media³². According to Örnebring (2010), this criterion might lead to typologies that tend to put together forms of user participation that differ in the level of user involvement or intensity of participation. In this research I have expressly tried to reconfigure participatory journalism by trying to give more attention to the point of view of the users, decentring the traditional focus of research on media institutions. Consequently, other kinds of typologies need to be taken as a reference. These should be typologies that are focused more on the degree or level of relationship that each participatory tool allows for users, both in user-user relations and in medium-user ones.

According to the previous premise, Jönsson and Örnebring (2011) classified the tools according to users' levels of involvement, distinguishing between forms with a low level of involvement (for instance, RSS or customisation tools), and forms with high involvement, such as those that allow users to produce original content. However, studies on 'participatory journalism' that try to focus on users' involvement and engagement with the participatory tools provided by the media, tend to use the concept of 'interactivity' to establish some typology of forms or features of 'participatory journalism'. Some early works draw on Jensen's definition of interactivity (1998) to adapt it to the context of the news media websites, such as Massey and Levy's (1999)'content interactivity' and 'interpersonal interactivity' or Rost's (2006) 'selective interactivity' and 'communicative interactivity'. More recent authors, such as Chung (2008), Chung and Nah (2009) or Larsson (2012), use a typology based on the kind of interactivity established between the individual and the medium enabled by each of the tools (human, medium, human-medium and medium-human). All these typologies are designed to adapt to the extremely dynamic nature of the Internet: new participatory tools appear every year, and tools that were popular five years ago may be almost forgotten by current users, as is the case with forums in online news media. Moreover, the typology of tools is also a response to the needs and

³² As will be seen in the Theoretical Background chapter, this focus on media institutions meant that a good deal of early research on the subject of participatory journalism also used interviews with journalists in order to analyse their attitudes towards the new phenomenon.

particular approaches of each piece of research: to fulfil different objectives, researchers needed to create typologies adapted to their particular aims.

In planning this research, two main reasons convinced me to create a new typology to be used in my study: 1. The need to design a typology of tools that would allow content analysis of news media websites, defining different models of media participation, in order to better compare the behaviour of different media but from the point of view of users' interactions. 2. The need to establish a typology that takes into account the social dimension of interactivity (Steensen, 2013), facilitating the comparison of data collected during the qualitative part of the study with the data collected in the content analysis of the media's adoption of 'participatory journalism' tools. As a starting point for the typology used in this research I have chosen the concept of interactivity (Schultz, 1999; Massey & Levi, 1999; Jensen, 1998), which is then divided into different types of interactivity that are used to group the different interactive features, as it will be explained in the next paragraphs.

Firstly, we define a group of features and services that allows users to interact with the system, adapting the content to their preferences. This group is labelled 'selective interactivity' (Rost, 2006) and includes mechanisms for personalization. This type of interactivity enables the adaptation of the web content of the medium in line with the user's preferences, either explicitly or implicitly (Thurman, 2008). Examples of selective interactivity are RSS feeds, email alerts and registration.

A second group of tools is included under the term 'participative interactivity', which broadens Jensen's concept of 'conversational interactivity' (1998). This kind of interactivity takes place in the context of a user-user or user-professional relationship, which enables users to interact with journalists and other users. This relationship is developed within the parameters previously established by the medium's website and results in user contributions in the form of comments, ratings, or any other input that does not involve genuinely creative activity by the user. Within this type of interactivity we can highlight mechanisms such as evaluation and sharing tools, or comments on news items.

Lastly, a third group of interactive features was identified, included under the label 'productive interactivity'. This takes place in the context of a user-professional relationship, the purpose of which is for the user to contribute original content. Wunsh-Vincent and Vickery (2007) propose three essential characteristics that content must possess in order to be classified in this group: publication, creative effort and creation outside work routines and practices. Six options are included in this group: sending stories, still images, footage, audio, questions for interviews and users' blogs.

All the available tools, classified by type of interactivity, can be seen below in Table 4.3. Table 4.3 also shows the different levels of analysis into which the study sheet is divided. As can be seen, the kind of interactivity is the first level of analysis. After that, the table shows the different participatory tools and, if it is the case, another level of analysis with the particular options that each tool offers. Finally, a last level of analysis involves studying at which level the visitors to the website are using concrete tools. In most news media, the number of comments on news stories and the number of social media interactions are shown, which allows quantification and analysis of the level of use of these tools. The following page presents the study sheet in Table 4.3, followed by a brief explanation of each one of the tools.

Table 4.3 Study sheet

FIRST LEVEL	SECOND LEVEL		THIRD LEVEL	FOURTH LEVEL
<i>Kind of Interactivity</i>	<i>Participatory tools</i>		<i>Tools options</i>	<i>Users' data analysis</i>
Selective Interactivity	Registration		Paywall	
			Registration with social media	
	RSS			
	Newsletter			
	Participation section			
	Personalization options			
News media contact email				
Participative Interactivity	News options	News evaluation tools		
		Send more information		
		Notify error		
		Contact author		
	Comments on news	Allow comments	Only with previous registration	Average number of comments on first 20 news stories
			Reply comment	
			Report comment	
			Vote / recommend comment	
	Social networks links on homepage	Share on Facebook	Average number of Facebook shares on first 20 news stories	

	Social networks options	Social networks tools to share news/articles	Share on Twitter	Average number of Twitter shares on first 20 news stories
			Other social networks	Average number of other SN shares on first 20 news stories
			Total of shares on social networks	Average number of interactions on social networks
	Other forms	Comment on blogs/opinion articles		
		Forums		
Most read/commented/shared news				
Multiple choice polls				
Productive Interactivity	Readers' stories			
	Readers' photos			
	Readers' videos			
	Letters to the Editor			
	Readers' audios			
	Interviews with readers' questions			
	Reader's blogs			

- *Selective Interactivity*

As previously described, this category labelled 'selective interactivity' groups features and services that allow users to interact with the system in order to adapt the content according to their preferences. Six indicators have been considered in this category. First of all, the use of registration systems which allow users to access exclusive content or services. The nature of these registration systems and the kind of information they ask in order to complete the registration can vary. The most important parameters that this research has to take into account are the kind of content that requires previous registration to be accessed, and the existence of hard or soft paywalls to access the website content. Also to be taken into account is whether the registration options allow users to access registration through their own social media profiles.

Secondly, three different forms of user content selection have been considered: 'content syndication' (RSS), that normally allows the user to select which section or kind of news they want to receive; 'newsletter', an easy way to receive the selected media content directly to email; and 'personalization options', the most direct way of selecting media content. This feature allows the user to select which kind of news will appear first on the website, changing the media's selection of news stories automatically, according to the user's personal preferences.

Thirdly, also taken into consideration is the presence of a participation section that groups the main features and tools that allow citizens to participate on the site. Some media decide to group the majority of forms of participation and concentrate them in a particular section or, conversely, distribute them throughout the medium. This last indicator cannot be considered properly as 'selective interactivity': the presence of a participation section does not imply users' interaction with the system in order to adapt content to their preferences. However, the presence of this kind of section is important to determine how much importance each medium gives to citizens' participation, how this section is embedded in the website structure and how easily users can interact with the participatory options that the media offer. For these reasons it has been decided to

include the analysis of the participation sections in this section, even if some good arguments for doing so can also be found in a separate section.

Finally, a last indicator, 'news media contact email', has been included. This indicator collects the different tools (normally an email address) included for users to communicate with the newsroom that are outside sections of the website, such as comment on news, or are aimed at user participation through original content creation, forms of participation identified in other sections of the study sheet.

- Participative Interactivity

Many different features can be included under the label of 'participative interactivity'. However, all of them have in common that they allow a user-user or user-professional interactivity, aimed at users' interaction with other users or with the content previously provided by the media. In order to better describe them here, I have grouped similar features or tools into the following categories: 'news options', grouping the tools that are present in the news included on the website; 'comment on news options', that includes tools related to news comments; 'social networks', where all the features related to the media's use of social networks will be analysed; and 'other forms of participative interactivity', a category that groups 'participative interactivity' tools that cannot be included in one of the previous categories.

News options

Different features that are included in the news form this group. These are:

- . News evaluation tools: This feature includes different options that allow users to rate the news stories, normally with the option to vote on the news story in a positive or a negative way, but also to grade the news story (from one to five, for example).
- . Send more information: Some media include on their news pages different systems to facilitate users' feedback, such as special buttons that give access

to a form or email contact. The aim is for users who might have information about the issue covered by the news story to have an easy option for sending it to the medium.

- . Notify error: This category includes different features aimed to make it easy for users to report possible mistakes or errors in the news stories. Like the previous category, these features normally appear in the form of special buttons or an email contact address.
- . Contact the author: This feature provides an option for users to contact directly the author of the news story. Normally, media that adopt this feature include the journalist's email address or Twitter account near their name to make it easier for users to contact them.

Comment on news

This group collects all the features related to comment on news. The different categories included in Table 4.3 are:

- . Allow comments on news stories: Media that allow comments on news stories are included in this category, even if they only accept comments on some news stories per day or limit comments on news stories about polemic issues. Notes should be taken in order to know which level of comment-accepted news stories the medium has. The following features in the subcategory 'Comment on news' can only be applied if the medium allows comments on news stories.
- . Only with previous registration: This category includes those media that only accept comments if users have previously registered online
- . Vote / recommend comments: Some media allow users to vote on other users' comments. These options are normally represented by way of positive/negative votes or, in some cases, with different grades of votes (from one to five, for example). All these options are included in this category.
- . Reply comments: This category includes only those media that allow users to reply to other users' comments, creating in this way another conversation inside the comments. This option normally allows a more

focused and clearer conversation, because direct replies to other users' comments are not lost in the middle of the high number of comments. By replying to others' comments, users have the chance to start a genuine conversation that makes easier the exchange of arguments and opinions.

- . Report comments: Any form of reporting of abusive or disrespectful comments is included in this category. A button present in each comment normally provides this feature. By clicking on it users can report the comment. In some cases after clicking the user has to indicate the reason that has motivated the report by filling in a form or writing a short text.

At another level of research, the study sheet also includes a quantitative study of the level of comments on news stories that each medium receives.

- . Average number of comments on the first 20 news stories: This figure shows an indicator of the number of comments made on the first 20 news stories on the homepage. The total number of comments on each medium's first 20 news items were counted over five different days (from Monday to Friday, alternating afternoon and evening periods). Then, the average number of comments on these days was calculated. The aim was to compare which media attract more comments and which ones fewer in a particular moment of time³³.

Social media

This section groups all the tools and tool options referring to social media, as well as the quantitative analysis of the social media interaction of each one of the media under research. The different sections of the study sheet aimed at researching how news media adopt social media are:

³³ The figure provides relevant information about the number of comments. In the study of UK and Catalan media this figure will be put in relation with how each news media website adopts the different options related to comment on news. This will allow for a better understanding of which role play comments on news in each news media website, but in any case the aim of these analysis of the average number of comments is aimed to generalizations about which news media attract more comments and which ones less. To do so, other factors should be taken into account, like the time that the news is in a relevant position on the homepage, the topic of the news story or the profile of readers of each news media, what overcomes the objectives of this study.

-
- . Social media links present on the homepage: This feature shows the media that decide to show a link to one or more social networks on their homepage. The link sends users to the medium's profile/fan page on the social network.
 - . Social media tools to share news stories/articles: Nowadays all media offer some features to 'share', 'tweet' or 'like' news stories. These features are an easy way to share news stories on social networks or tweet them to contacts. Two categories in the third level of research on the study sheet ask if the medium adopts tools to share on Facebook or Twitter. Another category in the fourth level asks if the medium adopts tools to share the news in another social media platform (the most common in this category of 'others' are Google+ and LinkedIn).

The next level of research aims to study the level at which users share or tweet the news from the different media under research through the tools offered on their websites. Four indicators have been used in the study sheet to represent this fourth level of research.

- . Average number of Facebook shares on the first 20 news items: This feature is an average of the total number of shares on Facebook of the first 20 news stories that appear on the homepage of the news website. Data was collected over five days, to obtain all the interactions made on Facebook for a total of 100 news stories. Then the total was divided by five to obtain the average number of interactions on Facebook for 20 news stories.
- . Average number of Twitter shares on the first 20 news stories: The same procedure was carried out to obtain the average number of news tweets on Twitter.
- . Average number of interactions on other social networks for the first 20 news stories: The same procedure was carried out to obtain the average number of news stories shared on other social networks (mainly Google+ and LinkedIn).
- . Average number of interactions on social networks: This feature is a sum of all the previous social media interactions. It offers a way of comparing

which media receive more interaction from their users through social media tools included on their websites.

Others forms of participative interactivity

This category groups together five different forms of participative interactivity that cannot be included in any of the other previous categories. These forms of participatory interactivity are:

- . Comments on blogs/opinion articles: In cases where the website includes blogs written by journalists, or opinion articles, this category groups together the ones that allow users' comments.
- . Forums: This feature allows users to open discussions and comment on existing discussions. Normally users establish in this way an asynchronous conversation, where the message posted by one user is responded to or commented on hours or days later. It was a popular feature some years ago, but its importance has waned in favour of other quicker formats of online conversation.
- . Most read, viewed, rated or commented: Normally this feature appears to one side of the website page, grouping together some rankings of news stories. In cases where the users can rate or vote on news stories, the most rated will appear in the feature. Other possible rankings are most viewed news stories or most commented ones.
- . Multiple-choice polls: These are features that allow users to show their opinion in multiple choice online polls. Some media attach these polls to current affairs news stories, rather than placing them to one side of the website page (the *Guardian*) or in the main body of the news, as with *Yahoo News*.

- Productive Interactivity

The label of 'productive interactivity' groups together the different tools that allow users to publish original content on the media websites. As in the previous

category of participative interactivity, the relationship takes place in a user-user or user-professional context. The main difference is that in the case of productive interactivity the aim of the user is to contribute with original content. The features included under productive interactivity are:

- . Readers' stories: This classification groups different tools that enable users to send their stories, normally by email or filling in a form, to the medium in order to be published. These stories are longer than comments on news or letters to the editor, but might have many different formats, depending on the criteria established by the media.
- . Readers' photos: This category includes those options that allow users to upload and publish their own photos.
- . Readers' videos: Tools that allow users to upload their videos are included under this label.
- . Readers' audios: This category groups different tools that allow users to upload their audio files to the website.
- . Letters to the editor: This classification describes those sections of media websites that collect letters to the editor written by users or newspaper readers. Normally these letters are sent to the email address provided in the same section of the website and/or to the printed newspaper section of the same name.
- . Interviews with readers' questions: This label defines those interviews that media conduct using users' questions. These questions can be sent by email or Twitter or by using a special feature provided by media.
- . Readers' blogs: This feature provides the option for users to open a blog on the media websites. In a blog, users can write their own content without any previous control by the media and receive comments from other users.

**SECTION II – QUANTITATIVE STUDY: CITIZEN
PARTICIPATION IN CATALAN AND UNITED KINGDOM
NEWS MEDIA**

CHAPTER 5

United Kingdom media and online participation

This chapter will present the results of the content analysis based on the application of the code sheet, showing interactivity features among the selected news media in the United Kingdom. As has been described in the methodology chapter, these media are: the *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *BBC News*, *Huffington Post UK* and *Yahoo News UK*. The results will be presented following the same structure as the code sheet, divided according to kinds of interactivity: i. Selective Interactivity ii. Participative Interactivity iii. Productive Interactivity; and grouping the tools according to the different levels of research: i. Kind of Interactivity ii. Participatory Tools iii. Tools Options iv. Users' Data Analysis). The code sheet and the explanation of the nature and characteristics of each one of the tools can be found in the chapter four about methodological issues.

5.1. Selective Interactivity

Six different indicators have been grouped under the label of 'selective interactivity': 'registration', 'RSS', 'newsletter', 'personalization options', 'participation section' and 'news media contact email'. Table 5.1 (see next page) shows how the different media under research in the United Kingdom adopt each one of these tools. This section will, firstly, conduct an overall analysis of how the different media adopt these selective tools. Secondly, the focus will be put on the overall study of the different tools, in order to analyse which ones are adopted

more and which ones are offered less by media. Finally, to conclude the study of selective interactivity, the analysis will dig deeper, analysing each tool and how it is adopted by each one of the media under study, explaining the specificities of each of the media's websites in their adoption of selective tools.

Table 5.1. Selective Interactivity - UK media

	Registration	RSS	Newsletter	Personalization options	Participation section	News media contact email
The Guardian	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
The Independent	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
The Times	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
The Telegraph	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Financial Times	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
The Sun	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Daily Mail	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
BBC News	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Huffington Post	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Yahoo News	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No

As can be seen in Figure 5.1 (see next page), there are some media that adopt more selective tools than others. The *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Times* and *Telegraph* each adopt five selective tools, all of them present on the study sheet with the only exception of 'personalization options'. After these media there is a second group formed by those that adopt four tools, *Financial Times*, *BBC*, *Huffington Post* and *Yahoo News*. The website of the economic newspaper, the *Financial Times*, as well as the *Huffington Post*, adopt all the features of the former group, with the only exception of a 'participation section'. In the same way, the website of the *BBC* adopts the same features, with the only exception of 'newsletter', and *Yahoo News* the same usual configuration of tools with the exception of 'news media contact email'. Finally, the *Sun* and *Daily Mail* are the two media that adopt the lowest number of selective tools, just three and two respectively. The *Daily Mail* just offers

'registration' and 'news media contact email' and the *Sun* these same tools with the addition of 'newsletter'.

Figure 5.1. Number of selective tools by medium (UK)

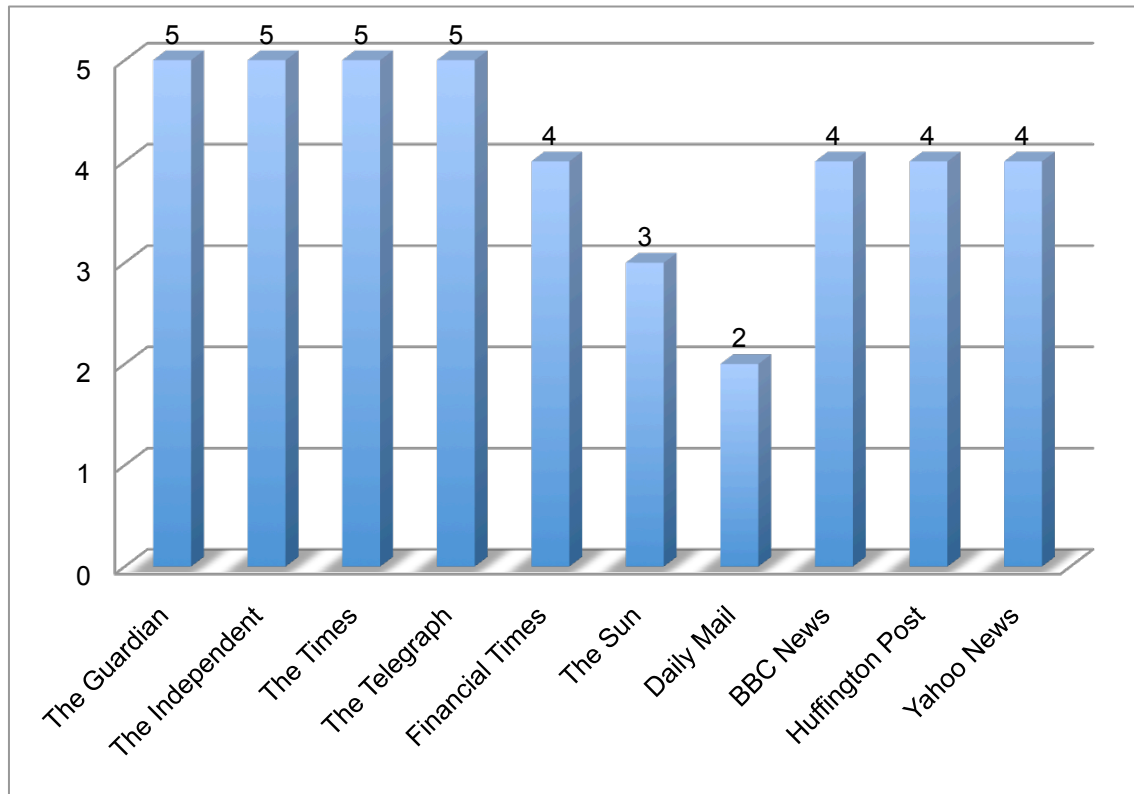
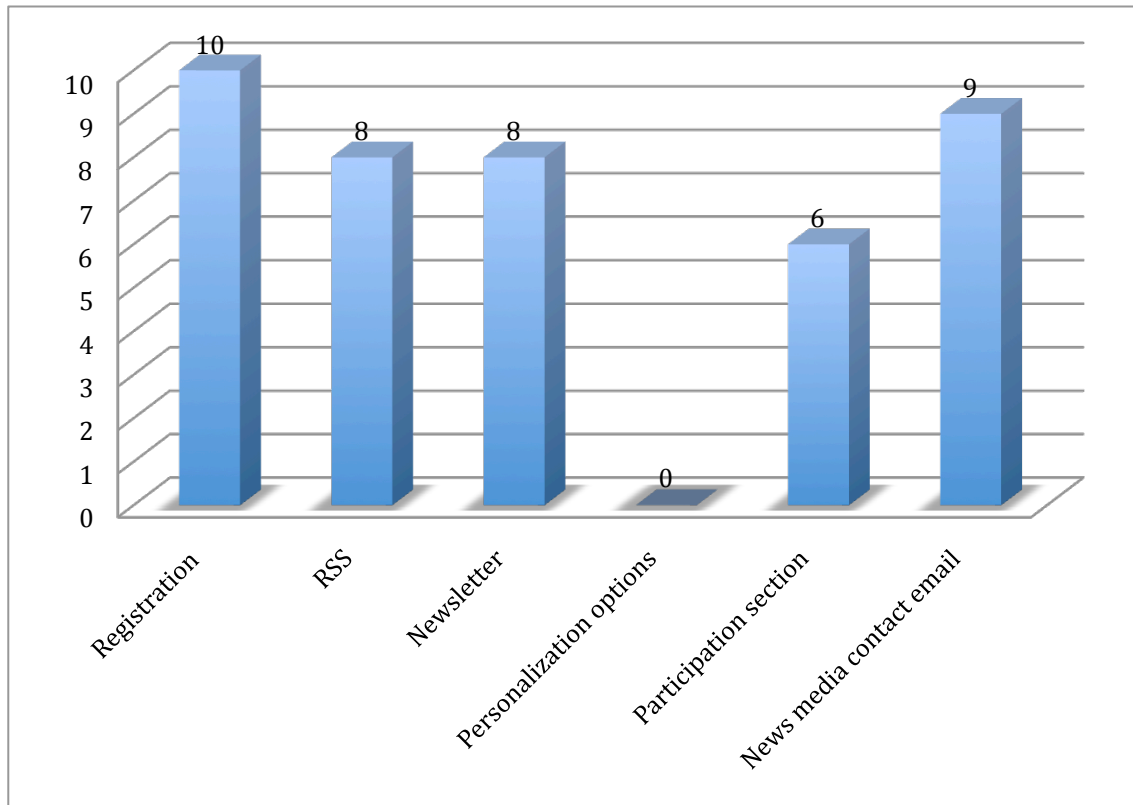


Figure 5.2 (see next page) shows the number of media that adopt each tool included under the label of 'selective interactivity'. As it can be seen, 'registration' is the most popular feature, adopted by all the media, followed by 'news media contact email', which is adopted by all except one medium. 'RSS' and 'newsletter' are both adopted by eight media, and six media include a participation section on their websites. Finally, none of the media included in this research offer the option to personalise the homepage or other sections of the website.

Figure 5.2. Number of UK media adopting each selective tool

5.1.1. Registration and user profile

All the media under study in the United Kingdom adopt some kind of user registration. Although it is present in all media, the registration option differs widely from one media to another.

Four of the media which are the object of this research maintain a paywall to access, and even participate in most of their content. The *Financial Times*' website implements a 'soft' paywall: it allows users to access some full articles and news, but requires registration. Users can register for free (giving their email address or using their Twitter account) and then gain access to eight articles per month. To read more, or gain access to the specialised content of the website, users need to be subscribed to one of the payment options (from £5 to £18 weekly). The *Times* started to charge for access in 2010. Without a subscription, users can read only

the first few lines of the story. No free content or participation options are offered for those users who are not subscribers (from £2 to £6 per week). The *Telegraph*, in April 2013, adopted the paywall model for United Kingdom users (already in place for readers outside the UK since November 2012). Without a subscription it allows users to read 20 articles per month. Participation options, such as ‘comment on news’, require registration, but not paid subscription. Although registration is needed to access the content, none of these media allow users to create a complete and personal profile on the website. User-user interaction in the website is limited to ‘comment on news’ responses. None of them offer features such as ‘follow other users’ activity’ or ‘record your own comments’. Finally, the *Sun* adopted a paywall in August 2013. All the content on the website requires a subscription to Sun+, although the medium offers users a one month free trial. After that, users must pay £7.99 in order to access the content of the *Sun*.

All the other six media under study have open access websites. Most of them (the *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Daily Mail*, *BBC News*, *Huffington Post* and *Yahoo News*) allow users to register in order to participate using their own profiles. All of these media offer the chance to register using email or a social media profile (Facebook, Twitter or Google+). In this way, the user can connect their activity on the website to their account on the social network. Although access to the websites is free for all of them, some of these media offer different incentives in order to promote users’ registration. *BBC News*, the *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Sun*, and *Yahoo News* for example, just allow comments and other forms of participation under previous registration on the website. In this group, the *Guardian*’s website is the only one that allows users to create a personal profile that saves all their comments, replies they have received and comments picked by the medium. However, it does not allow direct user-user interaction with private messages or a message wall in the profile. The *Daily Mail* also enables users to use a personal profile, but it just saves all the previous comments and shows the ‘Arrow Factor’, a feature that collects all the positive and negative votes that users’ previous comments have received.

With regard to registration and users’ interaction, The *Huffington Post*’s website is the one that facilitates the most connection between users. Despite not allowing

private messages between users, it does allow users to become ‘friends’ or ‘fans’, in order to follow others’ publications. The personal profile site on the website is similar to the wall of a social network, showing the user the most recent friends’ activity. Users can also access other users’ profiles in order to check what they have read or commented on. A feature in the user’s personal profile allows the user to hide this activity, in case they do not want other users to have access to this information. To promote user activity, the *Huffington Post* website has adopted a system of ‘badges’ that are included in the users’ profiles. A ‘Networker’ badge (level one or two) is given to those users with more ‘friends’ and ‘fans’, if they have previously connected their accounts to Facebook or Twitter. A ‘Superuser’ badge (also level one or two) is given to those that comment or share more news stories, also connected to Facebook or Twitter. The badges allow users to show their comments in different colours and have a small picture of the badge near the picture profile.

Table 5.2. Registration options UK media

	Registration	Paywall	Social media registration
The Guardian	Yes	No	Yes
The Independent	Yes	No	Yes
The Times	Yes	Yes	No
The Telegraph	Yes	Yes	No
Financial Times	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Sun	Yes	Yes	Yes
Daily Mail	Yes	No	Yes
BBC News	Yes	No	Yes
Huffington Post	Yes	No	Yes
Yahoo News	Yes	No	Yes

Table 5.2 sums up the different options for registration that have been mentioned previously. As can be seen, all the media under research include some kind of registration option, although in most cases this is not a precondition to be able to access content. However, as has been seen, registration becomes more important when users want to perform some participatory options, such as ‘comment on

news'. Among the media under research, the possibility of registration through social media has also become popular: the analysis of the websites of the *Times* and the *Telegraph* showed these to be the only ones which did not include this option in. These two media, together with the *Financial Times* and the *Sun*, are the also the only ones who have established a paywall to access their content.

5.1.2. Content selection

The most widely adopted features of content selection are 'RSS' syndication and 'newsletters'. Most of the media under study adopt those features that allow the users to select their news preferences (international, politics, sports), or to choose the media's news selection, and receive it periodically by email or by using a feed aggregator. Only the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail* do not adopt 'RSS', and only *BBC News* and the *Daily Mail* do not offer subscriptions to newsletters.

Despite both 'newsletter' and 'RSS' using ways of personalizing the news that the user receives, these features do not change the media selection, but are just different ways to access media content. The user can be subscribed to the general news selection or to a specific section of the website (sports or politics to name but two). Once the user has received the newsletter or checked their RSS feed, they can click on the article that they are interested in and read it on the website, but it does not affect the website structure which will be the same for every user. The next step in personalization would be 'personalization options', such as a homepage that could be adapted to the users' preferences, in the same way that they can personalise the RSS or the newsletter that they receive. However, none of the media under study are currently using these kinds of personalization options. Unlike RSS and newsletters, 'personalization options' do affect the structure of the website and therefore also the identity of the medium. This could explain the fact that none of the media under study are currently using these kinds of selective tools.

The only medium that is doing something similar is *Yahoo News*, that allows users to customise the personal site, 'My Yahoo', with different options such as email, weather forecasts or even news, classified in 'Today's News', 'Sport', and 'BBC News' among other options. Although it allows some degree of personalization, this feature is more related to the fact that Yahoo is not a media company focused mainly on news. It is in fact a web portal that offers different services, among them news. In this way, 'My Yahoo' should not be considered as merely a feature aimed at news customization, but a feature aiming to be the personal landing page for Yahoo users.

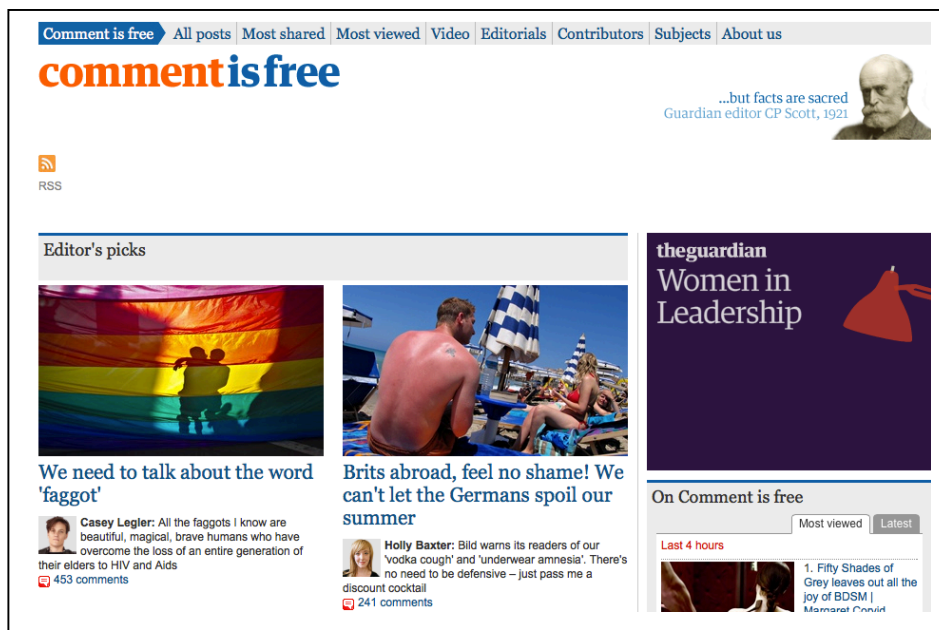
5.1.3. Participation section

The existence of a section in media websites that is specially aimed to facilitate and put together different participation tools is a good indicator of the media's attitudes towards citizen participation and involvement in the website. Participation sections normally aim to bring together different forms of user participation or are focused on one concrete form of participation. In this research, seven websites provide a special participation section. These are:

- The *Guardian*: 'Comment is free' is the name of the participation section of this newspaper's website (see Image 5.1 at next page). In this section, some *Guardian* journalists start discussion topics and debates, normally about current affairs but also about broader issues that are not strictly daily news. Some of the topics are started as a result of users' suggestions or relevant comments on news stories. It is also possible for users to start their own topics, but this is more infrequent and is always under the previous control of the newspaper's journalists. 'Comment is free' has a high number of participants and is the main section of the website where citizens can show their opinions, especially regarding the fact that the *Guardian* does not allow comments on most of the news stories. In April 2013 the *Guardian* launched 'Guardian Witness', an App for iPhone and Android that allows users to upload original content from their mobile phones. 'Guardian Witness' also has its own website to encourage citizens to participate. According to

the *Guardian*³⁴, their intention is to publish some of the content sent by users on the main website of the newspaper. Currently there is not yet any link on the *Guardian* website that establishes any connection to 'Guardian Witness'. Accordingly, it was decided not to include this feature in this research. However, it will be an interesting issue to follow in the future.

Image 5.1. Participation section in the *Guardian*



- The *Independent*: The section that aims to encourage citizen participation is called 'Voices'. It is a selection of opinion articles that provide some background to issues that users can comment on and discuss. During the period that the website was studied, no original content or issues suggested by readers were found. Participation in 'Voices' is not as big as in the *Guardian*, in the same way that the two websites have different traffic statistics.

- The *Times*: 'Feedback' is the section where readers of this website can send comments and ask questions, privately, to the 'feedback editor', a journalist of the *Times*. Periodically, this editor publishes articles in this section where the latest

³⁴ See Guardian Witness website: <https://witness.theguardian.com/about>

comments received are analysed. These articles are normally based on the emails and letters that readers have sent, and can be commented on in the same way as comments on news stories. The 'feedback editor' also encourages users to visit and participate in the newspaper's blog on Tumblr.

- The *Telegraph*: The website of this newspaper has two sections that can be included under the concept of participation section. First of all, the section 'Comment' offers a selection of news, chosen because of its relevance or special interest. Regarding these news stories, most of them are, in fact, stories that users can find in other sections, such as 'Finance' or 'Politics'. 'Comment' also includes articles under the label of 'Personal View' (opinion articles by journalists and experts) and 'Telegraph View' (that provides the editorial opinion of the journal about current affairs). Users who have registered previously, can comment on all these articles. Secondly, the *Telegraph* also includes another participation section, 'My Telegraph', that is a middle point between a site for debate and a social network. 'My Telegraph' allows the users to enter via a personal profile, open discussions without previous moderation (similarly to traditional online forums), create their own blog and save their comments on news stories. Some of the discussion groups are opened and moderated by the *Telegraph's* journalists. The range of issues of these groups is broad, from current affairs to topics not based on daily news. In fact, 'My Telegraph' is designed like a social network inside the medium. Despite this, like other online media, it lacks features that allow direct user-user communication. If the section 'Comment' is aimed at enhancing participative interactivity, 'My Telegraph' is aimed also at promoting user-user interaction through comment and debate, but also allows users to post original content (productive interactivity), using the blogs that they can create in the online space.

- The *Sun*: This newspaper does not really have a main site focused on citizen participation. Despite this, two of the website's sections could be considered, in some way, as sections that encourage participation. Firstly, 'Sun Justice' is a section of the *Sun's* website that directly asks for readers' engagement in order to denounce and try to solve some controversial issues. During the time of

this research, two journalists were in charge of this section, writing long articles, mostly based on first-hand testimonies of the citizens that were denouncing a controversial issue. 'Sun Justice' was aimed during this time at gathering users' signatures against school bullying, a controversial issue after the suicide of a young teenager. The issue was broadly reported using different interviews with relatives and pictures of the victim. Normally, the section covers different issues, comments being allowed on all of them. Secondly, although it cannot strictly be considered a participation section, 'Sun Politics' tries to encourage participation, providing in a relevant location the email address of the six journalists that work on this section. Users are told to email the journalists if they know of some political issue that might be newsworthy.

- *BBC News*: The British public broadcaster focuses citizen participation in a section of the website called 'Have Your Say' (see below Image 5.2). *BBC News* does not allow comments on most of the news stories. The ones that accept comments are included in this section, where all the news stories can be commented on.

Image 5.2. Participation section in *BBC News*

The screenshot shows the BBC News website's 'Have Your Say' section. At the top, there's a red navigation bar with the BBC logo, 'Sign in', and various news categories like News, Sport, Weather, iPlayer, TV, Radio, and More... A search bar is also present. Below the navigation bar, the main heading reads 'NEWS HAVE YOUR SAY'. A secondary navigation bar lists various news topics: Home, World, UK, England, N. Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Business, Politics, Health, Education, Sci/Environment, Technology, and Entertainment & Arts. Below this, there are links for 'Video & Audio', 'Magazine', 'In Pictures', 'Also in the News', 'Have Your Say', and 'Special Reports'. The main content area is dated '31 July 2014 Last updated at 12:14'. The primary article is titled 'Gatwick bag handling firm dropped' with a sub-headline 'Leisure airline Monarch terminates its contract with Swissport, one of the baggage-handling companies at Gatwick airport, after weekend chaos.' It includes a video thumbnail and a link to 'Baggage delay 'one of the worst'' and 'Apology over Gatwick baggage delay'. To the right, there's a 'Watch/Listen' section with a video thumbnail titled 'Lightning storms cap film'. Below that is a 'Get in touch' section with options to 'Send us an SMS or MMS to 6112', 'Send us your videos, pictures &', and 'Follow Have Your Say on Twitter'. At the bottom, there's a 'Can you help?' section with a video thumbnail titled 'World War One Centenary: Your st' and a link to 'How to ask for \$25' with the subtext 'Do you have a question?'. Other smaller articles include 'Israel calls up 16,000 reservists' and ''Tape measure test' call on diabetes'.

'Have Your Say' receives the highest average number of comments in all the media under study: 281 comments per news story. However, 'Have Your Say' is not limited to comments on news stories, it also offers the option of sending original material to the newsroom (video, photo, audio or stories). Users have different options for sending these materials: by email, Twitter, mobile phone, uploading content to a server or filling in a form, in case of ideas about possible stories. In any case, all the material is controlled by *BBC News* journalists before being included on the website or in any of the TV or Radio programmes of the Corporation. During this study, four different galleries of pictures were included on the site, using only pictures sent by users. According to the website, two radio programmes ('Radio 4: Call You and Yours' and 'Radio 5 Live: Your Call') and two television programmes ('Newswatch' and 'World Have Your Say') actively use material and feedback of the 'Have Your Say' section.

- *Yahoo News*: 'Your Voice' is the participation section of the site. The aim of the section is for users to publish their own stories about many different issues. All the stories published accept comments, six being the average number of comments on the first stories. To publish in 'Your Voice' the user first has to join the 'Yahoo Contributor Network'. Candidates need to send an email explaining which kind of stories they want to write and their motivations for participating in the community. The process takes about a week or two, and after being accepted the user can start to write comments on the site.

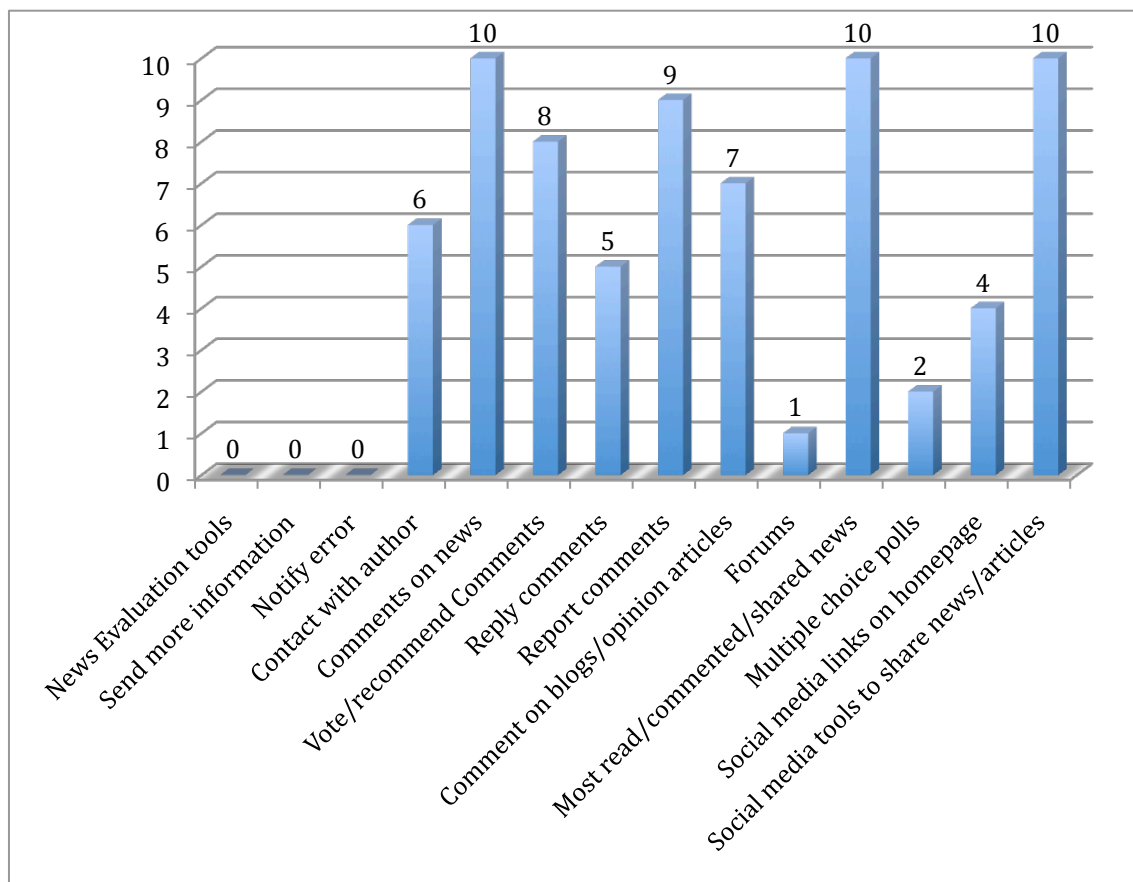
5.2. Participative Interactivity

Participative interactivity is the kind of interactivity that has the largest number of different tools on the study sheet. It groups the participatory tools present on news media websites that allow users to interact with journalists and other users, in the form of ratings, comments or any other input that does not involve genuinely creative activity by the user. This section will analyse all the tools related to participative interactivity. First of all, the section will start with a general overview of which tools are adopted the most and the least, followed by a study of the

number of tools each medium adopts. Secondly, the focus will be put on the tools related to news options. Thirdly, this section will look at the way in which the different media in the United Kingdom use comments on news stories, incorporating a quantitative study of the number of comments made on each medium. Fourthly, it will analyse a series of participative tools that cannot be included in any of the former categories. Lastly, the section will take into consideration how the different media adopt social networks on their websites.

To start this section, Figure 5.3 shows the number of media that adopt each one of the tools included under the label of 'participative interactivity'. Some of the tools are not used by any of the media present in this study. This is the case of 'news evaluation tools' and the option to 'notify error' or 'send more information' related to the news.

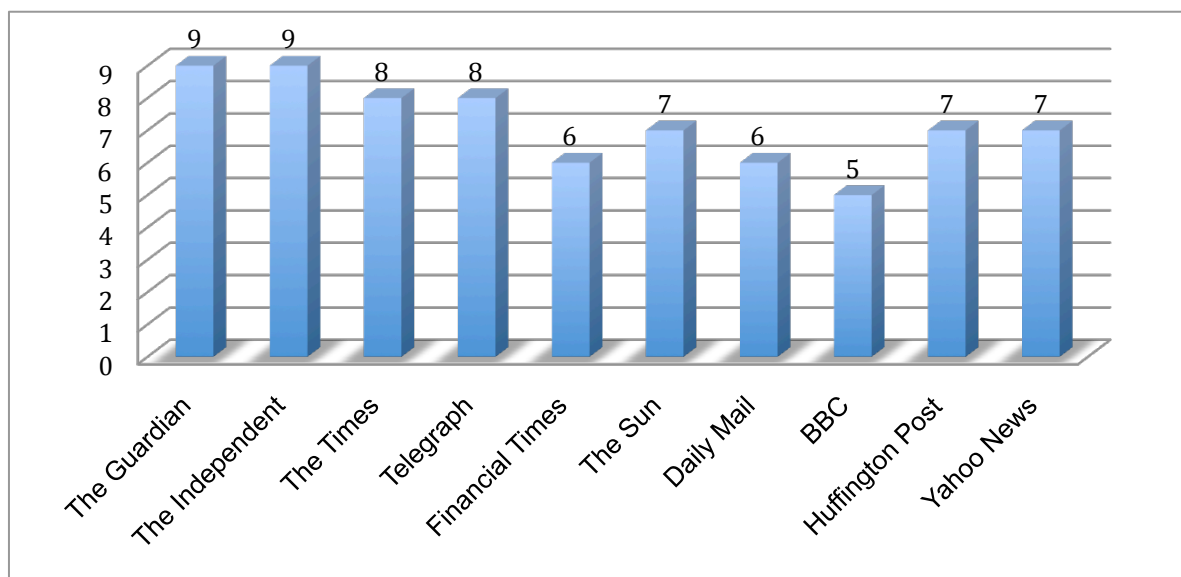
Figure 5.3. Adoption of participative interactivity tools in UK media



With regard to the most popular tools, all media use ‘comment on news’ and social media features to ‘share’ or ‘like’ content. All of them also include on their websites some kind of news ranking, most frequently about the most viewed news stories. Some options related to ‘comment on news’ are also among the most popular. All media except the *Huffington Post* have the option to report abusive or off topic comments. The option to vote on comments is also included by all media except the *Huffington Post* and the *Financial Times*. Other options related to news stories are not as popular as the previous ones. Comments on blogs or opinion articles are present in seven media; the option to make contact with the journalist/author of the news story is used by six media; and the option to reply to comments of other users, by just five. Finally, only two media use multiple choice polls on their websites (the *Guardian* and *Yahoo News*). However, the least adopted feature is ‘forums’, which appears only on the *Telegraph*’s website.

Regarding the media under study, Figure 5.4 shows how the *Guardian* and the *Independent* are the ones that use the most participative interactivity features, nine (out of a maximum of fourteen). The *Times* and the *Telegraph* use a similar number, eight, as well as the *Sun*, the *Huffington Post* and *Yahoo News*, all with seven. Finally, the *Financial Times*, with six tools, and *BBC News* with five, are the media under study that use the lowest number of participative interactivity tools.

Figure 5.4. Number of participative tools adopted by UK news media



As has been seen, a high number of different tools exist that can be identified as 'participative interactivity'. In order to better analyse this wide diversity of tools, they have been grouped into different categories of similar tools. Each of these groups of tools will be analysed separately in the following pages.

5.2.1. News options

None of the United Kingdom media under study offer any option included in next Table 5.3 other than 'contact author'. The features 'news evaluation tools', 'option to send more information' and 'option to notify error' are not included on any website. As will be seen later in this research, some Spanish media use these features on their websites. It was decided to include them in Table 1 for comparative purposes. 'Contact author' is used by six of the media. However, in most of the media that adopt it, it is a feature that is not present in all the news stories. To have the journalist's contact email or Twitter account could increase the feedback between readers and media, and make it easier to correct possible mistakes in the news stories.

Table 5.3. News options

	News evaluation tools	Send more information	Notify error	Contact author
The Guardian	No	No	No	Yes
The Independent	No	No	No	Yes
The Times	No	No	No	No
Telegraph	No	No	No	Yes
Financial Times	No	No	No	Yes
The Sun	No	No	No	Yes
Daily Mail	No	No	No	No
BBC News	No	No	No	No
Huffington Post	No	No	No	Yes
Yahoo News	No	No	No	No

5.2.2. Comment on news

'Comment on news' is adopted, in varying degrees, by all the media under study. *BBC News* is the medium that accepts comments on the least number of news stories, normally around two to four per day. However, as will be seen later, these few news stories receive a high number of comments. Only two media, *Yahoo News* and the *Huffington Post*, accept comments on all the news stories without any restriction. The *Times*, the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail* normally accept comments on all the news stories, but they impose some restrictions in those situations where the news might be especially controversial or polemic. During the period of study, these media employed comment restriction on just around one to three news stories each day. With regard to the other media, the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Telegraph* and the *Financial Times*, the situation is slightly different in almost all of them. In the *Guardian*, for example, during the research period, around nine to eleven news stories of the first twenty on the homepage did not accept any comments. The *Independent* moved around between three to seven news items that banned comments, similar in average number to that of the *Telegraph*. The different options related to 'comment on news' are summarised in next Table 5.4.

Table 5.4. Comment on news

	Comment on news	Comments only with registration	Vote/Recommend comments	Reply comments	Report comments
The Guardian	Yes***	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Independent	Yes***	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Times	Yes*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Telegraph	Yes***	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Financial Times	Yes***	Yes	No	No	Yes
The Sun	Yes*	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Daily Mail	Yes*	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
BBC News	Yes**	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Huffington Post	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Yahoo News	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

* These media allow comments on all news stories with only a few exceptions (one or two per day), normally on news stories about controversial issues.

** *BBC News* only accepts comments on a few news stories per day.

*** These media allow comment on news stories, but they normally close comments on more than one or two news stories per day.

All United Kingdom media allow only comments of users that have been previously registered on the website. Normally, that means creating a free account by entering email address, username and password, or registering using an account on Facebook or Twitter. In the case of those media that have paywalls to access some of their content (the *Financial Times*, the *Telegraph* and the *Times*), in order to comment, users have to be able to access the content before commenting on it. For example, the *Financial Times* allows users to read eight articles per month, with previous registration but without payment. Registered users can then comment on those articles.

Most of the media also allow users to vote for or rate the comments of other users. However, in most cases it does not affect the user's profile or the position of the comments. The *Guardian*, the *Times* and the *Telegraph* for example, offer users the button 'Recommend', showing for each comment the total number of recommendations that it has received. The *Sun* has the option 'Like', that works in a similar way. Other media, such as *BBC News*, the *Independent* or *Yahoo News* have a system that allows users to vote for the comment in a positive or negative way. This feature works as an indication of other users' opinions or attitudes towards the comment, but as has been said before, it does not affect the visibility of the comment. Only in the *Daily Mail* are the votes collected and then shown in the 'Arrow Factor', a symbol that appears in the user's profile, adding all the votes for all the users' comments. Finally, the *Financial Times* and the *Huffington Post* do not allow users to vote for or rate comments.

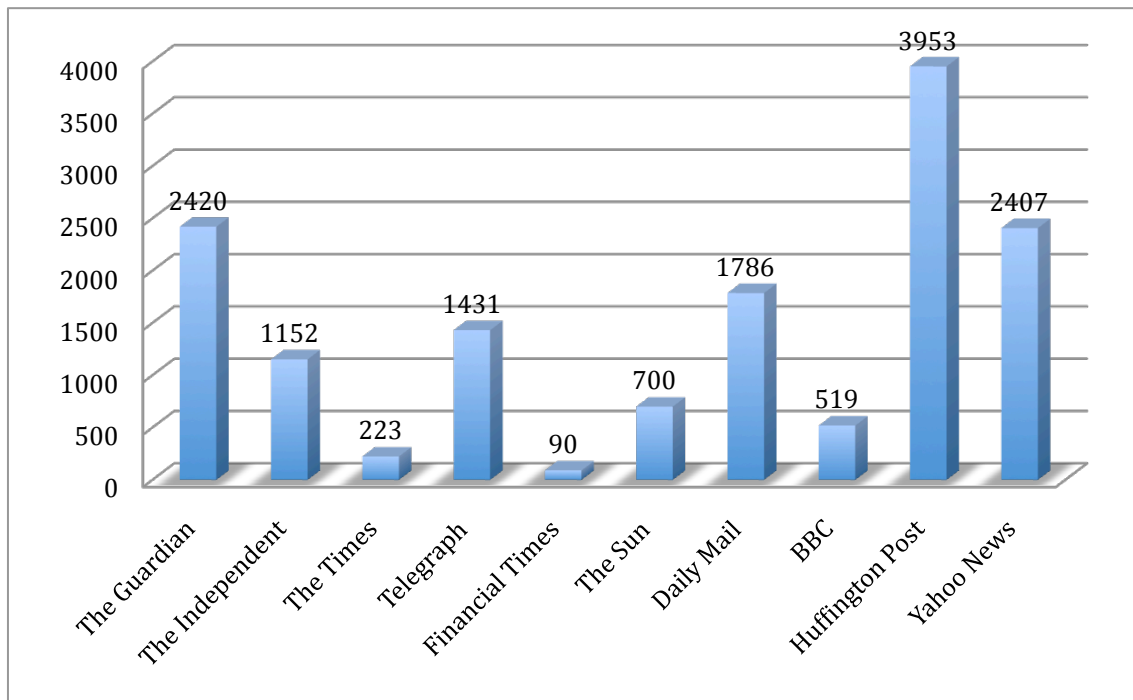
Regarding the feature 'reply comment', just five media include it, despite it being a tool that, potentially, could help to create better debates and facilitate user interaction. The *Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *BBC News* do not include it. The media that allow replies on comments are the *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Times*, *Huffington Post* and *Yahoo News*. The last one even includes a feature that shows for each news story the 'Most Replied' comments in order to guide users through the different conversations.

Finally, all the media, except the *Huffington Post*, include the option to report abusive, off topic, spam or inappropriate comments. Most of them include this feature as a flag or button. By clicking it, the user is notifying the abusive comment to the moderators, who will then proceed to determine if the comment is, in fact, abusive, spam or inappropriate. The *Times*, the *Guardian* and *BBC News* are the media that give the most options for reporting comments. They are also the media that ask for the most information from the user before taking into account the report. Both the *Times* and the *Guardian* offer a button that after clicking on it opens a small window where the user has to choose from among different reporting options (spam, offensive, disagree, off topic etc.), explain in a few words why they think the comment should be banned and, finally, include their email address. *BBC News*, after advising on which situations users should report, asks them to fill in a form, that also involves writing a short text explaining why the comment is inappropriate. In all cases, moderators will finally decide whether the reported comment is inappropriate or not.

5.2.2.1. Average number of comments on news stories

After analysing the different options included in the feature 'comment on news', I have included in the study sheet a fourth level of analysis. This fourth level is aimed at researching the actual degree of user participation in comments on news. As it has been said in the methodology chapter (chapter four), this data collected about the number of comment on news is not aimed at generalization. Rather, its aim is to offer a 'picture' of a particular moment in time, to be used together with the other data collected about how news media adopt comments on news. Figure 5.5 in next page shows the average number of comments for the first 20 news stories that appear on the home pages of the media's websites ³⁵.

³⁵ As already introduced in the methodology chapter, this figure shows an indicator of the number of comments made on the first 20 news stories on the home page. The total number of comments of each medium's first 20 news stories was counted over 5 different days (from Monday to Friday, alternating afternoon and evening periods). Then, the average number of comments for the first 20 news stories was calculated. The aim was to compare which media attract more comments and which ones fewer.

Figure 5.5. Average number of comments on news stories

As can be seen, the *Huffington Post's* news stories are the ones that generate the most comments. This is due to an active community of users but also due to the fact that the *Huffington Post* allows comments on all news stories, without any restriction. However, *Yahoo News* also accepts comments on all news stories but has an average number of comments that is almost half that of the *Huffington Post*. These two media are the only ones that accept comments on news stories without any restriction. On the other hand, the *BBC* is the medium that has the highest level of restriction on comments. Only one or two news stories per day on its homepage can be commented on. This situation seems to justify the low position of the *BBC* in Figure 5.5: it is the medium with the third lowest average number of comments on news stories. The other two, the *Times* and the *Financial Times* allow more news stories to be commented on per day, but are also the two media that have had paywalls to access content for longer than the others, which directly affects the number of users that can access and therefore comment on their news stories. To conclude, the positions of other media are more difficult to justify by considering their policies towards comments on news stories. The *Guardian*, for

example, closes comments frequently but, however, it is the medium which has the second highest average number of comments on news stories (2,420) just behind *the Huffington Post* and with more comments than the *Daily Mail*, which allows comments on almost all news stories. The *Independent* has a similar policy to that of the *Guardian* and its average is much lower, 1,152, similar to that of the *Telegraph*, with 1,431, which also conducts a similar policy. In contrast, the *Sun*, which allows comments on most news stories but has also recently introduced a paywall, has one of the lowest averages with regard to number of comments (700)³⁶.

Although the diverse policies towards ‘comment on news’ adopted by different media can explain some of the different levels of comments, there are other variables that must be taken into account, such as the overall number of visitors that each medium receives, the time that each news story appears on the homepage or the profile of the readers of each news website. Nevertheless, it could be reasonable to argue that a website that receives a higher number of visitors could easily receive a higher number of comments on news stories. However, as can be seen in Table 5.5 (see next page), this relationship is not as clear as it might seem. Table 5.5 offers two different indicators of traffic on news websites. First of all, traffic on all the media websites, with the only exception of *Yahoo News UK*, was researched using the Internet web traffic reporting company ‘Alexa’. Alexa’s software does not indicate the exact number of visitors for each website, but it does allow a comparison to be made of the different media positions among United Kingdom websites. Secondly, for some of the media present in this research, data can be used from the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), January 2013. What is interesting with regard to the ABC data is that it offers an indicator of daily unique browsers. Unfortunately, it was impossible to find data for four of the media: the *Huffington Post*, the *Financial Times*, the *Times* and *Yahoo News*³⁷.

³⁶ Data for the *Sun* is for the period before the introduction of the paywall.

³⁷ Unfortunately, it is not possible to obtain the number of daily unique browsers or *Yahoo News UK*’s position in Alexa’s ranking of UK websites. *Yahoo News UK* is included in the domain *Yahoo.com*, which makes it difficult for tools such as Alexa to compare its traffic data. *Yahoo.com* is, according to Alexa, the seventh most visited website in the United Kingdom.

Table 5.5. Traffic data for UK news media websites

	Position in Alexa's ranking of most visited websites in the UK	ABC January 2013 – Daily unique browsers	Average comment on news stories
bbc.co.uk	8	64 millions	519
Daily Mail	16	7,977,039	1786
The Guardian	28	4,319,370	2420
Telegraph	52	3,129,599	1431
The Sun	64	1,816,106	700
The Independent	134	1,214,144	1152
Huffington Post	168	-	3953
Financial Times	418	-	90
The Times	697	-	223
Yahoo News	-	-	2407

(Data collected during June 2013)

Table 5.5 shows a clear picture of the traffic attracted by the first six news websites (the *BBC*, *Daily Mail*, *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Sun*³⁸ and *Independent*). Data for these media have been found both in Alexa's ranking and in ABC January 2013, both sources showing a similar configuration of the visitors to news media websites. As can be seen, the average number of comments on news stories, however, does not have an absolute direct relationship with the number of visitors. *BBC News*, despite being by far the website that attracts the most visitors³⁹, is not the one that has the highest average number of comments. The medium that attracts the second highest number of visitors is the *Daily Mail*, with almost eight million daily unique browsers and is the sixteenth most visited website in the United Kingdom according to Alexa's ranking. The *Daily Mail* has an average number of comments on news of 1,786, lower than the *Guardian*, with 2,420, despite this last medium receiving almost half the number of visitors that the *Daily*

³⁸ The Sun started its paywall in August 2013, after this analysis was conducted.

³⁹ It should be taken into account that in the case of the BBC, the data is quantified for the website overall <http://www.bbc.co.uk> and not just for the <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/> that is analysed in this research. Nevertheless, the site of *BBC News* is generally considered the first one in visitors, not just because of its relevance in the United Kingdom, but also due to its international reputation.

Mail receives. Likewise, the *Telegraph* has a similar average number⁴⁰ of comments on news stories, 1,431, despite receiving nearly a third of the number of visitors that the *Daily Mail* receives. Finally, the *Sun* receives a relatively low average number of comments on news stories (700) for a number of daily unique browsers of almost two million. With 600,000 fewer daily unique browsers, the *Independent* has a higher average number of comments on news, 1,152.

For the other four media it is harder to make a clear analysis of their average number of comments on news stories compared to the number of visitors their websites attract. With regard to the *Huffington Post*, its position in Alexa's ranking is 168, close to that of the *Independent*, 134, that has 1,214,144 daily unique browsers, according to ABC. Although according to ABC data there is no certainty of the traffic of the *Huffington Post*, what is certain is that it is lower than the *Independent*, as it occupies a lower position in Alexa's ranking. Despite attracting fewer visitors, the *Huffington Post* receives many more comments, not just more than the *Independent*, but also more than all the other media in this study. With an average number of comments on news stories of 3,953, the *Huffington Post* has the highest average, duplicating for example, the average of the *Daily Mail*, which is in second position with regard to the number of visitors. Finally, both the *Financial Times* (418) and the *Times* (697) are way ahead in Alexa's ranking of the other media not only with regard to the number of visitors, but also with regard to the average number of comments on news stories (the *Financial Times*, 90, and the *Times*, 223). In the case of the *Financial Times* it is due to the fact that it is a medium focused on a particular kind of audience, with a paywall to access the contents. The *Times* figures should also be understood in the context of the recent implementation of a paywall. The *Times* had in 2010, according to ABC, a number of daily unique browsers of around one million. The newspaper lost most of them when it established a paywall to access all of the website's content⁴¹, which it must

⁴⁰ Despite the implementation of a paywall in April 2013 it seems that it did not affect the traffic on the website, mainly due to the fact that in the case of the *Telegraph* it can be considered a 'soft' paywall, allowing users to read a maximum of 20 news stories per day without subscription. See <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/adoption-metered-paywall-has-little-effect-telegraphs-overall-website-traffic>

⁴¹ See <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/jul/20/times-paywall-readership>

also have affected the number of comments on news. However, despite being in a lower position in Alexa's ranking than the *Financial Times* (418 and 697), the *Times* has a higher average number of comments on news stories (90 and 223). .

The media's policy towards comments on news stories, together with an analysis of the different levels of traffic that each website receives, can explain some of the aforementioned differences with regard to the average number of comments on news stories. However, although these concepts offer some insights, they do not represent the whole picture. As I will comment at the end of this chapter aimed at analysing United Kingdom news media websites, the strategies and efforts of some of the media under study in community building can explain some of the differences in the average number of comments on news stories. As will be seen in the last section of this chapter, aimed at analysing the participatory strategies of each medium under study, some media such as the *Huffington Post* maintain a policy of developing an active community of users that participate on the site, mainly with comments on news stories, incentivised by the adoption of tools that motivate user-user interaction. Other media, such as the *Daily Mail*, even if accepting comments on most of the news stories, do not have a website that attracts users to comment or to participate. On the other hand, media such as the *BBC* maintain a policy that consists of actively limiting the number of comments and user-user interaction, valuing other kinds of citizen participation.

5.2.3. Social networks

As Table 5.6 shows, all the media in this study use tools that allow users to share news stories or articles present on news media websites with their favourite social networks. Taking the form of small buttons normally present after the headlines of the news stories, these tools allow users to easily 'share', 'like' or 'tweet' the stories and, in this way, redistribute and spread the content among their own contacts on social networks. Regarding which social networks are most represented in these options included for sharing news stories or articles, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google + are the only social networks found on the news pages of all the media

under study. Less unanimity is seen regarding the presence on the news sites homepage of links to the medium's social network site. Only four media (the *Independent*, the *Times*, the *Sun* and the *Huffington Post*) offer these links that allow users quick access to their profiles on social network sites, normally to the Facebook or Twitter spaces of the medium concerned.

Table 5.6. Social networks tools

	Social networks links on homepage	Social networks tools to share news/articles
The Guardian	No	Yes
The Independent	Yes	Yes
The Times	Yes	Yes
Telegraph	No	Yes
Financial Times	No	Yes
The Sun	Yes	Yes
Daily Mail	No	Yes
BBC	No	Yes
Huffington Post	Yes	Yes
Yahoo News	No	Yes

5.2.3.1. Average number of interactions with social networks

In a similar way to that of the section aimed at studying comments on news stories, this fourth level of study will be aimed at quantifying users' interactions with the social networks tools provided by the different media under study in their news stories or articles⁴². Table 5.7 and Figure 5.6 (see both at following pages) show how users use the different tools provided by news media websites to share content on social networks. Similarly than in the analysis of comments on news, the data collected for social networks represents just a picture of a particular moment in time, rather than a generalization of each news media behaviour and

⁴² As explained in chapter four, the indicators of the average number of interactions on social network sites were obtained following this procedure: Firstly, over five days the number of interactions with social network sites made in the first 20 news stories (that is, all the 'likes', 'shares' or 'tweets' for each news story) were recorded. After that, the final total of all the interactions for each social network site was divided by five to obtain the average number of interactions for 20 news stories.

activity on social networks. Moreover, as it can be seen in Table 5.7 and Figure 5.6 not all the UK news media under study offer data of the number of times users have shared their content. Additionally, in some cases data is just available for Facebook and Twitter and not for other Social Networks⁴³.

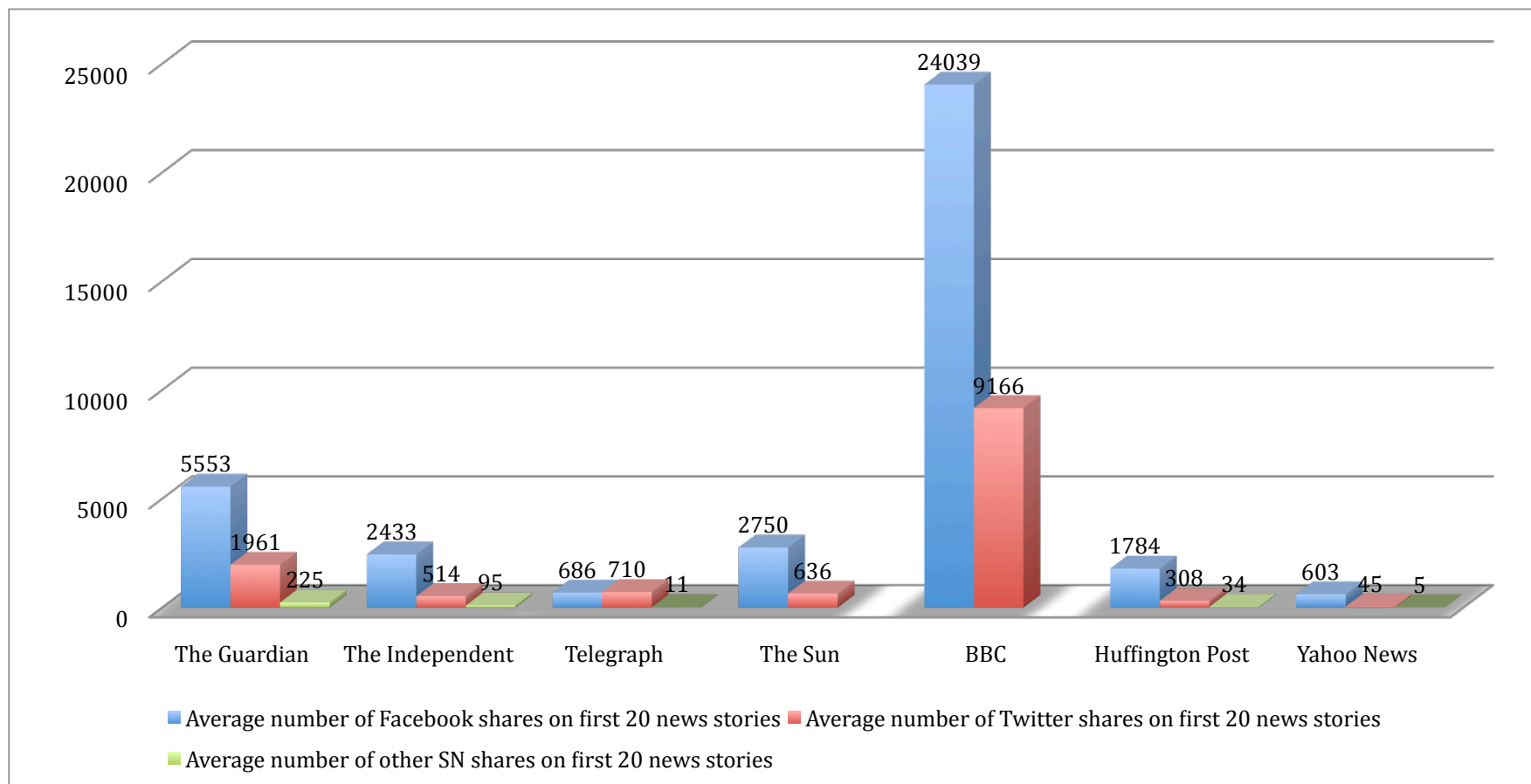
Table 5.7. Average UK media interactions on social networks

	Average number of Facebook shares on first 20 news stories	Average number of Twitter shares on first 20 news stories	Average number of other SN shares on first 20 news stories
The Guardian	5553	1961	225
The Independent	2433	514	95
Telegraph	686	710	11
The Sun	2750	636	-
BBC	24039	9166	-
Huffington Post	1784	308	34
Yahoo News	603	45	5

For those media that offer data for users' interactions, it can be seen that, for all the media with the only exception of the *Telegraph*, interacting on Facebook is the most popular way to share content on social networks, followed by sharing the news on Twitter. 'Shares' on Google+ and LinkedIn (both included in the category of 'other social networks') are well behind the previous two. With regard to Facebook, most media prefer the option of providing a button that allows users to quickly share a link to the news story on their Facebook profiles. Only the *Sun* prefers to provide a button that allows users to 'like' the news story. The *Huffington Post* allows both options. Finally, the *BBC* and the *Sun* just show data for users' interactions on Facebook and Twitter, without allowing users to use other social networks to interact with their news content.

⁴³ Among the media under study, two of them, the *Times* and the *Financial Times*, do not show data for users' interaction on social networks. Another medium, the *Daily Mail*, provides data for the total number of interactions, without specifying the number of interactions on each different social network (this data will be incorporated into the following analysis of the interactions overall).

Figure 5.6. UK media average number of interactions on social networks



Regarding the number of interactions, the *BBC* is by far the medium with the most interactions on Facebook and Twitter. All the other media are at another level in number of users sharing their content through the tools provided on news media websites. In order to better analyse these interactions, Figure 5.7 shows the aggregate of the average number of users' interactions on social networks for each medium. With the aim of making the data more comprehensible, the *BBC* was not included in the graph, as it has an average number of interactions of 33,205, much larger than the other media. Among the others, *The Guardian* is the one with the most interactions (7,739), followed by the *Daily Mail* (4,079). *The Sun* and *The Independent* have a similar number of interactions (3,386 and 3,042), followed by the *Huffington Post*, with 2,126. Finally, the *Telegraph* (1,407) and *Yahoo News* (653) are the media that have the lowest number of users' interactions.

Figure 5.7. UK media aggregate of the average number of social network interactions

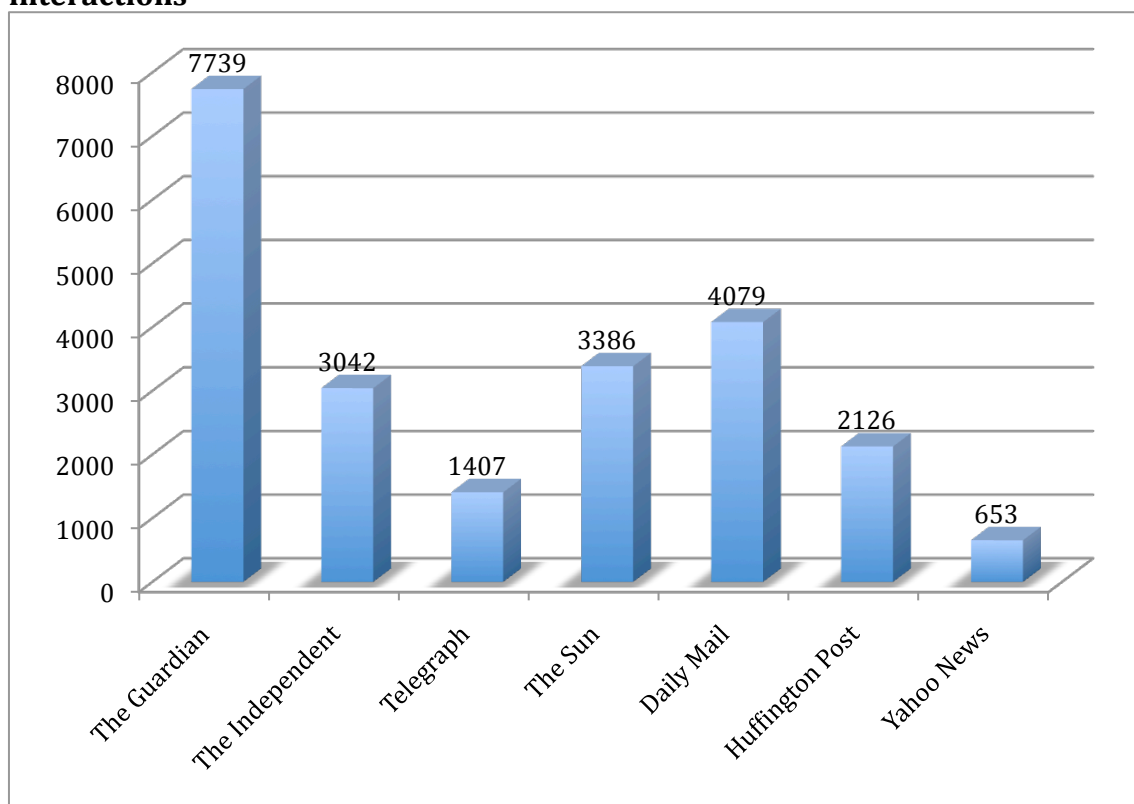


Figure 5.7 shows the aggregate of the average number of social network interactions made by users of news media websites. In Table 5.8 (see below) these aggregate averages have been included together with the available data of number of website visitors used to analyse comment on news (see former Table 5.5).

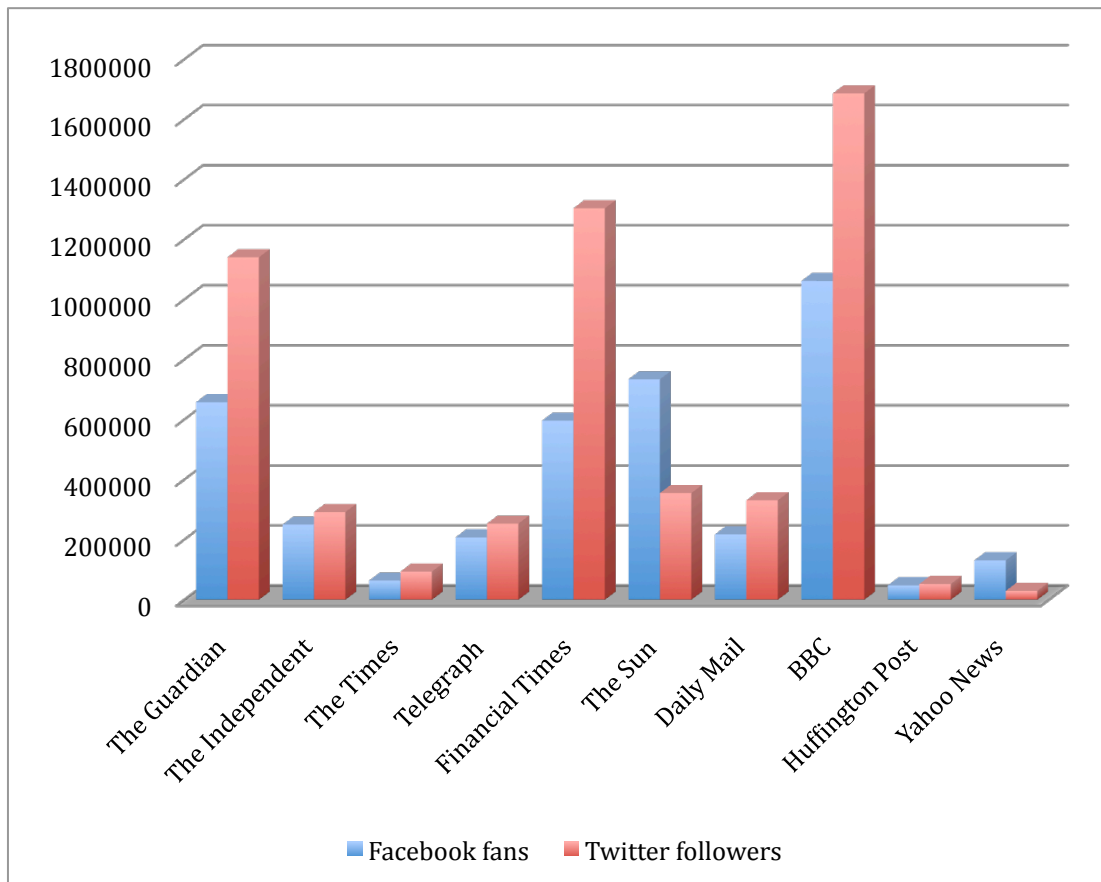
Table 5.8. UK media website traffic and the aggregate of the average number of social network interactions for each medium

	Position in Alexa's ranking of most visited websites in the UK	ABC January 2013 – Daily unique browsers	Aggregate of the average number of interaction on social networks
BBC	8	64 millions	33205
Daily Mail	16	7,977,039	4079
The Guardian	28	4,319,370	7739
Telegraph	52	3,129,599	1407
The Sun	64	1,816,106	3386
The Independent	134	1,214,144	3042
Huffington Post	168	-	2126
Financial Times	418	-	-
The Times	697	-	-
Yahoo News	-	-	653

As can be seen in Table 5.8, there is a correlation between the number of citizens visiting the website and the number of social network interactions made on the news website. As can be seen, the *BBC* is the medium that has the most users sharing or recommending its content. According to Table 5.8, it is also the website that receives the most visitors. The next media most used by users to share content are the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail*, third and second in number of visitors. The *Sun* and the *Independent* are also among the media most used to share content, being the fifth and sixth in number of visitors. Only the *Telegraph* shows a much lower number of interactions than its number of visitors would suggest. Finally, the *Huffington Post*, the medium with the lowest number of visitors (among the ones that have available data), also has one of the lowest aggregate average number of interactions, being only slightly higher than the *Telegraph*. These

patterns show a correlation between the number of users that visit the site and the amount of social network interaction related to content on news media websites. This is the opposite of what was seen in the previous section which analysed comment on news.

To analyse the number of shares and tweets made by users using the features present in media's news stories, even if it is a good indicator of social networks presence, may lead to the wrong conclusions about how news media adopt social networks and how they behave on them. A high number of social network interactions for a particular medium (former Figures 5.6 and 5.7) does not necessarily mean that this medium has an important presence on Facebook or Twitter. As has been seen, the number of social network interactions that each medium receives on its website has an important relationship with the number of visitors that the website attracts (without disregarding other factors also mentioned in the study of comments on news, like the time the news story is on the homepage, the profile of the audience of a particular medium and the kind of news story). Moreover, the audiences of the websites and social network of the media present in this research might be slightly, or completely, different. As will be seen in the focus groups, most citizens access media websites while just a few access media profiles on social networks. To better understand the real activity of news media on the two main social networks, it is necessary to analyse how users interact with them in their profiles on Twitter and Facebook, and not just in the features to share news that media adopt on their websites. In order to reflect how differently users behave on websites and on social networks, Figure 5.8 (see below) will show the different number of fans and followers of news media websites on the two main social networks, Facebook and Twitter.

Figure 5.8. Social networks presence of UK media

(Number of fans on Facebook and followers on Twitter on June 30th 2013)

Figure 5.8 shows the number of fans (Facebook) and followers (Twitter) for each medium. It shows different patterns of behaviour regarding the number of fans on the two main social networks. The *Financial Times* is the second in followers on Twitter and the fourth in fans on Facebook. The *Sun* is the second in number of Facebook fans, but the fourth in Twitter followers. As can be seen if we compare the data in Figure 5.8 with that of former Table 5.8, the presence of social network and the number of visitors to a website are not connected. The *BBC* is still the media in first place, both in terms of visitors and in social network presence, but after that, none of the other media follow the same patterns. The *Daily Mail* has a low number of fans and followers while the *Sun* and the *Financial Times*, both media with lower website traffic, have a bigger social networks presence. Also remaining in the same position are the two media at the bottom of the traffic

ranking, the *Times* and the *Huffington Post*, that also have low activity on social networks. The differences in users' behaviour on news media websites and on social networks can also be seen by comparing Figure 5.8 with Figure 5.6. In Figure 5.6 it is clear that citizens follow news media more on Twitter than on Facebook (except just on the *Sun* and *Yahoo News*). However, Figure 5.6 shows how users of news media websites prefer to share news links on Facebook, rather than on Twitter. These trends could point to a difference in the kind of users that tend to follow social networks and those that visit and share news content on news media websites.

5.2.4. Other forms of participative interactivity

This category groups five different forms of participative interactivity that cannot be included in any of the other previous categories. These forms of participatory interactivity are 'comment on blogs/opinion articles', 'forums', 'most read/commented/shared news' and 'multiple choice polls'. Table 5.9 resumes the results for the different news media under study.

Table 5.9. Other forms of participative interactivity in UK media

	Comment on blogs/opinion articles	Forums	Most read/commented/shared news	Multiple choice polls
The Guardian	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
The Independent	Yes	No	Yes	No
The Times	Yes	No	Yes	No
Telegraph	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Financial Times	Yes	No	Yes	No
The Sun	- *	No	Yes	No
Daily Mail	Yes	No	Yes	No
BBC	- *	No	Yes	No
Huffington Post	Yes	No	Yes	No
Yahoo News	- *	No	Yes	Yes

* These media do not include opinion articles

As Table 5.9 shows, most media allow users to comment on their blogs or opinion articles, with the only exceptions of the *Sun*, *BBC* and *Yahoo News*, media that do not include opinion articles or journalists' blogs on their websites. In all the media that accept comments on these kinds of articles or blogs, users have the same options that the medium allows in its 'comment on news' ('reply comment', 'rate comment' etc.).

Despite being formerly a popular feature⁴⁴, forums are now used by the *Telegraph* on its social network 'My Telegraph', as a way for registered users to communicate with each other. None of the other media use this kind of user-user asynchrony communication. Similar consideration can be made for multiple choice polls. A tool widely adopted some years ago⁴⁵, it is now just used by *The Guardian* and *Yahoo News*. Although it is a quick and easy way for users to give their opinions about current affairs, only these two media include these kinds of polls on their websites.

To conclude, all media use users' data to make rankings of news stories. All of them have a ranking of most viewed stories, normally in the form of a small feature on the right hand side of the webpage. The *Independent*, the *Times* and the *Sun* also offer a ranking of the most commented on stories, while the *BBC* also shows a ranking of the most shared stories.

5.3. Productive Interactivity

The label of 'productive interactivity' groups together the different tools that allow users to publish original content on the media websites. Similarly than in the former category of participative interactivity, the relationship takes place in a user-professional context, being absent in the case of productive interactivity the relation user-user. The main difference is that in the case of productive

⁴⁴ See for example the series of studies about UK media and participatory journalism: Thurman (2008) and Hermida and Thurman (2008).

⁴⁵ Idem

interactivity the aim of the user is to contribute with original content. Under this label of 'productive interactivity' seven different indicators have been grouped: 'readers' stories', 'readers' photos', 'readers' videos', 'readers' audios', 'letters to the editor', 'interviews with readers' questions' and 'readers' blogs' (see Table 5.10). This section will analyse how the media under study in the United Kingdom use these features. Firstly, there will be an analysis of which productive tools are the most and the least adopted. After that, there will be a study of the number of tools adopted by each medium, concluding with an individual analysis of each one of the media under study and the productive tools that they are using.

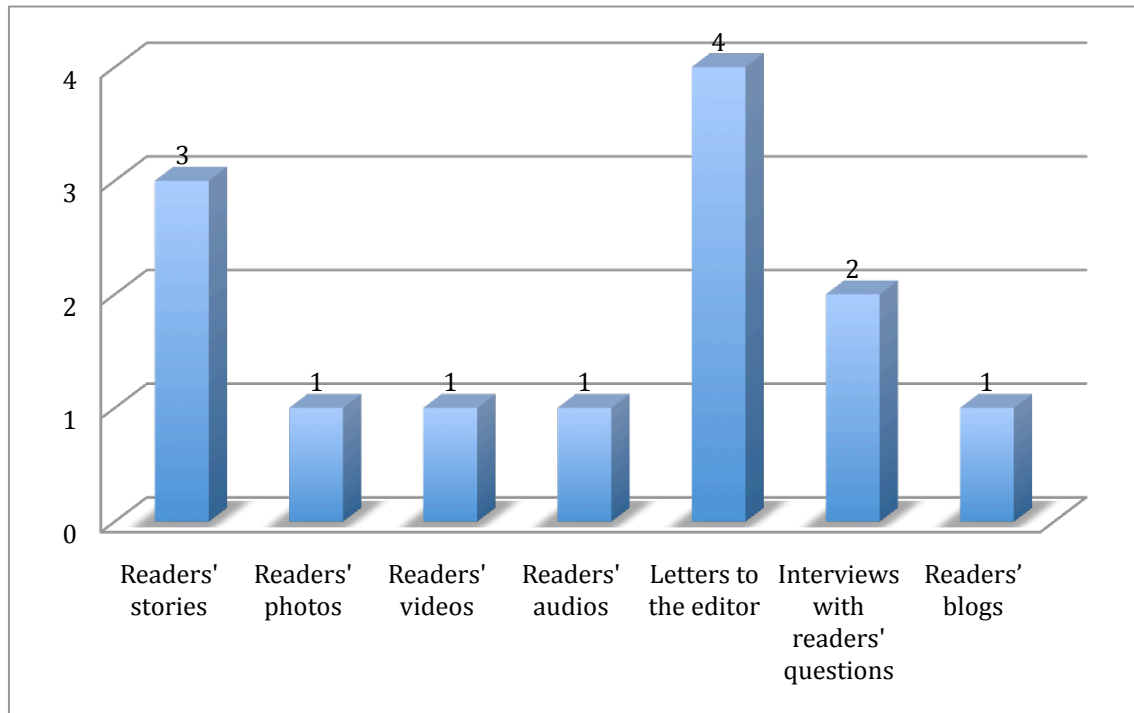
Table 5.10 Productive interactivity

	Readers' stories	Readers' photos	Readers' videos	Readers' audios	Letters to the editor	Interviews with readers' questions	Readers' blogs
The Guardian	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
The Independent	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
The Times	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
The Telegraph	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Financial Times	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
The Sun	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Daily Mail	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
BBC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Huffington Post	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Yahoo News	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No

Figure 5.9 (see next page) shows which productive tools are the most adopted. As can be seen, 'letters to the editor', adopted by four media (*The Independent*, *The Times*, *Telegraph* and *Financial Times*) is the most adopted productive tool. This tool, however, cannot be considered as a 'purely' digital tool. In fact, it is the equivalent of the digital age of the letters to the editor that newspapers have been publishing in their printed versions for many years. On their websites, news media publish a higher number of these letters, but the aim and philosophy of the format is the same. In none of the media that adopt this tool has there been seen any

response by the newsroom or similar feedback, features that would differentiate the digital format from the traditional one.

Figure 5.9. Number of UK media adopting each productive tool

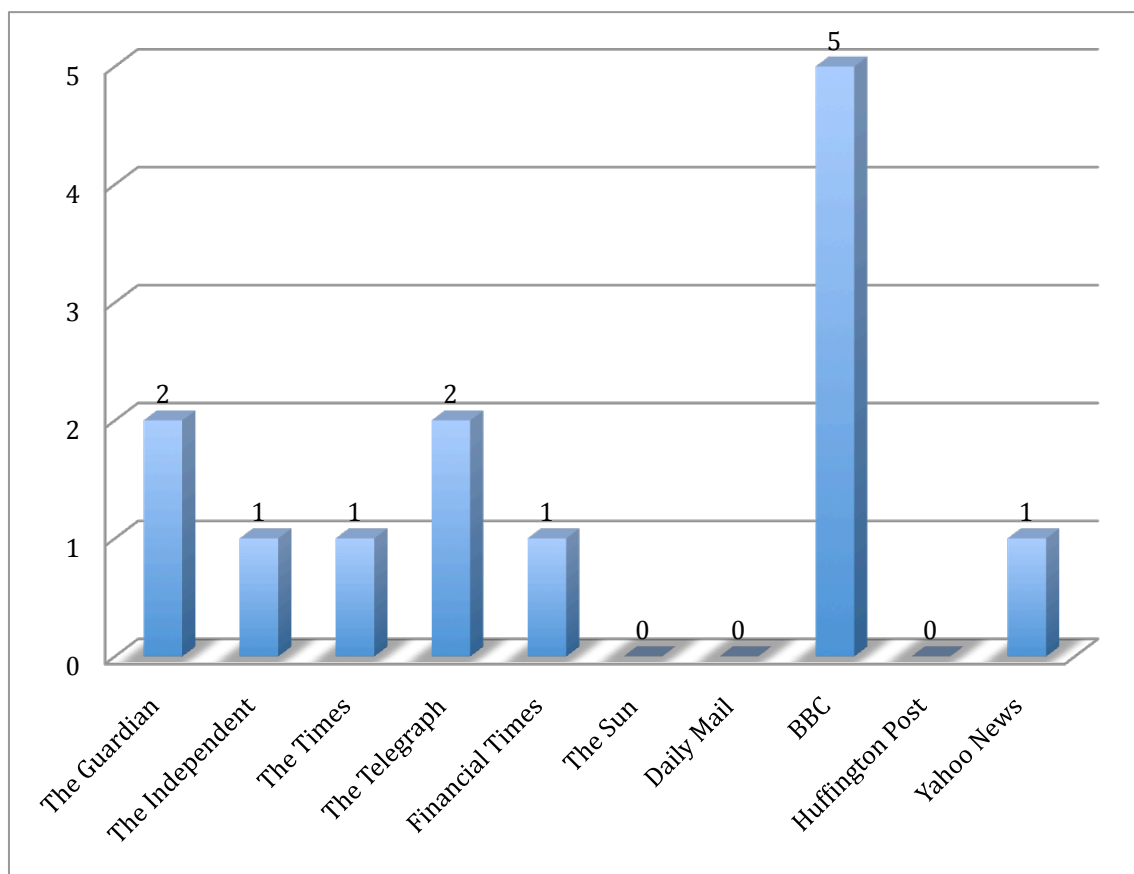


Three media adopt 'readers' stories'. These are: *The Guardian*, *BBC* and *Yahoo News*. The *BBC* also allows users to send original material in the form of pictures, video or audio. In all cases, the media that allow these different formats for sending original content, establish strong controls over publication. Only *Yahoo News* accepts these forms of publishing material without exercising previous control. However, users first have to register on the 'Yahoo Contributor Network', a process that is not quick and requires giving personal data and justifying an interest in the community. Only when users are registered can they publish in the 'Your Voice' section without previous control, for example, in a blog. In the other two media, *BBC* and *The Guardian*, it is more difficult for users to publish on the site. Users can send material to the media, but then is the media who decides in which way it will use these materials. For example, the *BBC* has a section that encourages users to send feedback and original material in different formats

(audio, video, pictures etc.). However, there is almost no place on the website where these materials can be seen. Just a few picture galleries, without any journalistic interest and some programmes (TV and radio) where the users feedback is commented on, but always without having access to the original comments of the users.

Finally, *The Guardian* and the *BBC* sometimes use users' questions to conduct interviews (live or not). The questions can be sent before the interview by email, Twitter or using special features that the websites provide. In any case, the questions are always moderated previously. With regard to 'readers' blogs', only *The Telegraph* allows registered users to open their own blog inside the site.

Figure 5.10. Adoption of productive interactivity tools in UK news media



As can be seen in Figure 5.10, three of the media under study do not adopt any form of productive interactivity (*The Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *Huffington Post*).

Moreover, three other media, *The Independent*, *The Times* and *Financial Times* just adopt the feature 'letters to the editor', a kind of participatory tool that already existed before the Internet in most of the newspapers. The *Financial Times*, for example, has a long tradition of publishing letters to the editor, with the website publishing many more letters than the paper edition. As a first conclusion, it can be said that six of the media present in this research do not use the Internet to promote or publish users' material.

In the group of media that develop and try to adopt users' content (the *Guardian*, *BBC*, *Yahoo News* and *Telegraph*), the most important case is the *BBC*. The news website of the British Broadcasting Corporation adopts all the possible features of productive interactivity, except 'letters to the editor'. As has been mentioned previously, the *BBC* groups all these features in the section called 'Have Your Say' and in the related radio and television programmes.

The *Guardian* is the second media that adopts more tools, two. In its section 'Comment is free' it allows users to send 'commissioned articles': users can send a story or raise an issue with the newspaper and then it will decide if a journalist should research more on the subject and write an article about it. A section of 'Comment is free', called 'You tell us' collects all the cases in which the newspaper has started an article on the previous advice of users⁴⁶. Another option, less common than the previous one, is to send an article proposal to the section 'Comment is free'. This article, if accepted, will be entirely written by the user and published in the section but always with previous control by the medium. Similarly, *Yahoo News* allows users to publish in the section called 'Your Voice', but first it asks those interested to join the 'Yahoo Contributor Network'. As has been mentioned previously when the participations sections were described, joining the

⁴⁶ Although no similar action of networking journalism has been active during the time of this research, it is necessary to mention here the use of citizens' cooperation by some news media to aid in the news-production processes of some issues. An example of this 'networked journalism' is the MP's expenses scandal and the efforts that some news media like The Guardian made in order to facilitate that common citizens check the thousands of pages of data about the MP's expenses. For more information about this case: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/jun/21/mps-expenses-crowd-sourcing-data>

Network is a long process that involves filling in a form and waiting for a number of days.

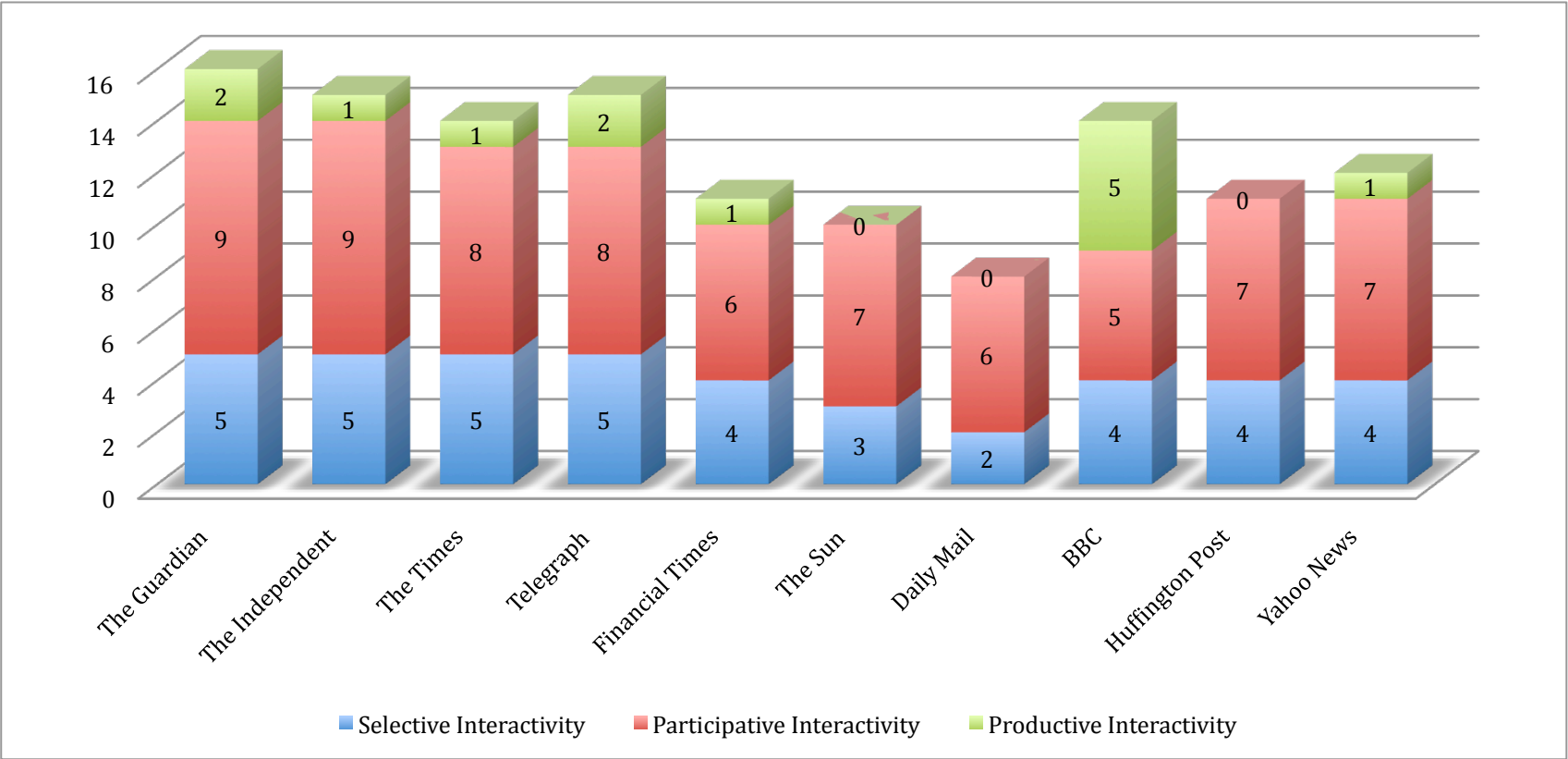
Finally, the *Telegraph* is the only media present in this research that allows users to open and publish in their own blogs. To open a blog on the site, users have to be subscribed. Blogs are opened in 'My Telegraph', the space on the website where users can visit other users' profiles, see their comments on news stories and read other blogs. In this case, blogs do not appear on the main website and only registered users that access 'My Telegraph' can read them.

5.4. Summary of results

This section will introduce a summary of the findings of this study of the ways in which United Kingdom media adopt user participation. First of all, an analysis will be made of the kinds of participation the media under study in the United Kingdom adopt on their websites: selective interactivity, participative interactivity or productive interactivity. Once the focus groups have been analysed, knowing which kinds of participation news media in the United Kingdom adopt will allow a comparison to be made between media's behaviour and users' preferences and attitudes towards online media participation. Secondly, the behaviour of each medium towards participation will be analysed. Previous research (Masip & Suau, 2014; Suau & Masip, 2014, 2015), points to the fact that Spanish and Mediterranean online news media are adopting a series of different models with regard to user participation. Media in the United Kingdom will be analysed individually in order to better understand their attitudes towards participation.

To start the summary of results Figure 5.11 (next page) shows the number of tools that each medium adopts, differentiated by kind of interactivity. In analysing these results, it must be taken into account that some kinds of interactivity have a higher total number of tools than others. A total of six selective interactivity tools, fourteen tools labelled as 'participative interactivity' and seven tools as 'productive interactivity' have been included on the code sheet used in this research.

Figure 5.11. Number of tools in UK media per kind of interactivity



As can be seen in Figure 5.11, the *Guardian* is the medium that adopts the most tools, with a total of sixteen. Among those, it adopts almost all the available selective tools, five (out of a total of six). However, the majority of tools adopted by this medium are participative (nine, out of a total of fourteen included on the code sheet), and just two are under the label of productive interactivity (out of a total of seven). Three other media show a similar configuration of tools also: the *Independent*, *Times* and *Telegraph*. All of them adopt a majority of participative tools (between nine and eight), adopting the same number of selective tools (five), and showing scant interest in developing productive interactivity (adopting just one or two tools).

Another group of media, formed by *Yahoo News* and the *Financial Times* show similar patterns but adopting always a lower number of tools. Although both media adopt one productive tool, the number of selective interactivity tools is lower than the previous group (four), as they are the participative tools adopted (seven *Yahoo News* and six the *Financial Times*). Similarly to *Yahoo News*, the *Huffington Post* also adopts four selective tools and seven participative, but no productive ones. Two other media, the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail* also show no interest in productive interactivity. These two media also adopt a lower number of tools in selective and participative interactivity. Finally, the BBC is the only medium that adopts a high number of productive interactivity tools, with a total of five, the same number as productive tools and one more than selective, a category in which it adopts four different tools.

According to the data shown in Figure 5.11, it can be concluded that United Kingdom news media mainly tend to adopt forms of participation that involve a low level of user content creation. That is, selective interactivity and participative interactivity tools. Most news media do not adopt productive interactivity tools which allow users to publish original content. And those which adopt these kind of tools, as will be seen in the following section, establish some form of previous control in order not to allow users to freely publish this kind of content.

As a result, the most common options for users to participate on news media websites are comments on news stories and social media distribution of news media content, both tools included under the label of 'participative interactivity' and adopted by all the news media under study. Accordingly, in the qualitative chapter, which will explain the results of the focus groups, citizens' attitudes towards comments on news stories and social media will receive special attention. However, citizens' attitudes towards the features included under the label of 'productive interactivity' should also be taken into account. Underrepresented in most media, it will be necessary to ascertain if citizens are really interested or not in this kind of participation. Similarly, personalization options, absent on news media websites, should also be analysed carefully, in order to better ascertain if citizens value these kinds of tools.

In the following paragraphs, each news medium under research in the United Kingdom will be analysed individually. The aim is to better understand, once the general picture is clear, the different policies and strategies conducted by each news medium with regard to user participation.

- The *Guardian*: This news medium is the one that adopts a higher total number of tools, sixteen (five selective, nine participative and two productive). The *Guardian* offers the option to register using social media profiles. It also provides a personal profile that keeps some of the user's information. However, it does not allow any kind of direct relationship among users (for example, marking favourites or friends, or sending private messages). Regarding comments on news stories, the online newspaper tries to control them by limiting the number of stories where users can comment. Even though it limits the number of news stories that can be commented on, due to the high number of visitors, the *Guardian* receives a high number of comments, being the medium that receives the second highest number of comments in this study. It also offers several tools in order to control and facilitate conversation (report abusive comments and reply to other users' comments). The objective of the medium is, without completely disregarding comments on news stories to channel the participatory interactivity towards its section 'Comment is free'. In this section, aimed at users' comments

and debate, it also includes some options for productive interactivity, such as sending stories or interviews with users' questions, although these are not the main tools promoted in the section. There is no chance for users to directly publish on the website, and, during the time that this research was conducted, it was difficult to find a story in 'Comment is free' that had been written by a user. Staff journalists, or guests who are writing in answer to a previous invitation from the medium, write most of the stories in the section, which normally has a high component of opinion, in contrast to the informative nature of the news present in other sections. Finally, with regard to social networks, the *Guardian* is one of the news media with the most fans and followers, and is also one of the first (the second, after the *BBC*) in users' activity sharing their news content through the tools provided on the medium's website.

- The *Independent*: Participation is structured on this medium in a similar way to that of the *Guardian*. It has a high level of total number of tools, 15. These are mainly participative (nine tools) or selective (five). The *Independent* has only one productive tool on its website, and this one is 'letters to the editor' a feature that, as has been explained previously, is not something new, it already existed before the Internet. In this way the *Independent* website does not use any new form of productive interactivity. The *Independent* has a participation section, 'Voices', similar to the *Guardian's* 'Comment is free' but it does not attract a high number of comments. As a result, participative interactivity is more focused on comments on news stories, which are allowed in almost all news stories. Among the news media present in this study, the *Independent* shows a correct relationship between visits to the website and number of comments. With regard to the distribution of news media content through social networks the *Independent* has a relevance according to its number of visitors and fans/followers: neither especially active nor especially passive.

- The *Times*: Any conclusion about the *Times's* policies towards participation should start by considering that this newspaper adopted a complete pay wall for its contents in 2010. No participation option is possible for those users that do not have a subscription. The *Times* adopts fourteen tools (five selective, eight

participative and one productive). User participation on the website is mainly restricted to participative interactivity tools, through the section 'Feedback', comments on news stories or content distribution on social networks. The *Times* only provides 'letters to the editor' as a productive interactivity tool, like the *Independent*. Participation in 'Feedback' is never in a direct way. Users can email the section with comments or letters, and then the journalist in charge of the section writes the stories commenting on users' feedback. As a result of its paywall, the *Times* has one of the lowest average number of comments on news stories. This low average could be an advantage in order to create a small but active community of users that know each other, but the medium does not provide any kind of tool in order to promote user-user interaction. Data shows that the *Times* has a low number of fans on Facebook and followers on Twitter. No data is provided about the number of interactions using the social networks tools provided by the medium.

- The *Telegraph*: This newspaper website is in second place with regard to the number of tools that allow user participation. In total it provides fifteen tools: five categorised as 'selective interactivity', eight as 'participative interactivity' and two as 'productive interactivity'. As with the *Times*, considerations about the *Telegraph's* model of user participation have to take into account that the journal established a paywall, in this case in April 2013. But, unlike the *Times*, the *Telegraph's* paywall is more open to non-subscribed users: it allows them to read twenty articles per month. Consequently, the paywall does not affect user participation on the website. None of the participation tools require subscription, just registration on the website which is without charge. The *Telegraph* structures participation mainly through two different sections: 'Comment' and 'My Telegraph'. 'Comment' is the participation section of the newspaper: it collects different stories, especially chosen to be commented on by users. *The Telegraph* allows comments on almost all the news stories, having a number of comments that corresponds to its website traffic. The news included in the section 'Comment' receives a higher number of comments, an average of around 100 per article. The *Telegraph* also has a section called 'My Telegraph', that is intended to be a users' meeting point. Designed in the same way as a social network, 'My Telegraph'

allows users to interact by starting and participating in discussion topics (also opened by journalists), saving comments on news stories and opening their own blogs or commenting on those of others. In fact, 'My Telegraph' concentrates the productive interactivity tools that the journal allows, allowing users to create debates or express their views in blogs that are not monitored beforehand. Despite these features, 'My Telegraph' lacks options for users to interact directly. The *Telegraph's* users are not really active in these blogs and discussion boards. Similarly, *Telegraph* readers are also not especially active in sharing news content through social networks tools.

- *Financial Times*: This newspaper with a special emphasis on economic news, has a website that allows a medium level of tools, eleven. Four of these tools are included under the label of 'selective interactivity', six under 'participative interactivity' and one under 'productive interactivity'. As with the two previous media, the *Financial Times* has a paywall to access its contents. In this case, as with the *Telegraph*, it can be considered a 'soft' paywall: it allows users full access to some generic content (with previous registration and a maximum of eight articles per month), but for more specialised content users need to subscribe. Regarding user participation, no special policy can be determined. It has no section aimed at participation, and the only productive tool allowed is 'letters to the editor', following the long tradition of the print newspaper in this kind of participation. The *Financial Times* has the lowest average number of comments on news stories, as well as also one of the lowest numbers of visitors to the website. However, the *Financial Times* is among the most followed news media on Twitter and Facebook. These trends in comments can be linked with the particular profile both of the content published by the medium and the readers' characteristics. This means users are interested in the content or the reputation of the newspaper, consequently following the medium on social media, but are not interested in commenting on this content. One possible explanation of this behaviour could be that the content provided by the newspaper on social networks has a high informative value. Users could therefore be following the *Financial Times'* posts on social networks because this is a good way to be quickly informed, but without having any interest in debating the content with other users, or the time to do so.

Quantitative data from the *Financial Times* about its users' activity on social networks would be interesting in order to verify at which level its contents are shared. Unfortunately, the *Financial Times* does not provide this information on its website.

- The *Sun*: The website of this newspaper is one of the news media's websites that offer fewer tools for user participation. Just ten tools in total are allowed on the website, most of them being participative interactivity tools (seven). Three are selective interactivity tools and there are no productive interactivity tools. The *Sun* focuses on user participation in comments on news stories and content distribution on social media. With regard to comments on news stories, it allows comments on all news stories, its website ranking being seventh in this study as far as the average number of comments is concerned, a low position if the fact that the *Sun's* website ranks fifth in volume of traffic is taken into consideration. On social networks the *Sun* has the second highest number of fans on Facebook and the fourth highest on Twitter, and has the third position in shared content through news media options to share on social networks. *The Sun's* policies with regard to comments and social media can be identified as a 'catch all' policy, based on attracting as many comments and fans/followers as possible, but without developing different tools that could organise this dialogue or users' interactions. During the time period of this research, The *Sun* adopted a paywall to access its content. Although the participatory tools remained almost the same after its introduction, the data regarding website visitors and the average number of comments were collected before the paywall was introduced. According to some analysts, the medium lost around 62% of the visits when the paywall was established⁴⁷. Despite this drop in number of website visitors, the number of subscribers to the *Sun* reached 117,000 in December 2013⁴⁸, some months after the establishment of the paywall, confirming its decision to charge users to access content.

⁴⁷ See <http://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2013/sep/16/sun-paywalls>

⁴⁸ See <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/dec/06/sun-paying-subscribers-paywall>

- *Daily Mail*: This medium has the lowest number of tools on its website. The *Daily Mail* only allows a total number of eight tools. Most of these tools are included under the category of 'participative interactivity', just two under 'selective interactivity' and none under 'productive interactivity'. It does not allow selective tools common to all other news media, such as RSS syndication or newsletters. Neither does it include any way of contacting the author, the newsroom or simply sending some feedback to the medium. Like the *Sun*, it limits participation to a 'catch all' policy based on comment on news and content distribution on social media. Regarding comments, the *Daily Mail* accepts comments on all news stories, and does not use any tool that allows the saving of comments or a minimum user's profile. It ranks fourth in average number of comments and has the second most visited website. Despite the relatively low number of fans and followers in this medium's profiles on social networks, especially taking into account that it has the second most visited website, the *Daily Mail* fans are especially active in sharing news stories from the website. The *Daily Mail* ranks third in average number of interactions on social networks, with only the *BCC* and the *Guardian* having a higher average.

- *BBC News*: This website has a total of fourteen tools for user participation. The distribution of tools among the three forms of interactivity is slightly different from the other media present in this research. The *BBC News*' website allows five tools described as 'productive interactivity', five as 'participative interactivity' and four as 'selective interactivity'. *BBC News* is, therefore, the medium that has the highest number of productive tools (five) and the lowest number of participative ones (four). The website allows users to send all kinds of content to the website. This content is included in the section 'Have Your Say', the participation section. Moreover, the content could be used in some of the television or radio programmes linked to the section. However, the medium keeps all the control in this process. No direct publication is allowed and the content, if it is published, is also in a secondary way, commented on or analysed by journalists (with the exception of some picture galleries). *BBC News* is also characterised by the limits it establishes to comments on news stories. Comments are allowed on only a few news stories per day, and it has not developed tools that organise the debates and

user-user interaction. As a result, *BBC News* has the lowest average number of comments, even if it is, with a large gap between it and the one in second place, the most visited website among the media studied in this research. Due to the popularity of the *BBC*, it is the medium with the highest number of fans on social networks.

- The *Huffington Post*: This digital medium allows a total of eleven tools. None of them is included under the category of 'productive interactivity'. It allows seven participative tools and four selective. The *Huffington Post* is the medium most focused on comments on news stories, almost disregarding any other kind of user participation. The user's profile is designed to facilitate users getting to know each other. Users can see others' profiles and the comments they made and also be friends or followers of other users, as on a social network. Moreover, the *Huffington Post* gives 'badges' to users according to the number of friends they have or the number of comments they have made. These badges are also shown when users comment on news stories. However, the *Huffington Post*, like all the other media present in this research, does not allow direct user-user communication. As a result of this participation policy based on comment on news, the *Huffington Post* is the medium with the highest average number of comments on news stories, even if it is one of the news media with the least number of visitors to the website. Regarding social media, the situation is radically different. Despite it being a medium that exists only online, its relevance on social media is low. It has one of the lowest number of fans and followers. However, these are an active community that frequently share the *Huffington Post's* news through its social networks tools, leading this medium to have a higher average number of social media interactions than other news media such as the *Telegraph* or *Yahoo News*, that have a higher number of fans and followers.

- *Yahoo News*: The second digital media in this study, the *Yahoo News* service, allows a total of twelve tools, distributed in this way: four selective, seven participative and one productive. However, the productive feature that it allows, called 'Your Voice', is not really promoted on the site and to publish in the section can be difficult. It works as a platform for users to publish their own written

contents, but without any connection with the site. *Yahoo News* allows comments on all news stories, having the third highest average number of comments among all the media present in this research. The site, however, does not allow users to have any kind of personal profile or connection with other users. As a result of this high level of number of comments and the lack of features to facilitate users' connection, it can be concluded that comments on *Yahoo* are not controlled by the medium, which simply follows a 'catch-all' policy. With regard to social networks, *Yahoo* has one of the least followed profiles on Facebook and Twitter, and the visitors to its website are not especially active in sharing its content.

CHAPTER 6

Catalan media and online participation

This chapter will present the results of the content analysis based on the application of the code sheet, showing interactivity features among the selected news media in Catalonia. As has been described in the methodology chapter, these media are: *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *20 minutos*, *ARA*, *El País*, *El Mundo*, *El Punt Avui*, *324.CAT*, *Nació Digital*, *Vilaweb*. The results will be presented following the same structure as the code sheet (as it has been done in the previous chapter that has introduced the results for United Kingdom media), divided according to kinds of interactivity: i. Selective Interactivity ii. Participative Interactivity iii. Productive Interactivity; and grouping the tools according to the different levels of research: i. Kind of Interactivity ii. Participatory Tools iii. Tool's Options iv. Users' data analysis.

6.1. Selective Interactivity

'Selective interactivity' groups six different indicators: 'Registration', 'RSS', 'Newsletter', 'Personalization options', 'Participation section' and 'News media contact email'. Table 6.1 (see next page) shows how the different media under research in Catalonia adopt each one of these tools. The section will, firstly, present an overall analysis of how the different media adopt the different selective tools. Secondly, the focus will be put on the overall study of the different tools, in order to analyse which ones are adopted and which ones are offered less by media. Finally, the analysis will dig deeper, analysing each tool and how it is adopted by

each one of the media under study, explaining the specificities of each of the media's websites in their adoption of selective tools.

Table 6.1. Selective Interactivity - Catalan media

	Registration	RSS	Newsletter	Personalization Options	Participation Section	News media contact email
La Vanguardia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
El Periódico	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
20 minutos	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
ARA	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
El País	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
El Mundo	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
El Punt Avui	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
324.CAT	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Nació Digital	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Vilaweb	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes

Figure 6.1 in next page shows the number of selective tools adopted by each one of the Catalan media. It reflects how four media adopt all possible selective tools, with the only exception of 'personalization options'. These media are *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *20 minutos* and *El Punt Avui*. In addition to these media there is a second group of four news media websites that each adopt four selective tools. *Ara*, *El País* and *Vilaweb* can be included in this group. They adopt the same tools as the previous group but do not include a participation section on their websites. *324.CAT* also adopts four different tools, but in its case, apart from 'personalization options, the website of this medium does not also include the option of subscribing to newsletters. Unlike the former three media, it does however include a participation section. Finally, the websites of *El Mundo* and *Nació Digital* are the ones that adopt fewer selective tools. *El Mundo* just adopts three different tools, 'registration', 'RSS' and 'news media contact email'. *Nació Digital* adopts two selective tools, 'registration' and 'news media contact email'.

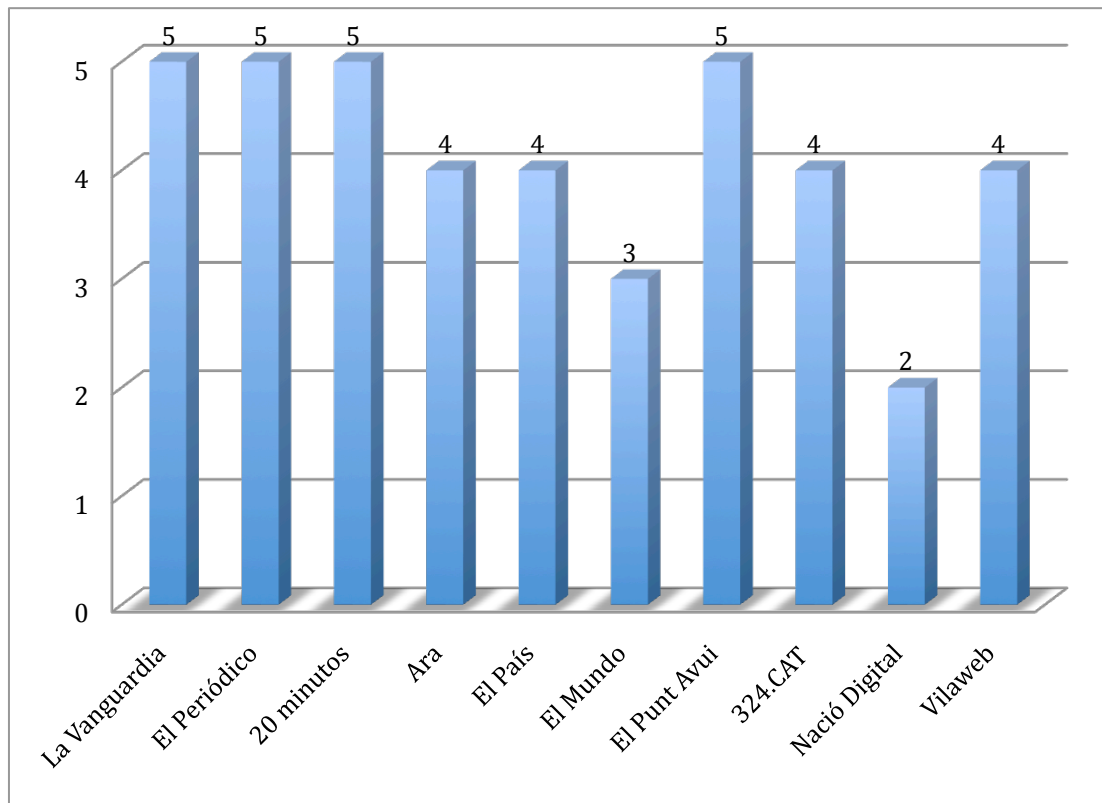
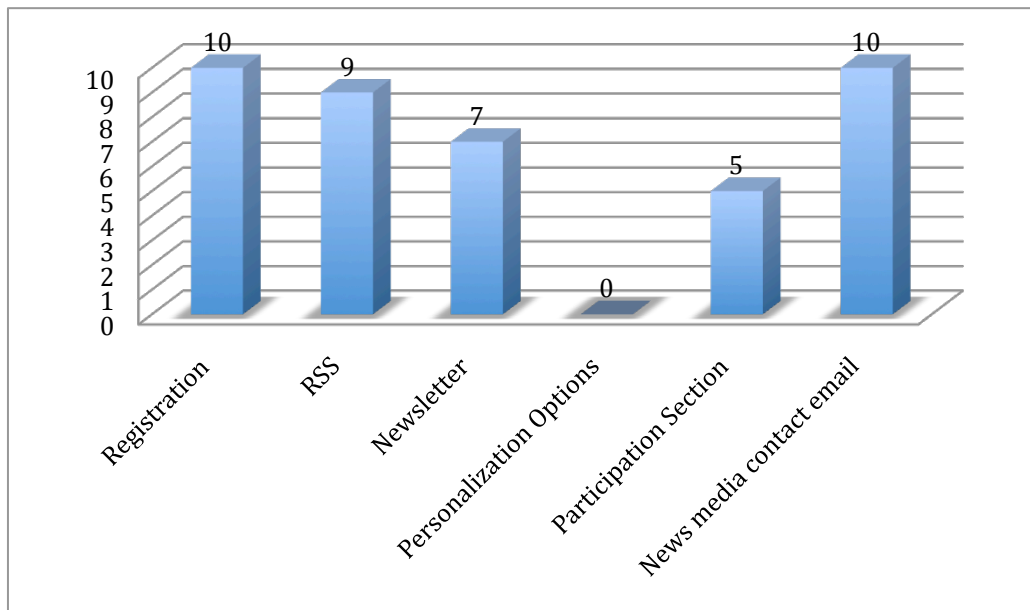
Figure 6.1. Number of selective tools by medium (Catalonia)

Figure 6.2 (see next page) shows the number of media that adopt each of the participatory tools labelled as ‘selective interactivity’. As can be seen, ‘registration options’ and ‘news media contact email’, adopted by all media, and ‘RSS syndication’, adopted by nine, are the most common options adopted by the media under study. Seven media offer users the option to subscribe to newsletters, with different options to customise the content they receive in their emails, normally connected with the medium sections (politics, international affairs, sports etc.). Half of the media under study, five, have a section on their websites aimed at user participation. Another one does not have a section aimed at citizen participation, but adopts a system of internal comments and user connection that works in a similar way to a social network. Finally, none of the media adopts any form of homepage news customization. The only similar tool is the one adopted by the website of the Catalan newspaper *Ara*, with a section on the website that suggests content to users according to their previous navigation of the site.

Figure 6.2. Number of Catalan media adopting each selective tool

6.1.1. Registration and user profile

All media under research in Catalonia offer some kind of registration option. However, the benefits of being registered widely differ from one news media to another. Especially between those media that adopt some kind of paywall and those that have open access websites.

Those that do not adopt any kind of paywall form a first group of seven media. These media are *La Vanguardia*⁴⁹, *El Periódico*⁵⁰, *20 minutos*, *El País*, *Nació Digital*, *324.CAT*, and *Vilaweb*. In this group, *20 minutos* is the only one that does not offer any particular benefit to users that register on its website. Like *La Vanguardia* or *El Periódico*, it allows users to use their profile on some social networks to register on the website. In this way, users' activity is connected to these social networks,

⁴⁹ *La Vanguardia* adopted a freemium model in which to access opinion articles, readers must be subscribed. Although it is a 'soft' paywall, the amount of content under paywall is limited, with just a few opinion articles per day and is the reason why this medium is analysed with other media that do not adopt any paywall.

⁵⁰ By the time of writing this chapter, *El Periódico* has established a soft paywall based on premium content, but offering free access to most of its news content.

increasing the media's visibility in these online environments. Nevertheless, *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico*, together with *El País*, also offer some additional benefits in order to persuade users to register, allowing users to subscribe to newsletters. Common to all these media is the option to personalise users' profiles, with nicknames and pictures. This facilitates user recognition in comment on news and other participatory spaces included in the media's websites. *Nació Digital* does not permit either social networks registration or subscription to a newsletter, but it does allow registered users to 'save' or 'remember' those articles or news stories that they want to keep in order to read them later. To conclude, *324.CAT* just allows comments under previous registration.

With regard to users' profiles, *20 minutos* deserves a special mention. It includes a complete profile of the user that also shows their latest comments on news stories, which other users they are following and also the number of votes received by their comments, as well as the votes they gave. Similarly to social networks, *20 minutos* also allows users to update their status, which can be seen by their contacts and other users that access their profiles. *20 minutos*, however, does not allow tools for user-user interaction outside the context of comment on news. It does not allow private messages and the users' status cannot be commented.

Another special mention should be made of *Vilaweb* and its particular forms of registration. This online medium does not establish any kind of paywall. However, it asks users to contribute to the medium with different forms of subscription that imply users' involvement within the medium, at different degrees depending on the quantity of the contribution⁵¹. The lower level of payment is 60 euro per year, and includes receiving an email from the newsroom which explains the issues that are going to be covered the next day, the right to open a blog on the medium's website and the right to participate in the annual meeting that the newsroom holds with subscribers. (Students can register with this option for just 15 euro per year). The next level of involvement requires an annual payment of 120 euro, and covers all the previous rights (two blogs instead of one) plus the right to participate in a monthly meeting with the newsroom and receive a weekly online magazine. Other

⁵¹ *Texas Tribune* (USA) and *Rue89* (France) offer similar options.

options (ranging from the cheapest at 240 euro per year to the most expensive at 500 euro per year) allow the use of a space in the newsroom to organise meetings or special subscriptions for companies or associations which include spaces for advertisements on the website.

Another group of websites is the one formed by those that establish some kind of paywall to access their contents. In this group *Ara* and *El Punt Avui* can be found. *Ara* allows non-subscribed users to access one article labelled as 'premium' per day. Users can register and access and comment on regular news stories, but opinion and in-depth analysis stories are normally just under this category of 'premium' and therefore can be accessed only with a previous subscription (25 euro for three months). Similarly, *El Punt Avui* offers non-subscribers the possibility of reading and commenting on up to five articles per day, without categorizing content. After reading these five articles, users need to subscribe in order to access more news stories or articles. However, in this case the subscription is cheaper at just one euro per month.

Finally, *El Mundo* had established by the end of 2013 a soft paywall to access its contents⁵². The paywall allows users to read 25 news stories or articles each month without making any payment. (In this case there is no 'premium' content that can be accessed only by subscribers) After these free 25 news stories, users should subscribe to one of the two options available. The 'Basic' option allows users to access all the content from their computers for 4.99 euro per month. The 'Orbyt Premium' option allows accessing the content through computers but also through smartphones and tablets. It also allows connecting to the online platform 'Orbyt', in which users can be subscribed to *El Mundo* and also other publications of the same business group.

As in the case of *324.CAT*, users can only comment after doing a complete registration on the website. User's profile on *El Mundo* is one of the most complete

⁵² See the announcement that the medium made on its website:
<http://www.elmundo.es/television/2013/11/02/5275681a63fd3dfb628b456b.html>

in Spanish media (see Image 6.1 below). It allows users to create a nickname and upload a profile picture, as in all the other media under study, but also includes a series of new options aimed at increasing the user-user relationship. Users can ‘follow’ special topics or other users: their comments on news stories will appear on a timeline bar in the user’s profile, in a similar way to that of social networks. Similarly, users can also update their status. Among these options for community building, *El Mundo* also includes the option to send private messages to other users of the site. All this user activity is rewarded by earning ‘Karma points’: users earn points when they access the site and spend time on it, comment on news stories or interact with other users. The points, then, serve as an indicator of the users’ activity and their level of participation.

Image 6.1. User’s profile in *El Mundo*



Table 6.2 at next page sums up the different registration options included in Catalan media. As can be seen, all Catalan media include registration options. However, in none of them is registration compulsory to access content, although it is needed in some in order to participate on the website. Another conclusion is that among Catalan news media the option to register through social media is starting to become popular: half of the media under study adopt this kind of registration

(*La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *20 minutos*, *Ara* and *El País*). Finally, just three media adopt a paywall to access their content. Two of them, *El Mundo* and *El Punt Avui*, adopt soft paywalls. The other medium, *Ara*, is the only one that establishes a more restrictive paywall.

Table 6.2. Registration options Catalan media

	Registration	Paywall	Social media registration
La Vanguardia	Yes	No	Yes
El Periódico	Yes	No	Yes
20 minutos	Yes	No	Yes
Ara	Yes	Yes	Yes
El País	Yes	No	Yes
El Mundo	Yes	Yes	No
El Punt Avui	Yes	Yes	No
324.CAT	Yes	No	No
Nació Digital	Yes	No	No
Vilaweb	Yes	No	No

6.1.2. Content selection

The most common tool for content selection is RSS syndication. Almost all media adopt it, with the only exception of *Nació Digital*. RSS allows users to subscribe to particular content of the media website (normally media offer different kinds of RSS subscription, based on sections such as politics, sports, international and culture, to name just a few examples) and receive updates to their email or through a feed aggregator. Newsletters are a similar way offered to users to receive the latest news stories or articles directly to their email. Most media offer some kind of newsletter (with general content or divided also by section), with the exception of *El Mundo*, *Nació Digital* and *324.CAT*.

Although users can choose which kind of news to receive through RSS or newsletters, these tools cannot be considered as ‘personalization’ as they do not

change the news selection offered by media or the content that users can see when they access the website: the homepage news selection and the hierarchy of news stories remain unchanged. Options for user customization are not present among the media studied in this research. None of them allows users to personalise media homepages according to their preferences for the kind of news or favorite journalists. Despite these options available with existing technology, media still prefer to maintain control of their image or brand which is strongly linked with their capacity to choose what is newsworthy and what is not, and the existing hierarchy among the 'news of the day': the reputation of a medium is strongly linked with the kind of news stories that it offers, as well as the particular way that it reports them.

The only medium that has established something similar is the Catalan newspaper *Ara*. It has a special section, named 'El meu Ara', enabled for registered users only. This option allows the website to study users' behavior and recommend content to them on the website, according to the articles they have read on previous visits. This option of indirect customization is not automatic, in the sense that it does not change or substitute the homepage of the newspaper. It is just an option that users can choose to take or not.

6.1.3. Participation section

The existence of a section in media websites specifically aimed at users' participation is always an indicator of how the medium understands and adopts users' participation in their website. These participation sections can be divided between those that are aimed at collecting most of the different forms of participation present in the website and those that are aimed at developing just one form of participation. In this last case, the medium chooses to strongly promote a particular way of participation, extensively developing it rather than adopting multiple and diverse different options of participation. Five of the media under study adopt a participation section. These are:

- *La Vanguardia*: The website of this newspaper allows a wide range of different participatory options to its users. Most of these options are grouped in the section 'Participación' (participation). In fact, this section groups all the participatory options that are not directly connected with news stories or opinion articles (such as users' comments or social media options). 'Participación' is a section of the website that is continually changing, with some fixed subsections, such as 'Lectores Corresponsales' (correspondents readers), in which readers living abroad can write about special events happening in the countries in which they are living. For example, in Image 6.2 (see next page) a journalist writes a piece using opinions of readers living in Thailand about the coup d'état in this country. Although in this example users are not directly publishing, users' original pieces are not uncommon in this subsection. Image 6.2 also shows other participatory options allowed on March 24th, most of them related to the European elections imminent at that time: two polls about the elections, one about whether the electoral campaign had changed users' voting intention and another about whether users had already decided their vote. To the right of the polls there is a collection of readers' letters to the editor that have as a common topic the European elections. Other options present in 'Participación' on that day are an interview with an expert on housing issues, based on users' questions; a collection of comments on news stories made about a certain issue related to the Catalan referendum and a videoblog of a user. 'Participación' also includes other participatory options that are not related to news content. Examples of this participation more aimed at leisure or entertainment are quizzes, a review about a new film, and users' pictures of their favorite places to visit for holidays. To conclude, the section has an email address for users to send their comments and recommendations about how to improve it, and also the possibility of joining the users' editorial board, in which chosen users advise the newspaper about its participatory policies.

Image 6.2. Participation section in *La Vanguardia*

Rechazo generalizado al 'coto' a los comentarios en las redes sociales
 Carla Santángelo Lázaro - Los usuarios de LaVanguardia.com defienden la posibilidad de expresarse libremente en las redes sociales y rebaten las propuestas de control
 16 Comentarios
 Encuesta: ¿Se debe reforzar la ley para moderar los comentarios en redes sociales?

ELECCIONES EUROPEAS 2014

ENCUESTAS
 ¿Sirven las campañas electorales para cambiar tu intención de voto?

1. Sí	5%
2. No	94%
3. No sé	1%

Han contestado 2334 personas

ENCUESTAS
 ¿Tienes ya decidido tu voto para las elecciones europeas del 25-M?

1. Sí	79%
2. No	13%
3. No iré a votar	8%

Han contestado 748 personas

ELECCIONES EUROPEAS

Prioridades
 J. HERNÁNDEZ RAMON, Santa Perpètua de Mogoda

Un proyecto de país
 GASPAR ROSELLÓ NÚRIA AYMERICH, Viceactor de política académica de la UB i directora de l'Institut de Seguretat Pública de Catalunya

Eslògan europeu
 GERARD BROS PÉREZ, Brussel·les

Olor de naftalina
 ÀNGELA FERRER I MATÓ, Girona

Los tailandeses celebran el golpe de Estado
 Patricia Plaza - Los lectores de La Vanguardia.com en Tailandia, más intranquilos, nos cuentan cómo están viviendo esta situación
 7 Comentarios
 ¿Estás en Tailandia? Escríbenos

CONCURSOS
 Sorteo de dos cheques de 150 euros para el Rec.09
 Premiaremos dos comentarios en forma de relato literario sobre el Rec.0 Experimental Stores que incluyan la etiqueta #RECLV en los espacios de LaVanguardia.com en Facebook y Twitter

- *El Periódico*: 'Entre tots' (among us) is the name of the participation section included on the web of this Catalan newspaper. In this section, users can send letters to the editor for publishing. Special calls are made when some issues become especially relevant, such as during the European elections. However, the section dedicates most of its space to pieces written by the newsroom's journalists, generated by a letter or complaint sent by a reader. Normally these pieces collect the testimony of the reader, complemented by other testimonies referring to the same situation and also contextual information about the social problem related to the piece (unemployment, bad neighborhood conditions, immigration etc.). Finally, the section also offers users the possibility of participating in live debates with Catalan leaders of political parties. The latest of these meetings was between the leader of the second party in Catalonia, interviewed by 10 readers. The meeting was recorded and published in the section.

- *20 minutos*: 'Comunidad 20' (community 20) is the name of the participation section of this Spanish newspaper. It groups all the different forms of participation allowed by the medium that are not related to news content. The

section opens showing a list of the most active users, with their nicknames and profile pictures. On the right hand side is information on how to send original content to the medium. Letters to the editor and users' pictures are published in this section. Furthermore, readers can also send a letter complaining about some issues that affect them directly. The medium can then send a journalist to report on the story and publish it in the participation section. Blogs and polls about current issues are also shown in this section. Finally, 'Comunidad 20' also shows a list of the most controversial comments on news stories made by users. Normally, the comments with more positive or negative votes appear in this section.

- *El Punt Avui*: The participation section of the website of this Catalan newspaper is focused on local issues linked with the editorial line of the medium. It contains a subsection aimed at sending questions to the users' local city council. Users can choose Catalan local councils from a list classified by regions. If their local council does not appear on the list, they can choose an option to notify the newspaper and it will get in touch with the local council to include it in the application. Similarly, another subsection of 'Participació' (participation) is aimed at putting citizens in contact with their local political groups. Users can look for their town and see which local groups are uploading content, normally in the form of links to blogs or websites. Another option for users' participation is to send pictures of their celebrations, weather pictures and also pictures focused on their towns and villages. Additionally, users can use a form to contact the newsroom and also use a form to send letters to the editor.

- *324.CAT*: 'ElMeu3CAT' (my3CAT) is the name of the participation section of the Catalan public broadcasting corporation. It is focused on users' own content, mainly pictures. The section is organised into different 'calls' for participation on items such as weather pictures, popular events such as local celebrations or pro-Catalan independence demonstrations around the world. Users can access these calls by clicking the button and uploading their own content to participate in the galleries, always with previous moderation. No other possibilities for user participation are allowed in the section.

- *El País*: The Spanish newspaper does not have a participation section. However, it does include a social network on its website, 'Eskup', which is important to analyse in this section as it is aimed at user participation. 'Eskup' is intended to be a tool to enhance comments and debate around the content published by the medium, mainly about political issues. Furthermore, its aim is also to facilitate the contact between the newsroom's journalists and their readers. Although it was launched in 2010 with strong campaign propaganda on the medium, it has never achieved its expectations. Nowadays it has almost disappeared from the home page of the medium and is not being promoted at all on the website. It allows users to 'follow' special topics (mainly about politics), other users or journalists. It also permits them to publish status updates with news links, even allowing users to contact each other directly through private messages, avoiding the common limitation of other media that only allow user-user interaction through comment on news. Although it is difficult to know its real success, and the publications seem to be mostly made by medium profiles or some journalists, it offers the possibility for users to participate by talking about and debating political issues. Some of the tools that 'Eskup' offers are also aimed at community building, such as the possibility to 'follow' other users, status updates (280 characters), private messages and mentions. As can be seen in Image 6.3 and 6.4 (see next page) Eskup's design and functionality is similar to those of social networks such as Facebook or Twitter. Image 6.3 shows the main homepage of Eskup, in which it is clear that the general topics under discussion are about politics. Image 6.4 shows users' timeline and its similarities with other social networks. Despite its functionality and tools that makes it similar to a social network, 'Eskup' seems nowadays to be more like the system that the medium uses to control comment on news. In order to comment, users must be registered with the medium and, consequently, must create a profile on the social network. Comments on news stories seem to be the users' main activity on the site, rather than status updates or users-journalists interaction.

Image 6.3. The social network *Eskup* in *El País*.

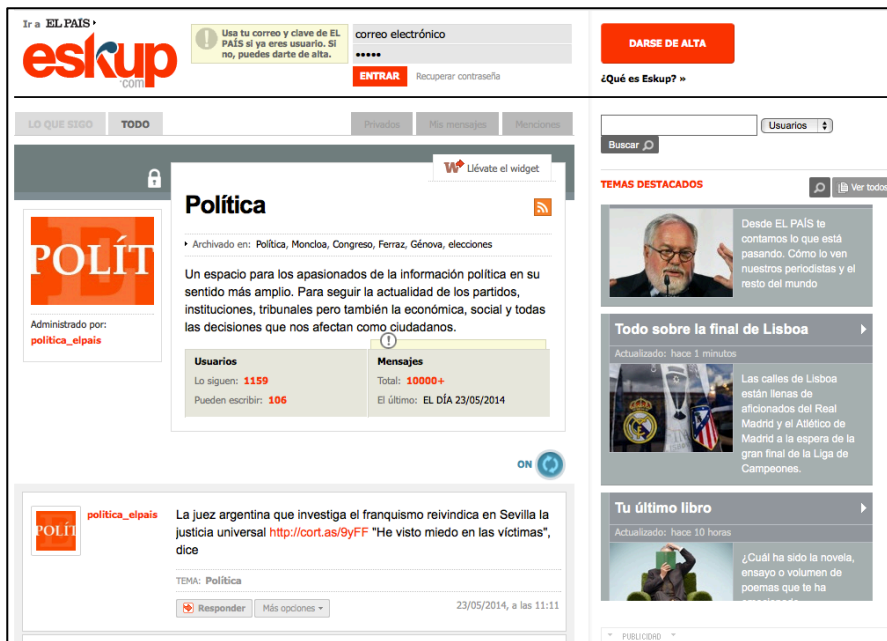


Image 6.4. Users' timeline in *Eskup*.

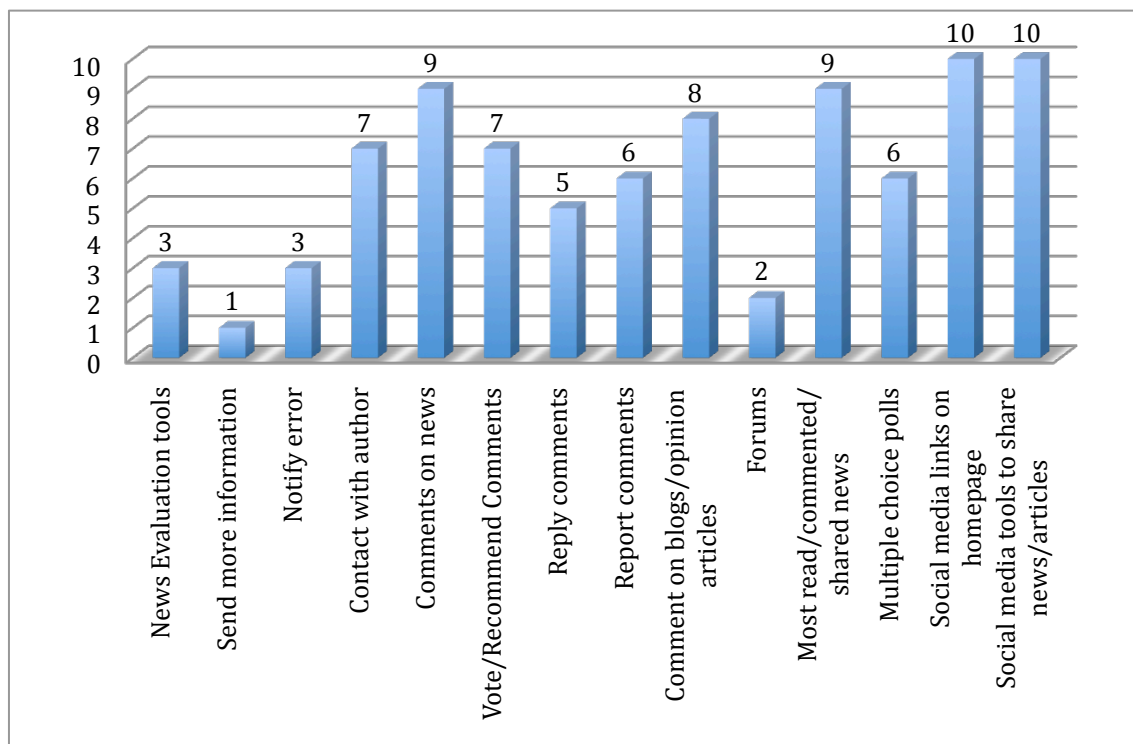


6.2. Participative Interactivity

As it has been seen, participative interactivity is the kind of interactivity that has the largest number of different tools on the study sheet. It groups the participatory tools present on news media websites that allow users to interact with journalists and other users, in the form of ratings, comments or any other input that does not involve genuinely creative activity by the user. This section, following the same structure than the one aimed at analysing United Kingdom media, will analyse Catalan media and all the tools related with participative interactivity.

To begin the summing up of this section on participative interactivity, Figure 6.3 shows the number of media that adopt each one of the tools. As can be seen, all tools are adopted by at least one medium. The most popular tools are those connected with social media: 'social media links on home page' and 'social media tools to share news'. All Catalan media adopt these two tools. These are followed by 'comment on news', and 'most read/commented/shared news', two tools adopted by all media with the only exception of *Vilaweb*.

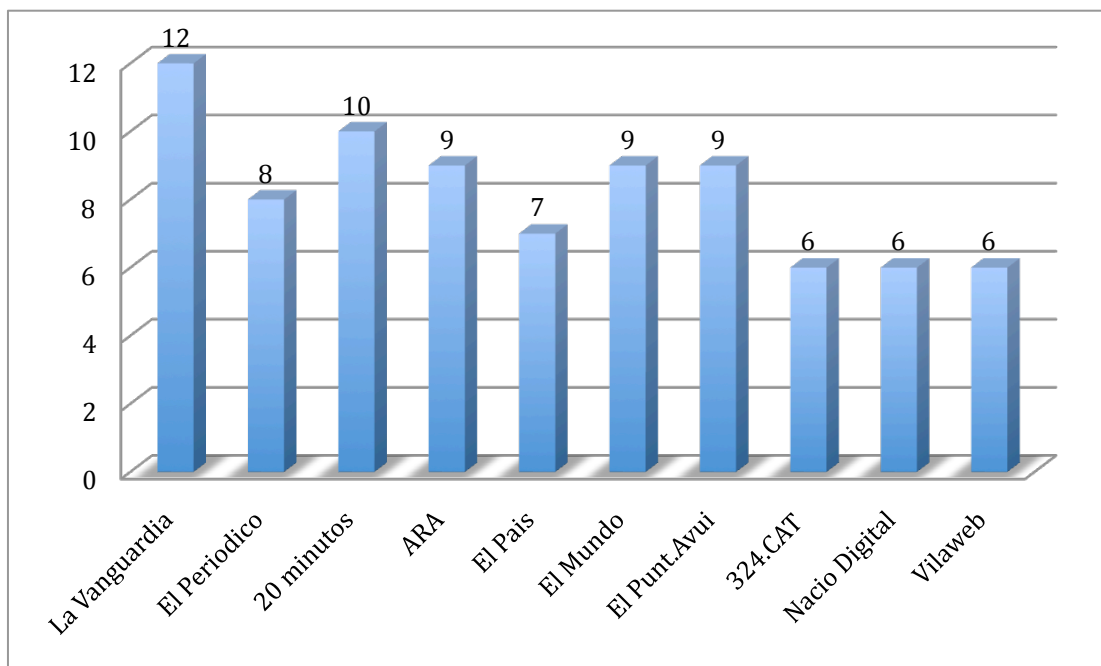
Figure 6.3. Adoption of participative interactivity tools in Catalan media



At another level of adoption there are tools such as ‘comment on blogs or opinion articles’, which are adopted by eight media, and ‘vote/recommend comments’ or ‘contact with the author’ of the news story, both adopted by seven media. Similarly, ‘multiple choice polls’ and ‘report comments’ are adopted by six media. Finally, another group of tools are adopted on a much lower number of Catalan news sites. This is the case of some of the options connected with news, such as ‘notify error’ or ‘news evaluation tools’, accepted by only three media, or the option to ‘send more information’, adopted by only one Catalan medium, *La Vanguardia*. Another tool, ‘forums’, is accepted on just two news websites, those of *La Vanguardia* and *Vilaweb*.

If the focus is put on the media under study, Figure 6.4 reflects a great disparity with regard to the number of tools adopted by each one of them.

Figure 6.4. Number of participative tools adopted by Catalan news media



Firstly, there is a first group of media characterised by the adoption of a low number of participative tools (six). These media are *324.CAT*, *Nació Digital* and *Vilaweb*, closely followed by *El País* which adopts seven tools. Contrasted with

these media characterised by the adoption of a low number of participative tools, there is *La Vanguardia*, which adopts the largest number of tools, twelve, and *20 minutos*, which adopts ten. Another group of media stand in a middle position, adopting between eight and nine tools (*Ara*, *El Periódico*, *El Mundo* and *El Punt Avui*).

Now that this general overview of participative interactive tools has been conducted, the next step will be to group the different tools into different categories with similar characteristics. The next paragraphs of this section will be aimed at presenting the results, following the structure of the study sheet in a similar way that was done when presenting the results for the media in the United Kingdom. Firstly, 'News options' collects all the tools that are present in news. This is then followed by a second level of study, 'comment on news options', which analyses those options related to news comments, and a final third level which quantifies the number of comments received by each medium. Secondly, the section 'other forms of participative interactivity' groups participative interactivity tools that cannot be included in any of the other categories. Finally, the section entitled 'social networks' will analyse how news media websites are adopting social networks on their websites. This section is followed by another level of study in which the level of social media interaction in each Catalan medium is quantified.

6.2.1. News options

As can be seen in Table 6.3 (see next page), all Catalan media except *Vilaweb* accept comments on news stories on their websites. Moreover, all media that accept comment on news do it in the majority of the news content that they publish. Although some media such as *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico* or *20 minutos* ban comments on some news stories related to controversial topics, this situation is uncommon and in all of them, more than 90% of the news stories accept users' comments. The common situation then is that with the only exception of *Vilaweb*, Catalan media adopt comments on news in almost all the news stories offered on

their websites, banning comments on only one or two news stories per day, as in the case of some media like *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico* or *20 minutos*.

Table 6.3. News options

	News Evaluation tools	Send more information	Notify error	Contact with author
La Vanguardia	No	Yes	Yes	No
El Periódico	Yes	No	No	No
20 minutos	Yes	No	Yes	No
ARA	Yes	No	No	No
El Pais	No	No	No	No
El Mundo	No	No	Yes	No
El Punt Avui	No	No	No	Yes
324.CAT	No	No	No	No
Nació Digital	No	No	No	Yes
Vilaweb	No	No	No	Yes

Less unanimity is shown in the other options reflected in Table 16. Regarding the different tools that enable users to send feedback to the newsroom through either email, a form which includes additional information, or other kinds of tools aimed at notifying errors, more than half of the media under study (six) adopt some of these options. None of these media, however, adopt all the options. In fact, the most common situation is that the media under research adopt just one of these options. For example, *La Vanguardia* uses a form aimed at sending additional information and also an option to notify possible errors, being the only medium that adopts two options. *20minutos* and *El Mundo* permit users to notify errors, while *El Punt Avui* provide journalists' email addresses and *Nació Digital* and *Vilaweb* provide a newsroom email address in case users want to send some comment or suggestion regarding the news. Finally, just three media, *El Periódico*, *20 minutos* and *Ara* adopt tools that allow users to rate news stories. These results are shown in the news stories, but also on the homepage, in a bar that shows the most rated news stories, the most viewed or the most commented.

6.2.2. Comment on news

As it has been seen in the former paragraphs, all Catalan media, with the only exception of *Vilaweb*, accept comments on news. Options related to comment on news, as well as the media that are adopting them, are summarised in Table 6.4.

Table 6.4. Comment on news

	Comments on news	Comments only with registration	Vote/Recommend Comments	Reply comments	Report comments
La Vanguardia	Yes*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
El Periodico	Yes*	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
20 minutos	Yes*	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
ARA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
El Pais	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
El Mundo	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
El Punt.Avui	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
324.CAT	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Nacio Digital	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Vilaweb	No**	-	-	-	-

* These media allow comments on all news stories with only a few exceptions (one or two per day), normally on news stories about controversial issues.

** *Vilaweb* does not allow comment on news. However, in some news stories of special relevance, it adopts a bar showing the feed of a related hashtag on Twitter.

In order to comment on news stories, all media ask users to enter some data, such as username, password and email address. This ‘soft’ registration does not generally require giving more personal data, and is generally linked with the registration on the media website. With the only exception of *Nació Digital*, which accepts comments just by including the email address, all other media accept comments only with previous registration on the website. The media that ask for more users’ data prior to comment are *324.CAT*, which asks users to complete a full profile (and moderates comments before publication) and *El Punt Avui*, which, once the registration is completed, asks users to verify it, which requires a payment of 1 euro. Except for these two media, registration on the other ones is quick and easy. Even those that have established some kind of paywall to access

content allow non-subscribed users to comment on the news stories that they can access.

Regarding the options related to comment on news, all media that accept comments adopt some of the options featured in Table 6.4. 'Vote comments' is the most widely adopted of these options: up to seven media allow users to vote for other users' comments (only *324.CAT* and *El País* do not adopt this tool), most of them allowing users to vote for the comment in a positive or negative way (with the only exception of *El Punt Avui* which only allows a 'like' on the comment). In most media these qualifications do not have any repercussions. However some media do use these tools to create rankings or lists of the most voted for comments. *20 minutos* creates, in its participation section, a list of those comments that have created more controversy and therefore more positive and/or negative votes. *El Mundo* has a section in each news story where users can see the comments which have received the most positive votes. In fact, *El Mundo* is one of the media that has placed greater emphasis on developing those functions related to comments. Near this 'most voted' section, each news story includes a 'Your mentions' ('Te mencionan') section, in which users can see the direct replies they had regarding this particular news story, and a 'Your network' ('Tu red') section, in which users can see the comments made by their contacts on this particular news story.

With regard to the feature 'report comments', up to six media adopt it. This option allows users to notify or report inappropriate or uncivilised comments made by other users. In this way, it becomes easier for the medium to ensure that the conversations generated in comments on news stories are respectful and users behave in an appropriate way. This option normally takes the form of a button near the comments. Users click on it to fill in a form in which they have to explain why this concrete comment is considered inappropriate and give some personal data (normally name and email address, in case the user is not registered). Among the media that accept comment on news only *El Punt Avui* and *Nació Digital* do not adopt these kinds of tools that facilitate advising media about inappropriate comments. Finally, despite the possibility of the feature 'reply comments' being an

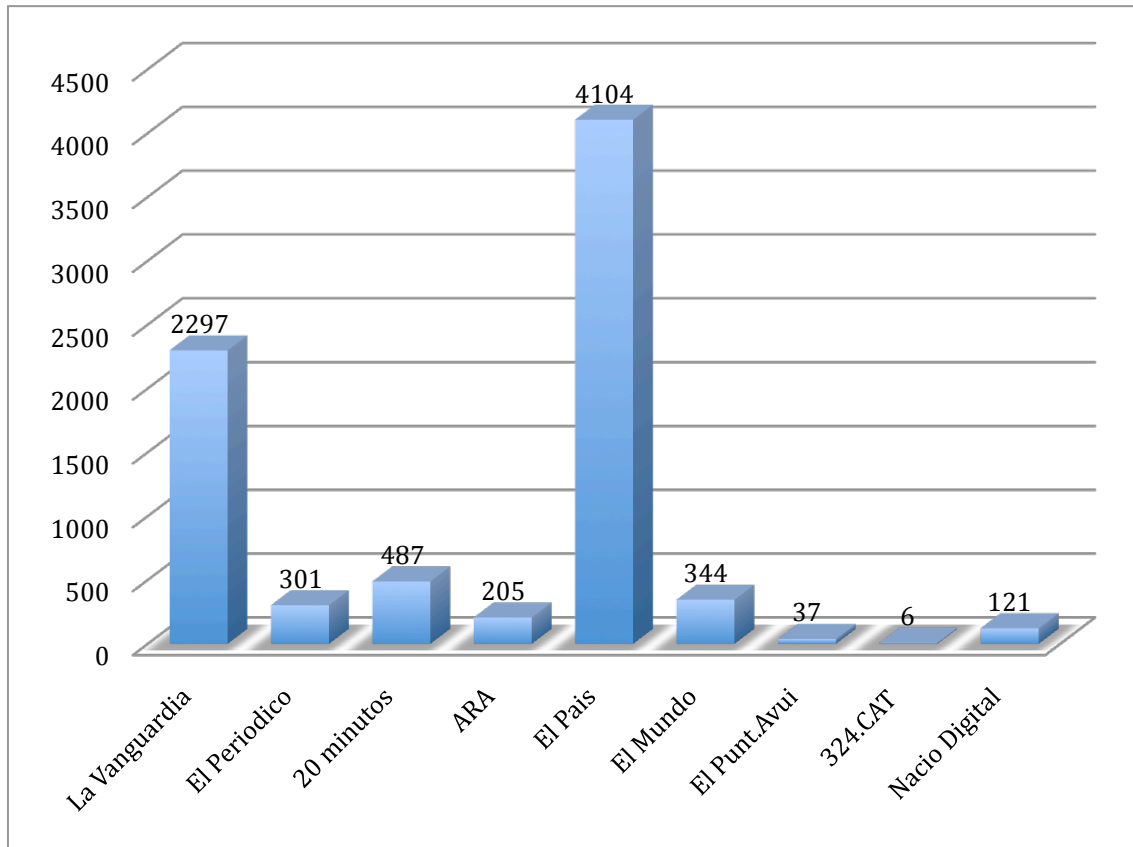
appropriate tool to co-ordinate and create more fluid conversations in comment on news, it is adopted by just five of the nine media that accept comments: *La Vanguardia*, *Ara*, *El País*, *El Mundo* and *El Punt Avui*.

6.2.2.1. Average number of comments on news stories

Following the structure of the code sheet, this section will introduce a fourth level of analysis related with comment on news. The fourth level of analysis is aimed at researching the actual degree of users' participation in comments on news. As it has been said in the methodology chapter (chapter four), this data collected about the number of comment on news is not aimed at generalization. Rather, its aim is to offer a 'picture' of a particular moment in time, to be used together with the other data collected about how news media adopt comments on news. Figure 6.5 (see next page) collects the average number of comments for the first 20 news stories that appear on the homepages of the media's websites⁵³.

Figure 16 shows how *El País* is by far the medium that attracts a higher number of comments, with an average of 4,104. The second medium is *La Vanguardia*, with 2297. All other media are in a completely different scale with regard to the number of comments on news stories. *20 minutos* leads this second group of media, with an average of 487 comments, followed by *El Mundo* (344) and *El Periódico* (301). *Ara* (205) and *Nació Digital* (121) form a third category, while *El Punt Avui*, with an average of 37 comments, and *324.CAT*, with 6, represent the media with the lowest number of comments on news stories.

⁵³ As already introduced in the methodology chapter, this figure shows an indicator of the number of comments made on the first 20 news stories on the home page. The total number of comments of each medium's first 20 news stories was counted over 5 different days (from Monday to Friday, alternating afternoon and evening periods). Then, the average number of comments for the first 20 news stories was calculated. The aim was to compare which media attract more comments and which ones fewer.

Figure 6.5. Average number of comments on news stories

The medium that has the highest average number of comments on news stories, *El País*, accepts comments on all news stories. Moreover, it actively tries to encourage users to comment, through a platform or internal social network especially designed to facilitate debate and news comments. Users can also have a complete profile and comments on news stories are additionally structured through the tool ‘reply comments’. The other medium with a high average number of comments is *La Vanguardia*. In its case, it does not include any special user profile or tool aimed at promoting comments like *El País*, but it allows comments on all news stories and also adopts all the tools aimed at facilitating comments on news stories (‘vote comments’, ‘reply other users’ comments’ and ‘report abusive comments’). Its participation section always includes a section in which comments on especially relevant news are summarised in order to present the readers’ opinions.

There are, however, other media that also adopt tools to promote comments that do not show high average levels of comments. The most relevant case is *El Mundo*, perhaps the media that has opted most heavily in favour of community-building features (see the previous section about registration options). Despite this and the fact that it also allows tools such as ‘vote comments’ and ‘reply comments’, its average number of comments is just 344, much lower than that of *La Vanguardia* and *El País*. The adoption of a paywall could be the reason why the number of comments on *El Mundo* are much lower. Other media like *El Punt Avui* or *Ara*, which also adopt paywalls show a low average number of comments. Another example of a low number of comments is *324.CAT*, the medium with the lowest average (6). Although it accepts comments on all news stories and it does not have a paywall, the fact that the previous mandatory registration requires time and personal information, together with the fact that it moderates comments prior to publication, could explain the reduced number of comments that *324.CAT* attracts.

As it has been seen in the analysis of UK media, the diverse policies towards comments on news stories adopted by different media can explain some of the different levels of number of comments. However, there are other variables that must be taken into account, such as the overall number of visitors that each media receives, the time that a news story appears on the homepage or the profile of the audience of each news media. Table 6.5 shows how, although in some cases there is a correlation between visitors and the average number of comments, in some other cases this correlation cannot be established. In the same way as for UK media, the data gathered from the web traffic reporting company ‘Alexa’ has been included in the table. Additionally, traffic data from OJD 2014 (yearly unique visitors) and from Comscore January 2014 (monthly unique visitors) has also been included. Not all media have data in these two different sources, but taken together only *324.CAT* is not represented. Although there is no way to directly compare the number of visitors from one unique source and for all the news media under research, the three sources together offer a general picture of which websites attract more visitors than others. Moreover, data from the three sources confirm each other in establishing a general classification of the most and least visited media.

Table 6.5. Traffic data for Catalan news media websites

	OJD December 2014	Comscore January 2014	Position in Alexa's ranking of most visited websites in Spain	Average number of comments on news stories
El Mundo	-	7.747.000	11	344
El País	-	7.046.000	12	4104
20 minutos	25.019.837	3.847.000	34	487
La Vanguardia	-	3.174.000	45	2297
El Periodico	465.215*	1.639.000	113	301
ARA	1.901.974	-	179	205
Nacio Digital	2.026.077	-	363	121
324.CAT	-	-	810	6
El Punt.Avui	937.506	-	860	37

*Results just for www.elperiodico.cat (the website of the news media written in Catalan) and not for www.elperiodico.com

As Table 6.5 demonstrates, there are large differences in the number of visitors to the different media under research. Accordingly, to establish general conclusions comparing the average number of comments on news stories might not be appropriate. However, comparing Table 6.5 with Figure 6.5 offers some relevant insights. For example, despite *El País* and *El Mundo* being similarly positioned in Alexa and Comscore data, the number of comments on news stories is much higher on *El País* than on *El Mundo* (4104 and 344). Regarding the other media, some correlation between their position in Alexa ranking and the average number of comments on news stories can be seen. With the only exception of *La Vanguardia*, whose website attracts more comments than that of *20 minutos* despite having a lower position in Alexa ranking and Comscore data, the rest of the media under study follow the pattern of the lower the position in Alexa ranking, the fewer the number of comments. The other only exception is *El Punt Avui*, that receives more comments than *324.CAT*, despite being 50 positions lower in the ranking made by Alexa.

6.2.3. Social networks

Table 6.6 shows how the tools related with social networks are completely integrated into news media websites. All media present in this research use links to their social network spaces (mainly on Facebook and Twitter) in relevant places on their homepages. Furthermore, all of them also include in their news and articles the option to share the content on social networks. Regarding these tools aimed at sharing, the most common are tools to share on Facebook or tweet on Twitter. At a second level of importance, can also be found LinkedIn or Google +. Finally, most Catalan media also adopt other social networks or similar online spaces where users can share their news. These other spaces are *Menéame*, *StumbleUpon*, *Tumblr*, *Tuenti* or *Reddit*.

Table 6.6. Social networks tools

	Social networks links on homepage	Social networks tools to share news/articles
La Vanguardia	Yes	Yes
El Periodico	Yes	Yes
20 minutos	Yes	Yes
ARA	Yes	Yes
El Pais	Yes	Yes
El Mundo	Yes	Yes
El Punt.Avui	Yes	Yes
324.CAT	Yes	Yes
Nacio Digital	Yes	Yes
Vilaweb	Yes	Yes

6.2.3.1. Average number of interactions with social networks

In a similar way to that of the section aimed at studying comments on news stories, this fourth level of study will be aimed at quantifying users' interactions with the social networks tools provided by the different media under study in their news

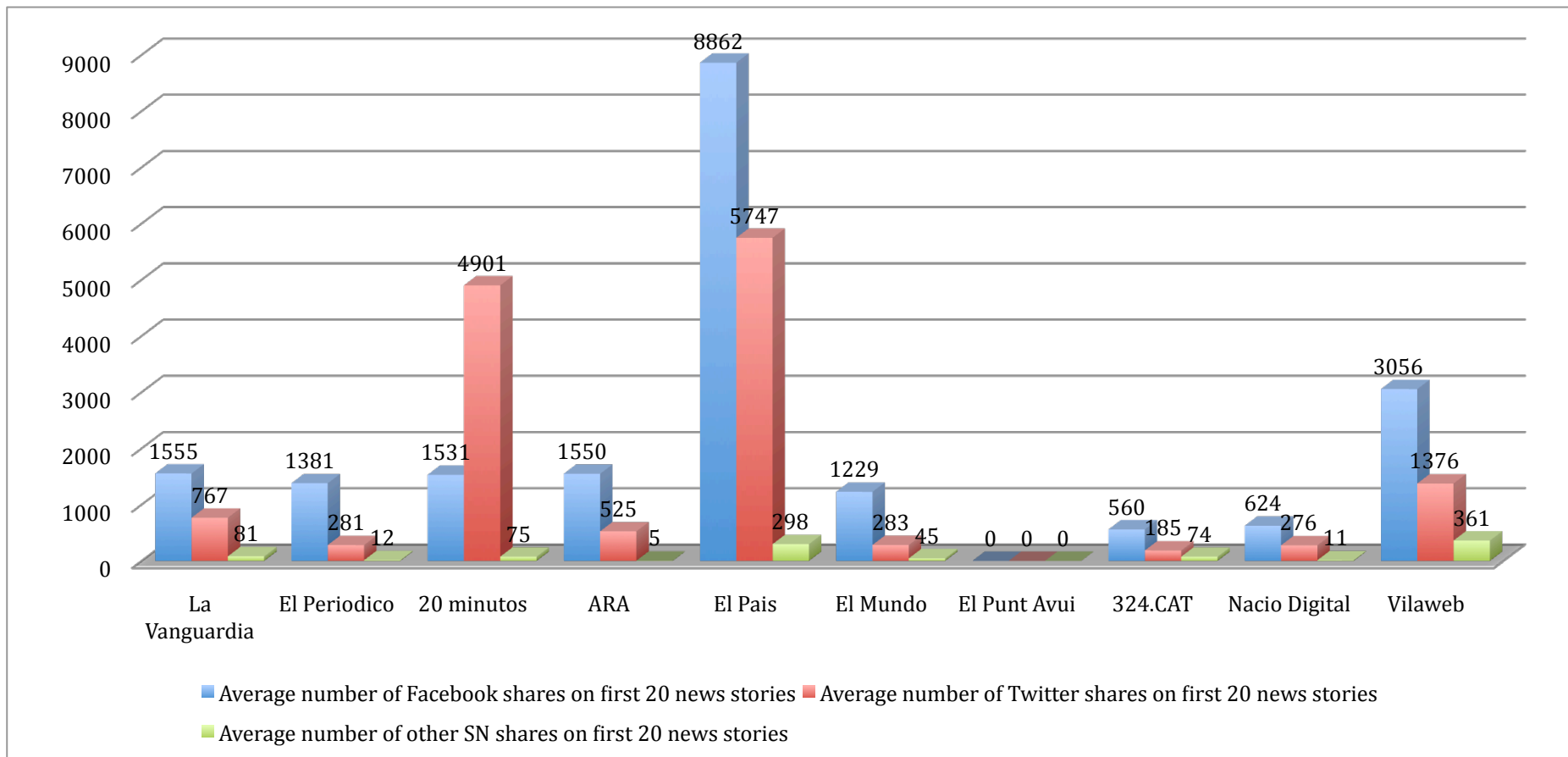
stories or articles⁵⁴. Table 6.7 and Figure 6.6 (see below and at following page) show how users use the different tools provided by news media websites to share content on social networks.

Table 6.7. Average Catalan media interactions in social networks

	Average number of Facebook shares on first 20 news stories	Average number of Twitter shares on first 20 news stories	Average number of other SN shares on first 20 news stories
La Vanguardia	1555	767	81
El Periodico	1381	281	12
20 minutos	1531	4901	75
ARA	1550	525	5
El Pais	8862	5747	298
El Mundo	1229	283	45
El Punt.Avui	-	-	-
324.CAT	560	185	74
Nacio Digital	624	276	11
Vilaweb	3056	1376	361

⁵⁴ As explained in chapter four, the indicators of the average number of interactions on social network sites were obtained following this procedure: Firstly, over five days the number of interactions with social network sites made in the first 20 news stories (that is, all the 'likes', 'shares' or 'tweets' for each news story) were recorded. After that, the final total of all the interactions for each social network site was divided by five to obtain the average number of interactions for 20 news stories.

Figure 6.6. Catalan media average number of interactions on social networks



All media, with the only exception of *El Punt Avui* show the number of times that users have shared or tweeted their content. All media also use other tools that allow sharing news stories or articles on other social networks (mainly Google + and LinkedIn), but these options are much less used than Facebook or Twitter. Some media do not even show data for each one of these other social networks and include just the total number of times that users shared in an 'others' category. Among the media that offer data for the number of social network interactions, the most common social network in which their users show content through the tools provided in their news stories is Facebook. This social network is the one that has the most interactions in all media, with the only exception of *20 minutos*, where the most shared social network is Twitter. In all cases, Facebook and Twitter are the two most used social networks to share news stories. The 'others' category is always in a much lower position in the total number of interactions.

Regarding the media under study, *El País* is by far the medium that attracts the most user interactions on Facebook. With almost 9,000 interactions it is way ahead of the second one, *Vilaweb*, which attracts 3,056. However, this predominance of *El País* on Facebook interactions is not repeated on all social networks. *El País* is also the medium with the most interactions on Twitter, with 5,747, but the gap with the second medium in Twitter interactions (*20 minutos*, with 4,901) is not as large as on Facebook. Finally, *Vilaweb* has a higher number of interactions in the 'other social networks' category (361, higher than the 298 of *El País*). The rest of the media show a very low number of interactions in the 'others' category.

Apart from *El País* and *Vilaweb*, with a high number of interactions on Facebook, the rest of the Catalan media show similar data. *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *Ara*, *20 minutos* and *El Mundo* all have between 1,500 and 1,200 interactions. In the last group, *324.CAT* (560) and *Nació Digital* (624) are the media with the least number of interactions. Regarding Twitter, apart from the higher results of *El País* and *20 minutos*, only *Vilaweb* shows a relevant position, with 1,376 interactions. The rest of the media have a number of interactions between 200 and 700.

Figure 6.7. Catalan media aggregate of the average number of social network interaction

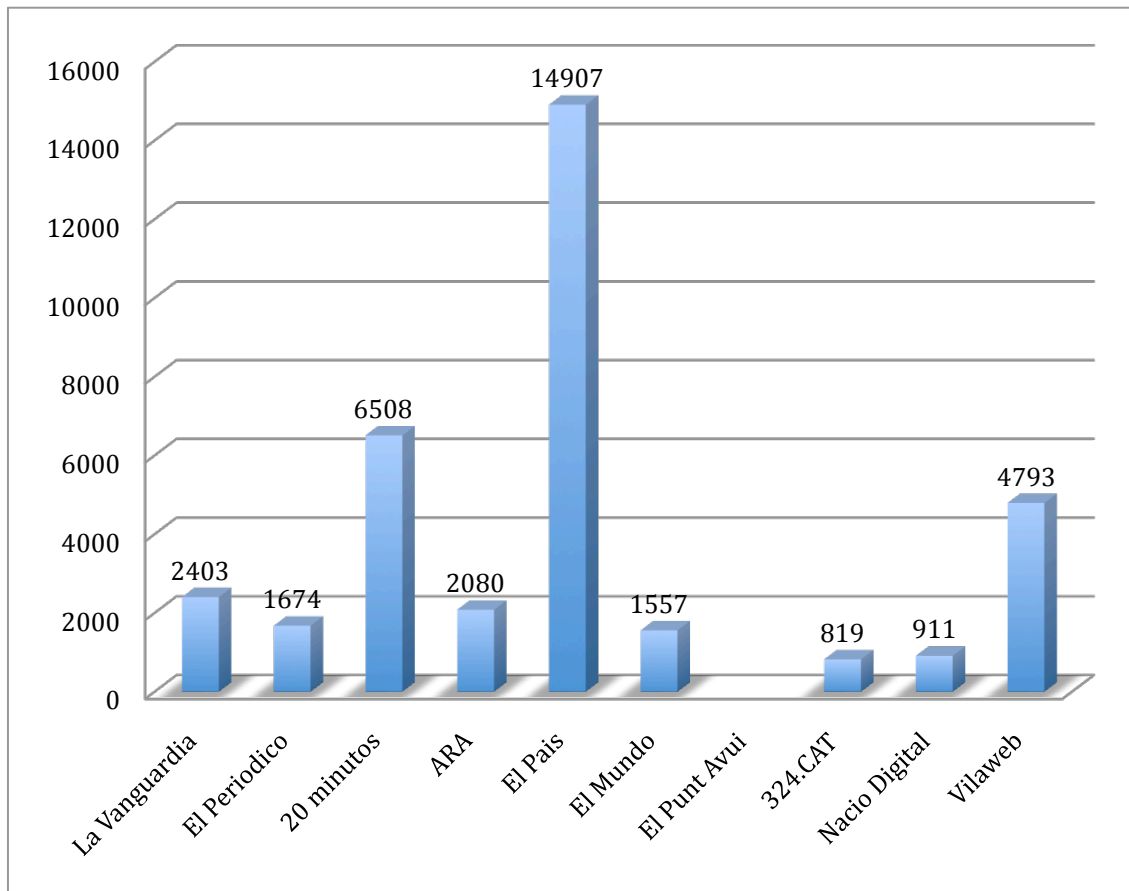


Figure 6.7 shows the aggregate of the average number of social network interactions made by news media website users. In Table 6.8 (see next page) these aggregate averages have been included together with the available data for the number of website visitors used to analyse comments on news stories, in a similar way to that which was used previously for comment on news. As can be seen in Table 6.8 there is no direct correlation between the number of visitors, together with the medium's position in Alexa's ranking, and the number of interactions on social networks.

Table 6.8. Catalan media website traffic and the aggregate of the average number of interactions on social networks

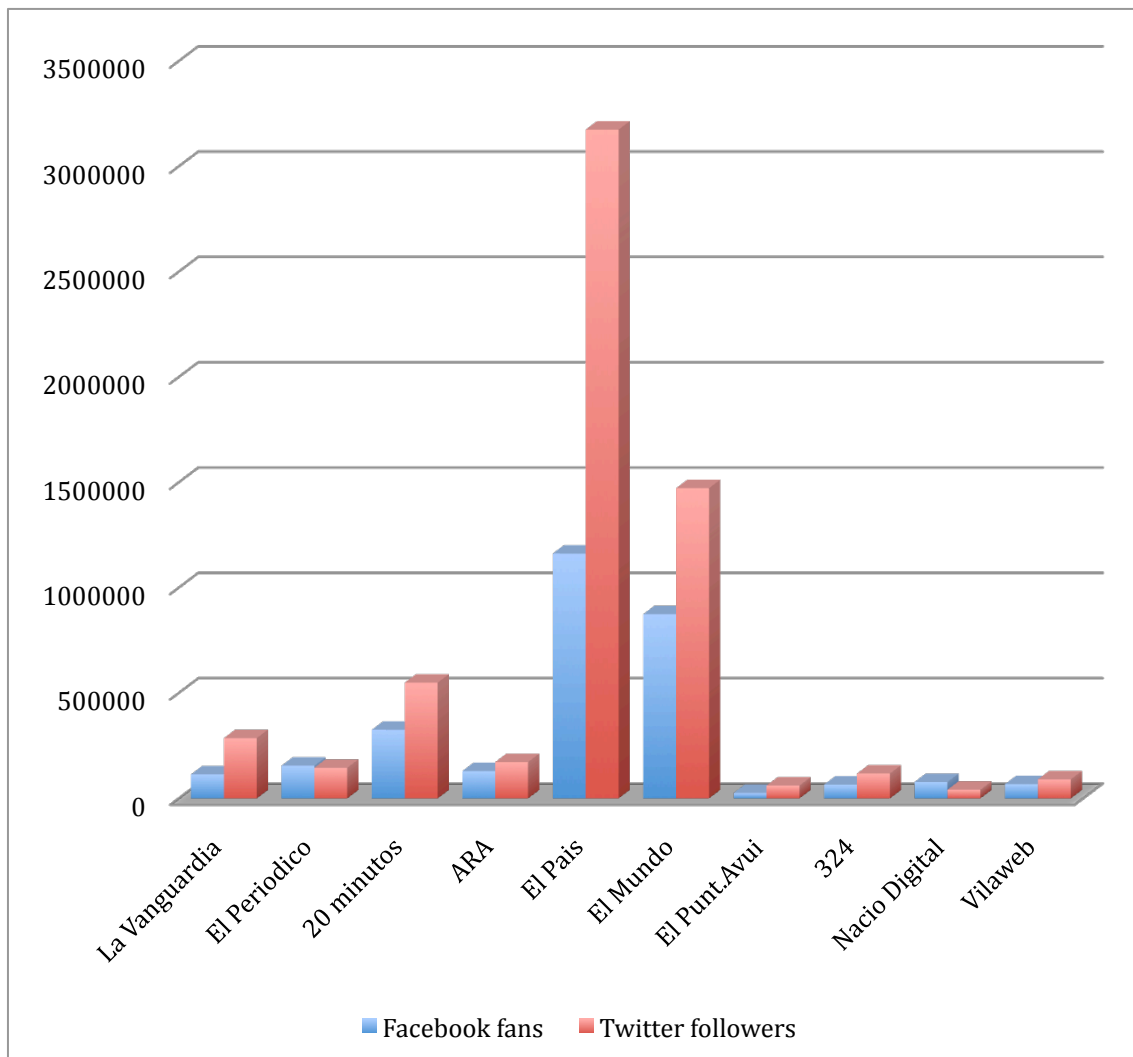
	OJD December 2014	Comscore January 2014	Position in Alexa's ranking of most visited websites in Spain	Average number of interaction on social networks
El Mundo	-	7.747.000	11	1557
El País	-	7.046.000	12	14907
20 minutos	25.019.837	3.847.000	34	6508
La Vanguardia	-	3.174.000	45	2403
El Periódico	465.215*	1.639.000	113	1674
ARA	1.901.974	-	179	2080
Nacio Digital	2.026.077	-	363	911
Vilaweb	1.214.429		571	4793
324.CAT	-	-	810	819
El Punt.Avui	937.506	-	860	-

*Results just for www.elperiodico.cat (the website of the news media written in Catalan) and not for www.elperiodico.com

El País is by far the first medium in average number of interactions. However, it can be seen that it is not the medium with the best position in Alexa's ranking, this position belonging to *El Mundo*. After these two media, the correlation between Alexa's position and the average number of interactions is more direct. The second medium with the most interactions is *20 minutos*, which is third in Alexa's ranking. Surprisingly, the third medium with the most interactions is *Vilaweb*, which is the eighth medium in the traffic ranking. This surprising position might point towards an active and loyal community of users. *El Mundo*, which is the first media in the ranking of visitors, is among the media that receive fewer interactions where social networks are concerned. The rest of the media follow a similar order with regard to their number of interactions and their position in Alexa's ranking, the only exception being *Ara*, which has more interactions than *El Periódico* despite the fact that it has fewer visitors.

To analyse the number of shares and tweets made by users of the features present in the media's news stories, even if it is a good indicator of social networks presence, may lead to wrong conclusions about how news media adopt social networks and how they behave on them. A large number of social network interactions for a particular medium does not necessarily mean that this medium has an important presence on Facebook or Twitter. Contrary to the United Kingdom media, the Catalan media under study do not show a clear and direct correlation between website visitors and social network interactions. Moreover, website and social media audiences of the media present in this research might be slightly, or completely, different. As will be seen in the focus groups, most citizens access media websites while just a few access media profiles on social networks. To better understand the real activity of media on the two main social networks, it is necessary to analyse how users interact with them in their profiles on Twitter and Facebook, and not just in the features to share news stories that media adopt on their websites. In this way, which media have a more loyal or engaged audience in social networks can be more accurately determined.

Figure 6.8 (see next page) shows the number of fans on Facebook and the number of followers on Twitter for the media under study. It can be seen that most of the media have a higher number of followers on Twitter than fans on Facebook. When the media are compared a similar pattern is reflected to that shown previously in Table 6.8, which shows the position of media among Spanish websites according to their number of visitors. As can be seen, *El País* is the most followed on social networks, followed by *El Mundo*. After that, the distribution of media is similar to the one in Table 6.8. *20 minutos* is the third most followed, with *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico* coming next. *Ara* is the last medium that has more than 100,000 fans and followers, the rest are under this number. With reference to these last ones, *324.CAT* shows the biggest number of fans and followers, despite being one of the websites with the lowest position in Alexa's ranking, and is followed by *Nació Digital* and *Vilaweb*. Finally, *El Punt Avui* is the last media in social networks presence.

Figure 6.8. Social networks presence of Catalan media

(Number of fans on Facebook and followers on Twitter on May 29th 2014)

6.2.4. Other forms of participative interactivity

This category groups five different forms of participative interactivity that cannot be included in any of the other previous categories. These forms of participatory interactivity are 'comment on blogs/opinion articles', 'forums', 'most read/commented/shared news' and 'multiple choice polls'. Table 6.9 resumes the results for the different news media under study.

As Table 6.9 shows, just two Catalan media do not adopt journalists' blogs, *'Nació Digital'* and *'324'*. Another medium, *'El Mundo'*, includes blogs, but in fact these are more similar to opinion articles, due the fact that most of them do not accept comments. In all other media, journalists' blogs are normally included in the 'Opinion' section, but labelled as blogs and not as opinion articles. Except in *'El Mundo'* all other media accept comments on all their journalists' blogs. Another common tool is 'most read, shared, rated or commented news stories'. Normally, media show these rankings in a place on the homepage or in the participation section. Multiple choice polls, a tool that allows the medium to 'test' the users' opinion about a topic is adopted by six of the media. Finally, the least adopted tool is 'forums'. Despite being a common tool some years ago, nowadays it has lost its popularity on media websites in favour of other forms of user-user communication, such as comment on news or social networks.

Table 6.9. Other forms of participative interactivity in Catalan media

	Comment on blogs/opinion articles	Forums	Most read/commented/shared news	Multiple choice polls
La Vanguardia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
El Periodico	Yes	No	Yes	No
20 minutos	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
ARA	Yes	No	Yes	No
El Pais	Yes	No	Yes	No
El Mundo	No	No	Yes	Yes
El Punt.Avui	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
324.CAT	No	No	Yes	Yes
Nacio Digital	No	No	Yes	No
Vilaweb	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

6.3. Productive Interactivity

The label of 'productive interactivity' groups together the different tools that allow users to publish original content on the media websites. Similarly than in the former category of participative interactivity, the relationship takes place in a user-professional context, being absent in the case of productive interactivity the

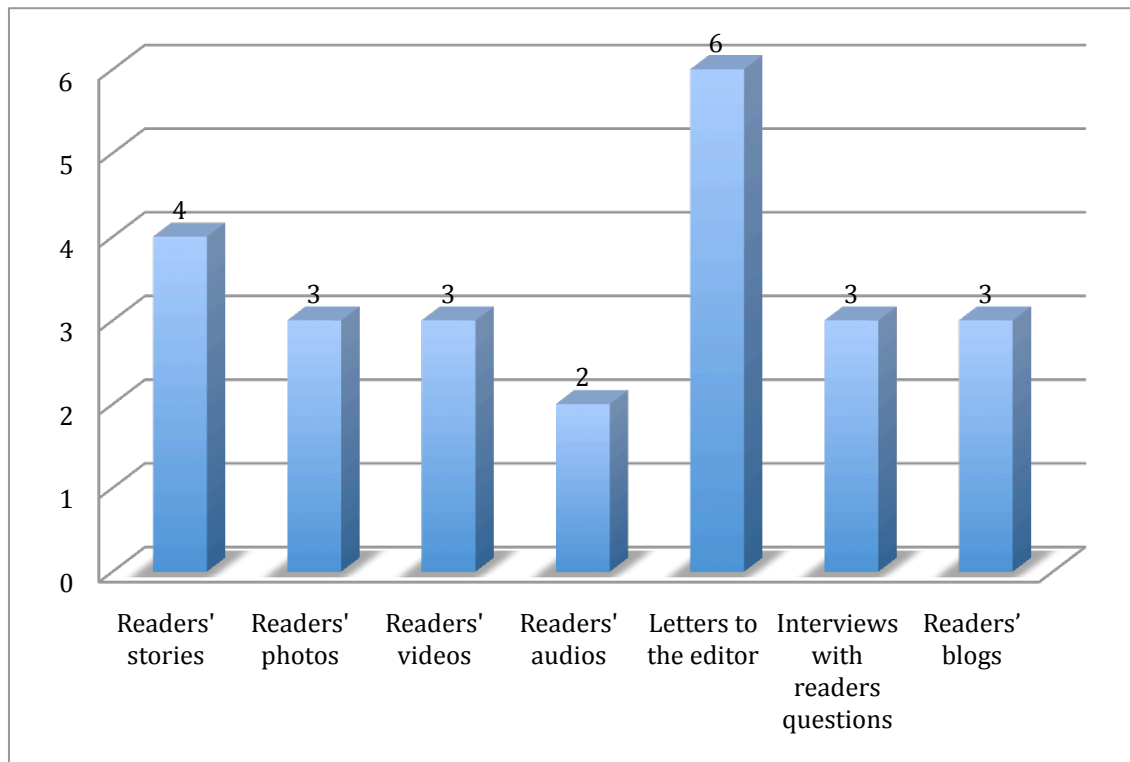
relation user-user. The main difference is that in the case of productive interactivity the aim of the user is to contribute with original content. Under this label of 'productive interactivity' seven different indicators have been grouped: 'readers' stories', 'readers' photos', 'readers' videos', 'readers' audios', 'letters to the editor', 'interviews with readers' questions' and 'readers' blogs' (see Table 6.10 below).

Table 6.10. Productive interactivity

	Readers' stories	Readers' photos	Readers' videos	Readers' audios	Letters to editor	Interviews with readers questions	Readers' blogs
La Vanguardia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
El Periódico	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
20 minutos	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Ara	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
El País	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
El Mundo	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
El Punt Avui	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
324.CAT	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Nació Digital	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Vilaweb	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes

Figure 6.9 (see next page) shows the most adopted tools among the Catalan media under study. As can be seen, 'letters to the editor' is the most adopted tool with six media offering it on their websites. As has already been commented on in the analysis of United Kingdom media, this tool is in fact just a reformulation of the classic printed version of letters to the editor. Before online media, in most newspapers this was

the only section that used to present readers' opinions. With the Internet, letters to the editor were one of the first forms of online participation adopted by media, with almost no changes in relation to the traditional letters sent to printed newspapers. It allows the newsroom to avoid letter selection, as the website has no problems of space. They can publish the most relevant ones in the printed version and include on the website most of the ones that they receive.

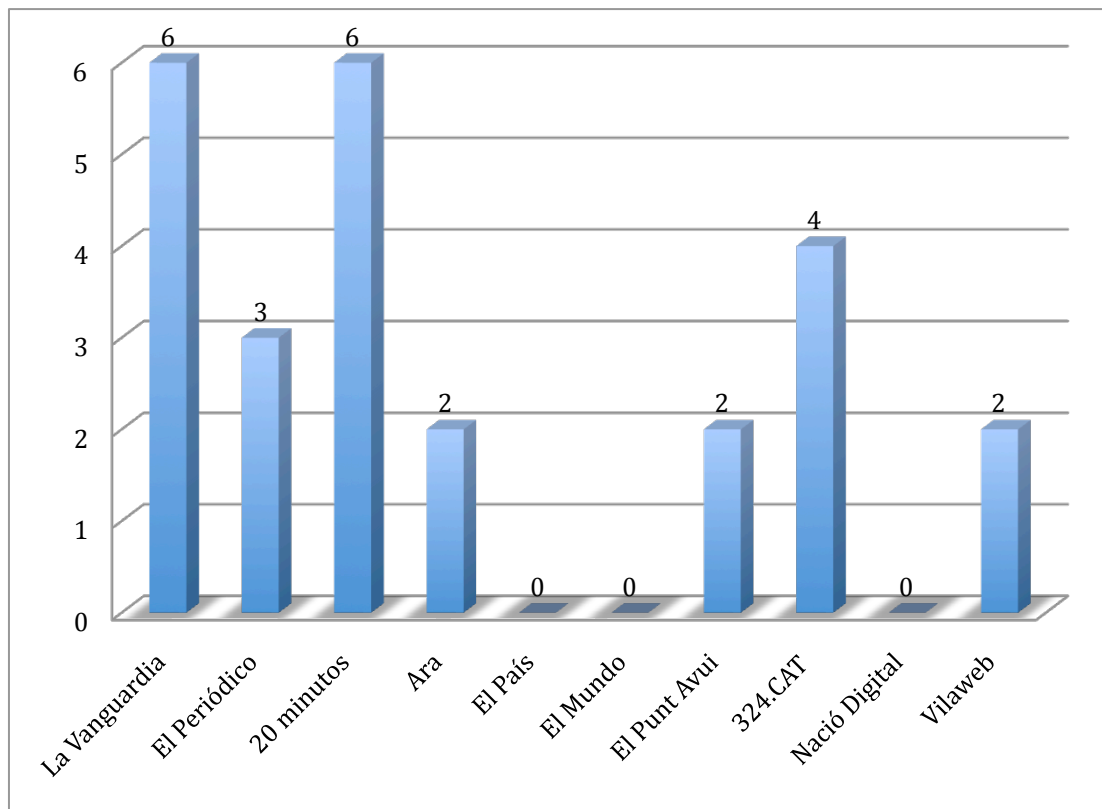
Figure 6.9. Number of Catalan media adopting each productive tool

The rest of the forms of productive participation are adopted by between two and four media. 'Readers' stories' are adopted by four media, *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *20 minutos* and *324.CAT*, even if this last does not show any of the stories in its participation section. Despite the fact that this tool could enable users to publish their own material, in reality it is used more as a tool for suggesting issues to journalists. The three newspapers that allow it use this option to motivate users to advise the newsroom of possible issues to be reported on, rather than encouraging users to contribute their own material. Users testimonies are then included in the piece, but always with the participation of a newsroom journalist.

The other forms of users' direct content production are also adopted by the same media, with the exception of *El Periódico*, that do not include options to send pictures or audio/video files. Finally, readers' blogs and interviews with readers' questions are both adopted by three media. *La Vanguardia* and *20 minutos* adopt

both tools, while *Ara* allows interviews with readers' questions and *Vilaweb* readers' blogs. In all the cases, user content is previously controlled before being published. The only exception is readers' blogs, which can be published without previous control.

Figure 6.10. Adoption of productive interactivity tools in Catalan media



As can be seen in Figure 6.10, three media do not adopt any tool labelled as 'productive interactivity'. These media are *El País*, *El Mundo* and *Nació Digital*. Another medium, *El Punt Avui*, adopts just one tool, 'letters to the editor', a kind of participation that existed long before the advent of online media. As a first conclusion, it can be said that four media of the ten under study, do not adopt any of the tools that new media provide in order to include content created by users on the website .

Among the group of media that allow some kind of citizen content creation, *Vilaweb* and *Ara* are among those that allow a lower number of tools, just two. *Ara*

allows readers to send letters to the editor, and also periodically conducts interviews with different personalities using questions that the readers have sent to the newsroom. *Vilaweb*, except for the letters to the editor, limits user content creation to those who subscribe to the medium. These users can open a blog on the medium website, and also benefit from other participatory options. For example, some subscription options allow users to be involved in collective interviews that take place in the medium newsroom. Although these are not really online interviews, they are played in live streaming onto the website. However, online users cannot directly ask questions, they can just see the interview that is taking place in the newsroom.

La Vanguardia and *20minutos* are the two media that adopt more productive interactivity tools: six in total. These media group all these options into their participation sections, offering users a wide range of different options in order to contribute with original content. Both media have sections in which users can send stories or complain about certain issues. Then the medium can send a journalist to cover the story or directly publish the reader's opinion about the issue. Letters to the editors and blogs are also options allowed by both media, although users' creation of blogs is easier on *20 minutos* rather than on *La Vanguardia*. Anyone can open a blog in *20 minutos*, but on *La Vanguardia* it is the newspaper who asks concrete users if they want to open a blog on the medium's website. Normally, these users are readers that are living abroad and who publish their blogs in the section 'lectores corresponsales'. Both media also allow users different options to send pictures or videos, although no audio options are offered on *La Vanguardia*. Finally, *La Vanguardia* also offers the possibility of sending questions to the online interviews that the newspaper carries out with different personalities. These questions are sent to the newsroom, filtered and asked to the person being interviewed.

To conclude, *El Periódico* offers just three options to contribute with original content and *324.CAT* four options. The Catalan public broadcaster mentions that it offers four different ways to send original material which are by sending stories, pictures, audio and video files in response to the different 'calls' that the medium

will send out in its participation section. However, at the present time these 'calls' only enable users to send pictures related to weather or local celebrations not really newsworthy items or those related to public issues. *El Periódico*, even if it adopts a lower number of tools, develops a more ambitious policy of user participation. Similarly to the websites of other newspapers, it allows users to send letters to the editor. Moreover, it includes in its participation section an email address to which users can send stories. Similarly to *La Vanguardia* or *20 minutos* these stories can be published directly (with previous control) or, more commonly, used by journalists to create a piece, generated by the reader's email. *El Periódico* also conducts interviews online using readers' questions, but also invites some users to conduct interviews in person with Catalan politicians.

6.4. Summary of results

To start the summary of results Figure 6.11 (next page) shows the number of tools that each medium adopts, differentiated by kind of interactivity. In analysing these results, it must be taken into account that some kinds of interactivity have a higher total number of tools than others. A total of six selective interactivity tools, fourteen tools labelled as 'participative interactivity' and seven tools as 'productive interactivity' have been included on the code sheet used in this research.

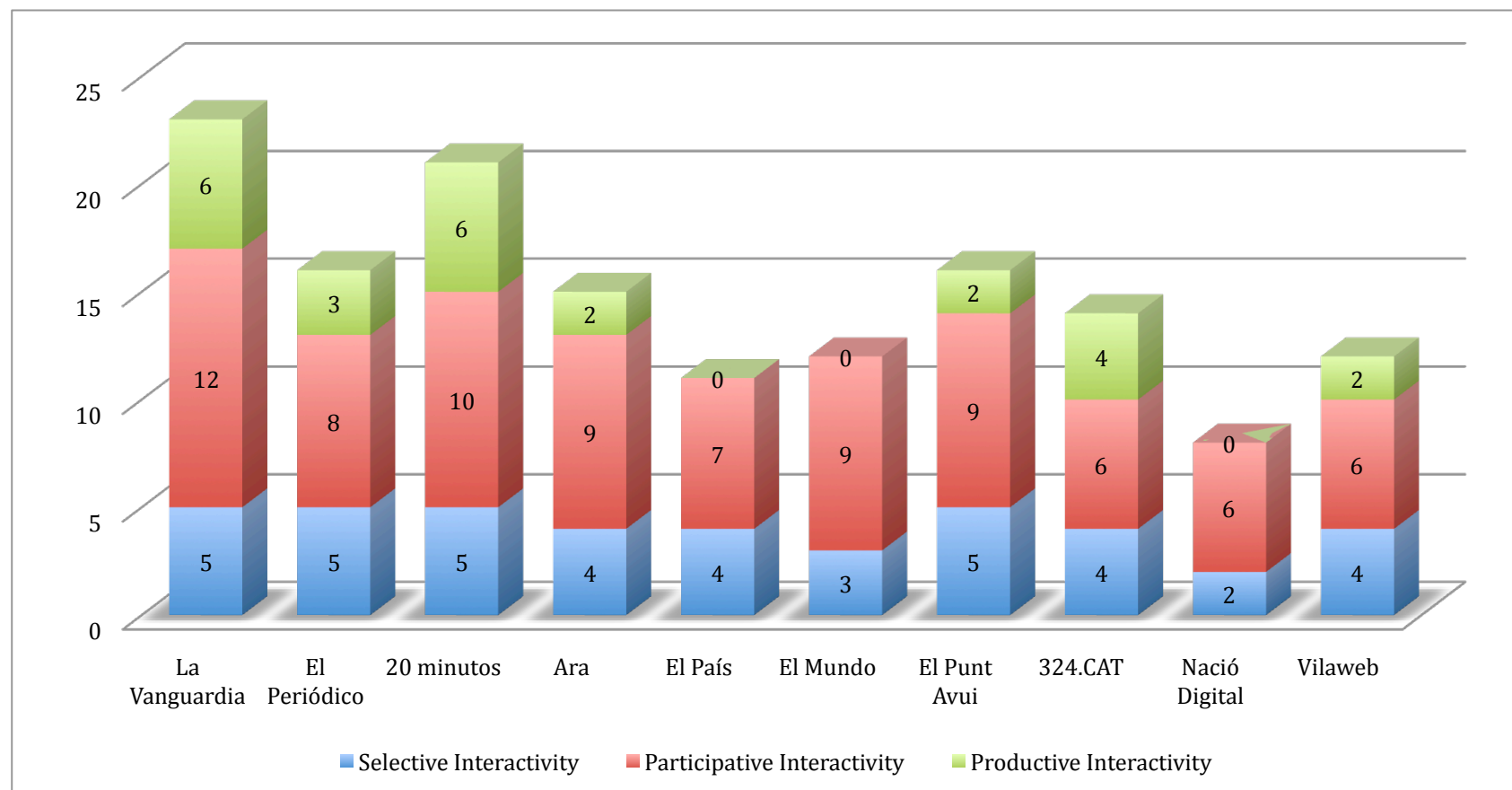
Figure 6.11. Number of tools in Catalan media per kind of interactivity

Figure 6.11 shows the number of tools, divided by kind of interactivity, that each medium adopts. It can be seen how selective interactivity is broadly adopted among the media under research. Six different tools were presented in the code sheet under this label. Four of the media get close to the maximum number of tools, adopting five of them. Another group of four media adopt four of the selective interactivity tools. Finally, 'El Mundo' which adopts three tools, and 'Nació Digital', two, are the media that adopt the least number of these tools.

Participative interactivity was the most represented in the code sheet, with fourteen different tools that could be adopted by media. In our selection of ten Catalan media, seven of them adopt half of the tools or more, these being *La Vanguardia* which adopts the most tools (twelve) and *El Periódico*, *20 minutos*, *Ara*, *El Mundo* and *El Punt Avui* which adopt between eight and nine tools. The rest of the media adopt fewer tools, but never lower than six.

Finally, seven different tools were included in the code sheet under the label of 'productive interactivity'. This is the kind of interactivity that shows the most differences in behaviour among the media selected. *El País*, *El Mundo* and *Nació Digital* do not adopt any of the possible tools. On the other hand, *La Vanguardia* and *20 minutos* allow a number of tools close to the maximum (six). The rest of the media are in a middle position, adopting from one tool (like *El Punt Avui*) to four (like *324.CAT*).

In conclusion, it can be said that the most common tools in the media under study are selective and participative ones, with just a few media adopting a relevant number of productive interactivity tools. However, although some of the selective and participative tools, such as 'social media', 'registration' and 'comment on news' options are broadly accepted, they present differences with regard to how the different media adopt them. In the next section each medium will be analysed individually, in order to better understand its particular selection of interactivity tools.

- *La Vanguardia*: This is the medium that adopts the largest number of tools, twelve participative, six productive and five selective (almost all the twenty seven tools present on the study sheet). As can be seen, it adopts a high number of tools distributed across its website, but mainly in its participation section and in comment on news. It has an easy registration option that can be done also by registering using social networks, registration being mandatory in order to participate on the website. The medium accepts comments on all news stories, having the second highest average number of comments on news stories among the media researched. However, it does not develop a complete user profile and comments option: it lacks tools to connect users to each other and to promote community-building. Rather than promoting users' interactions with each other, *La Vanguardia* seems more interested in promoting user-medium interactions, especially in its participation section, a real catch-all that adopts many different kinds of tools and articles aimed at attracting users. Although some of the options offered are aimed at entertainment, others are really useful and newsworthy, enabling users to facilitate original content that is subsequently used by journalists to create an article. However, there are no options for users to produce and publish original content, except in blogs; but even this options needs a previous offer from the medium to open a blog in its participation section (as for example, foreign correspondents' readers).

- *El Periódico*: The website of this Catalan newspaper offers a large number of tools. It adopts eight participative tools, three productive and five selective. Registration options are similar to those in *La Vanguardia*, with an easy registration that can be also done by connecting the profile with an existing one on Twitter or Facebook. By registering users have access to comment on news and are able to participate in 'Entre todos', the participation section. Comments on news stories present just the option of replying, voting or reporting as inappropriate. There is a lack of options with regard to developing users' profiles and user-user interaction. However, its average number of comments is related to the position it has in Alexa's ranking of Spanish websites. Despite the fact that it also adopts a high number of tools, its participation section differs from that of *La Vanguardia*: 'Entre todos' is not aimed at enhancing a high number of different tools. Rather, it

is aimed at direct contributions from users, in the form of letters or emails written to the newsroom, which are then processed and covered by the newsroom's journalists. Interviews using readers' questions are the other form allowed for users to produce original content. Regarding this point, it is necessary to point out that *El Periódico* organises some activities for those more active users, such as meetings in the newsroom or interviews with politicians in which the users can participate live.

- *20 minutos*: This Spanish free newspaper adopts a similar number of selective and participative tools to *El Periódico*, five and ten respectively. However, it differs greatly with regard to productive interactivity. *20 minutos* is one of the media that adopt more of these tools together with *La Vanguardia*: six in total. It has a participation section that works in a similar way to that of *El Periódico*, aimed at encouraging users to send their own material which is then processed and published by journalists. However, *20 minutos* promotes the sending of any kind of material to the newsroom, allowing any kind of format. *20 minutos* also promotes a complete user profile, that allows users to follow each other, and other tools aimed at community-building. The participation section is also organised according to this aim, with a strong presence of the most active users' profiles and also a list of the most commented or rated news stories. *20 minutos* has the third position as far as the average number of comments on news stories is concerned. This is in accordance with its position as the third website receiving the most visitors among the media under study according to Alexa ranking. Social network interactions on its website are also in accordance with the visitors it receives.

- *Ara*: The website of this Catalan newspaper has an average adoption of participative (nine) and selective tools (four), but shows a low adoption of productive interactivity (two tools). This medium has a paywall to access the content that is labeled as 'premium' (users can access just one of these articles per day, if they are not subscribed). This normally entails opinion and analysis articles, being the free access content that is considered as the news of the day. Comments are allowed on all news stories, but if users cannot access the content they cannot see the linked comments and neither can they participate in the conversation. In

fact, 'comment on news', together with some other options such as 'letters to the editor' or 'interviews with readers' questions' are one of the few choices for user participation. *Ara's* options of user profile are limited, showing the users' list of comments and the total number of positive and negative votes that users' comments have received. There are no options to 'follow' or contact other users or other tools aimed at facilitating a users' community. Despite having a paywall and not promoting comments on news stories and community-building, the average number of comments on news stories is related to the position of *Ara's* website among the media under study. Social networks are one of the points on which *Ara* stands out, compared with the other media. The community of users of *Ara* is especially active on the social network sites of the medium, especially on Facebook. Its social network users' interactions are the second in number, being just inferior to those of *El País*, a medium with a five times higher social networks presence than *Ara*.

- *El País*: The website of the Spanish newspaper is among those that adopt fewer interactive features. Firstly, it does not adopt any productive tool, giving no chance for users to contribute with original content. Secondly, it adopts just four selective features and seven participative. Participation on *El País* is mainly structured through comment on news. Comments are allowed on all news stories and registration on the medium (which also requires registration on its own social network, *Eskup*) is mandatory before being able to comment. Users' profile in *Eskup* is complete, with the option to communicate through private messages to other users, 'follow' them, see which comments on news they have made, and with the possibility also to 'follow' issues or topics. Although the visibility of *Eskup* on the medium's website is low, users access it each time they make a comment on a news story. Furthermore, users' loyalty is represented by the fact that those users that are making more comments appear highlighted in the comments list (called 'Foro abierto'). According to this policy of facilitating users' comments (but also due the high number of visitors), *El País* is by far the medium in this research with the highest average number of comments on news stories. Due to its relevance in Spain (and also in other Spanish speaking countries) *El País* has a strong presence on social networks, with a high number of followers and fans.

- *El Mundo*: Similar to *El País*, the medium with the most visited website, according to Alexa ranking, does not adopt any kind of productive interactivity tool. The number of participative tools is among the average (nine), but with regard to selective tools is among those that adopt fewer tools (three). With a recently adopted 'soft' paywall (registered users can access 25 articles per month), it is still too soon to draw conclusions about how it will affect its website, although according to Alexa it is still the most visited website among Spanish media. Its user profile is complete, enabling users to carry out similar actions as on *El País*: 'follow' other users, send private messages, and read others' comments. *El Mundo* understands participation, like *El País*, through comment on news. It allows several options linked to comments and has established 'Karma' points in order to reward those users that are more engaged within the community by commenting or accessing the site. Despite all these features aimed at community-building, and the fact that it is the most visited website, *El Mundo* is the fourth medium as far as the average number of comments on news stories is concerned.

- *El Punt Avui*: The website of this Catalan newspaper adopts an average number of participative tools (nine). It adopts just two productive tools ('letters to the editor' and sending pictures), and five selective tools. Regarding comment on news, the medium is trying to ensure the quality of the comments by including the need for a 1 euro payment aimed at verifying the user prior to the registration profile being accepted. Although this might be considered a barrier for users, *El Punt Avui* has a higher average number of comments on news stories than other media such as *324.CAT* which receives more visitors. Despite this, *El Punt Avui* has the second lowest average number of comments. With regard to productive interactivity *El Punt Avui* focuses this kind of interactivity on local issues. In fact, this medium is especially focused on this kind of news, both on the website and in the printed version. Its website includes a participation section that brings together the productive tools. This includes an option to ask questions to local councils and also picture galleries focused on local issues. In this case, the productive tools can be said to be directly aimed at reinforcing the editorial line of the newspaper.

- *324.CAT*: The news website of the Catalan public broadcaster has one of the lowest numbers of participative tools (six). Instead, it has a higher number of productive tools (four) and an average number of selective ones (four). It is the only medium among those included in this research that specifies on its website that the comments on news stories are moderated before publication, including also a complete mandatory profile to fill in before commenting. Despite this control, that might have pointed towards a policy of promoting debate on the site, *324.CAT* does not offer any of the tools aimed at community-building, such as a user profile that allows entry to others' previous comments, sending messages to other users or replying to comments. The offer of tools is completed with the options of productive interactivity. The participatory section allows users to upload content to the site (once it has been moderated). However, there is a general lack of visualization of this content, except through users' pictures. The site specifies that there will be 'calls' for user participation, aimed at encouraging users to send material related to certain issues, but the fact is that these 'calls' are infrequent and without any connection to news content.

- *Nació Digital*: This Catalan online newspaper is the medium that adopts the least number of tools. It adopts no productive interactivity tools but has two selective and six participative ones. Its options for user participation are almost limited to comments on news stories. These are, however, scarcely developed, with almost no restrictions on commenting apart from a quick registration (user name and email address). Although comments on news stories are the only noticeable option for users' participation, the medium does not include any option that develops this function, such as reporting comments, developing users' profiles or allowing users to respond to others comments.

- *Vilaweb*: The Catalan online newspaper adopts a number of four selective tools, six participative ones and two productive ones. It is the only medium studied in this research that does not allow comment on news. As a consequence, it lacks spaces in which users can debate online about the news and public issues. Users' profiles are not developed and it does not adopt any feature that allows users to

contact each other, apart from forums, a format that is however, out of date. Although being among the media that adopt a fewer number of tools, and the fact that it does not adopt users' comments on news stories, *Vilaweb* does develop user participation. This participation is however limited to particular spaces on the news website, such as in users' blogs or in forums. The medium also tries to involve users in the everyday life of the newsroom, through a system of paid subscriptions that gives users the chance to participate in newsroom decisions and meetings (see the analysis made in the selective interactivity section). In this way, the medium conducts a particular policy towards user participation, trusting and reinforcing its audience.

**SECTION III - QUALITATIVE STUDY: CITIZENS' ATTITUDES
AND MOTIVATIONS TOWARDS ONLINE MEDIA
PARTICIPATION**

CHAPTER 7

Findings of the focus groups in London

This first chapter of section III presents the findings of the focus groups conducted in London. Next chapter eight will present the findings of the focus groups conducted in Barcelona. Firstly, the present chapter introduces London participants' attitudes and motivations towards issues of public and media engagement. After established this context, the chapter focuses its attention on participants' discourses towards Internet use and online media participatory practices. As explained in the methodology, participants' discourses are analysed together with their answers to the previous questionnaire. In some cases this data have been quantified and showed through diagram maps. Nevertheless, during most of the chapter the different issues are analysed together with extracts of participants' interventions or dialogues from the focus groups sessions, as is usual in research based on focus groups.

7.1. Participatory discourses: public and media engagement among London focus groups participants

The main aim of this section is to analyse how the research participants understand their life in democracy and how they engage with public issues and the broad realm of 'the political' (Mouffe, 2001 and 2005). As has been previously seen in the theoretical background chapter, in late modern democracies there are many participatory practices, and attitudes towards participation, that configure a complex system of private spheres and possibilities for engagement (Dahlgren, 2013; Papacharissi, 2010). The purpose of this section is to analyse citizens'

discourses towards life in democracy and offline participation, starting at the first levels of engagement, public talk and ‘mediated public connection’ (Couldry et al., 2007; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013), and finishing with practices that demand higher participatory intensities and continued action on the part of citizen, such as joining an NGO or a political party. This analysis will present some shortcomings of the public sphere, identified within participants’ discourses and strongly connected with the actual hegemonies and power positions within current United Kingdom society. Finally, a diagram map will show the quantification of the qualitative data on public engagement collected during the focus group sessions, as well as its relationship to media consumption and public engagement.

7.1.1. Everyday talk: a first level of public engagement

To talk about public issues is one of the first manifestations of citizens’ engagement with, or attention to, ‘the political’. The second manifestation of this first level of engagement is a certain level of what Couldry, Livingstone and Markham called ‘mediated public connection’ (2007). According to Dahlgren (2011), these first manifestations of engagement are a precondition to more participatory practices, such as voluntary work in a community centre or being active in an NGO.

Most of the participants in this research do talk about public issues, at least once a week. Despite the fact that elitist or minimalist theories of democracy focusing on the individual argue that deliberation and conversation are not central pillars of democracy (Schudson, 1998), other authors believe that public talk is important in order to transform private expression into public opinion (Papacharissi, 2010). As Gamson (1992) points out, citizens are ‘thinking individuals’, but their ‘thinking’ is strongly influenced by their social reference groups (family, friends, and colleagues at work).

Consequently, through this everyday talk the research participants construct their opinions and ideas about public issues and their relationship with news media.

Moreover, everyday talk is also a good indicator of which public issues are the ones that receive the most interest from the research participants. As the participants pointed out, they normally talk about public issues in everyday contexts, in environments not specifically designed for debate. Rather, everyday talk is mainly performed in ‘accidental’ circumstances, although, as the next quotations reflect, each research participant was at least able to identify one context or group of people with whom he or she is more likely to talk about the public issues that they are most concerned about:

“It depends on what are you talking about. [He looks at the list of public issues.] I mean, I talk a lot about religion, about bills and also poverty. I talk at my friend’s house, she’s a single mother. We do talk about these things, in my home, in her home, but I don’t really spend my free time talking about these things.” M44

“I talk with my family mainly, you know about... It’s an ongoing thing. We seem to agree, like about crime, that’s a big one, about housing, poverty. Yes, mainly at home with my family.” F50

However, a lower number of the other research participants do have regular meetings in which they talk about public issues. As the following focus group participants explain, these groups are normally formed by members of a local community and consequently talk about local public issues, although in some cases they also talk about other topics that could be of special relevance in a particular context or at a particular moment:

“I also talk in a collective organization. We organise talks, also about some of these issues [she points to the list] but mainly about local issues. We have a session on Thursdays. Especially with young people, I think it’s important to talk about these things.” F42

“I joined a book centre. I help in organizing talks there. We bring people to talk about things, about the local community, but also about other things, to help people to know what’s going on.” F30

Which public issues concern the individual and the context in which he or she talks about them are a good indicator of the participants’ kind of public engagement. The previously quoted research participants show a certain sense of necessity or civic obligation in joining groups or simply being aware of, or talking about, public issues that are relevant for the community, whether this is local, national or international (what Bennett (2008) has identified as the ‘dutiful citizen’ model of citizenship). Other participants, however, show a lack of interest in these issues, but are not completely disengaged or passive:

“I’m not really interested in current events or what’s going on, so I don’t speak much about it. Since 17-18 I’ve had an interest in music, and I went on the Internet a lot, but mainly to talk about music and eventually then to talk about politics. I talk more about that online.” F25

Participants such as the above are more interested in individuality, rather than in community issues. They prefer to focus their attention on issues such as personal values, lifestyle or consumption, following what Bennett (2008) defines as the ‘actualizing citizen’ model of citizenship. As will be seen when analysing the research participants’ public engagement, this group of citizens tends to be formed of young people who complement their offline participation with high levels of online participatory practices, such as getting in touch online with like-minded citizens, which contributes to the development of small private spheres (Papacharissi, 2010).

However, among most of the research participants, family and friends seem to be the main social contexts where they most often talk about public issues and the different topics that they consider relevant or important:

“We talk about these things at the pub, when you meet friends.” M40

“My sons are living at home and we talk about those things often, about politics mainly. He is doing a course now, so we talk about education and this is nice.” M55

The main factor that explains why family (understood as the nuclear group that meets every day) and friends are the most common social contexts where public talk is performed is proximity. After all, it is easier for citizens to talk with the people they meet regularly. However, as the two research participants quoted next highlight, family and friends are two social groups that tend to share basic assumptions, political ideas and perspectives on certain issues.

“We probably talk with people that are friends, because we are friends and we share some ideas about these issues and we’re in some way similar. It’s difficult to find people with different ideas.” M29

“I talk with my family mainly, you know about... It’s an ongoing thing. We seem to agree, about crime, that’s a big one, poverty, housing. Yes, mainly I talk with my family.” F50

As the next conversation among the research participants reflects, talking about public issues with other citizens who do not share basic political ideas or ideological positions could result in difficult discussions or other difficult situations

- “I do sometimes discuss things with my neighbor, because I know for the most part she has a similar view to me, but my other neighbours, I know they would support Thatcher, so, you know, they are really royalists or whatever. I don’t talk [about politics] with them, I try to keep on friendly terms with them. (...) This is very British, I think. If you want to keep your friends you don’t generally discuss politics with them, unless you know that on particular issues there would be agreement.” F58

- “You express that very well, I really identify myself [laugh].” F59 (Another participant in this focus group, M55, also agrees.)

If public talk is therefore predominantly carried out with those that think in a similar way, it will be hard to get in touch with, and consequently better understand, citizens with different values and political positions. Political scientist Chantal Mouffe theorised the concept of ‘agonistic pluralism’ as “the very condition of existence” of democracy (Mouffe, 2001, p. 103). Mouffe argues that democracy needs, firstly, a basic consensus on the rules of the game. However, democracy also needs to embrace within it different identities and political positions, that are in fact what constitute the real choices for citizens. Tolerance and respect for different identities is therefore necessary for the correct development of a healthy democracy. However, it is more relevant for this research to note another conclusion that can be deduced from Mouffe’s theory. That is, the need for the public sphere to provide spaces where citizens with different identities and political positions can meet and exchange their perceptions and attitudes towards ‘the political’. According to the focus group research, these spaces are not common.

The participants, especially those with high levels of public engagement, value the chance to meet people with different opinions and values, as can be seen in the next extracts from the focus group sessions:

“It’s good anyway to engage with other people’s views. It’s a great way for discussion. Of course, with respect for others’ points of view.” M27

“When you are involved, then you meet more people and see different perspectives. If you just live somewhere, or just work somewhere, you could end up with a closed mind.” F30

“New people, I mean people that you meet in the street or other places. And then you find out their views, especially with religion. When it comes to religion, then this one believes in Jehovah, the other one in the name of God. I like to hear different stories about how they came to that.” F35

However, the research participants also point to a lack of spaces in which to meet those citizens who think differently. According to the results of focus groups,

citizens enter into contact with other points of view in two different places. Firstly, some of them do it directly, during their daily life in the workplace, identified as the everyday environment where they are more likely to meet citizens that are not like-minded. Secondly, most of them do it in an indirect way, through their everyday media consumption⁵⁵. Regarding the workplace, most of the research participants that have a job believe that this is the environment where they can talk about public issues with other citizens with different ideas or political positions:

- "I don't talk now, because I'm not working. [She had recently suffered an accident and had had to stay at home for one month.] When I work we have discussions in the staff room about what's going on in the news." F58

- "I'm lucky. In my department everyone agrees with me. What we have in my department is a basic agreement on broad political beliefs and views of the world. We agree with each other about politics on a basic level, but then we also disagree on some other issues." M40

"I think the context I find people that think more differently is at work. Work is the place where you come across people that think differently from you. Sometimes it could be quite difficult to talk about politics at work." M29

As can be seen in the previous quotations, the workplace is an environment identified as likely to produce debate about public issues with people that could have different opinions and points of view. However, this debate tends to be considered as more productive and interesting if it is conducted among other citizens who share a basic common view of the world, of general political ideas. In those workplaces where citizens have very different political positions, the outcome is public talk that can be transformed into discussion or even argument. As the following research participants explain, in these cases they prefer not to talk about public issues at work:

⁵⁵ The findings on media, with special attention to online public talk, will be presented in the next sections.

“At work I don’t hide my perspectives, but in a professional situation I will not attack people or strongly defend my perspectives. Is not hiding, it’s simply not opening debates with people when you know it will be conflictive. There are other forums for that, not in a professional situation.” F42 (This participant is a member of a local debating group that meets weekly.)

“I talk at work. But not much because my boss is an *****, she is really racist. It becomes so uncomfortable to talk about politics or religion, I tend just not to.” F29

7.1.2. Discourses about news media and life in democracy

Several authors consider a certain level of ‘connection’ with media as a first manifestation of engagement with ‘the political’ (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007) or as a precondition to other social practices with a higher level of participatory intensity (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). The following paragraphs will show how, although most of the research participants are ‘connected’ to news media, their actual evaluation of traditional media institutions is not positive. Most participants in the focus group sessions show high levels of distrust of media institutions. However, this general feeling of distrust is expressed in different ways, depending on the level of public engagement of each research participant.

All the research participants agree that there is a need for news media in society in order to know what is going on and to be able to conduct a normal democratic life in democracy. Accordingly, all the research participants, although at different degrees, confirm that they follow news media weekly, mainly traditional media. Among the research participants there are some that follow news daily and from many different sources of information and others that follow news weekly and from just one or two different media. As will be seen later at the end of the analysis of participants’ public engagement, more engaged citizens generally tend to give more importance to being informed, spending more time following current events and doing so using a higher number of different sources of information.

As the next quotation demonstrates, most of the research participants think that traditional news media cover the public issues in which they are most interested:

“I believe the media addresses all the issues I care about, however I don’t believe they address solutions, just facts, and not presented in a good manner. They are biased. Well, not all media, mainly mass media.” F30

Participants’ discourses, although recognising the need for news media in society, tend to disagree on the way that they actually perform their mission to keep citizens informed. Discourses of distrust were commonly found among all the research participants. As the next quotations exemplify, the participants tend to consider media as biased, especially with regard to some special issues such as the economy and poverty:

“The thing is that the function of the media is to communicate, to share with people information, but it is a bit of a manipulation game. And there are people that have power in the media and can manipulate it. Sometimes they are not telling you the whole of the story, there’s a bias, information that they are not telling you.” F36

“I don’t watch the news very often, I really just turn away from the news. They have this way of always blaming poor people. I don’t like it and I just follow the news sometimes, a couple of times a week, that’s all.” M44

The previous quotations also reflect a general feeling that traditional media institutions and political representatives are in some way connected. Some citizens consider that the current political system itself and the behaviour of the media contribute to a hegemonic position of media institutions and politicians which allows them to establish precisely which issues are going to be present in public debate. The following quotations of three research participants exemplify this extended discourse to all the focus groups conducted:

“Politicians and media don’t talk about public issues in the way I like. They’re not always honest, and I think they’re very biased in what is going to receive attention and what is not.” F36

“I think it’s really interesting how people in politics and media create an industry around what they’re saying. It’s not just what topics are trendy or not from this week to the next, and it’s nothing to do with which topics are more or less important, it’s just about people’s own way of manipulating what’s being talked about and how.” M33

“About welfare - it’s a good example. (...) The media tend to create this caricature that someone on benefits is breaking out of the system and don’t consider that benefits means also pensions, disabilities, just to justify biased ways, the ways of the Government. (...) Just because the system is not working at its best, it doesn’t mean we take the system away.” F42

Among those participants that can be considered as more engaged, the response to the discourse of distrust is to amplify the number and kind of media that are followed daily or weekly. The discourse of distrust of these research participants is also elaborated in a ‘constructive’ way. That is, participants talk about what the media should be or how they should provide information about current affairs, in order to have a better democracy, rather than constructing a pessimistic discourse in which nothing can be saved from traditional media institutions.

As an example of this ‘constructive’ discourse of distrust, some of the most engaged participants in the focus groups spontaneously started to talk about how to better overcome possible biases in coverage by the media:

- “Then I think you have to do research and find out, the thing is not everyone has the time. (...) If I want to find out more probably BBC News, but you know, BBC News, it’s meant to be good, but they don’t talk about lots of things.” F36

- "Yes, it's interesting how the BBC is sometimes more pro-government than other newspapers. I think that the easy thing to do is actually to read, to look at the political section if you are concerned about these things, or also the newspapers, you know, you have the *Guardian* and then the *Evening Standard*. You'll have the whole story quite quick and easy." M33

Discourses about distrust of media institutions are more aggressive among those more passive and disengaged participants. As the next quotations show, these participants also tend to establish connections between the performance of the media and the actions of political representatives. Their distrust and disconnection are therefore not limited to the media sphere but also to the public one, which drives them to passivity and disengagement.

"Most of the time you could regret but I think coverage is focused on political issues, to catch your attention, [news coverage] could be a cover up for something they try to hide." M34

- "I think that politicians and media perform a sort of process that obscures the truth, the real issues. I think the media in this country doesn't absolutely represent the reality, a kind of... It's not about impartiality or cynicism, it's about the political agenda. This largely right wing ideology upon us, that I really disagree with." M40

- "And the newspapers are all of them so heavily weighted, politically. Even the *Independent*, for example, is still... They still have a political position. They talk just about what they want to talk about." M39

- "And there is still this whole concept of class and you wouldn't generally see someone belonging to the working class talking about or reading the *Independent* or the *Guardian*." F29

Discourses of distrust are generally associated with traditional media institutions, which for all the research participants are the main source of information about public issues. Most participants do not differentiate between traditional and non-traditional media. The following quotation from a research participant, who makes

this differentiation, is an exception rather than the rule among the focus group participants:

“I believe the media address all the issues I care about. However, I don’t believe they address solutions, just facts. And they don’t present it in a good manner, they’re biased. Well, not all media, mainly mass media.” F30

Participants’ discourses towards alternative media will be extended in the next section on online media participatory practices, to connect this kind of media with blogs and other kinds of original content production, as well as other news sources directly connected with the Internet, for example, social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter. However, to finish this section about participants’ discourses on news media, a word has to be said about foreign media. Some engaged research participants reflected interest in news sources such as Russia Today or Al Jazeera, considering them as another way to compare the information that they can obtain through national news media.

7.1.3. Citizens’ participation: beyond the first levels of public engagement

The previous paragraphs have analysed media attention and public talk, practices considered by some authors as preconditions for engagement (Dahlgren, 2013; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). This section will put the focus on those practices that are of a higher intensity of participation, in which citizens must develop some kind of conscious action. Rosanvallon (2008) identifies these kinds of practices with ‘Involvement’ (practices that involve citizens gathering and agreeing collective action to achieve common goals) and ‘Intervention’ (practices that involve action aimed at influencing or producing a desired result). However, as has been seen in the theoretical background chapter, the nature and characteristics of the different participatory practices that can be performed by citizens nowadays are almost infinite, which makes categorizations and typologies of these kinds of practices more complicated. Rather than entering into these debates, this section will aim to present the focus group participants’ discourses on participation and public

engagement. It will focus on practices that imply an active participation, even if these are directly aimed at 'the political' and public issues, or are more related to the civic or the social world, without including a component of latent conflictuality.

When asked if they engage in some actions or participate somehow in their communities or in actions linked with the public issues in which they are more interested or concerned, approximately half of the research participants answered affirmatively. The participatory practices that emerged during the focus group sessions were highly diverse. What is also interesting is how the answer to this question is also an example of how each research participant understands 'participation' or 'engagement'. For some, this means activities that are specifically political in the sense of traditional politics (voting or joining a political party activity). For others, participation is understood as activities disconnected from political issues but aimed more at engaging with their communities or contributing to some tangible outcome, such as volunteering or joining neighbourhood associations or parents' groups. Furthermore, especially relevant are a final group of participants ('actualized citizens') who tend to directly connect their discourses about participation with online participatory practices, disregarding offline ones or relegating them to second place

Regarding offline participatory practices, as has been already said, these are highly diverse. Some participants in the focus groups understand participation in the sense of joining groups of people for a specific aim. The following quotations from research participants represent two of these forms of participation that have an absent component of conflictuality or which are depoliticised. This could be, for example participating sometimes in school meetings or sporadically helping at the local church or at a community centre.

"I'm a housewife, so I help in the school. I participate in the decision-making process in the school when I can, also at church, neighbours... I influence my friends [laugh]. It's important to participate in the community. If you want something from the community you have to give also to the community." F36

“What I do at times - one of my grandparents asked me to help at their church - is to edit the website, you know, with new information about meetings and events. It’s nice to see how they give back to the community, welcome them.” M27

Other participants show a higher level of engagement in some activities in which they are especially participative. These activities are not directly political but show, however, how citizens feel that it is important to contribute to some positive outcome for society:

“I do some voluntary work in my free time, once a week. It’s a book centre where people can come and talk and take free books - a kind of community centre. I think it’s important to be involved in your local community, to do something worthy. When you’re involved, then you meet more people and see different perspectives. If you just live somewhere or just work somewhere you could end up with a closed mind.” F30

“I run a youth group where we have dialogue groups and everything, helping the young to know what’s going on, helping also if they have problems. It’s quite active, we meet every week.” F42

Some of the participants directly identify participation with actions aimed at political issues. This is the case of the research participants that conceive of participation as activities such as demonstrations, boycotts or other non-traditional forms of political participation, although as the next quotations show, joining demonstrations is the most common one, spread widely across the age groups:

“I’m quite active, you know, especially these last years. I went to most anti-cuts demonstrations in London.” M28

“I’m not very active at the moment. I’ve just been to demonstrations against the closure of the maternity hospital here in Lewisham. That’s the only political thing I’ve done recently.” F59

A majority of the research participants also perform activities linked with traditional political participation. Among these, the most common is voting, performed by a majority of the research participants. However, there were also a few participants in the focus groups who identify participation with participatory practices of higher intensity in the form of traditional politics, such as being a member of a political party. The next two quotations are a representation of the only two research participants that stated they had joined (or were still members of) a political party, both of them middle aged participants:

“I’m a member of the Green Party. I find I’m very active now. I’m campaigning against an incinerator, so every Saturday I’m out looking for signatures.” M55

“Now I’m not that active, but 10 years ago I was. I joined the Liberal Democrats to be with a number of like-minded people of my town. I was really active. I was the branch secretary. I joined because of the philosophy.” F58

As can be seen, a wide diversity exists among the participants’ discourses about participation in public issues or engagement with the community. There is also a wide diversity of issues in which the research participants prefer to be involved. Rather than being focused on a small number of issues, the research participants in London show a wider diversity of interests with regard to their preferences for engagement or the public issues in which they show more interest.

However, what is common to most of the participants is that their participatory practices are mainly focused on their local area. With the only exception of those who joined demonstrations, their participation is mainly aimed at local public issues, rather than national or international ones. The participants’ preferences for local practices are explained in the next quotations by the higher levels of agency participants think they have with regard to local issues:

“If you’ve got a local issue, if it starts at the local and then rises and gets more points, and then becomes higher, the Government sometimes may take notice. That’s not always the case, but it can work to a certain degree.” M27

“Because of this experience [a fire in a building near her home], I started to think what should I do about it. They [the neighbours] started a campaign for the fire station. They had some meetings, and did some petitions. I joined some. In these local things, then, I think that really you can do something.” F29

“I prefer to be involved in local stuff, and then I don’t need to be worried about national bullshit. In local stuff you can also have more direct impact on things.” M 39

However, the participants’ discourses about their own agency, even in the local sphere, change depending on the nature of the participatory practices. These practices aimed at aiding the local community, such as organizing talks with neighbours or voluntary work in a community centre, are more likely to be perceived as efficient or as generating a positive outcome and consequently are seen as worthwhile activities. Agency and the participants’ perceptions of the efficacy of their participatory practices, starts to be more diffuse when participatory practices are aimed at affecting the decision-making processes of institutions, as the following quotations reflect:

“It’s hard at an individual level. You will hardly have an impact on these issues so your feeling is that this is not going to change.” M29

- “I think it’s important when there’s a group of people against a government decision and doing something about it to show your face there, just to increase the numbers. As long as you show up and it’s a big number. How many people went on a march is important.” M28

- “Yes, this I think is important. If it’s not a big number, then they’re not talking about it.” M29

- "It's like a vote. You can go to a protest and then this is your vote. It's the only way you have to express your opinion about these issues. That's all you can do." M28

Discourses about agency and the efficacy of participating and being involved in public issues show how the research participants understand that their access to power positions in the decision-making processes is limited. Although recognizing the fact that citizens have access to structures of expression and involvement (Rosanvallon, 2008), the research participants perceive a lack of access to effective 'structures of participation' (Dahlgren, 2013) through which they can have some real chance to intervene and affect the decision-making processes. These spheres of decision are normally perceived as the exclusive domain of hegemonic actors, normally identified with politicians and economic powers such as private companies or banks. As the next conversation in one of the focus groups reflects, even in those situations of high social contestation against a particular government decision, the participants have the feeling that influencing the decisions of their representatives is hard and could even discourage citizens from getting involved:

- "For certain things there is an influence, but, for example, with the war in Iraq, it was pretty obvious that most of the people didn't want that. So we went on demonstrations, but they've already got it sorted. It's like university fees or with the post offices in my town. You have the 12 weeks' consultation, but it's a mere formality, the decision was made in advance. Like it matters if 99% of the people say, "Don't close the post offices." They are going to close them anyway." F58

- "In Croydon when we talked about the incinerator, 90% of people were against it, however political parties in Croydon have voted for it. I feel local democracy is in a very poor state. "M55

This discourse of lack of political efficacy is present among all the research participants, even in those that showed higher levels of public engagement. An extended discourse among the research participants is that those actors that hold the decision-making process are inaccessible, with a lack of structures that could transfer citizens' opinions to their representatives. Even direct contact or communication with politicians is not considered as a key to solving the problem, as the following extracts from the focus group sessions show:

- "The MP is really who you have to speak to." M34
- "Yes, the MP. I used the MP for my one benefit. I wrote some letters about housing, but it was a personal issue about housing, and then the House of Commons wrote me back." F35
- "What you said about the Council, for example, I had an issue with rubbish collection, that they just hired a company to do that and when I had a problem they just said I had to talk with the company." M34
- "They just spread things, no one is responsible for anything." F35

"I wrote a letter to the Minister, but it was disappointing because I just got an answer from some civil servant in Wales. From that, I thought that the Minister doesn't even know that people are expressing their views. Because of that, I don't engage, I don't write to these people." F58

Although these discourses speak of lack of agency and political efficacy, what is absent among the research participants is a counter-discourse against the existent hegemonic power positions. Most of the participants recognise the gaps in decision-making processes that silence citizens' voices and prevent interventions in relevant societal decisions. However, for most of them, to participate or be involved is still recognised as something positive and necessary. What can be seen among the research participants is a general connection with their community and a widespread opinion that to follow public issues is, in fact, important. Moreover, half of the participants perform some kind of practice linked with 'the political'. Among those more engaged citizens, the attitudes towards being engaged are

positive, even though they also consider it difficult to affect representatives' decisions:

"(...) if we look at the Government, they never have the answer. They may have the degrees, they may have all the policies, but they don't have the answer. It's all about values, if you don't have the correct values they can call you MP, they can call you all the titles, but it's never going to stand, so it always comes back to values. Then it's us who should do something, not just waiting until they solve the problems." M44

"I like to be involved, to know what's going on. Now I'm really active, looking for signatures against the incinerator. It's a party activity and I like it, but it's every weekend and I also would like to have some free time." M55

"It's important to participate in the community. If you want something from the community you have to give also to the community." F36

However, even if the common discourse recognises the importance of being involved and participating, not all the research participants take part in these kinds of activities. As the next conversation in a focus group session shows, time and motivation are also important, and some citizens, although thinking that participation in public issues is relevant and beneficial for the community, do not cross the boundary from attention or connection to public issues into more active practices:

- "Where I live people are very involved locally. People meet regularly, and receive funding." M40

- "Then they are middle class." M39

- "Yes, middle class and very white. But nevertheless, I like the community action. I went to a meeting once, but I found it very boring. It's not an easy way for me to spend my time, I have to be honest. I live near Lewisham Hospital, [one month before the focus group, the future of Lewisham Hospital was a hot issue in the local area] this mobilised people in the local area. But

to my shame I have not been involved with that, even in a single thing, because I get tired, you know, I stay in bed [laugh]. I'm a bit selfish." M40

For other participants, a discourse of passivity is substituted by a more aggressive discourse against politicians and other hegemonic actors. These participants have lower levels of confidence in their own agency, combined with a broad distrust of media institutions and political representatives. Thinking that to participate and being involved is going to make hardly any difference, these participants decide not to be involved at all, as the following quotations reflect:

"Yes, but then when do you have the guarantee that something is going to work? I think that if I have the belief that something is going to work, then I will be more likely to participate. But I don't know, I'm very passive." M40

"I think it's important to participate, for example writing to the MP. You need to bombard the bullshit makers with bullshit of their own. But I don't have time for it." M39

7.1.4. Public and media engagement in London participants

The analysis of the focus group participants' participatory discourses showed that most of them are engaged, even if at different intensities, with community and public issues. Most of the research participants do care about what is going on, having some level of attention and response to 'the political'. Half of the participants also decide to step forward and participate in different kinds of activities, mostly connected with their local communities. Even if this connection exists with the broad world of 'the political', it is also true that traditional politics is perceived as an isolated sphere, a sphere that is difficult to contact and even more difficult to enter, in order to influence the debates and change the policies decided by political representatives, who hold all the power in decision-making processes.

According to the research participants, this is one of the main shortcomings of the public sphere, and more ways to allow citizens to affect these kinds of processes are needed. The majority of the research participants do not understand participation in decision-making processes as something that should be reserved for an elite of hegemonic actors. However, when analysing participant's discourses and their levels of public engagement, a majority of them are not developing any direct participatory practice connected with 'the political', although most of them are connected or engaged with their community through non-political practices. Rather than contesting the present distribution of power and claiming to be involved in every decision-making process, participants seem to express another understanding of participation. It is one that allows them to express their voice, trusting that they are going to be heard, and enabling them to establish a more direct relationship with elite participants - mainly political representatives, but also other hegemonic actors and institutions, such as news media.

Secondly, the focus group results also pointed out another deficiency in the public sphere - debate and exchange of opinion are not common among the research participants. Their public talk is performed mostly with friends and relatives that tend to share the same values and political positions. Some participants encounter different perspectives at the workplace, but it is clear that this environment is not suitable for a free exchange of opinions.

The participants' discourses towards participation, life in democracy and public issues provide a general idea of the common and general trends among the participants. However, analysing the different discourses made by each research participant, together with their answers to the questionnaire distributed beforehand, also allows a deeper understanding of each participant's level of public engagement. Quantifying the data collected during the focus group sessions provides a better picture of the different ways in which research participants are engaged with community and public issues according to the typology of levels of public engagement created for this research⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ See Chapter 4 on methodological issues for a further explanation of the structure of the typology of public engagement. See also Chapter 4 for a better explanation of the process of quantifying the

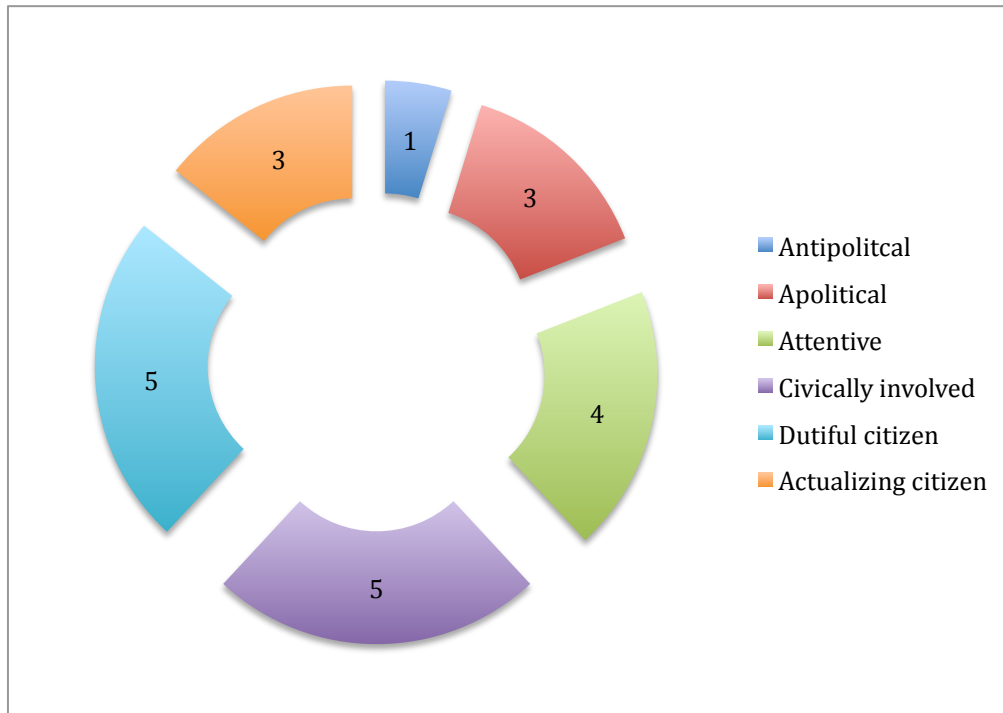
Figure 7.1. Public engagement among London research participants

Figure 7.1 shows the overall distribution of the 21 research participants in the typology of public engagement. It can be seen that the first group of active citizens is the ‘dutiful citizens’ category, grouping five of the research participants. These citizens are characterised by an understanding of participation as a collective activity conducted for community goals through traditional forms of participation and other unconventional forms that have been ‘normalized’ in political life, such as demonstrations or political strikes. Formed mainly of middle aged and older participants, their attitudes towards participation show they consider citizens’ involvement and interest in politics and current affairs as a duty for citizens in democracy.

The other group of active citizens, although they conceive participation in a completely different way from the previous one, are ‘actualizing citizens’, a category which groups three of the research participants. Formed mainly of young

data collected during the focus group sessions and how participants’ discourses have been used to ‘place’ each participant in a specific category of the typology.

participants, this group understands participation as connected to personal interests or lifestyle, being conducted through individual or small-group actions, although it can also be sporadically performed by some other kind of collective form of participation, such as demonstrations. However, 'actualizing citizens' show an understanding of participation not directly aimed at collective goals, preferring to channel their participatory energies individually or within small groups of like-minded citizens.

If ordering citizens according to their degree of involvement in community and public issues, the next category are 'civically involved' citizens, a category that groups five of the research participants, same number than 'dutiful citizens'. Citizens of this kind are engaged with society, performing public talk often and are generally aware and concerned to know what is going on. They are also normally connected with their communities, performing practices of low intensity of participation that do not represent political conflictuality or continued action (such as participating in schools meetings, helping occasionally in the local church, being a member of an international NGO or participating in a musical association).

In contrast with these groups of active citizens, Figure 7.1 shows also how one research participants is labelled as 'antipolitical' and three as 'apolitical', showing no active engagement at all in public issues or community, although there is a basic level of connection, higher in the second group than in the first one. Between the active and the inactive can be found a third group of participants (formed by four participants), labelled as 'attentive'. Although showing low levels of active participation, 'attentive' citizens also show basic levels of public talk and their discourses about participation reflect some kind of connection with public issues. In exceptional circumstances, such as when they are affected personally by a particular political issue, citizens of this kind find it easy to move one step further and get involved and perform active participatory practices.

The quantification of the data confirms the general trends in public engagement identified among participants' discourses, previously summarised in the first paragraph of this section. Participants' discourses also showed a widespread

distrust of politicians and political parties (named as ‘the establishment’ or ‘the system’, by some participants), although this distrust is not aimed at the democratic system (understood as the rules of the game). As has been seen, distrust of politicians is linked by most of the participants to distrust of traditional media institutions. Both political parties and media are pillars of western democracies, so the reality that citizens do not trust them should be something to be worried about. However, even if most participants distrust the media, it is also true that almost half of them frequently consume news and current affairs content.

The effects of media consumption on political participation have been a common debate in media studies in recent years. As seen in the theoretical background⁵⁷, some scholars argue that some connection exists between media exposure (even with informative contents) and political distrust, civic disengagement and ignorance about public affairs, in what is known as ‘media’ or ‘video malaise’ theories (Robinson, 1976; Postman, 1985; Witelbols, 2004). These theories have been recently contested by authors such as Pippa Norris (2000) or Markus Prior (2007), who argue that attention to news media acts as a ‘virtuous circle’ in which those more participative citizens are more likely to turn to coverage of public issues. In a high-choice media environment, those citizens that want to be informed have more possibilities to do so, as have the more disengaged citizens to avoid news about public issues, which consequently increases the gaps between engaged and passive citizens.

Analysis of the focus groups’ discussions showed a direct relationship between the levels of public and media engagement. Figure 7.2 (see next page 263) shows how the levels of public and media engagement are combined among research participants.

The participants’ levels of public engagement have been fixed according to the typology of public engagement that has already been presented in the chapter on methodology. For the values of media engagement the following codification has been used, according to the participants’ interventions in the focus group sessions

⁵⁷ See pages Chapter 3 for an extensive review of the different authors and theories.

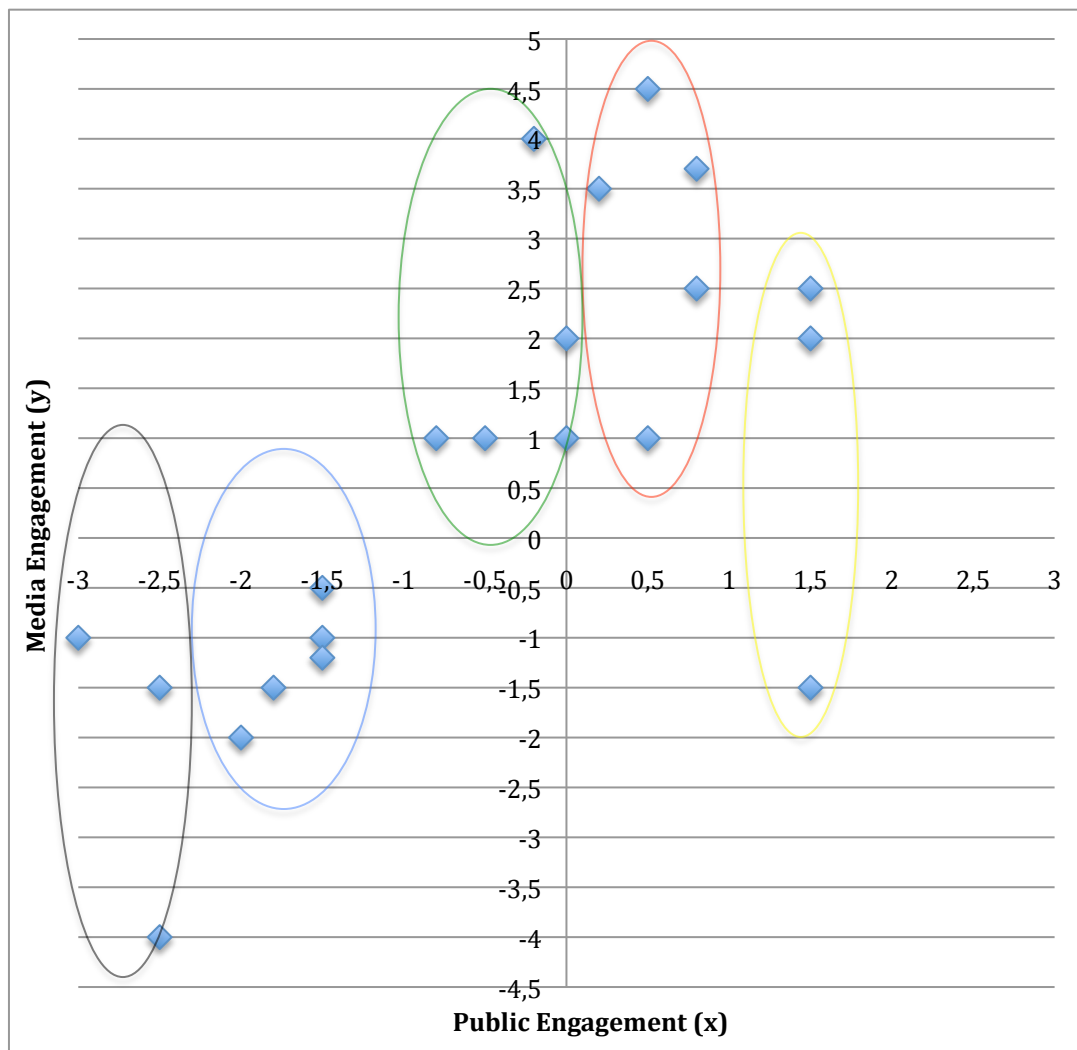
and their answers to the questionnaire distributed beforehand: -4: Do not follow current affairs, not interested or high distrust of news media. -3: Less than 15% of media consumption aimed at current affairs. -2: Entertainment representing the majority of time, with current affairs around 30%. -1: Media consumption at 50% entertainment and 50% current affairs, but the participant identifies themselves more with entertainment. 0: Half of media consumption aimed at current affairs, follows news weekly in a low number of different media. 1: Media consumption more connected to news media (60-70%), following news almost daily in one or two different media. 2: Media consumption aimed principally at news media (nearly 70%), following news daily and checking a large number of different media, but less than four. 3: More than 70% of media consumption aimed at current affairs news, following less than four media. 4: Almost all media consumption aimed at news, following more than four different media.

As can be seen in next page, the result confirms Norris' and Pickard's theories on the relationship between media consumption and public engagement. Generally, those participants with higher levels of public engagement tend to consume more current affairs information, while those with lower levels of public engagement tend to consume media but more for entertainment formats.

Figure 7.2 (next page) shows that non-participative forms of citizenship ('apolitical', 'antipolitical' and 'attentive' groups of the research participants) have levels of media engagement from -1 to -4, which means that their media consumption is generally aimed at entertainment formats and when they do follow news, they tend to do it with just one news medium rather than checking different sources. Following the typology of public engagement and forms of citizenship, the next category are the 'civically involved' participants, who show a level of media engagement from 1 to 4, although the average is around 1.5 (just one participant has a level of 4, the others around 1 and 2). At the top level of media engagement can be found the participants labelled as 'dutiful citizens', who consume media almost specifically to gather information about current affairs. Lastly, elsewhere in Figure 7.2 (marked as 1.5 in public engagement) the three participants identified as 'actualizing citizens' can be found. These participants show some of the highest

levels of distrust of traditional media, tending to gather news from other sources, especially from online alternative media or social networks. Consequently, in their answers they identify themselves with different levels of media engagement, following a less homogeneous behaviour than the other groups. Two of the research participants in this category have a higher media engagement (2), but the other one has a lower position (-1.5).

Figure 7.2. Public and media engagement in London participants



Note: The circles group the participants according to their levels of public engagement. Red: dutiful citizens, Yellow: actualizing citizens, Green: civically involved, Blue: attentive, Black: apolitical.

Among participants with higher levels of public engagement, the 'civically involved' but especially among the 'dutiful citizens', following the news is

considered as a civic duty or an obligation, and traditional media are perceived, even taking into account their limitations and biased coverage, as the main sources from which to gather information. To sort out these limitations, engaged citizens adopt two different strategies. Firstly, some choose to gather information from different media. Following different TV channels or newspapers is considered a solution to the bias problem. Participants under the category of 'dutiful citizens', for example, tend to follow four or more different media and 'civically involved' participants also tend to be highly attentive to news media, normally having more than two different sources from which to gather news and following current affairs daily. Secondly, some other participants turn to the Internet in order to avoid being informed by traditional media sources only. In this group can be found participants labelled as 'actualizing citizens', more likely to engage with online sources, as will be seen in the next section.

The next section will present the focus groups' results relating to how research participants use the Internet and their attitudes and motivations towards online participation. While some authors believe that the Internet is unlikely to be the solution to the problems of disengagement and disconnection (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007), others argue that online participation could bring access to a more direct form of citizenship (Coleman, Anthony & Morrison, 2009) or even be a tool that may complement, and probably slowly replace, the information provided by old media (Press & Williams, 2010). This research believes that more interaction between media and citizens is needed, in order to overcome problems of distrust and disengagement (Bohman, 2000). Furthermore, as previous research has pointed out, spaces may be needed for citizens' deliberation, to give them appropriate channels to express their voice (Couldry, 2010), recognizing that this is precisely one of the main functions of media in democracy and one of the opportunities that new media offer. However, to increase debate and reflection among citizens might not be enough to overcome the disconnection between citizens and traditional politics, if it is not supported by connection and effective chances to influence the decision making process (Sparks, 2001).

7.2. Online participatory discourses: mediated participation in the online realm

This second section of chapter seven focuses its attention on participants' discourses towards Internet use and online media participatory practices linked with participatory journalism and social networks. It will be seen how research participants understand online participation, how they make sense of it and which are the participatory practices that they prefer to conduct online, as well as how online media participatory practices might affect the previously mentioned shortcomings of the public sphere. Furthermore, it will be analysed if citizens are searching online ways of participation or involvement that they cannot find offline and if, by doing so, are they contesting the traditional hegemonies and actors' powers positions within the public and media sphere.

7.2.1. The Internet: different understandings of a multi-faceted medium

As has already been presented in the theoretical background chapter⁵⁸, Internet use can be understood as a number of integrative and pre-existent everyday practices developed using the online medium, for example, shopping, home banking, entertainment, maintaining social networks or getting the news (Christensen & Ropke, 2010). This list of everyday online practices could be endless and illustrates how deeply the Internet is embedded in modern life, changing the nature of pre-existent practices but also introducing new ones. Different research participants showed very different discourses about how they conceive and understand the Internet and the online world. Some of them pointed very clearly to one or two activities by which they identify their time spent online and the capabilities and nature of the medium. However, the majority of research participants explained that they use the Internet for almost everything, without prioritizing a concrete practice or understanding of the new medium. As the following quotations show, they understand the Internet as a useful tool which

⁵⁸ See Chapter 3 for further analysis of the subject.

enables them to carry out a wide range of different activities, saving time and resources during their daily life:

“For a lot of things, really, I check media, I read news. I cross reference the story, very quickly, then I’m also checking Facebook. I have a couple of pages [fan pages] there, but also for some projects at work and of course for shopping too. I like to shop online for things.” F42

“The Internet is a tool. I can find things for online shopping, or talk with someone, watch movies. It’s just a tool to do different things. It makes your life easier. But if I want to relax I read a book, have a drink or watch TV.” F36

For some participants the Internet is mainly a source of information. However, rather than pointing out that it is a source of news or current affairs information, these participants use the Internet as a source of practical information for everyday life or as a tool which helps them to do more easily what would otherwise be an offline activity:

“I use it to Google, things I want to check, a medical issue, for um... I don’t really use it that much, for references I think, things that matter like look where this place is, schedules...” F50

“I’m an addict of the Internet, clothes, shopping, looking for places, checking what people think about something before buying it or going there. I can’t remember the time before the Internet” [laugh]. F35

This last quotation shows how important the Internet is in the everyday lives of research participants. Their evaluation of the new medium is in general positive, as the following conversation in a focus group session reflects:

- “It would be so weird to live without the Internet.” M35
- “Yeah, I remember it was in the 90s, 97 or 98, I can’t remember, I was working somewhere and this Spanish girl was working there too. She quit

and came back and she gave her email address and I didn't even know what that was ! [laugh]" M34

- "Yes! Can you imagine? The age before websites, emails? I guess we're quite fortunate to have what we have now." M35

There is another group of participants, working in an office or in some other computer-related job, who prefer not to use the computer in their free time. For these participants, the Internet is understood as a tool that facilitates or is required to develop their work. In their free time they prefer not to use it more than is necessary. As the following extracts reflect, one of the situations in which participants of this kind use the Internet is when they watch films online:

"I use it as a resource, mainly at work. I use it for research, stuff for the job. Then outside, not that much, more the phone, apps for shopping, running contacts, friends. We have also this video streaming on the Internet." M33

- "You know, I always work in front of the computer. I spend a lot of time on the Internet learning about my job. It's very useful to learn about new software and these things. But when I come back home I have no interest in the Internet, I don't have TV." M39

- "Well, we're watching films, on streaming, at home." F29

- "Yes, streaming films, that's right. But I don't really consume content, I don't have Facebook or anything similar. You know, I don't care about the online community, I think it's just boring people saying boring things. I'm not talking or listening to other conversations in a pub if I don't know them, why would I do that online?" M39

For more engaged citizens, mainly in the previously mentioned category of 'dutiful citizens', the Internet is understood as a medium that helps them to gather news from different news media, increasing the number of different media that they can check every day. These participants tend also to be less interested in other activities that they can do online, especially with regard to social networks or

other forms of contact with friends rather than email. The next conversation in a group of highly engaged participants reflects this trend:

- "I'm using it as an online newspaper, it's easier to move around. I'm not really engaging in forums. It affected when I'm buying newspapers, it's really diminished. I do it on a monthly basis." M55

- "Yes. I don't know what I'm going to do when we have to start to pay to read newspapers online. I've no doubt we will pay eventually, I mean not for all of them, maybe the ones that I usually read on a daily basis, if it's not too expensive." F59

- "Yes, I like that, changing from here to there to see different ones. I always start with the *Financial Times*, then the BBC. I did it more when I was working in an office, I had more free time there to read." F58

The Internet extends almost infinitely citizens' capabilities of selective exposure. With the wide variety of things citizens can do online, they need to actively look for news, visiting a news media website or similar, in order to be in touch with current affairs content. Consequently, it is in Internet use where the kinds of media engagement citizens have can really be tested. Although it is true that for some citizens news consumption is still mainly an analogic experience, through printed press, radio or television, the Internet is slowly replacing these traditional forms of news. However, it is not replacing the sources. The most visited websites to consume news among research participants are still by and large traditional media websites. For those more engaged citizens, the Internet reinforces their media engagement, allowing them to check a higher number of media in order to receive different perspectives and opinions on current affairs. However, for those less engaged, the Internet reinforces their lack of consumption of public affairs content. The following conversation in a focus group session formed of young participants with different levels of engagement points in this direction:

- "I'm using the Internet to gain information. It's replacing physical media to read news or finding out what's going on in the world. People can make research about their own interests. It's also mobile and easy to access." M29a

- "It's free, you don't have to spend money, it's a lot more convenient. I use it also for entertainment. It's getting information and also entertainment, and they cross over at some point. With politics and news I gather information, but it's also entertaining me." M28

- " What I like on the Internet is that I can find different opinions there. It's easy. But what I'm using it for a lot is sports. I check out a lot about sports on the Internet." M29b

7.2.2. Uncontested hegemonies in the media sphere (1): primary gatekeeping and hegemonic power position

Nicholas Negroponte was one of the first authors that pointed out how digitalization could affect the ways in which citizens gather news content. Negroponte (1995) suggested an increasingly bigger role of the user in the selection of media content, predicting the idea of the 'Daily Me': a personal newspaper made according to the topics that each user prefers to read. Almost two decades after Negroponte's prediction, citizens still cannot design their own daily newspaper, but they have many options for choosing which kind of news they want to receive online. From RSS Feed to newsletters and news aggregators, the options to select and personalize content, facilitating users' self-exposure to the contents that they prefer, are becoming more and more common. Not only can citizens develop this personalization on their computers or Internet browsers, but online news media are also adopting some of these features in order to respond to the users' demand for choice and specialization, but due mainly to commercial factors (Thurman, 2011).

Moreover, as Thurman (2011) argued, personalization created some concerns among editors that have implemented some of the features on their own media websites, especially with regard to "loss of opportunities for serendipitous discovery" and "personalization's potential to erode one of journalists' core professional functions: news judgement" (2011, p. 19). As Prior (2007) pointed out, in a high-choice media environment citizens can easily avoid accidental

exposure to news content in cases where they prefer entertainment formats. In this context, personalization could bring this selective exposure to a new level by allowing users to easily select which kind of news content they want to be exposed to (for example, sports, local news, politics, and cultural news). The risk, then, is to create fragmented societies in which citizens do not share a general basic framework of experiences and values, and are concerned only about their small groups of interests, such as sports or hobby communities (Sunstein, 2003).

During the focus group sessions the research participants showed that their concerns about these issues related to selective interactivity. Almost half of the participants have registered on at least one media news website (seven participants), and more than half of them subscribe to the newsletter of a news website (twelve). Most participants agree to 'light' ways of personalization, such as newsletters, or follow different sections of the media on social networks (for example, two participants said they were following political and foreign affairs sections of a newspaper on Twitter). With regard to 'hard' personalization, such as customizing their own medium in order to see first certain kinds of news, or personalizing a news aggregator and using it as the main source of news, participants showed different perspectives. Some groups saw no problem with it, thinking that this might be a better way to find the kind of news that they like:

“On a news site, I wouldn't mind to prioritize the topics I want to know first. That would be OK. I use other sites, like Amazon, that selects your information. I think it's great.” M33

- “I would do it, why not? Just to see what it's like. I probably would be more holistic with the choices I make.” M31

- “Yes. I think they are doing in it in this feed, that you manually... Basically when you have in a website this orange button, if you click on it, it's connected to your browser and then it gives the news of these websites. It's a news feed. I know that Firefox has that feature, but I'm not definitely using it.” M27

-
- "I think it's useful, just to gather info from your IP address, so it's convenient to find particular news." M30

The previous quotations come from participants with lower and middle levels of media and public engagement. What is more interesting is how some of the participants with higher levels of engagement consider personalization as a useful option, as it could aid them in gathering news and choosing between sources of news. However, as the conversation in this focus group's session shows, participants could not agree if content personalization was a good or a bad option:

- "This is really individualism." F59
- "When I did this MA, I did work about Malawi, so I did this thing with Google News, signed up, it was for a very specific topic. I must admit that my experience with Google News, it was good and useful." F58
- "I think I'd like to design my own pages, or select which news I have. So, if I could do that I probably would do that." M55
- "If you pick up the newspaper there's a variety of news, you're in contact with these kinds of things, but if there's just what you selected you're cut off." F58
- "Oh, but, you can do it the same just going to the back of the newspaper." F59
- "But if you buy the whole newspaper, you don't think you are going to read it?" F58
- "I think that if it's something important you are going to find it anyway, it will come up." M55

Some other groups were highly concerned about the issue of personalization. These groups were concerned that by adopting customization features, users may be restricting their information about issues of public interest. If some of the participants with high levels of engagement in the previous group thought that 'hard' personalization could be a good option for receiving news in an easier way, the following participants (young engaged citizens) prefer the traditional way of receiving news and organizing the newspaper's sections:

- “You can do it with Twitter.” M28
- “It’s a question of easy access. The danger is that you only read stuff that you want to hear, and not necessarily getting a big range of opinions.” M29b
- “In a newspaper you pay for all of it. But if you don’t pay for any of this you can just never read anything about politics or news. You can just look out for what’s happening in music or sports and ignore anything else. It creates people that grow up without learning all this stuff that maybe they consider boring.” M28
- “Yes, with the Internet you have this risk, or you only read the headlines.” M29a
- “There is so much information flying around. The misconception is because there is so much information, like people growing up now would be so informed all the time, but really so much is just noise. And you only pick up the stuff you like. When there were just, like, four channels you were forced to watch things that you were not interested in. Now you can spend all day just learning about David Bowie.” M28

These participants understood that, by using personalization, some users more interested in entertainment or soft news would be less in contact or not in contact at all, with hard news. That is the same point made in a focus group formed of young and middle aged disengaged citizens. Even if the members of this group were participants with a low level of public engagement and who consumed media mainly for entertainment, they valued the gatekeeper function of the media and their news selection as something important to enable them to be informed about general issues in society and not just what they are most interested in:

- “It’s like reading the *Sun*. It’s like they say, “You are this kind of person you should be interested in that.” Facebook does that. As soon that you update your status that you are going to marry, there start to appear adverts about marriage and weddings. That’s insane. It’s making people more small minded.” F29

- “My wife put me onto an application on the iPad that is to select news. I think it’s good to be surprised. I’m not into the theatre, but I might be interested to know what’s going on at the theatre.” M40
- “That’s why the newspaper’s very good. You read your things, you don’t touch the other sections. But then maybe when you’re painting, putting something on the floor, then you read new things. The good thing with physical newspaper is that it’s going to be there until you put it away.” M39

Another issue that appeared in this focus group, as well as in others, is the general feeling of distrust of implicit personalization (when a website adapts its content according to users’ previous activity on the site). It is valued as beneficial on sites directly aimed at buying things, such as Amazon or eBay, but as dangerous when participants talk about social networks, sites that manage more personal information about the users. Accordingly, most participants also decline to give their personal data on media websites, due to the common perception that media want the data in order to commercialise it.

To summarise, the research participants showed that the metaphor of the ‘Daily Me’ is still far from reality. ‘Soft’ personalization in news media websites is widely accepted, but ‘hard’ personalization seems not to attract most users. Despite the warnings of selective exposure theories, generally speaking, it is those participants with higher levels of media engagement who seem to be more attracted by ‘hard’ personalization options (both on news media websites and on other platforms), rather than those with lower levels of public and media engagement. Although participatory journalism tools that offer possibilities for ‘soft’ personalization are not widely demanded among the research participants, they are also not generally perceived as prejudicial. As long as these tools do not affect the media’s content selection, participants seem to agree that they can be useful in aiding them to surf through different sources of information. This is precisely the reason why the more engaged participants seem to prefer these tools, rather than the less engaged ones. Participants with higher levels of public engagement tend to look actively for different sources of information and some of them perceive that these options might aid them in doing so. Conversely, participants with lower levels of public

engagement tend to prefer to check one or two media in order to have a better idea of what is going on and what the issues of the day are. Consequently, for a majority of these research participants, news personalization is not really an option that they feel attracted to.

What remains clear, then, is that for most of the research participants, the news gatekeeping function of traditional media institutions is something that they value and appreciate. In other words, most of the participants accept the hegemonic power position of traditional media institutions in the selection of what constitutes the 'news of the day'. The participants' common understanding is that this is precisely the function in society of journalists and media institutions. Although the research participants frequently show high levels of distrust of news media and express their disagreement about how journalists and traditional news media institutions cover some issues, this criticism does not represent a challenge to their role as the hegemonic actors in selecting and publishing news. This widespread discourse and common understanding of the role of news media and journalists is also perceived when talking about online media practices that require a more active and intense participation, such as practices related to content production. The next section will be aimed at analysing participants' discourses related to these kinds of practices, such as user-generated content in participatory journalism, or more independent ways of content production as in citizen journalism.

7.2.3. Uncontested hegemonies in the media sphere (II): content production

In a scenario where citizens distrust traditional media, identifying them with political elites and economic groups, the different forms of 'citizen journalism' seemed to be a breath of fresh air in a traditional and business-centred media environment. Authors such as Rosen (2006) argue that by using new communication technologies citizens could easily produce and share contents, without interacting with media and journalists, who have lost control of the audience and the gatekeeping role, which have been monopolised by professional

journalists for the last few centuries (Singer, 2005; Lowrey & Anderson, 2005). Moreover, some authors have already pointed out that the new scenario would force us to entirely rethink the profession of journalism (Deuze, 2006) and that the concept of 'citizen journalism' (Gilmor, 2004) seemed to be the future in a scenario where traditional media were facing a crisis in their reputation and their business models.

This section will study citizens' attitudes and motivations towards what Carpentier (2011) called "participation in the media". These online media participatory practices require high intensities of participation. It is the citizen who produces the content, publishing it on news media websites, through participatory journalism options such as sending pictures, stories or videos (being therefore considered as 'user-generated content') or in their own online spaces, such as blogs, or specialised citizen journalism websites or alternative media. Wunsh-Vincent and Vickery (2007) propose three essential characteristics that content must possess in order to be classified as this kind of participation: publication, creative effort and creation outside of professional routines and practices. In all these options of content production it is the user who takes control of the form and format of the content that is going to be published, (although if this is published on news media websites or citizen journalism platforms, some previous controls may be established).

Some of the participants showed a negative opinion of 'citizen journalism' and 'user generated content'. It seems that, at the initial stages of the Internet, the new medium represented for users something new and trustworthy, in contrast to traditional media. The discourse of novelty seems to have been widely accepted, looking to the new medium as something fresh and intrinsically positive. However, this early positive opinion about the new forms of journalism and content production introduced by the Internet may have changed, as the following quotations from the focus groups reflect:

“When the Internet first started I kind of believed what I read there, like Wikipedia or blogs, but then I actually quickly reviewed my opinion. I thought it was a truthful resource [but not anymore].” F58

“I look at it as busybodies. These people, a lot of people, I think that the Internet allows everyone to write about things, maybe they want to receive attention. I think it’s biased. (...) This is a problem with the Internet because how much can you trust something? Because any idiot can publish [on the Internet].” F36

User-generated content is also generally perceived as something not relevant for news. Participating on a media website, by sending movies or videos, is commonly understood as something linked with public issues information. Rather, the participants’ discourses about these online practices mostly link them with entertainment and self-promotion:

- “A classic example is when we have extreme weather and then you take photos of the weather and then you send it to a local news channel, and it’s not even newsworthy [laugh]. I think people feel empowered to have the chance to take pictures and then share them with other people.” M29a

- “I think more than anything it’s just because they wanted to have it published, not that the issue is important.” M29b

As far as citizen journalism is concerned, some of the participants with higher levels of public and media engagement value it as a source of new information. As has already been seen, these participants are the ones that most actively look for different opinions and perspectives regarding current affairs. Citizen journalism contributes with new voices to the media sphere and is consequently perceived as valuable. However, discourses of distrust are also present with regard to citizen journalism. The participants do not trust it more than they trust traditional media institutions. They believe that citizen journalism sites may provide new voices and perspectives, especially regarding their local

communities, but these new actors must be considered with the same wariness as traditional media institutions:

“I’m subscribed to the Croydon Citizen, most of the articles are pretty relevant, anything going on in the local community, people write there. I haven’t written anything there.” M55

“It’s really great, [citizen journalism]. It allows more people to give their opinion on a topic. I suppose that the difference between a journalist doing it is that the journalist is meant to confirm the story and the others can say anything. They may exaggerate. All these things you have to take them as they are. I think it’s great because it allows people to participate, but it could also be dangerous. [The participant talks about the Boston bomb and how several citizens’ websites started to look for the terrorists among the people that appeared in the pictures that were taken before the bombs.] Everyone can access it, no quality control, a lot of noise, crap and exaggeration.” M33

Among the research participants, those young ones identified in the category of ‘actualizing citizens’ are the ones more likely to have a better opinion and higher level of trust towards citizen journalism and other forms of citizens’ content production. Their positive opinion about these new forms of journalism goes hand in hand with their discourses of distrust and low engagement with traditional media institutions. The following quotations from research participants reflect the discourses of this kind of participant:

“I have to say, maybe not with every single issue, but some of these issues, I read about them in other circles like blogs, written by people that used to be journalists or by students of journalism, a lot of the things they are saying, I think are more truthful or tend to be much more fair rather than, you know, proper professional journalists or newspapers. There are always some journalists that you can trust more than others.” F25

“I think it’s becoming more and more popular now, the local TV. Recently, I’m not sure, a lot of local TVs have citizen journalists to report some sort of local news. It’s an interesting concept. Whether it works or not we’ll have to wait and see. (...) They will treat things different because they come from the local community, you know, you could say that they have first hand experience, that they know the actual... But in the end the issue is the same, would they be biased? That’s the issue.” M27

However, the common discourse among the research participants is that they do not consider citizen journalism as a relevant source of information that will replace traditional journalists and media institutions in the near future. The common understanding is that journalism is a profession and that news media are still needed. Furthermore, although the new voices that citizen journalism could provide are valued, the hegemony of traditional media is not in question. These institutions, as well as professional journalists, are commonly understood as the actors that should maintain the role of producing information about current affairs. Consequently, participants establish clear differences between professional journalists and amateurs or citizen journalists and the kind of content that each one should publish. The next quotation exemplifies this common discourse among the research participants:

“I see the advantages of it. It makes all of us amateur journalists, but journalism is a profession. Presumably the professionals should do it.” M29

Citizen journalism is seen as something necessary only in exceptional circumstances, such as when professional journalism cannot access the location (in the case of some foreign affairs news), or as has been seen in the previous quotations, in those local issues that traditional media cannot cover due to a lack of journalistic manpower or newsroom priorities (the difficulty for national newspapers to cover the whole country):

“I think the places where citizen journalism works is in places where traditional media actually cannot go or have access, because it’s too dangerous. Like in Syria or this kind of stuff, all the pictures coming up from

there were from people living there. All the information came from the people. Here we don't have this need, we are free to go anywhere. It's a big thing in the world, but not in this country." M28

With regard to the focus group participants' attitudes and motivations towards their own content production, discourses clearly point to a lack of interest in producing periodically their own current affairs content, both on news media websites or on independent platforms such as blogs or citizen journalism websites. However, most of them appreciate having the opportunity to send their own material in exceptional circumstances, such as when something has happened that directly affects them (such as problems with rubbish collection in their neighborhood), or some national or international issue strongly attracts their attention and they feel the need to express their opinion through news media (as in the case of Margaret Thatcher's funeral). In those cases, the participants value the opportunity they have to publish their own content on news media websites, although most participants see it as something they would do only once or twice in special cases. As the following quotations demonstrate, the main problem here is that the research participants tend to consider that this kind of participation involves a great deal of effort but a low return:

"I think if something upsets me or I have enough passion I would do something like that. In fact, I wrote once to a newspaper, but they never published the letter, because it was against something they'd published before." F29

"Oh, that's a lot of effort. I do care about things but I'm too lazy and I prefer to spend my time on things that amuse me, rather than important things. Probably I never will do it. Probably I'll talk about that at the pub [laugh]."
M40

More attractive seems to be the option to participate in 'network journalism'. Some research participants remembered when the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph* asked for citizens' help in researching WikiLeaks cables. (2010-11) and the MPs' expenses

scandal in 2009. As in the previous quotation from one of the participants, the general feeling is that journalists exist to do journalism, which is considered a profession. Citizens do not want to become journalists, but they would sometimes like to be part of the process, if they feel that their contribution could be valuable. However, despite the interest that such initiatives give rise to, most participants state that they do not have time to be part of it:

“If something happens in your local area, or you see something. This second step [go to the media] is a big step. Most people would not do that. Everyone has their lives, their things that they like to do. Having the conviction to do it is hard. I’ve been a couple of times in places that perhaps I could have taken a picture and sent it to a newspaper, there were no journalists there, but you know, I didn’t have the instinct to do it.” M28

7.2.4. The contested hegemonies within the media sphere: spaces for debate and distribution of news media content

One of the conclusions of the focus groups related to the issue of public engagement, was the widespread feeling of distrust towards political representatives and media institutions. This broad and generalised disengagement coexists with another shortcoming of the public sphere - a lack of spaces for citizens to debate and find different opinions and political positions. The effects of these shortcomings are especially strong on those participants with lower levels of public and media engagement and who are less likely to engage in public talk and to look for different perspectives through news media. Previous research has argued that the Internet could help to reinvigorate a “long-lost public sphere” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 114). These theories normally draw on maximalist conceptions of participation (Carpentier, 2011) that attribute high importance to citizens’ involvement within the media sphere (Tewksburg & Rittenberg, 2012), understanding the role of the media as a key element in the Habermassian (1989) conceptualization of a deliberative public sphere, consequently giving news media

a central position as instruments for this public debate and deliberation (Curran et al., 2012).

The aim of this section is to analyse the focus group participants' attitudes and motivations towards online media participatory practices that include a component of debate and deliberation. Firstly, attention will be drawn to the different spaces that news media provide on their websites for citizens' debate. Although these are not the only options for this kind of participation, comments on news stories are generally perceived by the focus group participants as the main (if not the only) spaces for debate on news media websites. Secondly, this section will analyse other spaces where citizens can debate and deliberate. Generally, the focus group participants tend to associate these other spaces with social networks (mainly Facebook, but for some participants Twitter also). This section will show how traditional news media websites have lost their hegemonic position as central actors in promoting online public talk: citizens prefer to gather, debate and share content in online spaces outside news media websites. However, traditional media still maintain a hegemonic position with regard to the formulation of the agenda of relevant public issues: what citizens debate about and share online are mainly links to traditional news media content, although this position is starting to be contested in an online public sphere with an unlimited number of different voices.

7.2.4.1. Comment on news

Almost half of the participants in the focus groups stated they had commented on news stories at least once. None of them admitted to commenting frequently, but most of them said that it was not unusual for them to read some comments after reading the news. Reading comments is a practice aimed to test public opinion about an issue, as some of the research participants argued. They confirmed that they read comments after reading the news in order to know what people think about an issue and to check if their own positions or values fit with the majority, as the following quotations exemplify:

“I’ve never commented but I do read the comments. I’m interested in what people think. If you read, like, the *Guardian*, for example, it’s not really an informed dialogue most of the time.” F42

“Actually, sometimes it’s interesting to see what people say about things. Sometimes it’s like, ‘Really, did you say that?’. Sometimes it’s shocking.” M27

“I think sometimes I go to those websites to read what other people have written because I want confirmation that other people think the way that I do. Occasionally, like with Margaret Thatcher, I wanted to know how many people thought she was wonderful, but then most of it was uneducated comments. There were also some intelligent comments there. I want to look at people’s comments because I want to know that there are people that think the way I do, but I don’t feel a particular need to add my voice to those comments.” F58

As the previous quotations exemplify, the main discourse related to comments on news stories is expressed among the research participants in a negative way. None of the research participants showed a positive discourse related to the possibility of engaging in an online debate through news media websites. On the few occasions that the participants remember why they made a comment it was because they believed that the news was especially important or because they strongly disagreed with some previous comment. Accordingly, commenting is mostly understood as a reaction to a previous position, and not as an action that obeys a willingness or preference to debate or exchange positions and perspectives about public issues. Participants also said that they were more likely to comment if they saw that no one had already expressed their positions, as the following quotations show:

“Yes, about me, I comment in the *Guardian*. I just comment when I read something that makes me so angry and no one else is saying anything about it. It’s a reaction.” M28

“Certainly I’ll comment if it’s something that makes me angry. I’ll comment if I think it’s important.” M44

Comments on news stories and forums about politics on newspaper websites are not perceived, even for the participants with higher levels of public engagement, as suitable spaces in which to debate public issues. It is a fact that most of the participants read the comments, but after that they do not feel compelled to join the conversation by contributing with their own ideas. During the focus groups, three different reasons appeared that explained why participants do not use this form of online participation: the fact that they do not know other participants; the feeling that comment on news is not a possible source of new ideas, perspectives or information; and the widespread perception that online debates on media websites tend to be too aggressive, offensive and without any previous control or moderation.

Among those citizens with high levels of public engagement, the debate flowed around the fact that online debates on media websites were not providing them with any new useful information or different and valuable perspectives. The participants were pointing to a general critique of online discussions. According to their opinion, people who join these discussions are not really informed about the issues that they are talking about. Consequently, joining the conversation will not provide any new input. In this case, the benefit of participating (joining an unrewarding conversation) does not compensate for the time and effort that making a comment involves. As a result, after reading some comments and testing the general trend in the last comments, they tend to leave the site or read another new one. The following focus group conversations among participants with high levels of public and media engagement reflect this common behavior:

- “I don’t add my comments, I look at them, but sometimes I think that the Internet has given everybody the opportunity to have a voice.” F58
- “But some voices are more valuable than others.” F59
- “Well, some are very offensive really.” M55

- "They don't really write properly, it's not good English. Then when you say something people can come back with very offensive comments, and I think, 'I don't want to engage with that.', with crackpots. If something irritates me, like Margaret Thatcher, I email [name of a friend, also present in the focus group], or someone else that I know. I send emails to people, not on my Facebook page or in the *Guardian*. I don't engage with it. I feel tempted sometimes, but I don't want to engage in those discussion forums, they [the other people who comment] are complete strangers." F58

- "On the Internet you can misunderstand things. Also, I think that they're not discussing things so deeply, that's my personal opinion. I don't think it's that effective." M44

- "Yes, it's not the right format where to discuss." F42

Connected with the previous point there is also the issue of time. The participants tend to consider that engaging in this kind of online debate requires time and attention. Putting in balance the time they would need to spend and the value of the inputs they would receive by joining the debate, most of the research participants do not consider it worthwhile to start an online media debate:

"During elections I check the Internet to gather info about candidates, but never comment or participate more on the Internet. Maybe it's lifestyle, I haven't got a lot of time. I have two children. I'm doing courses. I don't like to sit for a long time in front of the computer. It involves you sitting there in front of the computer, it's tedious." F36

"You get also the same people all the time, commenting on the same topics. I haven't got time to sit at my computer and engage with an online community like that." F59

Another characteristic of online media debates that the focus group participants dislike is the feeling of debating with unknown people. Some of the participants pointed out that debating with people that they do not know, or that have no name

or personal information, does not attract them to online media participatory practices. The participants in the focus groups showed that they need some level of trust to participate in online communities. To openly show their views and opinions to strangers is, according to some of the participants, a practice that they identify with younger generations who grew up using the Internet.

“I suppose that the age that we are, then there’re ways it influences how we talk with people, or voting. I would never participate in a blog or respond to a news article, because I don’t see that anyone will be looking [participant refers to the fact that his friends will not see the comment].” M33

“No, I never talk with these idiots. I have no interest in the online community, I think it’s just boring people saying boring things. If I was in a pub I wouldn’t start to talk or listen to others’ conversations, because I think they’re boring and I don’t care. I send emails to friends.” M39

“That’s the reason I don’t post regularly, because there’s no reason that anyone should really care about what I think.” M29

Nevertheless, the most widespread discourse among the focus group participants is that online media debates are too often full of users who do not behave in an appropriate way. Inappropriate comments and overly aggressive conversations tend to be considered the normal trend in these online participatory spaces. This situation discourages participants from joining the conversation and freely expressing their views. Regarding inappropriate comments, some participants have no clear idea about whether comments are moderated or not, or about which kind of controls media websites have established for comment on news or in forums. However, features such as ‘report comment’ have been used by some of the participants, who value the chance to report these kinds of comments.

“I remember that, on the *Guardian*, I saw a comment that was so racist so I reported the comment for being offensive. It was so rubbish and offensive, I

can't remember the details. It's useful to have a button to remove this kind of stuff." F42

"If you look at the comments, for example the *Telegraph*, they just represent the extreme, not the normal opinion, mostly people that are spitting anger." M55

- "Like with these big issues, controversial, and you see that someone says, 'Comment 417, your comment sucks!' and you think, 'Who is moderating this stuff?' " M27

- "They are not moderated, that's the problem." F25

- "I know, the only thing is that comments are under moderation, someone is at the other side, filtering and everything." M27

Moderation is therefore considered as a key point that can turn a disorganised and uncivilised discussion into something more worthy. Some of the participants established a difference between sites that are or are not moderated, and the quality of the opinions that people make on the comments:

- "I think people that comment on news are really angry, more angry than me. And about things that I'm not angry about - obsessed on some issues. I think that the proportion of people that comment is very low, but it produces a very negative view of humanity." M40

- [Commenting on a BBC blog that he likes] "It's good when people that comment are intelligent, because you get the other side." M39

- "That is because it's a BBC blog and then it's moderated. It's intelligent things published, but also moderated." M40

- "Yes." M39

- "Many blogs or news comments are not moderated. My email is on Yahoo, and for this I'm connected to news on their website. The comments there are so racist." M40

To summarise, comments on news are commonly perceived among the research participants as the only form of debate and deliberation on news media websites. Just a few of the participants pointed to other forms of debate on news media websites, such as forums. Moreover, in talking about comments on news stories, the research participants tend to do it with negative and pejorative discourses, which reflects the common understanding that comments on news stories are not recognised as a format for a useful exchange of opinions and debate about public issues. Consequently, it can be argued that, according to the participants in this research, news media are not providing interesting spaces that could contribute to reinvigorating the public sphere by helping to overcome some of its shortcomings, specifically the lack of spaces in which to debate and encounter political positions or ideological values.

Secondly, during the focus group sessions the research participants clearly identified several reasons that explain their negative opinion of comments on news stories as spaces for debate and deliberation: 1) debates in comments on news stories are conducted with people that they do not know; 2) comments on news stories are not perceived as a possible source of new ideas, perspectives or information; 3) online debates on media websites tend to be too aggressive, offensive and without any previous control or moderation. As will be seen in the next section, social networks are understood by some of the research participants as spaces that overcome these three negative views of comments on news stories, consequently attracting more users to comment and debate there than in comments on news stories.

7.2.4.2. Social Networks

According to the study of the focus group participants' levels of public engagement, several disconnections and disengagements between media and politics were pointed out. The previous section about comments on news stories showed how traditional media institutions are generally failing, according to the research participants, in providing online spaces in which to foster public talk and

interaction among citizens. This section will focus on the role social networks might have in some of these issues. Firstly, it will look at how citizens, in their daily use of social media, encounter different identities and political positions which challenge their own perceptions and attitudes towards 'the political'. Secondly, it will present the way in which social media become spaces where debate spreads more easily than in the online spaces previously analysed. By doing so, social networks are contributing to challenging one of the former hegemonies of traditional media institutions: the conception of news media as the main actors that enhance debate among citizens, selecting the issues of the day and facilitating current affairs content through which citizens can comment and debate. However, euphoria about the potential for social networks to reshape the media sphere should be limited. The focus group sessions also showed discourses of distrust towards social networks among the research participants, something that goes hand-in-hand with the fact that a large section of society is not using this kind of media and their associated online media participatory practices in their everyday lives.

'Submarines of the media sea' is a good metaphor created by Mikko Villi to define the behavior of most users on social networks: "they surface episodically, but nevertheless they are present" (Villi, 2012, p. 618). With the widespread use of smart phones among citizens, access to social networks has become quick and easy, a practice no longer restricted to the household or the workplace. With regard to public issues content, most of the users are passive, not posting links to media news or other material from other sources on a daily base. However, they are influenced by this kind of content every day. Participants noted that on their timeline they see links about public issues daily, posted by their friends or contacts. The following extracts from focus group conversations exemplify this general trend among the participants:

- "When I'm using news websites I'm reading the things that I'm specifically interested in. But when I log in on Facebook, it's when I pick up things that otherwise I will not know, because most of the people on Facebook are

people that I'm not meeting in 10 years, so it's interesting to know what someone else is interested in." M29

- "Like, 'Look what this cat is doing!'" M28

- "[laugh] Yes, exactly! There's so much crap, but also, for example, with the riots a couple of years ago or with Margaret Thatcher last week, there was so much opinion about it. I don't put links too much, I'm more looking at what people are doing and reading it. Occasionally I comment on it. I don't update often my status or posting links, only occasionally." M29

"I can be very happy just chilling out and suddenly something comes to me, and it's not from mine, it comes from the newsfeed, because you know the newsfeed, it's just a public thing." M44

Through their daily use of social networks, the research participants enter into contact with posts and links about public issues that could interest them or, moreover, provide a different point of view or perspective from their own values and political positions, contributing to a key element in democracy: understanding, or being in touch with others' points of view and positions. Understood in this way, social media become a suitable space where citizens can easily enter into contact with values and political positions that they do not encounter in their daily lives. It is also important to point out that this characteristic of social media is especially interesting for those citizens with lower levels of media and public engagement, as these are the citizens that are less likely to encounter these different positions in the other contexts of their daily lives.

As has been seen, low levels of media engagement imply being in touch with a small number of different news media, an attitude that is normally linked with low levels of public engagement (no civic activity and low public talk). Citizens with low levels of media engagement, then, are less likely to enter into contact with citizens or media that support other values and political positions. Consequently, they are more likely to be isolated in their own disconnection, political passivity or political values. However, by engaging with social networks, these citizens could be exposed to news and links about public affairs that normally would never reach

them. Social networks, therefore, could be a useful mechanism through which citizens can be exposed to information about public affairs. For those with high levels of public engagement, social networks will never be their only source of news, but for those with lower levels of public engagement, social networks could mitigate in some way their normal criteria of selective exposure that tends to pay more attention to entertainment formats rather than news and other public affairs formats.

Approximately a quarter of the participants have posted on their timelines, or updated their status with public issues content, some of them more frequently than others, but all of them at least once during the week before the focus group met. These participants can be divided into two main groups. Firstly, those who have a special issue that they like to post about, such as the following quotation from a research participant who does not have an especially high level of public engagement, but who likes to update his status with links he thinks important for his contacts:

“I use Facebook mainly, you know, status, always have a Christian element on them. It doesn’t come to any argument, but introduces some debate, but nothing controversial, and yeah, if I see a story that is quite big I will check it out and read more about it.” M44

Other citizens, categorised as ‘actualizing citizens’ in the public engagement typology, tend also to focus on some issues with regard to what they post on social networks. As the following quotation from one of the participants reflects, they tend to be the participants who are more interested in online communities of individuals with shared interests:

“I post about gender and equality, I’ve joined several groups. I talk about that more online, having discussions on social media. Most people I know do not follow current events or are not engaged or interested in what is going on or in the issues I care about. So I talk more about these issues online.” F25

Most of the participants, however, are not so focused on just one issue when they share links on social networks. Most of them follow current events, using other media or the same social network, and when they see something that is especially interesting, they post it on Facebook :

“The last thing I did, it was an update about Nelson Mandela [the former South African president was in hospital at the time of the focus group], and as soon as I put it on the wall everyone was commenting, everyone wanted to know something [laugh].” F35

By doing so, citizens act as curators of media content. They select from the whole media ‘sea’ (to continue with Villi’s metaphor) the content that is more relevant or interesting to share with their contacts. Some of this content will not be about public issues, as demonstrated in a previous quotation from participant M29: “there’s so much crap [on Facebook’s timeline]”. Nevertheless, some part of the ‘sea’ is formed by public issue links, most of them, in fact, links to traditional media news websites, that are still the main source of information shared on social networks, according to the research participants. As the focus group participants pointed out, this kind of social curation of public issues content is performed by citizens with all the different levels of public engagement. Although those with higher levels of public engagement tend to post more links about public affairs, the participants with lower levels of public and media engagement are also exposed to public issues content on their timelines, sharing some of it.

Finally, this practice of social curation also affects the ways in which information flows. A news item that was occupying a secondary position on a news media website could be resented by social media users, giving it a relevance and repercussion that it would never have had without being spread through social networks. Singer (2013) has argued that users now have the potential to be “secondary gatekeepers” of media content, contesting one of the traditional roles of professional journalists. According to Singer, social networks will be just one (but probably the most important) of the different ways in which citizens can spread content into the media sea.

Another consequence of social curating is the ease with which citizens can start debates on social networks. In an environment in which it is so easy to be exposed to links to public issues posted by friends, the participants are more likely to start conversations and debates about these links. Here the important point is that contacts on Facebook, the main social network according to the focus group participants, tend to be friends. They are probably not people that users meet every week. It may even have been a long time since someone has personally met most of their contacts on Facebook, but nevertheless, they are not strangers and a basic level of trust is shared among social network contacts. This makes it easier for people to start to talk and debate different positions. Moreover, it also reduces the chance that the online debate will degenerate into an exchange of inappropriate replies. In contrast with the negative discourses towards comments on news stories, most of the research participants developed positive discourses towards debates on Facebook:

“For example, when Margaret Thatcher died, an old friend from work posted something on Facebook and when I saw it I was so angry and I responded and also posted something, and then lots and lots of people responded to that. So I think that on a small scale there was a dialogue from lots of different people, then every one of us changed their minds a little bit in one way or the other, through the dialogue.” F36a

“I think that social media are actually so important for this thing. It’s amazing how much people are posting their opinion on Facebook, broadcasting their opinions and then their friends comment on it and start political debates.” M28

“I more tend to comment if someone posts something, rather than posting myself. For me Facebook was a godsend. I’m very lazy about emails and phone calls, but I like to socialise and know what people are doing. Facebook helps me on that. I like it or comment when someone posts interesting things. I check it on my phone several times.” F36b

Despite these previous reflections on social networks, it is important not to overestimate their effects on the public sphere and democracy. Even if results from the focus groups pointed in the direction of social networks being online spaces that may facilitate public talk, a healthy understanding of the ‘agonistic pluralism’, and the connection of disengaged citizens, it is also important to point out that a large percentage of the population live their daily lives completely outside social networks. According to Reuters Institute, 52% of the United Kingdom population are Facebook users, which is an important number, but that leaves almost half of the population out of the main social network (Newman & Levy, 2013).

Among the research participants, 15 of the 21 confirmed having an account on social media (half of them being active users, posting at least weekly), mainly on Facebook but some of them also on Twitter or LinkedIn. Among the participants that do not have an account on a social network, the discourse tends to be extreme, a kind of anti-Facebook activism, as the next quotation reflects:

“I don’t, I don’t use Facebook. I’m against it. I don’t see the point. I’ve never wanted to have it. Why would I need it? Why? Maybe it’s because of my age, I don’t see it. I share stories with my friends, verbally, but not getting on there. Nor also by email. Face to face, you know, you can see the reaction, you can see if the person..., you can’t see it on Facebook. You can write everything on Facebook and everyone would accept that. I’ve never done it. I hope I will never have to.” F50

Discourses of distrust or anti- social networks are mainly aimed at Facebook, which is perceived as the main social network. These kinds of discourses are more common among the middle aged or older participants, pointing to a clear tendency for the young to be the main users of social networks, as the following conversation in a focus group session shows:

- “I dislike about Facebook because it means that you know about people even if you are not seeing them. I don’t want to know what they do.” M40
(...)

- "(...) But we're not very modern. Maybe it's the way that people behave now." M40
- "That probably empties them. Maybe you have nothing to tell anyone in person, then you think that the people on Facebook care about you." M39

7.2.5. Online media participatory practices and Public Engagement

The previous sections have shown how the research participants articulate their understanding of the Internet and which discourses are connected to the different online media participatory practices that can be developed on news media websites. It has been seen how practices related to content selection and personalization, as well as content production, do not generally interest the focus group participants. Furthermore, practices linked with commenting and debating may interest the research participants, but only in certain environments that could ensure a proper exchange of ideas, rather than contexts in which inappropriate behaviors are not penalised. The lack of interest in debating on news media websites represents a failure of traditional media to solve some of the shortcomings of the public sphere identified in the previous section on public engagement. The participatory energies that could be accommodated on news media websites may consequently be moving to other online environments, where citizens can better develop practices such as the dissemination of content, debate and opinion exchange, compared to the former hegemonies of traditional media institutions and their central position as hegemonic actors in the public sphere.

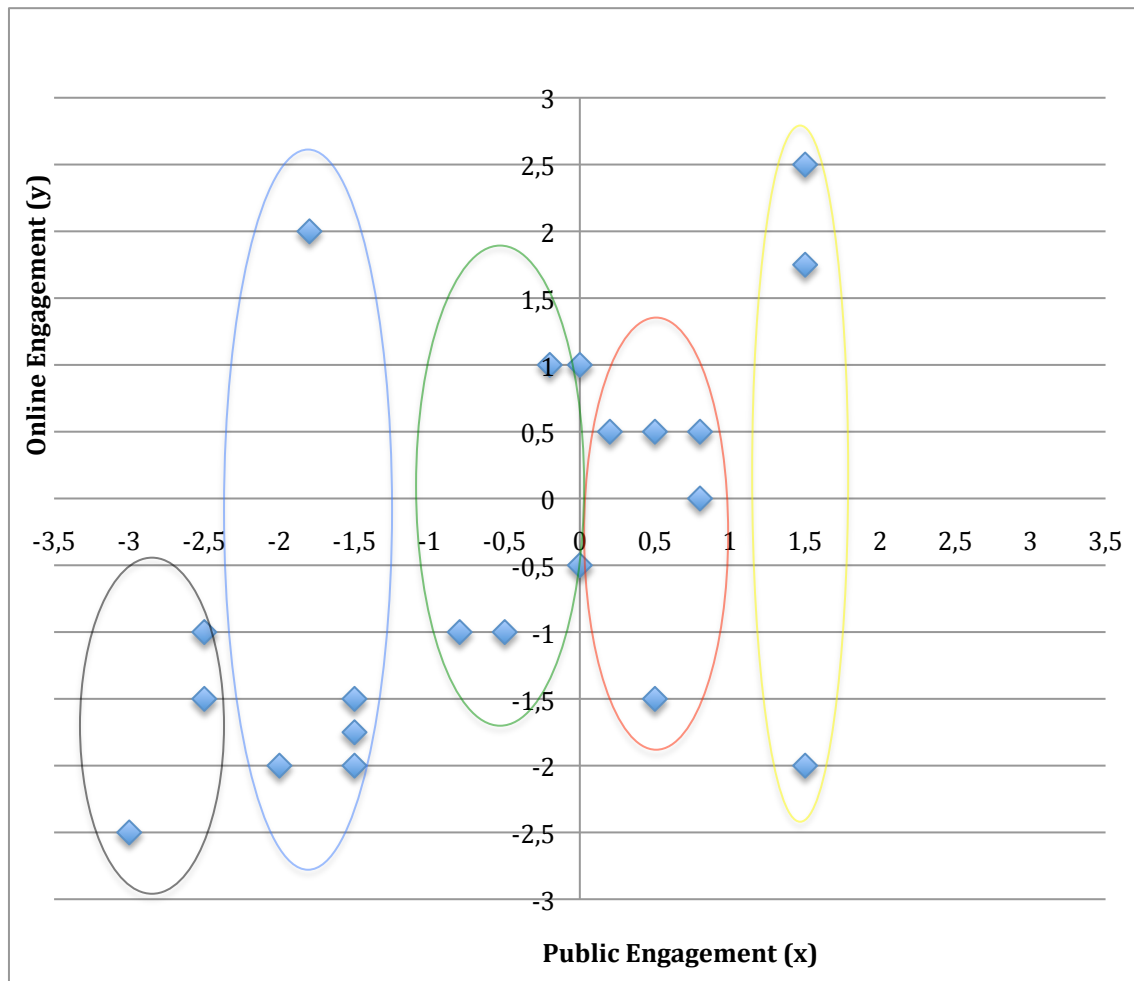
The following paragraphs will provide an in-depth analysis of the relationship between online and offline participation. In order to do so, rather than researching the common or general discourses among the research participants, the focus will be put on the individual level, quantifying the data collected and trying to find different attitudes and behaviors depending on each participant's level of public engagement. It will be seen that high levels of online participation are not directly related to a greater involvement or participation in the offline world. Rather, results point to multiple different ways of online engagement. On some occasions

levels of public engagement have a relationship to online media participatory practices, while on others these connections become more diffuse.

Figure 7.3 at next page shows the relationship between the participants' levels of public engagement and the levels of 'online engagement', that represents how each participant understands their online activity. The levels of online engagement have been formed using the following categories, based on the participants' responses during the focus group sessions and to the questionnaire distributed beforehand:

- +4 – Internet perceived as a space for original content production
- +3 – Internet understood as space for political participation or campaigning
- +2 – Internet as a space for interaction, debate and opinions' exchange
- +1 – Internet as a primary source for news about public issues
- 0 – Internet as a secondary source for news about public issues
- 1 – Internet as a source for practical information (daily-life or job-related)
- 2 – Internet as a source for entertainment
- 3 – Internet perceived as non-interesting
- 4 – Anti-Internet discourses

Figure 7.3 shows the position of each research participant by combining the levels of public engagement and the levels of online engagement. As can be seen, for those participants with negative values of public engagement (passive or disengaged participants, with only one exception) the Internet is commonly understood as a source of entertainment or of practical everyday or job-related information. Conversely, those participants with a close to zero or positive value up to one (that is, 'civically involved' and 'dutiful citizens') manifest a tendency to consider the Internet as a primary or secondary source of news about public issues. Consequently, these groups of active and engaged citizens who participate offline do not tend to consider the Internet as an especially suitable place to develop their willingness to participate. Rather, they tend to understand the Internet as an online source of news that otherwise would be more difficult to gather.

Figure 7.3. Public and online engagement in London participants

Note: The circles group the participants according to their levels of public engagement. Red: dutiful citizens, Yellow: actualizing citizens, Green: civically involved, Blue: attentive, Black: apolitical.

Finally, there is a small group of citizens who perceive the Internet as a place mainly understood as participation, although this participation could be represented through practices of interaction or as practices more directly related to political participation, such as campaigning. Two of these citizens are under the category of 'actualizing citizens', while the third is an 'attentive' citizen who develops a strong online participation consisting of disseminating religious content through social networks, participating more online than he does offline. The trend in 'actualizing citizens' was already detected when analysing the participants' understandings of participation and public issues. The participants under this category showed a particular trend consistent with understanding

participation as primarily online. Accordingly, it is not surprising that their understanding of the Internet also includes an important participative component.

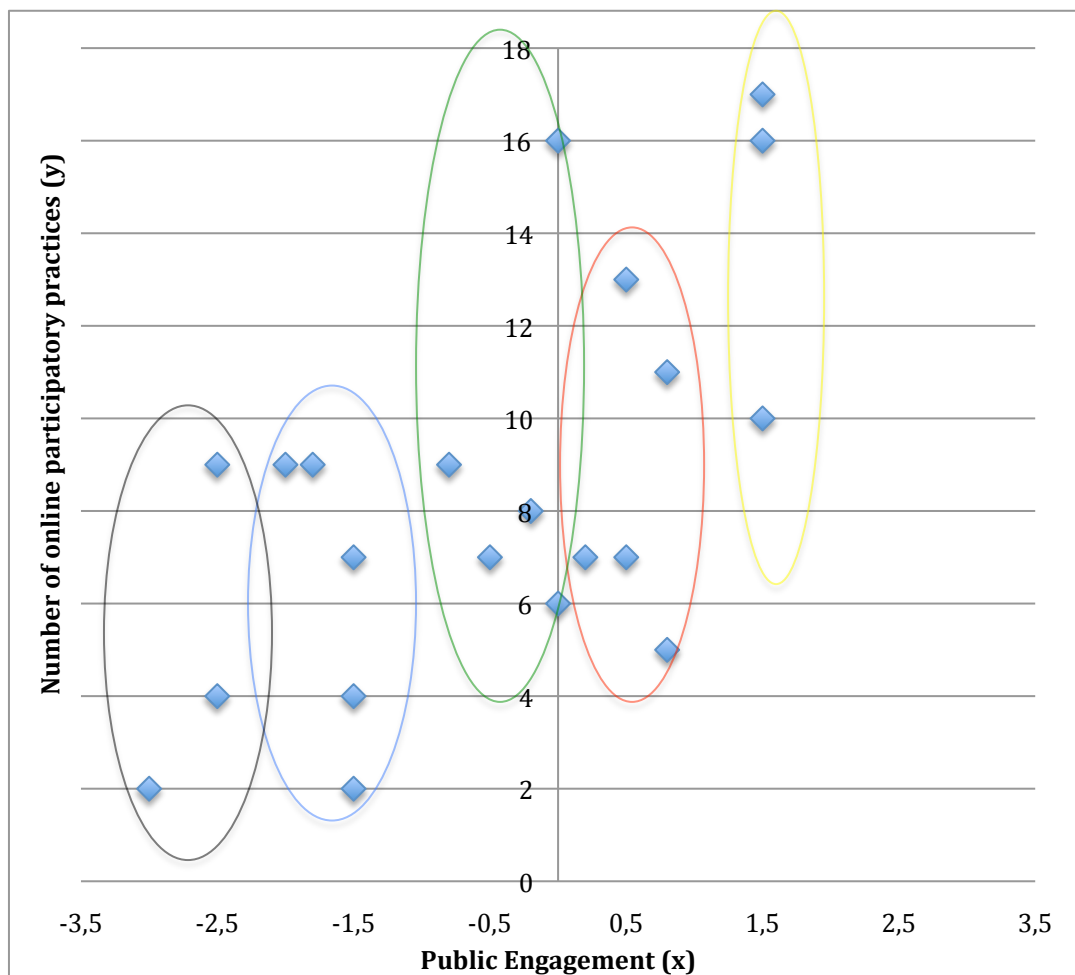
However, coming back to the majority of the participants, the fact that they do not understand the Internet as 'participation' does not mean that they are not developing online media participatory practices. To test this kind of participation, perhaps more unusual or occasional, but nevertheless present, an index was created: 'number of online participatory practices'. This index is a sum of all the practices each participant confirmed having conducted at least once during the two weeks before the focus group session. The list of all the possible practices can be found in the questionnaire distributed beforehand, Appendix 2.

Figure 7.4 (see next page) shows how widely adopted online participatory practices are. What is clear at first sight is that no participant with negative values of public engagement has conducted more than nine of these practices. However, this trend does not show that more engaged citizens tend to conduct a higher number of online participatory practices. Rather, results in the categories of 'civically involved' and 'dutiful citizens' show that these participants adopt from five to sixteen online media participatory practices, without any clear trend. Conversely, 'actualizing citizens' are the ones who show a higher number of practices. The three participants in this category have conducted between ten and seventeen and practices.

To summarise, the first point to note is that online participation does not directly attract those participants with more public engagement, with the sole exception of 'actualizing citizens', the only ones that show a preference for participating online in practices related to the broad world of 'the political'. Secondly, the Internet is perceived in many different ways by the research participants, although just a few do it in participatory-related discourses. However, online participation is not generally rejected but simply understood as something occasional or circumstantial. This kind of participation, then, is common to all the different kinds of public engagement, without any clear trend being identified, rather than just being a preference of 'actualizing citizens' for online participatory practices.

Finally, results point towards a general trend in the research participants to consider online participatory practices as something complementary to their actual forms of engagement. Accordingly, those spaces that attract them in everyday life contexts are the ones that may attract more participation related to public issues or 'the political'. For example, social networks have a special potential to attract non-engaged participants through indirect practices such as posting or commenting on others' publications about current affairs or public issues.

Figure 7.4. Public engagement and number of online participatory practices in London participants



Note: The circles group the participants according to their levels of public engagement. Red: dutiful citizens, Yellow: actualizing citizens, Green: civically involved, Blue: attentive, Black: apolitical.

CHAPTER 8

Findings of the focus groups in Barcelona

Chapter eight presents the findings of the focus groups conducted in Barcelona, in a similar format than former chapter seven about the findings of the focus groups conducted in London. Firstly, it introduces participants' attitudes and motivations towards issues of public and media engagement. After established this context, the chapter focuses its attention on participants' discourses towards Internet use and online media participatory practices. As explained in the methodology, participants' discourses are analysed together with their answers to the previous questionnaire. In some cases this data have been quantified and showed through diagram maps. Nevertheless, during most of the chapter the different issues are analysed together with extracts of participants' interventions or dialogues from the focus groups sessions, as is usual in research based on focus groups.

8.1. Participatory discourses: public and media engagement among London focus groups participants

This first section will analyse citizens' discourses towards life in democracy and offline participation, starting at the first levels of engagement, public talk and 'mediated public connection' (Couldry et al., 2007; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). After that, it shows different discourses of disengagement and distrust towards traditional institutions. However, as it will be seen, these discourses coexist with a vivid public sphere in which Barcelona participants show high levels of involvement. Finally, as in the former chapter about London findings, a diagram map will show the quantification of the qualitative data on public engagement

collected during the focus group sessions, as well as its relationship to media consumption and public engagement.

8.1.1. The first levels of public engagement: public talk and media connection

As has already been mentioned in the previous chapter on the London findings, according to Dahlgren (2011), some practices exist that can be considered as first manifestations of engagement, a precondition to more participatory practices that require a higher level of engagement and citizens' action, such as voluntary work or joining a political party. These practices imply a basic level of attention or connection to 'the political' and are identified with 'public talk' or everyday talk about public issues and 'media connection', performed (even if with different intensities) by almost all the participants of the focus groups. Although elitist or minimalist models of democracy tend to diminish the importance of such practices (Carpentier, 2011; Held, 2006), maximalist models attribute high importance to them as citizens' first levels of connection and engagement (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013).

All of the focus groups participants talk about public issues at least once a week, and most of them confirm that they also engage in public talk, even daily. As Gamson (1992) has already pointed out, public talk is normally conducted among citizens' groups of reference, such as family, friends and colleagues at work. Participants in this research follow this behavioural pattern, reflecting a vivid public sphere in which they normally and frequently talk about the public issues in which they are interested. This public talk is mostly conducted with friends and family, groups of normally like-minded people that participants meet regularly, which makes it easier to comment on the issues of the day or on the debates that are common in the public arena. The following quotations exemplify the common trend among the research participants in engaging in public talk with their closest groups of reference in everyday life contexts:

“In my case, with the ones that spend the most time with me, my family and friends.” M58

“Normally you talk with your closest circle, husband, sons, mainly when you share these daily moments like dinner, lunch, that’s the time. Sometimes I hear that television is killing communication, but I really don’t think so, we are always commenting on the news.” F61

However, a common characteristic of these groups of reference is that they are likely to be formed by citizens that share a basic range of political ideas and attitudes towards certain public issues. Some of the research participants have shown that they are particularly aware of this circumstance:

“With my family and friends we talk a lot about politics, sports, about society, in general, also about the economy. With my friends, generally, we tend to agree on the basic things. It’s uncommon to find that in a conversation we’re four against one. We tend to debate about little differences, not about the big ones.” M24

“I talk with people that are close to me, with my friends, if I know that they think the same as me, and with my husband and daughter.” F54

Consequently, it will be difficult for most citizens to talk about public issues with people that might have different opinions and points of view. As noted in the previous chapter, there is a need in democracy for the public sphere to provide spaces where citizens can meet, and exchange their perceptions of and attitudes towards public issues (Mouffe, 1997). These exchanges contribute to create more common understandings, helping the development of a healthy democracy in which the adversary is not considered as an antagonistic enemy. Such a society is more likely to develop what Mouffe (2013) defines as ‘agonistic pluralism’, a necessary struggle between political ideas and positions that, however, agree with the ethico-political principles on which society is based. The research participants pointed out several spaces where they are more likely to find people that might

think differently. These spaces tend to be formed with people that are not together by choice and who did not know each other before. The most common example of this kind of ‘accidental’ situation in which public talk might be conducted is the workplace. However, due to the particular circumstances of this everyday situation, the participants tend to prefer not to engage in public talk at the workplace:

“In my case, the workplace is not a good place to talk about these things. It’s simply not the right time, perhaps sometimes, but just a little bit and basic comments.” F54

“I never talk about politics in the workplace. There are too many different opinions there. It’s not going to be productive to talk there.” F32

Another research participant explained how, due to special circumstances at his workplace, he came into contact with other citizens that under normal circumstances he would have been unlikely to meet:

“I’m not working anymore but, in the last months there I remember that several new employees, that came from Valladolid and Cordoba [central and southern Spanish cities respectively] arrived at the workplace. They were people with a good education and background, and you know, as we were working really closely, it was easy to start to talk sometimes, especially because they’d had to move very quickly and come to live in Catalonia, even if they hadn’t wanted to. [He worked for a bank that had closed several branches around the country.] I was surprised because they were people with whom I could talk about almost anything, but when the topic of Catalan nationalism and the referendum on independence came up, then it was impossible to continue talking in a civilised way. They really knew nothing about the situation here.” M58

Other research participants explain also how these ‘accidental’ situations offered them the chance to meet and talk about public issues with people that think differently and with whom they normally found it difficult to get in touch. The

following quotations show how the research participants came into contact with different political views through everyday contexts such as joining a sports team or going on a trip to another region:

“I now play in a football team in Ripollet [a city close to Barcelona] and the points of view of the members of the team are completely different. It’s clear that there are some big differences, regarding political positions, or at the social or cultural levels. We’ve got people ranging from those that read newspapers every day to people that never follow the news.” M24

“We [with his wife] go to a village near Valencia [a Spanish region near Catalonia] once a year. The political atmosphere has always been very bad there, but recently it’s got worse. The people who vote PSOE [centre left-wing party] and the PP ones [right wing] barely talk to each other. When I arrive I try not to talk about politics, but as a Catalan it’s impossible, there is always someone that brings up politics and then arguments start.” M75

Among the research participants there was a willingness to actively look for public talk with non-like-minded people only in those participants with higher levels of public engagement. These citizens, who tend to have strong political or ideological positions about public issues, establish discourses in which they see it almost as a duty to know better how other citizens think or to debate in a civilised way with non-like-minded citizens. The following quotations show these discourses of duty among some of the research participants:

“In the normal groups it’s difficult to find people to compare opinions with, but I really like it. I think it’s positive to have the chance, so the few I do know, I always try to talk to them, in a civilised way. I like to talk about these things.” M63

“Look, I don’t like to argue with anyone, but sometimes I hear these opinions and I feel I have to say something, especially if it’s about some political issues. I am always defending them to whoever wants to listen to me. I know some

people will disagree, but if we can talk normally I think it's good to debate about it." F59

For the rest of the participants, this lack of public talk represents a shortcoming of the public sphere: an absence of encounters with different positions and values that, as will be seen later at the end of this section, can be partially solved through news media. However, this shortcoming of the public sphere is also in part mitigated by the high level of public talk conducted among the research participants overall.

Good examples of this trend are the young research participants. If the young participants are analysed in isolation, it can be found that most of them talk about public issues several times a week. Regarding the topics or issues that centre this public talk, debates about the economic crisis and its consequences (unemployment, family evictions due to the impossibility of paying the mortgage, growing differences between rich and poor and cuts in public services) are the most common public issues in the focus groups composed of young people (participants between 24 and 34 years old). This age group is suffering the highest unemployment rate (36% for those around 25 and 29 years old and 57% for those under 25, according to the 'Instituto Nacional de Estadística' (INE), 'National Institute of Statistics', data from October 2013. The high levels of unemployment are combined with low salaries and a large number of part-time jobs, and as a consequence, and according to INE, around 80% of young Spanish people under 30 are still living with their parents, due to the impossibility of being economically independent. The following quotations introduce a discourse that was repeated among several of the other young research participants:

"In the groups of people I know it's always common to end up talking about jobs, well, more about the lack of jobs [laugh]. Now I have one, but many of my friends don't, and most of the ones that do have one, it's not connected with something they have studied. It's like if there's nothing else you can do..., but we don't talk about politics, just the economy and jobs." F29

“We [friends] talk about the precarious job market, and I don’t see politicians or the media talking about it. Sometimes they do, but just at a general level, without getting to the main points. They don’t say what the situation’s like in some economic sectors, like communication.” M32

This last quotation also introduces another important issue. Discourses of disengagement from traditional institutions such as political parties and politicians are common among the research participants, not just among the young ones. The next section will analyse these participants’ discourses. However, before looking at these discourses, a word must be said about another issue of disengagement. This is disengagement related to traditional media institutions and the general perception of their biased coverage and how participants use news media to access different points of view and political positions.

For the majority of the research participants, when talking about where they can find opinions that contrast with their own ones, the most common answer is through news media. Among the research participants there were high levels of media engagement and news consumption, what Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) called ‘mediated public connection’. Most of the participants follow news daily or several times a week, normally through more than two or three different media. There normally exists a strong relationship between the participants’ levels of media engagement and public engagement. Those with higher levels of public engagement tend to spend more time consuming news about public issues and checking a larger number of media than do those with lower levels of public engagement⁵⁹.

As in the focus groups conducted in London, most citizens, especially those with high levels of public engagement, are aware of the need to consume more than one medium in order to grasp the whole reality. Media are considered as non-neutral, generally supporting their own agendas and with connections to political and economic powers. Discourses of distrust towards traditional media are common

⁵⁹ This issue will be further developed in the last section of this analysis of participants’ public engagement, where the diagram map that quantifies participants’ public and media engagement levels will be presented.

among research participants. The following quotation exemplifies this common discourse:

“There are some issues that are never covered, either by Catalan media or Spanish ones, mostly issues about corruption. Recently a small online journal [he is talking about *Cafe amb llet*, a Catalan online news media, known for its investigative journalism reports against corruption and political scandals] published some reports about corruption in the health system. I only saw it because a friend posted it on Facebook, but I didn’t see it anywhere else.”

M32

The previous quotation exemplifies the discourse of distrust. However, it also introduces an additional discourse that is not followed by most of the research participants. This is the shift towards non-traditional media to look for the news that traditional media institutions are not covering, a shift that is more common to the young participants, as the next quotation exemplifies:

“Also because of the situation that we are living in, people are getting angry and some new voices are starting to appear, in politics and in the media. Perhaps they are not the main actors, but if you know where to look, you’ll find places in the media where they talk about our real problems.” M33

As the previous quotation exemplifies, the young participants tend to be the ones less faithful to traditional media. These participants, although still following them, feel the need to compare their coverage with other non-hegemonic sources of information, perceived as less connected to political and economic powers. This trend, although still small, could in the future contest the present hegemonies existing within the media sphere.

However, as has already been said, this is not the common discourse among the research participants. Although there are general discourses of distrust towards traditional news media, these are by and large the most followed news sources among research participants. Most of the participants structure their discourses of distrust perceiving traditional media as having their own agendas for the issues

they want to report, agendas that are commonly understood as connected with the agendas of political elites, but none with the real problems of ordinary citizens:

“Right now, the media and politicians are talking too much about the Catalonia-Spain issue and what this politician said about that, or the other one about this. Who cares what they say? I don’t say it’s not important, but it’s not the only problem we have. They don’t talk about education, for example, and how the government is cutting resources there. They just talk about it when teachers organise a strike.” M25

However, although there is this general distrust of media institutions, research participants still prefer these sources of news. Most participants normally identify one or two media as representatives of their own ideology, and these are the media that they tend to follow the most:

“We normally follow the media that we think are closest to our opinions and values, and then follow some others to know what they are saying, but the daily newspaper is always the one that supports my positions.” F66

“I like to read different opinions, but you know the problem with that is that you can’t be checking 20 different media every day. There is no time for that, so on weekdays I think people have checked the ones that suit them and a bit of the other ones” F32

As can be seen, there is a widespread belief among the research participants that news media are biased and that their coverage responds to a particular ideological position. Although this is a common perception, most participants actively employ selective exposure in order to be informed through those news media that best suit their political ideology or values. Consequently, not all the research participants make the effort to try to overcome these shortcomings of traditional news media. Rather, the most engaged participants are aware, and behave accordingly, that in order to be in touch with the whole reality, to hear ‘different positions’, they sometimes need to consume news from other media, even those that represent a completely opposite ideological position from the one they have or feel

comfortable with:

“I believe that every news media has an ideology, and before you go there you need to know exactly which one it is. I always access different media when I want to know what they are thinking about Catalonia in Spain, so I go to the Spanish media, even sometimes the most nationalist and right wing ones [laugh].” M56a

“I agree with you. Nowadays you need to read different news media in order to be correctly informed. The media reflect the plurality of ideas that we’ve got in this country now.” M56b

8.1.2. Discourses of disengagement and participation

In all the focus groups conducted, there were more or less radical discourses of disengagement from traditional institutions, but mainly against political representatives who are perceived as a problem by the majority of the research participants. As far as this issue is concerned, distrust and disengagement towards politicians are extremely widespread, regardless of age or levels of public engagement. The following quotations reflect this widespread feeling among the participants:

“I see that people are tired. It’s because of politicians. Every week there is news about corruption, and you know, with the economic situation you would think that there would be some politicians that said different things, like to encourage the population, but it’s always the same. They’re the same as before.” M56

“Politics has lost all the credibility that it had before, because with all that has happened to the people you just see corruption everywhere and there’s this feeling that politicians are always so mediocre. And I am sorry, because when I was young I knew a lot of them that joined parties in the last years of the

dictatorship and they were nice, but now they have no credibility. They're just there because of the power and money. Then you go to vote and you can't choose them because the electoral lists are closed. You choose the party and it's the party who chooses who goes onto the lists and in which position. Citizens have no decision." F64

The previous quotations reflect how disengagement with politicians goes hand in hand with a discourse of lack of spaces in which to participate and a general feeling that elite actors hold hegemonic power positions, preventing citizens from having a voice in decision-making processes. The focus is usually put on the links and connections between traditional institutions such as political parties and unions with other hegemonic actors, such as elite private companies and the main traditional media:

"I think the problem is that the traditional organizations are not useful anymore. Seriously, who trusts a political party or the main workers' unions now? They work for the economic powers and people know that. They receive money from the main companies. They go to work for them after they leave politics. Politicians are doing nothing for this country and people know it." M56

Research participants establish discourses of disengagement with traditional institutions such as political parties but they do not know how to change this situation. The common discourse is that political parties hold their power in a way that leaves no space for citizens' participatory energies. Rather than being the solution to the economic problems that the country is suffering, political parties and politicians are perceived as the problem that has created this situation. The following dialogue among research participants in a focus group session shows how, although the problem has been identified, there is no agreement as to what should be done:

- "So then, who do you vote for to change that? It's impossible. They're all the same. You don't know what to do." F31
- "What do you want, more political parties?" M24

- "I don't know what to suggest. I don't have any solution and I don't think anyone has." F29
- "Me neither, but the idea is simple [laugh]. Now, they say that in business the key is to listen to the customer, so, the same for political parties." M24
- "The problem is that they're all are the same." F31
- "But then, us, with this kind of mentality, we're also contributing to maintain this situation. We need to participate and get involved if we want to change things and get heard." M24

With regard to what can be done to overcome the present situation, different discourses can be perceived towards participation and involvement that change mainly depending on the participants' age. Generally speaking, older research participants who show high levels of engagement tend to put the focus on forms of organization which follow standard and traditional parameters, while younger participants have a completely different discourse that instead of putting the focus on organization, takes into account new forms of mobilization. The following quotations reflect how the middle-aged participants tend to establish discourses which support traditional forms of organizing political or civic participation:

"Look, due to my job [this participant is a lawyer] I talk a lot with people who try to be active in housing issues. Nowadays, unlike in the 70s, people are not politicised. I was talking the other day with three or four people who were going to be evicted from their home and there was no collective thinking about the problem. They still think it's a personal issue of them against the bank, when in fact it's the whole problem of our society and who is ruling it. There are civic platforms for that, but people just join them when they see the police coming to take their home. The solution is to join more NGOs and create new political parties to take power, not to protest just when you are affected." M56

However, the young focus group participants (aged 24 to 34), when talking about disengagement from traditional institutions, rarely maintain a discourse of creating institutions that would replace the old ones. The young participants'

discourse is more connected to a general feeling that the older generation still think in ways that have now disappeared. The following conversation reflects this discourse:

- "Perhaps a change happened, I mean, with the old and the young. Our parents, for example, they were very linked with political parties, socialist or other ones, but now this has changed. No young people are joining political parties and the generation of our parents is more and more disappointed with them, especially now with the economic crisis." F28
- "I think that what has happened these last few years has especially affected the people of that age. These people thought, 'Now I am voting for this one but nothing changes and the other one is just the same, so then why bother to vote?' " F31
- "Yes, for us younger ones, we've never been connected with political parties. I've always considered that they're all the same." F29

The difference resides in the different ways that the different age cohorts articulate their understanding of participation and engagement. While some of the engaged middle-aged participants perceive engagement as participation in collective aims or activities, even if this represents carrying on traditional or non-traditional forms of political participation, young cohorts tend to perceive participation and engagement as being outside collective duty and more linked with personal initiative or as an individual activity. Some of the young focus group participants even perceive participation as a primarily online activity, as will be seen in the following section about online participation.

What is interesting to point out here is that this disengagement from traditional institutions is not directly connected with a broad disengagement or a lack of participation in public issues or in the participants' communities. Outside institutionalised politics or participation, there is a wide range of activities with which the focus group participants of all age groups feel connected, although in many different ways. As two particularly engaged research participants pointed out, even those citizens that seem less engaged will, in the appropriate

circumstances, go one step further and engage in participatory activities. According to the following extracts from the focus groups, if citizens are at least 'connected' or 'attentive' to public issues, it is then generally easy for them to participate with the necessary motivation or encouragement from other citizens:

- "I am very participative. I respect those that don't participate. Perhaps they've got a passive attitude or don't have the time, but certainly it's not as many people as we normally think. Look, I've been to see people that have companies in my town and asked them to hire someone that lost their job and has a family. And you know, sometimes I believe that they're going to send me out in five minutes, but surprisingly they're normally very receptive. You explain the issue to them and most of the time it works, they hire them. There are people in business that you think would never join an NGO or association, but, you know, these people are also worried about the community. You need just to offer them the chance to do things for others."
M59

- "I agree, this is why I normally say that there are many different ways of being participative. There are people in my neighbourhood that are giving a lot of money to local NGOs, and I know because I'm in these organisations. But they don't want other people to know, so it looks like they're doing nothing, but they're doing a very important thing for the community." M61

"There will be always people that don't want to participate. It's normal. They say, 'But politicians won't not listen', 'They'll do whatever they want', or similar things. But I think that what we have here is many people trying to do things for others and that's very good. If we can still have a welfare state in this country it's thanks to these many associations that are fighting and saving society, stepping in when the state is no longer there." F64

The next section will analyse in which activities of high intensity of participation (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013) the focus group research participants are involved and which conditions could bring them to non-participation. It will be argued that,

due to the special economic and political context⁶⁰ in which Barcelona finds itself nowadays, citizens are more likely to be involved, it being difficult to avoid a basic level of engagement or even to participate sporadically in some activity. However, some discourses are similar to those found in London. That is, the general perception of a lack of political efficacy and the preference for participating at the local level as this is perceived as being more likely to produce any relevant output.

8.1.3. Getting involved: participative citizens in a vivid public sphere

The theoretical background presented the different debates around a shift in recent years in how citizens participate in the public sphere (Inglehart 1997; Norris, 2001), moving from institutionalised forms of participation towards non-traditional ways of being involved, such as social movements or demonstrations. Accordingly, factors such as voting or party affiliation no longer represent the levels of people's mobilization. These trends are especially confirmed in the Spanish case, as the recently published European Social Survey (ESS) points out⁶¹. According to this European comparative survey, Spanish citizens show one of the highest levels of distrust of traditional political institutions. Trust in politicians and political parties has dropped since the first year in which the survey started (2002). In 2013, out of a maximum mark of 10, Spanish citizens gave their politicians 1.9, the same mark that they gave to political parties. Most citizens also state that they do not see any differences with regard to the policies proposed by the different political parties.

⁶⁰ That is, the aforementioned economic situation and the effects of the economic crisis, but also the different campaigns and activities connected with the national issue, with a referendum for Independence which was due to be carried out in November 2014. Focus groups in Barcelona have been conducted during a period of time of high tension between some Catalan parties (including the regional Catalan government) and the Spanish government, who strongly disagreed in accepting a referendum on independence. By the time of finishing the writing of this thesis, the referendum was held but was not recognised as binding by the Spanish government. Some Catalan parties are now trying to hold regional elections by March 2015, with a pro-independence programme in case they got the majority in the Catalan Parliament. For more information about this issue that has been dominating political debates in Catalonia for at least the last four years see <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/nov/10/why-an-independence-referendum-in-catalonia-is-inevitable-in-two-charts>

⁶¹ Data from <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/country.html?c=spain>

This general distrust of their representatives and traditional political institutions does not imply a lack of interest in public issues, as has been identified in the focus group participants' discourses. In fact, data from the ESS show that Spanish citizens are more interested and mobilised than in previous years (data which started to be collected in 2002) when Spanish citizens could be described as 'passive'. Data shows that 25% of Spanish citizens joined a demonstration last year, the European average for this activity being just 6.7%. Similarly, the percentage of those that state that they have no interest in public issues or the political situation of the country has dropped since 2002, being now just 19% of the population compared with the 36% of the first year of the survey. Even if the ESS does not show data separated into the different Spanish regions, it can easily be assumed that Catalan citizens are at least as mobilised as the average Spanish ones (due to the similarity of the effects caused by the economic crisis), and even more probably more to the high impact of the independence and national debates in recent years.

The following quotation from one of the research participants sums up a widespread discourse among the research participants. That is, that the particular political and economic context is causing more citizens to be interested in public issues and to be motivated to engage in a wide range of participatory activities, contributing to a lively and vivid public sphere:

"We've got many examples now of how people are getting involved in order to change things: we've got the 'indignats' ['indignados' movement], we've got l'Assamblea [Catalan National Assembly, a pro-independence association], many things. Civil society is mobilizing and it has obtained results. It's the current situation that is forcing people to act." F59

The previous quotation introduced the two main issues that are generally dominating the public sphere, the economic crisis and its effects on citizens and the national debate about the relations between Catalonia and Spain and the celebration of an independence referendum. The first one, the economic crisis and

its effects, has already been mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. It attracts all kind of citizens, but it is among the young that it is particularly effective in mobilizing them into the public sphere, as the following participant explains:

“In the last year people have become more interested. I was volunteering in an NGO in a working class neighbourhood in Granollers [a city near Barcelona], that’s a place where live people with low levels of education, and you know, it surprised me how active they are, because I thought that participating was something more linked with the middle class and those with higher education, but now these people there are also mobilizing, because they have seen how hard everything is now.” F25

For some young people, mobilization into participatory practices is due to a feeling of anger against what they consider to be a particular elite of politicians and economic powers. As previously mentioned, discourses about disengagement towards traditional institutions and hegemonic actors are particularly strong among the young research participants:

- “Before I had only ever been on just one demonstration, one organised by a left-wing union, but since the economic crisis I don’t even remember how many demonstrations I’ve been on during the last five years, many more than before. Yes, the crisis really is mobilizing a lot of people to go onto the streets.” M32

- “Yes, people are mobilizing more but they’re also getting more and more angry. I don’t know what could happen. I don’t know if they’ll start to think, ‘Why go to vote?’ People are getting tired of being cheated by politicians. Who knows how all of this will end?” F32

- “It’s true, I know no one who says they like politicians, no one.” M23

Although the economic crisis and its effects have contributed to mobilization, especially among the young research participants, it should not be discounted that the other age groups could also be similarly mobilised, as the next research participant explains:

- “People are really participating now, much more than before, because now they’ve seen the effects of the crisis up close. I’m in the Red Cross and in Caritas [Spanish catholic NGO aimed at helping poor people] and I see how many people are suffering, a lot, and more and more people are realising that and deciding to do something about it. We always have volunteers in any activity we are organising. People are always coming to help us.” F64

The second issue that is contributing to the generation of a lively public sphere among the Barcelona research participants is the national issue. In this case, the middle aged participants were more likely to show the mobilization effect of this issue during the focus group sessions. As already mentioned, at the time the focus group sessions were taking place, some Catalan parties were proposing to hold a referendum on independence in November 2014.

The opposition of other Catalan parties, as well as the Spanish government, has created a controversial political conflict that is generating an intensive public debate, with related news appearing in the media almost daily. For some research participants, this issue is also contributing to mobilizing citizens into more active participatory practices, such as demonstrations and other activities in support of the referendum, and is particularly successful in mobilizing citizens each September 11⁶². The following conversation in a focus group shows how some participants feel the mobilizing effect of the national issue. As can be seen, the research participants that are more connected to this discourse tend to be so because they feel that it is an issue initiated and carried out by ordinary citizens, rather than being driven by a particular elite or by political parties. The discourse of disengagement towards traditional institutions comes back here as an important element that helps to mobilise citizens into the activities connected to the national issue:

-“Now with this issue of independence, it’s normal to join these associations, l’Assamblea [Catalan National Assembly] or the Plataforma [Platform for the

⁶² National day in Catalonia and traditionally the day on which pro-independence supporters try to mobilise citizens in a demonstration in Barcelona city centre.

Catalan Language] and people think that they want to be there, because you see what they are doing and it's good. I've joined them now, and I've never joined any association before." F66

-“I agree, the political context is in some way forcing you to participate. We are making history and I think we need to be there. Before, I used to consider these things as controlled by politicians, but now you see that it's the people behind it so you want to be part of it.” F61

Among the research participants some discourses about lack of political efficacy were also been found that could negatively affect the levels of the participants' active engagement in public issues. Practices aimed at directly aiding the community, such as cooperating in NGOs or other associations, tend to be perceived as more efficient in the short-term, due to the fact that citizens participating in these kinds of activities can have a direct relationship with the people they are aiding. However, participants' perceptions about the efficacy of their own agency and participatory practices starts to be more diffuse when those practices are aimed at affecting the decision-making processes of institutions, both in the short and the long-term:

“No way, I can't see a way how to get there and influence them. It must be something big enough and mobilise a lot of people. For single things we don't know what to do.” M60

“Because of my job and several organisations I've joined, I need to be in touch with the local government and other institutions and sometimes it's impossible, it's too bureaucratic, when you want to do something that's outside the rules.” F57

“In this country we need a more participative culture. We don't know what to do if we want to get in touch with our representatives.” F28

As Coleman (2007, p. 22) argued, “to engage is to have a voice, but not necessarily to be heard”. Defining political efficacy as the citizens' sense of effective competence in influencing the political sphere (Reef & Knoke, 1999), the research participants tend to consider that they have little opportunity to influence this

sphere of decision-making. This discourse is present among all the research participants, disregarding their levels of public engagement, and contributes to the general discourse among the research participants that ordinary citizens are completely separated from the spheres of decision-making controlled by hegemonic elites of politicians and other relevant actors. The few opportunities that the legal system does provide to give a voice to citizens and enable them to enter into the decision-making process (popular petitions) are also perceived as ineffective, as they also need to be approved by representatives in Parliament:

“In fact, how the structure is organised, there are not many opportunities to influence the system. You know, it’s difficult to force a change, for example collecting signatures to change the law. You know that if the main parties disagree it’s going to go nowhere. Our chances of influencing the political system are really small.” F66

Moreover, even if in the focus groups in London the participants reflected similar discourses of lack of political efficacy, at least these participants were able to identify to which political representative they could address their complaints. Due to differences in the political system, the Catalan participants are not able to identify which politician represents their vote, and consequently to whom they can address their complaints⁶³. This feeling of lack of agency is perceived as demotivating by some citizens, who have the feeling that current actors in positions of power are inaccessible even to the most basic of citizens’ demands:

“Everything in politics is like a closed circle, it’s too hard to enter there. We should be organised in a different way. Perhaps with some new parties that are emerging now, because with the old ones, it’s too hard and this is really frustrating.” M58

Regarding where they prefer to participate, the Catalan research participants, as well as those in London, show some preferences for participating at the local level.

⁶³ Each UK electoral constituency elects an MP who is the direct representative of the citizens of that constituency. Spanish citizens, on the other hand, choose closed lists of candidates that normally answer to their parties, not to the voters of their constituency.

This trend is understandable because the participants think that their political efficacy is higher in this sphere compared with at the regional and national level. The common discourse is that they prefer to be involved in those situations where they think their actions can have some positive outcomes:

- "I participate mainly at the local level. I think it's super important, not just every four years, to be involved in the projects there, to participate in those that affect you." F25

- "I agree with that, it's easier for me to influence my local council rather than the governments of Catalonia or Spain, that are further away. I don't believe I have any chance of influencing their decisions." M24

- "But the problem is that you should get something when you participate. The system now, even at the local level, means that you need to put in a lot of effort to get in touch with them and affect their decisions, and even with that you never know if they're going to listen. The current system is designed to try and prevent participation when it should be the other way round. They should be trying to increase people's participation." M25

- "I had this issue in my town. They wanted to build this stuff and we started to be against it and to mobilise the neighbours. We started out with 20 and in the end we were 600 people there. Four months fighting against the local government and in the end they had to stop their idea of destroying the old city centre. At the local level it's easier to influence them. They can't just do what they want." F64

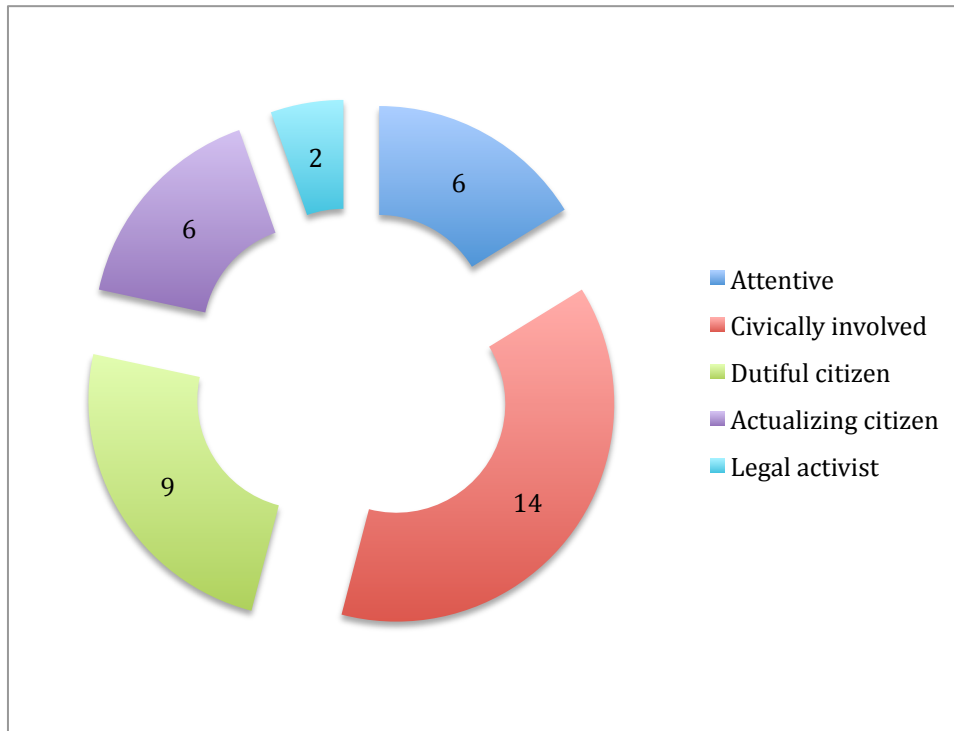
- "But then at the national or regional level it's harder. You don't know how to organise many people. It's harder and easier for them to ignore you." M56

8.1.4. Public and media engagement in Barcelona participants

The quantification of the data collected during the focus group sessions reaffirms the conclusions made in the analysis of the participants' discourses⁶⁴. The distribution of the 37 research participants among the different levels of public engagement identified in the typology can be seen in Figure 8.1 (next page). Among the different categories in the typology of levels of public engagement, the one that groups most of the research participants is 'civically involved', with 14 participants included in this category. This kind of citizen is engaged with society, conducting public talk often and is generally aware and wants to know what is going on. Additionally, they are normally connected with their communities, performing practices of low intensity of participation that do not force them to get involved everyday such as helping occasionally in local community issues or being a member of an NGO that aids people affected by the economic crisis, or of the Catalan National Assembly (a pro-independence organization), or more frequently in getting involved in something less 'political' in its aims such as participating in a musical association or being a member of a boy scout group.

In second place can be found the participants grouped under the label of 'dutiful citizens' (nine participants). In this category the middle-aged participants are mainly to be found, characterised by performing active forms of involvement in their communities. The range of activities can be really diverse (ranging from traditional forms of participation such as joining a political party to less traditional forms such as participating in a political strike or demonstration) but what citizens of this kind have in common is that they are performing them due to a feeling of duty or civic obligation towards the community and the collective. Participation, then, for these citizens is understood as something collective rather than individual.

⁶⁴ See Chapter 4 on methodological issues for a further explanation of the structure of the typology of public engagement. See also Chapter 4 for a better explanation of the process of quantifying the data collected during the focus group sessions and how participants' discourses have been used to 'place' each participant in a specific category of the typology.

Figure 8.1. Public engagement in Barcelona research participants

After that there are two different kinds of public engagement that group a similar number of the research participants (six participants in both cases), ‘actualizing citizens’ and ‘attentive’. The first groups mainly the young research participants, while the second one is less homogeneous with regard to age cohorts. A high level of engagement and involvement characterises actualizing citizens but, instead of obeying a collective sense of duty, these citizens participate due to individual political attitudes. Consequently, their forms of participation tend also to be more individual rather than collective, even if they can also take part in some non-traditional forms of political participation (such as demonstrations), if these are not organised by traditional institutions such as political parties or workers unions. On the other hand, ‘attentive’ participants show low levels of active participation, but basic levels of public talk and their discourses show some kind of connection with public issues. In exceptional circumstances, such as if they are affected personally by a particular political issue, it is easy for this kind of citizen

to move one step further and get involved. Finally, there is also a minority of the research participants (two) who come under the category of 'legal activist'. These participants are mainly active in non-traditional forms of political participation and their discourse about public issues and life in democracy always includes a narrative of change and transformation.

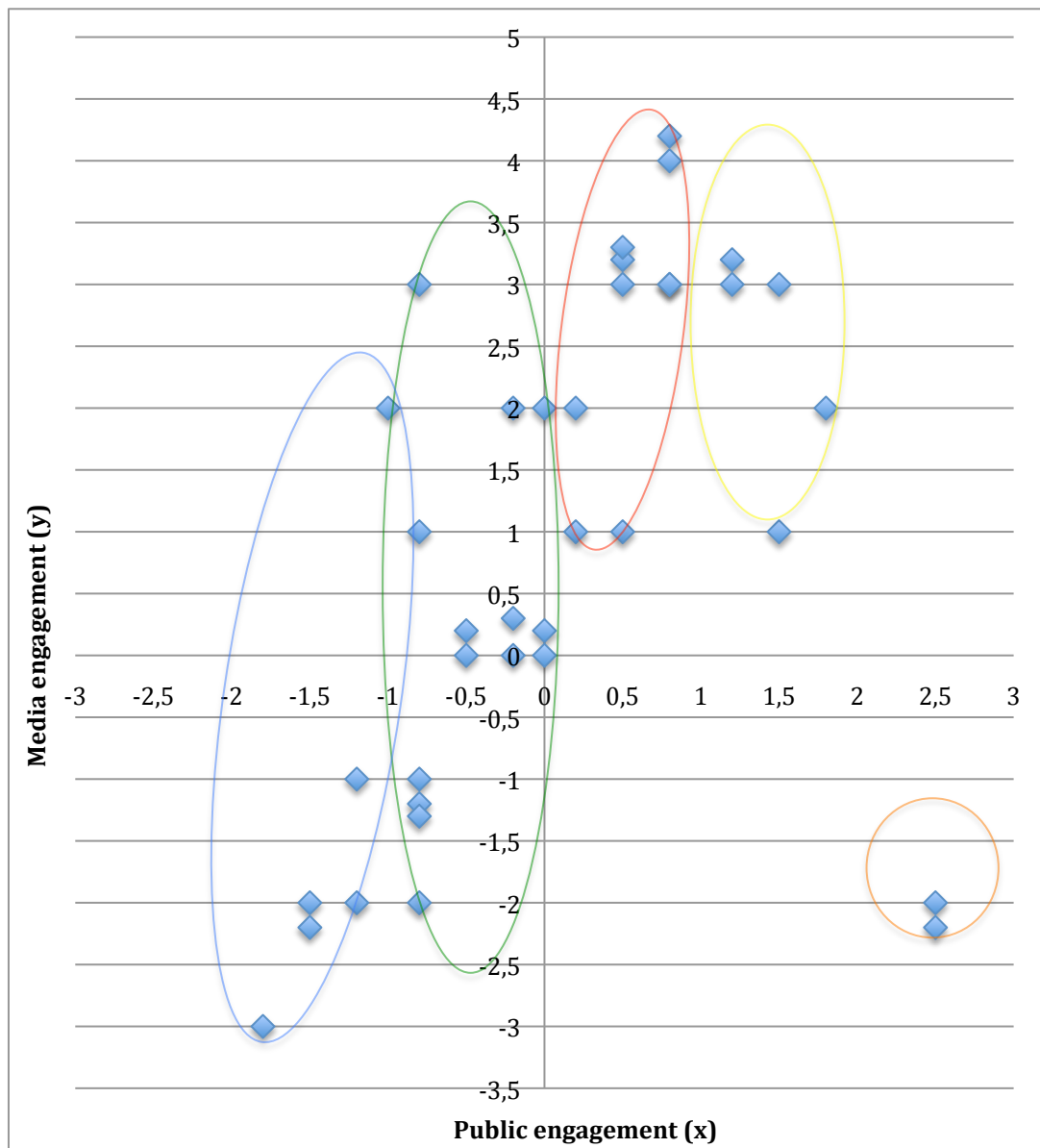
Figure 8.1 reflects how almost all of the research participants are at least connected to public issues and develop activities identified as the first levels of engagement (public talk) or with their communities (low intensity participatory practices). The participants that go further and get engaged in more active participatory practices connected with 'the political' are not in the majority among the research participants, but, nevertheless, also represent a high number (15 research participants for a total of 31, that is, the sum of dutiful and actualizing citizens and legal activists). The result is a distribution of public engagement that represents a vivid public sphere where citizens have not only a wide range of practices to develop, but also the attitudes and motivation needed to get engaged and participate, even if at different intensities.

With regard to media engagement, results among the Barcelona participants also confirm the tendency already seen among the London participants. As Figure 8.2 shows (see next page), the general trend is that those participants with higher levels of public engagement also have a higher level of media engagement. This general conclusion reaffirms theories already presented that argue how those citizens who are less engaged tend to choose their level of news exposure selectively, reducing the amount of news or current affairs information (Prior, 2007). This leads to a virtuous circle in which those who are more engaged consume more current affairs information, which in turn contributes to their public engagement and participation in public issues, while those with lower levels of public engagement remain without incentives to get involved or participate (Norris, 2000).

Nevertheless, behind this general trend some interesting nuances can be found that provide relevant insights. The direct relationship between media engagement

and public engagement is not as strong as has been seen among the London research participants. The graph shows how the majority of the research participants are mostly placed in higher public engagement positions. Accordingly, the majority of participants are also placed in higher media engagement positions. The thesis is that the economic and political context is generating more attentive citizens, attention that also produces more interest in getting involved and participating, even if just occasionally, following a trend similar to the virtuous circle described by Norris (2000).

Figure 8.2. Public and media engagement in Barcelona participants



Note: The circles group the participants according to their levels of public engagement. Red: dutiful citizens, Yellow: actualizing citizens. Orange: legal activist. Green: civically involved. Blue: attentive.

The analysis of each group included in the typology of forms of public engagement reinforces this thesis, showing how the general trend of higher public and media engagement is followed, although there are also a number of participants that 'escape' it. This is especially relevant in the category of 'civically involved' (public engagement values from -1 to 0), the one that shows less uniformity in its participants' levels of media engagement. Although the majority of participants of this kind show a moderate level of media engagement (around the 0 position), some of the others show a high interest in consuming news and checking different sources (showing positions higher than 1) while other participants show a higher interest in entertainment and check just one or two media sources to be informed (positions lower than -1). That this is the group that shows less homogeneity is not something that should come as a surprise. This is the group that represents those citizens that are 'connected' and also develop some kind of low intensity participatory practice. Within a vivid public sphere or an especially conflictive political and economic system, these are the citizens that could be the easiest to mobilise. These are also those citizens that are more likely to turn to the news if something especially interests them. Accordingly, a less homogeneous behaviour with regard to media engagement is to be expected among these research participants.

Homogeneity starts to be clear in the categories of public engagement close to the previous one, 'dutiful citizens' and 'attentive'. 'Dutiful citizens' (those with levels of public engagement from 0 to 1) have positions of media engagement from 1 to 4, normally following the relationship between higher positions of public and media engagement. In the same way that these research participants feel it is a 'duty' to participate and be involved in their community and practices aimed towards 'the political', they also feel it is a civic obligation to follow news media in order to be updated about what is going on in public issues. They tend to be the citizens who consume more media for information purposes and also those that actively look to check different media sources with the aim of receiving as many different perspectives and opinions as possible. On the other hand, 'attentive' participants show the lowest levels of public engagement (from -1 to -2) and the lowest also in media engagement (from -1 to -3). Their media consumption is, then, aimed mainly

at entertainment formats, and when they consume news they tend to do it from one or two different sources only.

Finally, 'actualizing citizens' (values of public engagement from 1 to 2) also show high levels of media engagement (most of them around 3). Furthermore, as will be further analysed in the next section on online participatory practices, this is the group of citizens who are more likely to actively look for alternative sources of news and current affairs information. 'Legal activists' (values of public engagement from 2 to 3) show a similar news gathering behaviour to the previous category of 'actualizing citizens', but with lower levels of media engagement (-2), which shows their higher distrust of traditional news media and their lack of an active and widespread sphere of alternative media.

To sum up, this review of participants' public and media engagement has analysed the different ways in which the research participants engage with the public sphere. All of the research participants are, although at different intensities, connected with news media. More than half of them also go one step further and participate actively in a wide range of activities linked with 'the political'. As a consequence, it can be argued that the Catalan public sphere is a vivid one. However, several shortcomings were found in this public sphere. Even if the Catalan participants show high levels of public engagement and mobilization, they also show high levels of distrust for politicians and traditional media, and also a general sense of lack of political efficacy, in a similar way to the results obtained from the focus groups in London. Furthermore, the Catalan participants also suffer from a lack of spaces in which to discuss public issues and to discuss with other citizens that have different political positions or values. Different positions tend to be identified with the cleavage Catalonia - Spain, and it would seem that there is little contact among people on either side of the cleavage. Media are one of the few spaces where they can get in touch with these different positions. However, as has been seen, the decision to actively consume different media in order to get 'the whole picture' of political perspectives depends on the education levels and public engagement. Despite the fact that most of the participants are 'connected' to news media, they tend to consume those media that represent their own values and

positions. As a consequence, issues of selective exposure should not be disregarded, especially if we consider the importance of the Catalonia - Spain cleavage and the lack of contact between both sides.

8.2. A vivid public sphere: transferring participatory intensities into the online realm

This second section of chapter eight will present the results of participants' attitudes and motivations towards a series of online media participatory practices linked with participatory journalism and social networks, and how these practices might affect the previously mentioned shortcomings of the public sphere. The main question here is how these participatory energies of the vivid Catalan public sphere are accommodated in the online environment. Are citizens searching online ways of participating that they do not find offline? Are news media offering enough opportunities to suit citizens' preferences? Or, on the other hand, do citizens have to look for other online spaces in order to fulfil their willingness to participate, challenging the traditional hegemonies and power positions existing in the public and media sphere?

A series of comparative surveys indicated a higher level of online participation in Spain compared with other European countries, among them the UK (Newman & Levy, 2013). Although these studies marked out the trend, they do not explain why online participation is higher and for which reasons citizens prefer some online participatory practices rather than others. The argumentation of this research is that due to contextual circumstances (the economic crisis and the independence referendum), the Catalan public sphere (as well as the Spanish one) has become more vivid than before, with citizens more likely to be connected to news media and public issues, but also more likely to participate, even if at different intensities, but always preferring non-traditional forms of political participation, which include online participation. The hypothesis to be tested in this section is if that these contextual factors are also influencing Catalan citizens in their online behaviour, with a large number of them channelling online their participatory

energies, spreading their voices hoping to be heard by a political sphere formed of hegemonic actors perceived as distant and ineffective.

8.2.1. Online practices and the participatory dimension of the new media environment: Understanding the Internet as participation.

As a starting point for this section, attention will be focused on how some of the citizens involved in the focus groups of this research identify, through their discourses about participation, the concept of 'to participate' as something that exists first and foremost, in the online sphere. This implies attributing to participation a meaning that it could not have had some years ago, when the participatory dimension of the new media environment was not yet as developed as it is today, reflecting how new communication technologies are embedded in our daily lives (Christensen & Ropke, 2010; Press & Williams, 2010). By transferring to the online world a formerly offline concept, the meaning of participation is also transformed in new different approaches and common understandings, generating discourses that might challenge the existent hegemonies in both the public and the media sphere. The following paragraphs will describe how different participants understand the Internet and online practices. As has already been pointed out, some of them understand the Internet as participation, while others attribute to it other less participative meanings. However, as will be explained in all the sections of this second part on online media participatory practices, the new media environment and online participation are transforming the ways in which citizens engage with the public and media spheres, even for those citizens that show less interest in engaging with online practices.

Some of the research participants during the first group of questions aimed at issues of public engagement, before starting to talk about the Internet and online participation, when they were asked about how they participate in their communities, or which kind of actions they do that are related to public issues, mentioned firstly online participatory practices, giving them more importance and

relevance than the participatory practices performed in the analogical world. The majority of these participants are under 32 years old and are included under the category of public engagement labelled as 'actualizing citizens'. Their understanding of participation as mainly an online practice is connected with platforms of online petitions and, more commonly, social networks and practices of sharing and commenting. The following conversation in a young participants' focus group session exemplifies this trend:

- "It's interesting to be in touch with these online platforms, these ones to mobilise people like change.org, because it's a good way to know what's going on and also because your vote there could help to change real situations. Sometimes it happens that you sign one of these petitions and after some days you see that it really worked, because there are a lot of people signing this. It's not like when you bring the signatures to Parliament, that never works." M32

- "But it's also the same on social networks, isn't it? That you think when something bothers you, 'I'll share it on Facebook or Twitter' and that's it, it's like complaining to someone, and those closer to you are going to see it." F27

The previous dialogue has also introduced an important common understanding among participants labelled as 'actualizing citizens'. This is the attribution to online participation of a higher potential agency rather than offline participation. By perceiving online participatory practices as potentially more likely to influence politicians and to have positive outcomes rather than other ways of direct and analogical participation, these participants are also manifesting a preference to develop these kinds of online practices. The next extract from another focus group session with young participants reflects how one participant understands participation as sharing content and political opinion through social networks, while another one manifests a clear preference for online participatory practices rather than offline ones:

- "I participate on social networks. When I see something I post it because I want people to know about it." F29

- "As for me, as far as that's concerned, I was part of a political party in my home town and I really think that it could be more effective doing things online rather than something like I did." F28

Together with the high levels of distrust of traditional institutions (mainly politicians and news media), this understanding of participation among the young research participants manifests itself as a tacit acceptance that the 'official' public and media spheres have no place for them. Controlled by hegemonic actors, the public and media spheres are perceived as having no instruments with which to articulate citizens' voices. Consequently, those citizens with participatory energies gave up trying to enter decision-making processes, accepting that their only chance is not in directly participating in them, but in influencing and putting pressure on those hegemonic actors that do hold power positions in these processes. Not being allowed to have a voice through the 'official' or 'traditional' channels, 'actualizing citizens' turn to new media to articulate their participatory practices aimed at expression and involvement (Rosanvallon, 2008).

The young participants, however, are not the only ones who understand participation as mainly online practices. Another participant (59) also shows a similar understanding of participation as an online activity aimed at connecting with and influencing other citizens, with a component of content creation previously unseen. His discourse, however, is less aimed at a general distrust of traditional media and political institutions. Consequently, his participatory energies are also articulated through news media websites, as well as other online practices outside traditional media online spaces:

"Participation. Yes, for example I write. I have a blog. I write letters to newspapers about what I'm concerned about or what interests me. Sometimes I get the letter published on the website or even in the newspaper, others I don't. It really doesn't worry me because I also post it on my blog. I think that this is participation because if you are contributing with your knowledge, your point of view, then you are participating." M59

Except for the previous participants' discourses, the common understanding of participation is as something that belongs and is mainly linked to the offline world. In talking about how they are connected with their communities or how they participate in public issues, most research participants answer with the different discourses already explained in the first part of this chapter, looking at public engagement. However, when talking with the research participants about their use of the Internet and if they could describe what they are doing online in a few sentences, a wide range of different answers were received, showing how diverse Internet use is, and how participation plays an important part in it.

The participants' discourses towards the Internet reflect how it is something with different meanings, each participant attributing to the Internet a different meaning and connecting it to a large number of different practices. Among the Catalan research participants, as happened among the London ones, Internet use depends on personal characteristics: age, where they work, quantity of free time, interests or hobbies, etc. Almost all of them use the Internet to access online news media (except one participant). The number of media varies, but normally those participants with higher public engagement tend to check a larger number of media. Following a large number of media is linked with online use, online newspapers being the kind of media most followed in the online environment. Another pattern is that the young participants tend to use the Internet more to be in touch with their friends. They are the group that is the most active on social networks, even if there are also older participants that also use them. Sending an email is another way of being in contact with friends, but this action is mainly performed by those participants that are not active on social networks.

With regard to participation on news media websites (participatory journalism), it does not seem to be a priority for the research participants. Just two of them included participatory practices in their descriptions of Internet use, showing how participatory journalism-related practices are not commonly understood as a meaning of Internet use, not being an extended practice among research participants, other than reading the news online or other participatory practices such as being in touch with friends on social networks. The next two quotations

are from the only participants who identified participatory journalism as part of their understanding of the Internet:

“I also use the Internet to read the news, then to check my bank account and also to have my say. I like to write my opinions on social networks, also in online newspapers, in blogs linked to news media. Also to communicate with friends, now with WhatsApp.” M61

“I use the Internet basically at work, but also to read the news, comment on it, also for email. It’s for practical stuff and also to communicate with friends or family.” M56

Participation in media websites, that is, ‘participatory journalism’, is mainly understood as the practice of ‘comment on news’, the most quoted form of participation among the participants, when they are asked about how they think they can participate on those news websites. The following paragraphs will analyse the participants’ discourses towards this practice. After that, other participatory practices that a few of the participants perform will be introduced, such as writing letters to the editor or participating in online interviews. It will be seen how, for some citizens, media websites represent an online space that can accommodate their participatory energies. However, it is necessary to point out that these citizens represent a minority of the participants and most of them do not take part in these practices. Generally, participants older than 40 show less interest in online participation, whereas the younger participants participate more online, but preferring to do so on social networks, rather than on news media websites.

8.2.2. Participatory journalism: an anarchic public sphere

Previous research has argued that the Internet could help to reinvigorate a “long-lost public sphere” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 114) and that online deliberation can increase participants’ political knowledge and public engagement in the same way

as face-to-face deliberation (Min, 2007). However, other authors argue that the quality of debate of some comments on news spaces is low, producing just one-direction communication instead of argumentative debates (Ruiz et al., 2011). This last discourse seems to be the most popular among research participants. Disregarding the levels of public engagement, comments on news stories are not generally considered as a space in which to perform public debate or to keep in touch with different opinions or points of view about public issues, as the following extracts from the focus group sessions exemplify:

- "I've never tried to do that. I just see how stupid or aggressive the people commenting there are. I don't want to do it." M60
- "Me neither, it would be a drop in the ocean. A serious journal should filter stupid comments or highlight those comments that are interesting or well written, but now all the comments receive the same consideration." M60
- "It's become very uncivilised now." F72
- "Yes, that's true." M63 and M60
- "Initially there was more respect between people there, now this is lost" F72

- "There is not much chance for debate there. If you look at it, much of it is just bad words, nothing with objectivity or interest in comparing points of view. Almost all of them are disrespectful comments or completely supporting the newspaper's opinion. If I wanted to compare my opinions I would never go there." M24
- "I agree, I think the only people commenting there are the ones that are 100% supporting some position, so it's impossible to comment or debate." M25

As the previous quotations reflect, comments on news stories are not generally considered a suitable 'public sphere' in which to conduct public talk. The main critical discourse against performing this practice is that comments on news stories are dominated by users that do not want to debate and instead are more focused on arguing, filling the space with inappropriate and aggressive comments.

According to some users, this is due to the format that news media adopt to implement users' comments. Even users that might be attracted to online debate do not consider news media as suitable spaces:

"Perhaps it's because the format is not attractive. Sometimes I see that some issue or news produced a debate when I am with my family or friends but not online, I never go there. Maybe it's because the format of these discussions doesn't attract me." M58

"I think online debates are the future. It's really interesting how you can easily start an interesting debate there. In my local association of 'Proces Constituent' [a new political party that has appeared in Catalonia] we used to meet weekly on Tuesday nights, that's impossible, just to talk. Why not do it online, organising a forum? But not in news media, there it's impossible. It's not the best way, people are not committed there. It's simply not the right place." M56

"I tried to comment once, but it didn't work. They were complaining about something, I don't remember what. I disagreed and I wrote something but then when I had to enter the comment it was too complicated." M25

In all the focus group sessions it appeared that most of the research participants had commented at least once on a news story. However, despite the fact that most of the participants had performed this practice at least once, they did not incorporate it into their repertoire of daily practices. As a practice needs repetition and a certain component of unconsciousness in its application (Bird, 2010; Couldry, 2012), it cannot be argued that these participants commented on news stories as a practice. Instead, their behaviour should be understood more in terms of a reaction to something. As some of the research participants have explained, they decided to comment because something that they had read, such as a news story or another user's comment, caused them to have an emotional reaction, either because they strongly disagreed with the comment or the approach taken in the news story, or because the topic of the news story affected or shocked them in

some way. The following extracts from focus group sessions show how participants articulate these reactions that, in some way, compel them to join the online conversation:

- "I do comment, occasionally, if I see something that makes me angry, if not, I don't comment." F28
- "Yes, it must be something that shocks me, if not I don't feel I need to comment on it." F31

- "I used to comment on online newspapers, I liked it. When I saw something that really made me very angry I used to comment, on a news story, on an opinion article or on another comment, but not anymore. Now it's too rude and too stupid. I'm sure political parties are paying people to comment there, it's too stupid." F61
- "I also used to do it on a local news website but I stopped. There was no control, and some people were simply saying such crazy things, because they were hiding, anonymous users. I stopped going on there. There was no control." F59

As the previous dialogue among research participants exemplifies, there is a widespread opinion that news media are not exercising enough control over the users that are participating on their sites. Moreover, some participants also pointed out how it is, in fact, easier to participate by commenting on news stories, rather than in other participatory activities, such as sending a letter to the editor:

- "They must force people to identify themselves. Some will complain but it's really necessary, I think." M56
- "I agree, even giving the DNI [National Identity Number] and having a database to prevent people from insulting other users. Look, to send a letter to be published on the website of *La Vanguardia* or *El Periodico* you have to give this personal information, why not in comments?" F64

“The problem with that is that users are anonymous there. If everyone there had to sign their names we’d soon see if they would continue saying the kind of stuff that is normal now. What should not be possible is that someone on the Internet can call you a [expletive deleted] and nothing happens. Sometimes the media doesn’t even block the user or delete the comment.”

M23

As the previous quotations indicate, anonymity is one of the reasons the research participants think might be the cause of inappropriate comments and uncivilised behaviour in comments by news users. Due to this inappropriate use and the lack of control, most of the participants do not find news media websites suitable spaces in which to debate. Those citizens looking for spaces where they can debate or encounter different views, are going to other more specialised online spaces, as these two participants’ quotations reflect:

“I’ve done it sometimes. On this site, Open Democracy, people publish opinion articles there. Sometimes you can find good things to read. But sometimes, even if it’s one of those well-known professors, there are also mistakes or I disagree with something so I comment, as other people do. You don’t find the same inappropriate comments there as you do on news media websites.” M63

“I’d like to find forums where I can debate, not just about politics but maybe also about music or literature. But the truth is that when I look for these forums I don’t find them. I just can see forums or comments on news websites that are not the kind that I am looking for, especially the political ones, the level is so low there.” M56

However, there was also one research participant who confirmed that he comments regularly. In this case, the aim is to participate in online debates and give his opinion, even though he also recognises that sometimes the conversations are not interesting enough or too uncivilised. Despite this, this user does not find other online spaces that fulfil his needs better, and seems satisfied with the kind of

participation that he can perform on online media websites:

“I make comments very frequently. I like to have my say there, show my opinions about current affairs, if I liked the news story or if I feel I’ve got something to say. I also see that depending on the subject, people are more aggressive, or even start a dialogue with two of them saying bad things to each other. It’s a problem of the people, not the format. You’ll always find uncivilised people.” M61

To sum up, news media websites are not attracting most of the participants to debate and share opinions and points of view with other citizens. The format and the lack of moderation, which causes inappropriate behaviour by some users, discourages the research participants from joining these spaces provided by media, mostly for comments on news stories. Consequently, news media websites are not helping to solve one of the identified shortcomings of the public sphere, namely the lack of spaces in which to encounter others’ points of view. This shortcoming is present in the lack of public talk with citizens who have other political or ideological positions and in the participants’ own news media selection, that tends to confirm rather than contrast or challenge their own perspectives. The next section will show how engaged citizens are using other online platforms to challenge traditional media’s former hegemonic position in the public sphere by creating spaces for debate outside news media websites. Some of these spaces, such as forums or email groups, are closed, thus preventing a beneficial outcome for less engaged citizens. However, others such as social networks are open, which leads to the spread of public issues content and public debate among those less engaged citizens who in their everyday lives are not likely to receive inputs from different political or ideological positions.

8.2.3. From the public to the private sphere: creating participatory spaces outside media institutions

During the focus group sessions some of the research participants talked about a

series of online participatory practices that directly challenge traditional media's hegemony with regard to their traditional role as central actors in the public sphere. Although these practices are different in nature, all of them have in common the fact that they were started on news media websites and that later the participants moved away from these websites to perform the same practices of commenting and debating in private online spaces, contributing to the creation of small private spheres which contrast with the 'official' public one. The main reasons that led participants to these practices was in all cases that they had lost interest in continuing to participate on news media websites. Participants point to an initial strong motivation to participate in the formats provided by news websites that was afterwards lost when they realised that these websites could not fulfil their participatory needs, as the following participant explains:

"People want to participate, most like it. But some of them are discouraged because they see that they're not receiving anything from this participation. But when people see that participation is generating something that's positive, that they receive new information, then they like it. The problem is that now there are not many spaces. In newspapers participation is manipulated or comments are too aggressive. Who wants to participate there?" M68

A common practice among the research participants, especially among those that do not have an account on social networks, is to send a private email to their friends when they have seen news or any other link that interested them and they want to share it. However, one user, formerly active in commenting on news media websites, explained how he created an email list with friends and other people that were also regular news commentators. This user sends a short opinion article to the email list, almost one a day, and then the others start a debate about it, sometimes also sending opinion articles instead of short comments. In this way, they can maintain an online debate, but without being worried by uncivilised behaviour or disorganised conversations with too many participants. Another one of the research participants does something similar but, instead of using an email list, he has created a private forum also with users that used to comment on news

media websites:

“It’s small debates that work best. I have this forum with six or seven people. It was people that used to comment on a newspaper website, at the beginning, when there were fewer people there, and we ended up knowing each other, and now we’ve got our own forum. Almost all of them are retired, so we’ve got free time [laugh]. There are people that write every day, others less often. It’s good because you can write when you want. Look, one of us is living in Brazil now.” M56

As the previous participant explains, free time is a key factor for conducting these high intensity online participatory practices. However, these are also practices that require some level of connection with public issues, together with motivation to engage in these kinds of debates with other citizens. The three participants who conduct these kinds of practices are included in two different categories of public engagement that assume a certain level of connection: ‘civically involved’ and ‘dutiful citizens’. What these participants also have in common is that they do not have an account on social networks. Consequently, rather than using social networks to conduct practices of sharing and commenting, when they decided to leave news media websites they turned to the online spaces that they already knew: emails and forums. For those participants that do have an account on social networks and are active users, these online spaces might be a direct way of challenging news media’s hegemonic positions, sharing and debating public issues content, or an indirect way of receiving this kind of content that might disrupt their normally selective exposure criteria. The following paragraphs will analyse participants’ use and understanding of social networks, together with the different practices that, directly or indirectly, might be challenging the former position of traditional media institutions as the hegemonic actors of the media and the public sphere.

8.2.3.1. Sharing and debating political content: social media as citizens' participatory spaces

If Internet use was previously understood as a different set of practices that have in common that they are manifested online, a similar consideration can be made of practices related to social networks. Instead of creating new practices, social networks have changed the way in which citizens perform pre-existing practices, such as contacting friends, or receiving and sharing information (including, of course, news media) (Couldry, 2012). Different social networks are designed to fulfil different aims. Some of them are focused on a specific area. (Instagram, for example, is aimed at sharing pictures, while LinkedIn is intended to be used mainly for professional purposes). However, in the research participants' discourses the social networks most frequently mentioned are general ones, not aimed at one specific use or objective: firstly Facebook and secondly Twitter. These social networks are the online spaces where the research participants perform diverse practices: contact friends, get news, update their status and share pictures, comment on others' publications and even receive information from other contacts.

This diversity of practices is reflected in the participants' conversations. For example, when asked about how they use the Internet, some participants in the youngest sector (younger than 35) talk about social networks as their main practice performed using the Internet. Social networks, then, are understood as one of the main important factors of these users' Internet experience.

- "You can use it for everything, like Facebook or Twitter. I use them for work, but also to be informed or to contact friends." M24

- "When I have the Internet, I use it to be in touch with friends on Facebook, but also for gossip [laugh]. I like to know what my contacts are doing. I don't usually check news media directly, but I receive news from my Facebook timeline, and then I click it if I am interested, so also for news, but yes, mainly for gossip [laugh]." F25

- “ I’m addicted to Facebook, but using the phone. Sometimes I also check some news. I never buy the newspaper, but I do read it online. I also follow Facebook links and also Twitter, but less, not every day.” F27
- “I also check Facebook quite often, but just for a little while, five minutes. I access, check the timeline and then, well, I go to other websites that interest me more. I’m never on there for a long time.” M25
- “It’s my Bermuda Triangle [laugh]. Gmail, Facebook, Twitter, I can be on there for hours, and then if I start with YouTube [laugh].” M24

Another example of how social networks are embedded in citizens’ everyday lives are these two dialogues in which participants, by answering the question about how they participate in their communities, directly introduce their use of social media:

- “Me, for example, I do it on social media, when something that I’ve seen... I share it because I want my friends to know about it, not just commenting on it, also just to let them know.” F29
- “Yes, it’s because there are some times that you really think you must do it, that you want people to know.” F31

- “And I also participate on social networks, because there are times that I see something and I want to share it, on Facebook or Twitter, and it’s like, if it’s more direct, your friends are going to receive it.” F27
- “Yes, and sometimes it gets bigger, like this issue about the two lesbian girls that were fired. People started to share and then the media took it up.” M25

In this case, social media are understood as a tool for political participation. The practice of sharing news or links about public issues, then, is understood as another practice linked with the concept of ‘participating in your community’, this ‘community’ being the group of friends and contacts on the social network and the act of ‘participation’ the selection of the news or a link that is going to be shared. The motivation to share it is to let people know about something that happened that attracted the attention of the participant, and caused them to feel

a strong (positive or negative) emotion. This point will be returned to later and the practice of sharing and commenting on links or news stories about public issues on social networks will be analysed in more depth. However, at this point it is important to point out that, although a large number of the participants have an account and are active on social networks, there is also a large number of the research participants that have no interest in these online sites. Generally, the research participants in the older focus groups (more than 60 years old) tend to show less interest, or even more aggressive opinions, towards social networks. This discourse is also connected with some distrust of these online sites, and concerns about how the younger generation are using them:

- "I have an account on Facebook because I wanted to install a programme and it required an account with them. I've never used it. I have no need of it, being connected to a social network. I have no interest in that. I try to avoid it." M63

- "It could even be dangerous." F72

- "Yes, I see it with my sons. There's a lot of crap on there, anonymous stuff. I don't like them going on there." F76

- "Impunity." M60

- "Anything that's anonymous, I don't like it. I think people should have a face online." F76

- "Well, but there is no anonymity. You have your name and picture." M63

- "Well, you can put whatever you want." M60

- "Yes, sure." JS63

- "Or put a different name, I don't like it." F76

- "For me these things have arrived too late, I am too old to get involved with that." F61

- "Me neither. I am not interested in knowing what others are doing. I don't need to know what my friends are doing or to call them." F59

- "It's got positive and negative things. I see how my daughter uses Facebook. All day long she's exposed to others' opinions about what she's doing, whether she's beautiful. It's too hard for a teenager." F54

- "That's true, perhaps too dangerous, especially for teenagers." F61

However, among those research participants that are not interested in the new opportunities to communicate with friends that social media offer (11 of the 37 focus group participants do not have an account on any social network, and six that have an account are not active users), there are some who join social networks for professional reasons. Some of them use LinkedIn as a way to be in touch with other professionals, and some others use Facebook. In those cases, what they want to do is to promote their business or professional associations to ordinary citizens:

"I use LinkedIn, and I have to say that it's very useful. I would never be on a social network like Facebook, but I am interested in LinkedIn. I don't like to show my personal life, but I just see positive things in showing and getting in touch at a professional level. I've made contact again with people that I worked with 20 years ago. This is good. I can be in touch with them now."
F54

- "Facebook is too much for me. I opened an account once but I never used it. I don't like to show my life, to contact friends, to send pictures. I have WhatsApp." M58

- "I use it at a professional level. I put pictures of my company on Facebook, the things I'm doing, my shop, very useful. I create a network of contacts, people that are interested. F57

- "It's true, on a professional level it's good." M58

- "I have a profile there, of the company, and also my own that I had to create to open the company one. With my professional association we communicate through Facebook, in the chat group. Sometimes it's a mess but it's OK. Everyone can go on the site and change things there. But with friends, I have the cell phone, I have email, I don't need it." F57

- "Yes, there are too many things now." M65

Table 8.1 (next page) shows participants' level of activity on social networks (see

below). Out of a total of 37 participants, 26 have an account on social networks. Those that have an account also tend to be active, publishing weekly (20 of 26). Participants also show a high level of activity with regard to sharing links about public issues (a practice also known as ‘social curating’). In total 22 of the research participants said they had shared links about public issues, and 20 of them shared news media links on social networks. These data reflect a high level of activity on social networks, with regard to sharing links related to public issues that interest the research participants.

Table 8.1. Social Networks

Do not have an account	11
Have an account	26
Active (publish weekly)	20
Follow a news media account	17
Share news media links	22
Share links about public issues	22
Total number of participants	37

Even if they do not represent the whole picture, the participants under 35 years old (16 participants) are the majority among the social media users. All of them have an account on at least one social network and are also active users. Some participants older than 35 have also an account (10 participants), but among this group half of them are in fact not accessing or actively using their accounts. Among those that use social networks, all of them confirmed that they have regularly seen links about public issues shared by their contacts. This trend confirms some previous theories that pointed out how incidental exposure might be higher in online environments (Anduiza et al., 2009), facilitating access to information that challenges users’ own political positions and values. Political segregation and news selection will, then, be lower in the online environment rather than in the analogical world (Gentzkow & Saphiro, 2010). Discourses about finding political information or links to public issues on social networks (mainly Facebook) were common during the focus groups, as the following conversation in a focus group session exemplifies:

-
- "I'm active on Facebook, I comment and I share things, and I've also found a lot of interesting things there, links, information. The problem is, if you have like 100 or more contacts, then it's impossible to know what everyone's saying. But on Facebook it is different than on news. I've had interesting debates on Facebook, talking about politics or what is going on." M32
 - "Yes, in my contacts I've got people that support almost every party, so I too have interesting debates there. I really enjoy it." M23
 - "It's because on Facebook no one is anonymous." M32
 - "Sure, I know exactly who is who, so people are not going to blame each other." M23

Through their daily use of social networks, research participants are in touch with links about public issues that could provide a different point of view or perspective from their own values and political positions, contributing to a key element in democracy: understanding, or being in touch with, others' points of view and positions. Consequently, social media might become a suitable space where citizens can, easily, enter into contact with values and political positions that they do not encounter in their daily lives, contributing to overcoming some of the shortcomings of the public sphere previously analysed. Normally, this characteristic of social networks will be especially important for those citizens with lower levels of public engagement, those that are less participative in their communities and less attentive to news media. In this case, social media will act as a different way to 'force' disengaged citizens to be in touch with public issues content.

Consequently, it is important to confirm whether during their social network experience participants receive inputs (links or other kind of shared information) that contest their own values or political positions, and to what extent these inputs prompt them to start online debates that contribute to their engagement with 'the political'. The research participants' discourses about their social media experience tend to confirm this theory. Most of them have seen content on social networks that have contested their own previous values or political positions, even if at different intensities and always depending on the number or kind of contacts

they have. However, the general discourse is that social networks are an online space where ‘the others’ can be found, as the next extracts suggest:

“Well, maybe it’s because of my personality, or ideas. Most of my contacts tend to follow general kinds of opinions, but sometimes I do see others’ points of view. I even have one contact that was a supporter of the Popular Party [Spanish nationalist and right-wing party] that was too much and too different from all my other contacts. In fact, we share a lot of friends on Facebook. I don’t know, before he used to comment and debate a lot, but recently he’s disappeared, perhaps he’s blocked me or something like that [laugh].” M33

“It depends on the context. I have three friends that are very provocative, sharing things that are very controversial and always generating debate on Facebook. I think they like it [laugh]. I have friends that just put some status update or a picture sometimes, but others, they really like to post about public issues and create debate, sure [laugh].” F31

The last quotation also indicates another characteristic of social networks. That is, how easily the research participants see, and participate in, the debates that spontaneously may appear when some contact posts a link about public issues. Generally speaking, these debates on social networks (mainly on Facebook, which is the social network that the research participants always talked about when considering online debates) are perceived in a positive way. In contrast to debates on news media websites, which were associated with negative discourses, debates on social networks tended to be associated with positive discourses. The next quotation exemplifies this common perception:

“I like it when people comment on my comments or I debate on Facebook. It’s like people sharing their views and you always learn something new, it’s good. I like to know how others think. But always with respect, of course, nice debates, not people blaming each other.” F23

Participants point to the fact that their contacts on Facebook are friends, relatives

or acquaintances, which contributes to maintaining good behaviour and ensures civilised comments and debates. Some other participants, although they read the discussions if these interest them, do not join the debates. However, this is due to a general preference for not joining online debates rather than due to a negative opinion of the format or the way in which debates are performed on social networks:

- "I don't very often participate in debates. I see these debates frequently, not every day but perhaps weekly. Sometimes I participate, but I generally do so with an ironic comment rather than a strong opinion." M33
- "Me neither. I don't comment frequently, I don't like to show my ideas online." F28

As results in former Table 8.1 show, social curating is an extended practice among research participants: 59% of research participants share links or other material connected with public issues. Even if the nature of this shared material can be diverse, a great part of it is in fact links to news media content. Twenty of the 37 research participants shared news media content, a similar number to the total number of users that share public issues links (22). Moreover, in participants' discourses, when talking about sharing links on social networks, the common subject is news media links, even if these are not the only material connected with public issues that the participants share online.

When considering its effects, it is important to point out how 'social curation' might be directly affecting the current structures in which information flows, consequently challenging the existing hegemonies within the media sphere. A news story that was occupying a secondary position on a news media website could be resented by social media users, giving it relevance and a repercussion that it would never have had without being spread through social networks. As previously mentioned, Singer (2013) argues that users now have the potential to be "secondary gatekeepers" of media content, contesting one of the traditional roles of professional journalists. According to Singer, social networks will be just one (but probably the most important) of the different ways in which citizens can

spread content into the public sphere.

The motivations that prompt the participants to share material among their contacts on social networks are very diverse. However, a common trend among the participants' discourses is the need to inform or to denounce something. Through social media, or other sources of information, participants have received some new information that shocked them and made them feel that their friends and contacts needed to know about it. When sharing, most of the participants do not aim to start an online debate, although they expect some kind of 'social approval' of their material, in the form of a 'like', a comment or mention or a 'retweet'. These kinds of 'social curating' practices caused as a reaction to something that especially shocked participants, connected with an emotional reaction, is widespread among participants with different levels of public engagement, as the following conversations in different young focus group sessions show:

- "I share something when I think it's interesting, to support it and spread it."

F25

- "Yes, me too" F27

- "Yes, it's like wanting to get something to more people. Maybe you read it or saw it and then you believe that this should receive more attention." M24

- "To make more people know about it." F25

- "I don't really do it a lot. I share more funny things, like dogs [laugh], but news, sometimes, but not every week really." M25

- "Sometimes I don't receive feedback. It's disappointing [laugh]." F25

- "I do receive comments, maybe because I have contacts from most of the political positions, from right-wing to left-wing. I have even sometimes stopped following my own publication because some people started a debate there that in the end started to annoy me." F24

- "I share something when I think it's interesting or important." F31

- "Sometimes when it's a news item that shocked you, or because it's something close to you I link it, to do something about it." F28

- "Yes, like posting it and then putting your opinion about it." M29

It is perhaps among the most engaged participants that these actions are the most planned, obeying less an emotional reaction and more a willingness to start a debate among a group of friends or contacts. In these cases, participants show their interest by selecting the people who will receive the link about public issues, as the following quotations reflect:

“I do that. On Facebook. I have my normal account and then I personalise by groups of people. When it’s something more personal or private I select so that just my friends can see it. When I want everyone to know, I make it public. It’s normally about politics when I publish for everyone, yes. Then some people participate and some don’t, but almost always I have a debate, it’s nice.” F61

“I do it at a professional level, on LinkedIn. I have this group of people that work in my field, around 60 people I think. And I post to the group links to news that are relevant for us, about work but also general issues. Then people can read it and even comment inside the group. It’s very good, really, good feedback.” M56

This section has analysed different practices through which research participants are challenging, directly or indirectly, the existing hegemonies present in the media and the public sphere. Moreover, some of these practices might have the potential to partially overcome some of the identified shortcomings of the public sphere. By creating online spaces where they can gather online and discuss and share public issues content, citizens show how traditional media could still be important as a source of news, but their websites are not necessary for citizens to gather online. Instead of an online reflection of the physical spaces aimed at debate and opinion exchange existing within the offline public sphere, news media websites do not attract most of the research participants that are looking to conduct these kinds of public talk practices, not even those who are more engaged and who presumably could be more interested in doing so.

Instead, the engaged research participants interested in online participation prefer to create new spaces for debate, or to use existing ones, such as social networks, to engage in public talk. Furthermore, social networks also have indirect effects on the existing hegemonies within the public and media spheres. These everyday online spaces seem to attract young research participants who see them as an effective participatory space: even those less engaged have shared and commented on public issues links, contributing to challenging the hegemonic position of news media in the dissemination of public issues content and their central position in the public sphere.

However, the hegemonic power position of traditional news media in all the processes related to the news cycle is not yet under question. Although some of the developments and associated practices originating within the new media environment seem to point to a transformation of the existing hegemonies, others point to a continuity of the previous power positions. The following sections will analyse, firstly, online media participatory practices linked with content creation and secondly, practices connected to news selection and personalization. As has been seen in the London focus groups, these practices do not attract the research participants at the same level as practices related to interaction and dissemination. As a consequence, some of the power positions that traditional news media still hold might not be under challenge in this actual phase of development of the new media environment.

8.2.4. Higher participatory intensities? News' production as an uncontested hegemony

Commenting on news media content or sharing it through online environments such as social networks or others such as email or forums, are not the only ways in which citizens can participate with news content. Some years ago the concept of 'citizen journalism' appeared, and it quickly became a buzzword. Authors such as Rosen (2006) argued that, using new communication technologies, citizens could easily produce and share contents, without interacting with media and journalists,

who have lost control of the audience and the gatekeeping role, which had been monopolised by professional journalists during the last centuries (Singer, 2005; Lowrey & Anderson, 2005). Moreover, some authors had already pointed out that the new scenario would force an entire rethink of the profession of journalism (Deuze, 2006) and this concept of 'citizen journalism' (Gilmor, 2004) seemed to be the future in a scenario where traditional media were facing a double crisis: a crisis of reputation and a crisis of business models. Aware of this shift in the traditional hierarchy of roles, media institutions were forced to adopt the new paradigm in their newsrooms (Singer et al., 2011; Bruns, 2005), even if in most media institutions the motivations were more economic rather than aimed at audience empowerment (Rosenstiel & Michell, 2011).

News media websites are adopting a wide variety of participatory tools in their websites, what Carpentier (2011) calls "participation in the media". However, in most cases marketing discourse has appropriated this participatory culture transforming it into a commercialised narrative aimed at enhancing participatory practices that are denaturalised, that are not truly participation: one of the actors keeps all the power without sharing it with the other actors involved in the process (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). Consequently, it can be argued that users' production of original content takes place in the context of a user-user or user-professional relationship, the purpose of which is for the user to contribute with original content, therefore published on media websites (called 'user generated content') or in their own online spaces or community or independent media (citizen journalism). Wunsch-Vincent and Vickery propose three essential characteristics that content must possess in order to classify it as this kind of participation: publication, creative effort and creation outside professional routines and practices (Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery, 2007). Sending their own original stories, images or videos to media websites (assuming that this content could be edited but without losing its initial meaning and purpose) and creating their own websites or blogs, or contributing to citizen online media, are some examples of citizen participation in the media environment. In this section participants' discourses towards these online media participatory practices will be presented.

Professional journalists have for a long time been the hegemonic actors in the news production process, before some evolution within the news media environment started to contest their hegemony, in favour of non-professional or amateur citizens. There is, however, a widespread discourse among research participants that maintains that journalism is still a job for professionals and that this hierarchy or hegemony should persist in the future. All the focus groups made a clear distinction between professional and amateur sources of information. It was only in the focus group sessions that were formed of the youngest participants that the most positive discourses towards 'citizen journalism' were to be found, discourses that tend to outline the benefits that this kind of reporting could have, especially with regard to the new voices that it could represent:

- "I think it's good that non-professionals are also reporting news and posting their opinions, but you always need to read it remembering that the author is an amateur." F25
- "Yes, the point is knowing that the person who is writing is not a professional and is doing it strongly influenced by his opinion, very subjective, but it's good. It's a way to give a voice to issues that otherwise would not appear." M24
- "And maybe they are better than a professional journalist, perhaps I can even trust them more." F25
- "Perhaps, but these people are always very focused on one single issue. Maybe they are independent but also very biased." M25

These participants welcomed amateur journalists reporting news, hoping that this will bring into the public sphere some issues that they believe are disregarded by traditional news media. However, this first positive opinion does not imply that amateur journalists are considered more trustworthy than professional ones. Rather, most focus group participants were sceptical about non-professionals reporting, reproducing discourses of distrust similar to the ones towards traditional news media institutions. However, discourses of distrust are not the only ones associated with 'citizen journalism'. There is also a common understanding that considers amateurs or non-professional journalists as suffering

from a lack of expertise that is not commonly associated with professionals. Professionalism is commonly associated with expertise and accountability: knowing who is publishing or signing the news stories or opinion articles gives confidence to the research participants. As in news comments, anonymity is considered as a negative condition, having a bad effect on the authors' credibility and news content quality. 'Citizen journalism' is perceived as not trustworthy because these platforms do not have a 'brand' that could support their credibility and expertise. The following quotations from engaged participants show how they do not consider 'citizen journalism' as a possible relevant source for news, even if characteristically they actively check several different news sources in order to be informed about public issues from different perspectives:

- "No, I don't read these things. If it doesn't have some control or filter, if everyone can write on there, it doesn't have any interest for me. I value my time. There are only 24 hours in a day." M63
- "I agree, if an amateur wants to write like a professional journalist, first they need to earn my trust. Just because they say they are independent am I supposed to trust them more than a professional? That's nonsense!" M60
- "I don't do it. It's biased. These people that send videos, or blogs - journalists should pay more attention to this kind of information. I still trust a professional journalist more than an amateur one." F61
- "I agree, the amateur doesn't have any kind of accountability. The professional has some limits, must answer to their information. Who is filtering the amateur? Who responds for the content? Are they objective? You don't know." F59
- "When I read the news I want to read people who know about the subject. Information is not like art, where you can be a genius. I want journalists that know about what they are reporting, experts. Citizen journalism looks like everyone can have an opinion about everything." F61

As the previous quotations reflect, some discourses point to the absolute lack of control that represents publishing on the Internet. 'Citizen journalist' is linked by

some participants to an ‘amateur’ culture in which everyone can have their say, without giving any value to expertise or knowledge. This discourse is present even among the young participants, who understand the problems of a medium where everyone can publish, although they also appreciate it, as it could bring new voices into the public sphere. In the end, they recognise that it is a problem that everyone has to solve for themselves, discerning what has quality from what has not, or demanding ‘citizen journalism’ platforms to compare who is publishing and at what level of expertise. As the following quotation reflects, non-professionalism is connected with lack of quality when there is no control over who publishes:

“I know that now everyone is a blogger, writing about anything, and pretending to be experts, we have bloggers everywhere, without any professional control, nothing. This should be controlled, limited, just the experts should write about some issues.” F32

On the other hand, a few of the research participants do conduct some practices of content creation associated with public issues. Among them, the most common is to have their own blog. What is interesting to point out is that none of them establish a discourse in which they consider themselves as a ‘citizen journalist’. Even if they post about public issues, they do not consider that their posts are aimed at producing journalistic content: all of them consider they are just publishing their own opinions and do not believe they must adapt their publications to criteria such as objectivity or based on trustworthy sources. Furthermore, there is no discourse of contest or challenge to the hegemony of journalists among research participants that publish blogs. Their practice of writing the blog is considered mainly in terms of entertainment, because they like to write and show their opinions, rather than being aimed at influencing an audience or as a conscious decision to compete with journalists with their own stories, as the following extracts from the focus groups show:

“I have a blog hosted now on a local online news medium. At the beginning I had my own blog. I was posting my point of view about local issues, also about politics, just because I like to write and show my point of view. They

contacted me and asked me if I wanted to have the blog on their website and I said, 'Yes' as I thought it was a way to spread my message more. I don't have very much feedback from the comments there, but I get it when they post the link on their sites on Facebook or Twitter." M24

"I've got a blog now. I write for a cultural magazine once a week. I have some interest in these issues so I decided to open a blog about it. It's mainly about theatre, in fact." M33

As can be seen, 'citizen journalism' is not considered by the participants as a new kind of journalism that can revitalise traditional media, even less replace it in the near future. Moreover, the two participants previously quoted started independent blogs that ended up forming part of an online news medium. Some research participants also value the chance to read these publications, inside news media sites or in independent blogs, but do not consider them in any way 'better' than traditional journalism. The same reticence is shown with regard to user-generated content. Reproduced here is the same discourse about the necessity of controlling this material before it is accepted and published by the media.

"I think we need to be cautious here, because what people are sending to the media is just a little part of the whole picture, because now, for example, with this video of the policemen punching this man - OK, that looks very aggressive, it's easy to blame them for that, but how did it start? I haven't seen any video showing what happened before. It's dangerous because journalists should be more careful with this kind of material. For me, it doesn't have more credibility just because it's from a citizen. I distrust it in the same way I distrust a journalist." M63

However, most citizens also recognise the value of being able to send material to news websites in order to denounce some situations that directly affect them, such as problems with the bus timetable, rubbish collecting issues, a road in a bad condition, for example. In some cases, as in the quotation below, denouncing the situation on media websites, by sending a picture for example, is seen as possibly

more effective than going to political representatives or local institutions. In these cases, citizens show a higher consideration for their own agency if they complain through news media, rather than if they go through the channels provided by representatives of political institutions, as the following conversation shows:

- "I think that if you send it to a newspaper and it gets published it would be more effective than writing to the local council." F28
- "Yes, I agree. I wanted to complain about the bus time table so I wrote a letter to the local council - no answer. Then I wrote to the local newspaper with a picture and they published it and the day after that they published the answer from the local council. I really didn't know whether to be happy or angry." M29

Another practice included under the label of 'participatory journalism' is what is known as 'letters to the editor'. Before the existence of the Internet these were sent by ordinary mail and a selection of them published in the printed newspaper. With the advent of the Internet, although the section in the printed version was not abandoned, most of the newspapers created a specific section on their websites for the publication of these readers' letters. Some media websites allow users' comments on these letters, creating a new participatory space, and some others do not. Most of the focus group participants have never performed this practice. However, among those that have, a high level of repetition exists over time. The discourses of these frequent users point to a keen interest in writing and also to high levels of connection with media and public issues, most of them having high levels of public engagement ('civically engaged' and 'dutiful citizens') and participating actively in their communities. The motivations to perform this practice are, firstly, a personal interest in writing. Participants value their writing skills and understand that writing a letter to the editor is very different from writing a comment on a news story, in terms of the knowledge required and the effort needed. Secondly, as the participants that perform this practice are connected and active in their communities, letters to the editor are normally used as tools to denounce a situation that has shocked them or with which they strongly disagree. The following quotations show the opinions of two frequent

writers of letters to the editor:

“In my case, it’s when I see a news article that outrages me, that’s when I decide to write a letter about it. It’s always about politics or the economic situation, also when I see something. I’m retired now and I’ve joined several NGO’s so I’m in contact with people that are really suffering. Normally most of my letters are published.” F64

“I mainly write about corruption, it’s what angers me most. And it works. I always receive a lot of feedback from other readers, from friends.” M56

To sum up, apart from these few last exceptions, the research participants do not generally perform practices of content creation. It has been seen how, although the research participants do not generally use traditional news media websites for comment or debate, there are other online spaces that are, in fact, attracting their attention. Otherwise, content production related to public affairs is not performed by most of the participants, either on news media websites or in other online environments such as citizen journalism platforms or their own spaces for publication, such as blogs. Hence, it can be concluded that these practices do not generally interest the research participants, rather than concluding that there is a problem of inconvenient formats on news media websites. Neither do most of the participants have the motivation to publish content about public issues.

Furthermore, participants’ discourses generally tend to differentiate between the material produced by professional journalists and that produced by amateurs, establishing a clear taken for granted understanding that journalists are the actors in charge of publishing news content. What can be seen is a strong differentiation between professionals and amateurs, regarding news production: alternative voices are valued but not considered per se as unbiased, trustworthy or more representative of citizens’ perspectives. The journalist is still considered as the main actor in news production processes, as well as journalism being commonly understood as a profession that should be valued and respected, according to the central position and function in society that research participants attribute to this

profession. Consequently, on those occasions when the research participants perform practices of content creation connected to public issues, they are not doing so with a conscious motivation to challenge existing hegemonies or compete with professionals. Rather, the few participants that perform these practices understand them as a complement to traditional news rather than a potential substitute. Accordingly, they have no problem in performing these practices within the context of a traditional news website as participants' discourses are more about cooperation rather than competition.

However, there is also a general positive discourse related to practices of content creation of low intensity, which require less time and effort. Rather than publishing periodically, participants seem to value having the possibility to contribute sporadically with original content on news media websites. This content is normally linked to special circumstances or is about an issue that has particularly upset or affected the participants. It also takes the form of a short piece of writing (letters to the editor) or a picture in which the particular situation is shown (rubbish collection problems, for example). In these cases that involve publication on a news media website, participants value the possibility that by publishing it, the case could attract attention, forcing public powers to intervene. Consequently, the participants show how news media websites, thanks to their relevance and high number of visitors, might be used as a form of agency, 'forcing' public powers to intervene in situations that in normal circumstances would not merit their response to citizens' demands. Such a role as 'drivers' of agency is not recognised in other alternative media, due to their normally lower number of visitors and relevance to society.

To conclude, this section has shown how journalists and traditional media institutions still hold the main position in news production processes. The Catalan participants' higher participatory energies are not aimed at contesting these hegemonies as news producers. Rather, they prefer to conduct online other kinds of practices, such as commenting and debating, and in those cases where citizens show motivation to produce content, this production is not aimed at contesting the existing power positions of journalists and traditional media. The next section will

analyse another uncontested hegemony within the media sphere: news selection and personalization.

8.2.5. Primary or secondary gatekeepers? News selection as an uncontested hegemony.

Together with content production, interaction and dissemination, news selection and content personalization are the other two practices that could potentially be highly modified in the new media environment. The metaphor of the 'Daily Me' (Thurman, 2011), a personalised online newspaper composed of news items about a series of topics predetermined by each citizen, is technologically possible, but not yet socially adopted. As will be seen in this section, the research participants still consider news media selection of the 'issues of the day' to be one of the main roles of journalists and media institutions in society. Consequently, the central position of traditional media institutions as the main actors in the primary gatekeeping or news selection process is nowadays uncontested.

As seen in the first sections of this chapter, concerning the participants' public and media engagement, traditional media institutions are generally perceived as partisan and biased. However, the research participants who know exactly the different political positions supported by the media they consume, generally accept this situation, choosing the news media that best suit their political or ideological positions. Most engaged citizens, in order to overcome news media bias, tend to consult a larger number of different news outlets to complement their main sources of information, which enables them to perceive different 'realities' or approaches to current affairs issues. To make it easier to check the news in different media, some of these engaged participants use 'soft' systems of personalization, online tools such as following news media on social networks, taking out subscriptions to newsletters or using customizable personal web portals such as iGoogle, to be able to check the headings of the different content published by the media they want to follow.

Among these 'soft' systems of personalization, newsletters are the tools that are most commonly adopted by the research participants. As the following research participants argue, newsletters are a quick and easy way to know what different media have published:

"Yes, I did that. When I registered with the *New York Times* or *Il Corriere* they asked me if I wanted to receive newsletters, then they ask you which content you want to receive, which sections of the newspaper. I chose the ones I am more interested in. I think it's OK for them to send you an email and you can then check if they have published anything interesting. It's very useful because I like to check different media so going to each website everyday takes too much time." M63

"Well, I prefer to read the newspaper, the printed version, but on my iPad I like to read different newsletters, *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *Ara*. It's good to know what they have published." M58

Other participants prefer to perform similar processes of news selection but using other online tools, such as social networks or iGoogle:

"Before I had this thing, iGoogle, now they have changed it, I don't know why. I am trying to adapt to the new one now. It was so useful because in five minutes I could make a quick review of all the news media I was following and what they had published. I like it because it's quick and I can personalise it according to my preferences." F54

"I do something similar using Facebook, It's like my personal assistant who prepares a press summary [laugh]. All news media have spaces on Facebook and they publish their news there, so I follow the news media I like and each time I open Facebook I can make a quick review of what's going on. From there I can see if I like some news, click on it and go to the news media website. You know, I hardly ever post personal things on Facebook, and I have just a few contacts so I use it mainly for this." M61

The previously mentioned different kinds of 'soft' content selection and personalization are based on news media's selection of what is newsworthy and what is not. Furthermore, except for newsletters, where users can choose the kind of content or section (sports, culture, politics, etc.) that they want to receive news about, the other tools are completely dependent on news media's criterion of news selection. The participants do not normally consider these 'soft' forms as dangerous to their ability to be informed. Moreover, they think that these options are good and positive, reinforcing their selective exposure (Prior, 2007) to public affairs content.

However, this opinion changes when the participants are asked if they would change the news media homepage to adapt it to their news preferences, which represents a new step towards personalization, because it could avoid being exposed to non-desired news ('hard' personalization). In this case, most participants disagree with this possibility, with a discourse that tends to support the news media's hegemony in selecting what should be newsworthy and what should not. The common understanding is that news media make a selection of the issues of the day and that it is good and beneficial to be exposed to this selection, rather than an individual one, as it is more representative of what is happening in society rather than of the participants' own interests. The following extracts from focus group sessions show this widespread discourse among all the research participants that supports news media hegemony in news selection:

"I wouldn't do that. I like to be able to see everything, all news articles, and then choose which ones I want to read. In this way you can sometimes find things that you didn't expect." M25

- "No, I don't like this personalization. I like to look for things in the newspaper. I normally read the printed press but also online, and I like to quickly check all the news they have." F66

- "Yes, I always prefer to read the newspaper. We're from the paper generation, reading online is so tiring. I spend a lot of time in front of the

screen at work and I don't want to spend more time in front of it once I've finished." F54

- "I don't want to do that. I like to access the page of the newspaper and look at the things I'm more interested in, but I also like to be surprised." F25

- "Me neither, I don't like that." F32

The participants' discourses tend to disagree even more in cases of implicit personalization, that is, when a website adapts its content according to a user's previous activity on the site. Regarding the application of these kinds of personalization options to news media, the research participants tend to consider it in an extremely negative way, as it is commonly understood that it implies changing the role that news media has traditionally had in news selection, as well as users' ability to freely navigate through the site looking for the content they desire, but at the same time being exposed to other kinds of news. The following conversation between two engaged participants reflects this common belief among the research participants:

- "I completely disagree with that because I like to choose what I read. If I want to look for news then I go to the *Guardian* or to *La Vanguardia*, and I have a look at what they're saying. If I want to read about the economy I go to other websites, but I don't like the fact that they control what I want to see. I'm going to choose it by myself." M56

- "I agree, I like to choose by myself, not have someone controlling what I read." F64

- "I am scared of these kinds of things - if they know too much information about you." M56a

- "But perhaps it's good, isn't it? I mean, if they can easily give you what you want then you save time, if you check different media." M56b

- "Yes, but in the end I'm actually doing it by myself, one day I buy *La Vanguardia*, the next one *El Periódico*. I can choose what I want, I don't need that. I prefer to choose my contents rather than have someone else do this." M56a

To sum up, the research participants are generally against options of 'hard' personalization if these imply modifying the normal or traditional way in which news media gather, select and present information. There is an extended common understanding about the central position of traditional media as the main actors in this process, together with a common perception among the research participants that it is good and beneficial to be in touch with the majority of issues presented on a news website or printed in a newspaper. Although the research participants have high levels of distrust of traditional media institutions, understanding that their coverage is frequently biased and based on political and ideological positions, this distrust does not extend to the news selection and the gatekeeping role of news media, which is not generally in question.

Although the research participants do not broadly adopt options of personalization, as far as 'soft' and 'hard' options are concerned, they show a clear preference for the former rather than the latter. 'Soft' personalization is commonly perceived as helpful in the process of news gathering, especially for those more engaged participants who tend to check a large number of news outlets. Furthermore, 'soft' personalization is not perceived as damaging the hegemony of media institutions as gatekeepers of current affairs information, as it is based on the content selection made by news media institutions rather than being based on users' preferences. Conversely, 'hard' personalization is commonly understood as prejudicial as it may affect the correct exposure to the 'issues of the day'. Engaged participants are not directly interested in these options, because they affect the editorial line of the news media. Less engaged participants, the ones that may be more affected by selective exposure, do not seem to be interested in these personalization options either. It seems that in a high-choice media environment, rather than personalizing news media websites, participants prefer to choose the news media that they consume, trusting that the choices of content they make will adequately satisfy their needs, rather than personalizing the content accordingly. Consequently, research participants prefer not to act as primary gatekeepers, trusting news media to perform this role. However, they do value the chance to apply tools that facilitate the news gathering process, or, as has been seen previously, to act as secondary gatekeepers, sharing and disseminating news and

public issues links among their friends and contacts, using different tools provided by the new media environment.

8.2.6. Online media participatory practices and Public Engagement

The first section of this chapter presented participants' discourses towards issues of public engagement and participation in the offline world. Results pointed to an active and vivid public sphere in which most research participants were attentive and connected to public issues, with an important number of them participating, although at different intensities, in practices related to public issues. Two contextual factors have been found that contribute to this vivid public sphere: the economic crisis and its effects and the national issue. Results also showed a strong and widespread feeling of distrust towards traditional institutions, as well as an important belief in lack of agency and opportunities to influence decision-making processes. Furthermore, although the Catalan public sphere is a vivid one, it suffers similar shortcomings to the London one. Apart from the aforementioned widespread distrust of traditional institutions, the Catalan participants also suffered from a lack of spaces in which to encounter opinions and political views, a situation particularly intensified among those participants with lower levels of public engagement.

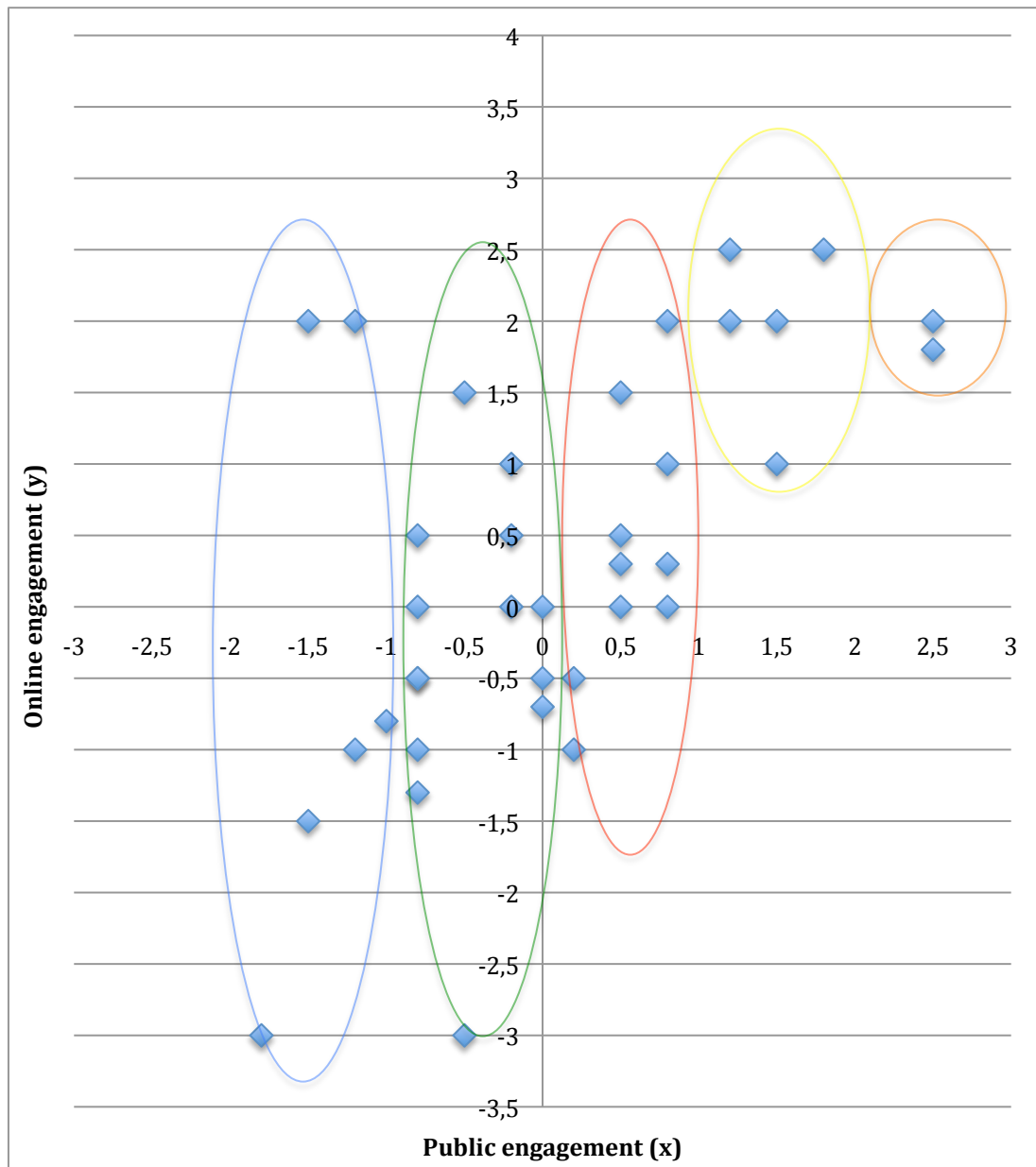
After the study of the participants' public engagement, the results related to online media participatory practices were presented. The aim of this section was to better understand how the participants perceive online participation, and how online practices linked with news media websites were accommodating the intensities of participation perceived in the previous chapter on public engagement. It has been seen that, although news media institutions still hold some of their traditional hegemonies (news selection and news production), reshaping them in the new media environment, this is not the case for their former central position in the public sphere with regard to debate and exchange of opinion. Rather than taking advantage of the changes offered by new communication technologies to establish their websites as central forums for debate, the spaces provided for this aim by

news media websites do not generally seem to attract the research participants. Focus group results pointed to a generally active online participation, although not always related to participatory practices connected to news media websites. Other spaces, such as social networks, are perceived as more suitable for conducting an everyday participation connected with public issues and current affairs.

This section will analyse the connections between online and offline participation. The aim is to better understand if there are some patterns that can be identified in the kind of citizens that are turning to the online world to channel their participatory energies within a vivid Catalan public sphere. In order to do so, this section will quantify some of the behavioural patterns identified during the focus group sessions, in a similar way to that which was done in the first section of this chapter, when research participants were classified within the different categories of public engagement.

Figure 8.3 (see next page), shows the relationship between the participants' levels of public engagement and their levels of 'online engagement', that represents how each participant understands their online activity. The levels of online engagement have been formed using the following categories, based on participants' responses during the focus groups sessions and the questionnaire distributed beforehand:

- +4 – Internet perceived as a space for original content production
- +3 – Internet understood as space for political participation or campaigning
- +2 – Internet as a space for interaction, debate and exchange of opinions
- +1 – Internet as a primary source for news about public issues
- 0 – Internet as a secondary source for news about public issues
- 1 – Internet as a source for practical information (daily-life or job-related)
- 2 – Internet as a source for entertainment
- 3 – Internet perceived as non-interesting
- 4 – Anti-Internet discourses

Figure 8.3. Public and online engagement in Barcelona participants

Note: The circles group the participants according to their levels of public engagement. Red: dutiful citizens, Yellow: actualizing citizens, Orange: legal activist, Green: civically involved, Blue: attentive.

As can be seen in Figure 8.3, there is no absolute relationship between the levels of public and online engagement. It seems that high levels of public engagement tend to imply high levels of online engagement, although low levels of public engagement do not always directly imply low levels of online engagement. Results for the positive values of public engagement (that is, those more engaged citizens) tend to show a more participative understanding of the Internet among those

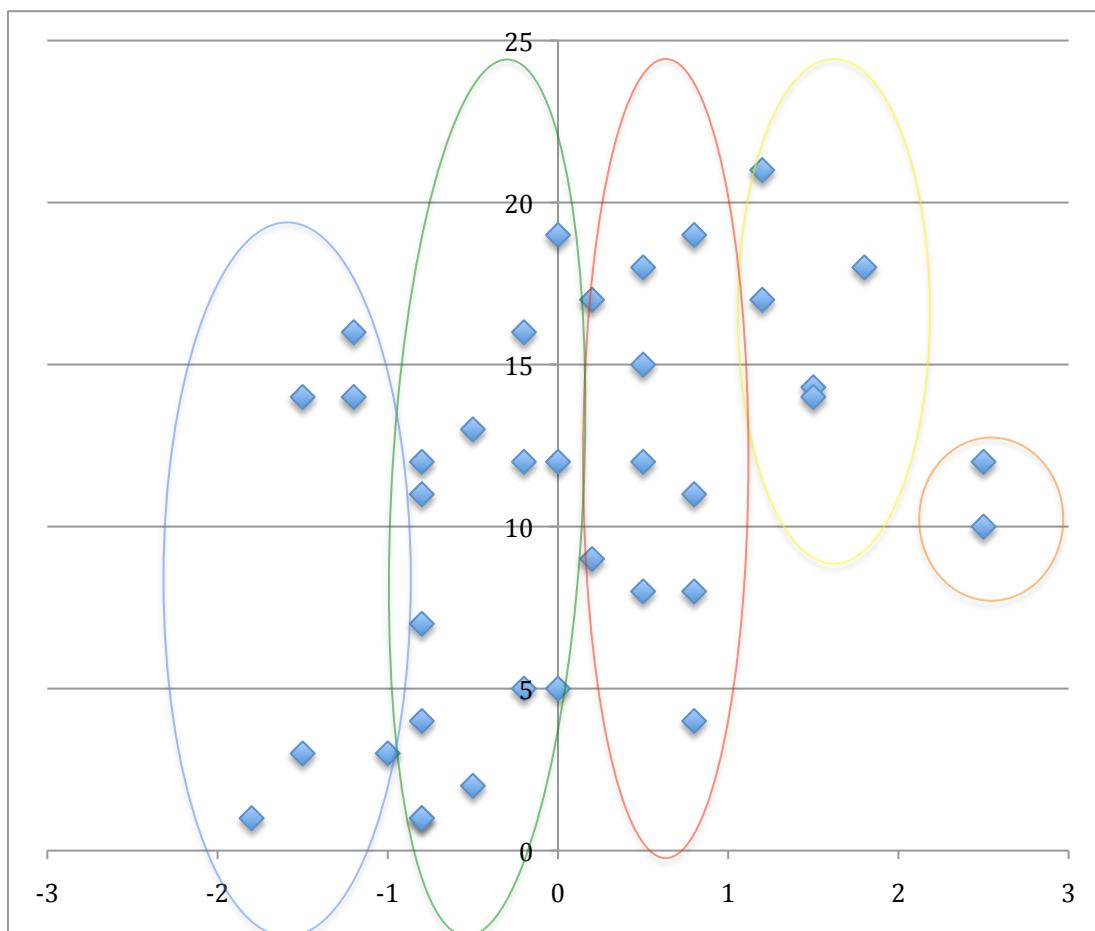
participants labelled as 'legal activists' or 'actualizing citizens', while 'dutiful citizens' (values from 0 to 1) tend to generally understand the Internet as a secondary or even primary source of current affairs information. On the other hand, results for the negative values of public engagement show a less homogeneous pattern, with 'civically involved' and 'attentive' citizens engaging online in multiple ways, from participative practices linked with public issues to attitudes of non-internet use. In order to better analyse Figure 8.3 the following paragraphs will look more closely at the results for each category of public engagement.

As has already been shown, 'dutiful citizens' tend to understand the Internet as a primary or secondary source of news. These tend to be older or middle-aged participants, who understand that consuming news and public affairs information is part of their 'civic duty' as citizens in democracy, as is also some level of participation and involvement in the community and with public issues. Consequently, their understanding of the Internet is generally linked to news gathering, considering it as a source that facilitates the checking of a larger number of news media. However, most of them still prefer to access news through traditional formats (printed press, TV or radio), rather than access news media mainly online.

Moreover, 'dutiful citizens' tend to prefer traditional forms of political participation, which means they are not generally interested in the participatory dimension of the Internet. Nevertheless, due to the fact that most of them access traditional news media websites to gather information (even at a primary or secondary level) citizens of this kind are likely to engage in low-intensity forms of online participation included on news media websites (participatory journalism), such as polls, newsletters or occasional comments or votes on news stories. In order to grasp this idea better, Figure 8.4, below, shows another indicator: 'number of online participatory practices'. This index is a sum of all the online participatory practices each participant confirmed having conducted, at least once during the two weeks before the focus group session. The list of all the possible practices can be found in the questionnaire distributed beforehand, Appendix 2.

Figure 8.4 shows how, although most 'dutiful citizens' do not understand their Internet use as mainly connected with the participatory dimension, they do conduct some participatory practices. Although these participants show a high dispersion (one participant had conducted just four participatory practices and another had conducted 19) the average number of practices for these 12 research participants represents a medium level, 12.

Figure 8.4. Public engagement and number of online participatory practices in Barcelona participants



Note: The circles group the participants according to their levels of public engagement. Red: dutiful citizens, Yellow: actualizing citizens, Orange: legal activist, Green: civically involved, Blue: attentive.

Continuing with the analysis of the categories of public engagement, Figure 8.4 reflects how both 'actualizing citizens' and 'legal activists' generally perceive their Internet use as connected to the participatory dimension. These two categories are formed mainly of the younger participants, more attracted by non-traditional

forms of political participation and with an understanding of citizenship and public issues that differs from the previous category of 'dutiful citizens'. However, it is important not to generalise and imply that young citizens tend to form these two categories. Despite the fact that young focus group participants form these two categories, there are also other young participants in less engaged categories of public engagement, such as 'attentive' or 'civically involved'.

However, as has been seen in the previous sections of this chapter, what is different in these two categories is their understanding of participation. While 'legal activists' conceive participation as connected to offline and non-traditional practices of protest, online participation being an accessory or instrumental way of being involved, 'actualizing citizens' tend to consider participation as mainly online, a format of participation that seems to better suit their need to participate in small spheres of personal interests. Figure 8.4 shows this trend, with 'actualizing citizens' being the category in which the focus group participants tend to conduct a larger number of online participatory practices, an average of 17, while 'legal activists' conduct just an average of 11.

Conversely to the previous categories, results for the negative values of public engagement show an interesting lack of homogeneity with regard to the online engagement of those participants labelled as 'attentive' or 'civically involved'. (see former Figure 8.3). The latter, for example, includes a majority of the participants that consider their Internet use as a secondary source of information, with most of them close to considering it also as a source of practical information, rather than news. However, this category of 'civically involved' also includes a participant who perceives the Internet as non-interesting and two who consider the Internet as their main source of news. Similarly, the distribution of online engagement among 'attentive' participants also suffers from a lack of homogeneity, but in this case even stronger than in the previous category. According to Figure 8.3 two 'attentive' citizens consider the Internet mainly as participation, and two others as a source of practical information. There is another participant who considers the Internet as a secondary source of information and another one who perceives it as non-interesting.

This lack of homogeneity with regard to Internet use is better understood if analysed together with the number of participatory practices conducted by those participants with negative values of public engagement. Figure 8.4 shows how research participants for these two categories of public engagement are clearly divided between those who perform online participatory practices and those who do not. In the case of 'attentive' citizens this distribution is especially clear: three participants under this label are not attracted by online participation (conducting three and one practices), while the other three show high levels of online participation (two conducting fourteen online practices and another one sixteen). Civically involved citizens follow a similar pattern, with half of them conducting five or fewer online participatory practices and the other half 11 or more, with the sole exception of one citizen who conducts seven. In the case of 'attentive' citizens this online participation is in fact the only way that they do perform some kind of participation. Although these are generally practices of low-intensity performed in everyday-life environments, such as social network sites or news media websites, attentive citizens are those that are more likely to be mobilised due to contextual issues, which is the case of the Catalan public sphere, as has been seen in the previous sections of this chapter. Similarly, 'civically involved' citizens are characterized as being more active than 'attentive', although in practices not connected to political or potentially conflictual issues. Their willingness to participate online in similar daily-life environments to those who are 'attentive', points to a latent potentiality for the online sphere to bring new citizens to participate in 'the political'.

SECTION IV: CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES BEYOND

CHAPTER 9

Summary of conclusions

As explained in the introduction to this thesis, the conclusions have been divided into two different chapters. This first one, Chapter 9, is a summary of the different findings of the previous chapters that presented the field work of this project, in which the conclusions are introduced in relation to the previously presented research objectives and hypotheses. Firstly, it presents the conclusions related to the content analysis made for UK and Catalan news media websites (Chapters 5 and 6). Secondly, it presents the conclusions related to the focus groups conducted both in London and Barcelona (Chapters 7 and 8). This chapter concludes by presenting a table that summarises all the research objectives with their connected hypotheses and conclusions. To conclude this thesis, next chapter ten will then relate the conclusions to previous research and suggest new lines of research that might continue this research project.

9.1. Articulating citizen participation: how news media are adopting participatory journalism

Former section II of this research, which includes Chapters 5 and 6, was aimed at answering main research objective B (previously presented in the Introduction to this thesis) and its connected secondary research objectives. As explained in the Introduction and the fourth chapter about methodological issues, in order to conduct research on main research objective B a study was carried out to ascertain how news media websites are adopting citizen participation through a content analysis based on a study sheet. Ten leading news media websites in the UK and

ten in Catalonia were researched. Main objective B is reproduced here again for the benefit of the reader:

Main Research Objective B: To study through which participatory options news media are adopting citizen participation. To research if news media are opening their websites to users' contributions, facilitating citizens' opinion exchange, or restricting participatory formats.

This main research objective is divided into three secondary objectives that address different approaches and perspectives of the research subject. The next sections will analyse its secondary objectives and test its connected hypotheses. For better clarification, the secondary objectives and connected hypotheses are presented again at the beginning of each section.

9.1.1. Half opening the gates: news media websites as spaces for interaction

This section will be aimed at explaining the results associated with the first two secondary research objectives of part B, B1 and B2. As these are particularly intertwined I have decided that it will be better to present them together in the same section. Both secondary research objectives, together with their connected hypotheses are shown below for clearer comprehension:

Secondary Objective B1: To analyse which kinds of options for participation are more adopted by news media websites, options of selection, interaction or content production.

- **Hypothesis B1:** News media generally prefer to continue offering users options of participation that are not directly connected to the news production process.

Secondary Objective B2: To look for differences between kinds of media or between the two countries present in the research.

- **Hypothesis B2:** Regarding participatory journalism, no big differences are expected to be found between Catalan and UK news media websites.

Research has found that there is a common group of tools that are widely adopted on Catalan and UK news media websites. Furthermore, these tools are to be found mostly under the labels of selective and participative interactivity, the tools under the label of productive interactivity therefore being the ones that are less accepted, confirming hypothesis B1. The findings also suggest that some slight differences exist between the way that Catalan and UK news media websites adopt participatory journalism, contradicting in part hypothesis B2. UK news media tend generally to adopt a lower total number of tools. This also includes a general tendency to control and limit comments on news stories. The summarised conclusions are shown below, followed by a brief summary of the findings that develops each research objective and hypothesis:

Conclusion B1: There exists a series of participatory tools that tend to be the most adopted on most news media. News media websites prefer to include options of low-intensity of participation. This implies adopting participatory interactivity and formats of selective interactivity that do not imply hard personalization. Formats that allow users' direct contribution (productive interactivity) are those that are least adopted.

Conclusion B2: Although there exists a series of widely adopted common tools, there are also great differences in the total number of tools and how these are applied and combined. UK news media tend to adopt a lower number of participatory options than Catalan ones. There is also a tendency on British news media to control comments and establish mechanisms to enhance quality and limit inappropriate use or antisocial behavior.

In order to test hypotheses B1 and B2, Table 9.1 (see next pages) groups results from Chapters 5 and 6. It shows the level of adoption (in absolute numbers and in percentage terms) of each participatory tool between the 10 Catalan and 10 UK news media present in this research, divided also by kind of interactivity. It can be seen how among media from both groups there is a series of tools that are always among the most adopted. Hence, regarding the most adopted tools, there are no significant differences between Catalan and UK media. These tools can be defined as: registration, news media contact email, social networks tools to share news/articles, RSS, Most read/commented/shared news, comments on news, Newsletter, Vote/recommend comments and Comments on blogs/opinion articles. It is important to note that in this list of most commonly adopted tools there are no tools to be found under the label of productive interactivity. The majority of these tools (five of them), are considered as participative interactivity, or as selective interactivity (four of them), in a clear signal that most news media websites do not favour direct content production by citizens.

The only widely adopted participatory feature in the British media that does not appear among the most widely adopted tools in the Catalan media is the option to report comments. This feature is adopted by 90% of the British media but only by 60% of the Catalan media. On the other hand, all the Catalan media websites under study include links on their home pages to their spaces on social networks (mostly on Facebook and/or Twitter). In the British media this option that facilitates a quick and easy connection to social media is only present on 60% of the websites.

Table 9.1. Participatory tools on Catalan and UK news media websites

	Catalan Media (N=10)		UK Media (N=10)	
	n	%	n	%
Selective interactivity				
Registration	10	100	10	100
RSS	9	90	8	80
Newsletter	7	70	8	80
Personalization options	0	0	0	0
Participation section	5	50	6	60
News media contact email	10	100	9	90
Participative interactivity				
News evaluation tools	3	30	0	0
Send more information	1	10	0	0
Notify error	3	30	0	0
Contact author	3	30	6	60
Comments on news	9	90	10	100
Vote/recommend comments	7	70	8	80
Reply comments	5	50	5	50
Report comments	6	60	9	90
Comment on blogs/opinion articles	7	70	7	70
Forums	2	20	1	10
Most read/commented/shared news	9	90	10	100
Multiple-choice polls	6	60	2	20
Social networks links on homepage	10	100	4	40
Social networks tools to share news/articles	10	100	10	100
Productive interactivity				
Readers' stories	4	40	3	30
Readers' photos	4	40	1	10
Readers' videos	3	30	1	10
Readers' audios	2	20	1	10
Letters to the editor	6	60	4	40
Interviews with readers' questions	3	30	2	20
Readers' blogs	3	30	1	10

Comments on news is the participatory feature that shows the greatest difference between the two groups of media. Although 100% of British media and 90% of Catalan adopt the feature, these general data do not show the complete picture. In

fact, three British media, the *Guardian*, the *BBC* and the *Daily Telegraph* do not allow comments on most news items. The *BBC* only allows comments on one or two items of news per day. The *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph* tend to allow comments on a higher number of news items, three or four. Other British media, such as the *Sun*, the *Independent*, the *Times* or the *Daily Mail*, also impose restrictions on comments, normally not allowing comments on certain polemic issues. As a result, comments are not allowed on between 10% to 20% of items per day.

These data show a tendency in British media to control comments and establish mechanisms to enhance quality and limit inappropriate use or antisocial behaviour. In all the British media, comments are only allowed after prior registration. This is particularly relevant if the fact that that four of the media studied have established a paywall to access the content is taken into consideration, thereby limiting participation on their websites. The British media, in order to control comments, have also developed some tools that did not exist a few years ago (as can be seen in the review above of earlier literature on the subject). In all 50% adopt a tool that enables users to reply to other users' comments. Most media (80%) also accept that users can vote for or recommend other users' comments, and most UK media (90%) have a feature that assists users in reporting antisocial or inappropriate comments.

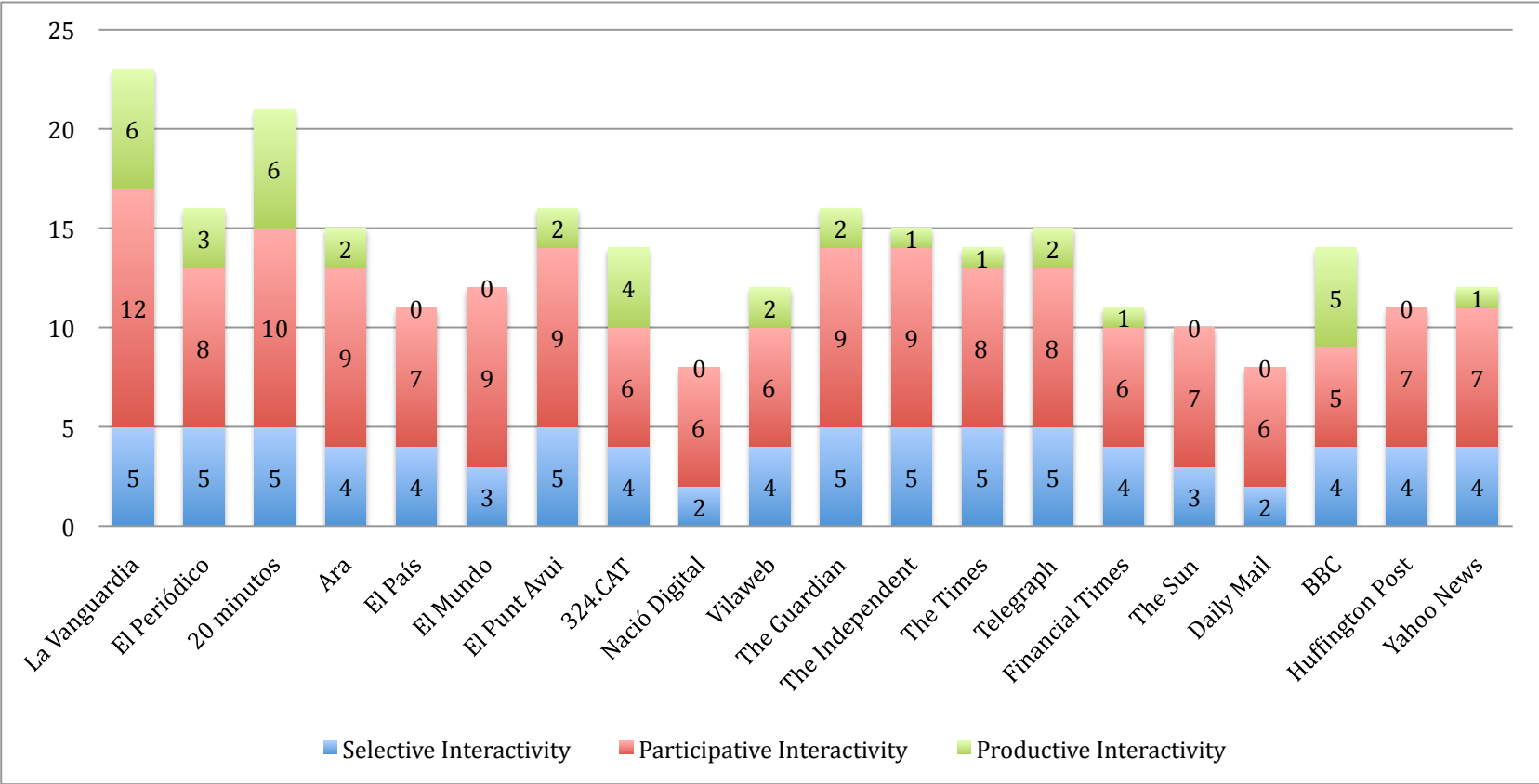
However, most Catalan media do not generally follow this general trend found among UK news media websites to control or limit comments on news stories. In total 90% of them accept comments on all news stories. Even if users can only comment if they are registered, registration is quicker than in most British news media: on most of the Catalan media's websites users can sign up without creating a complete user profile, filling in a form accessed in the comments section. However, tools aimed at enhancing the quality of comments generally show a similar level of adoption in the Catalan media: 50% of media allow users to directly respond with comments (the same percentage as in the UK), 70% adopt tools to vote on or rate other comments and 60% (a lower percentage compared with the UK) assist users in reporting other users' inappropriate comments. Additionally,

Catalan news media do adopt some features related to news that are not present among UK media. These are options such as ‘news evaluation tools’, ‘send more information’ and ‘notify error’ (adopted by around 10% to 30% of Catalan media but not by any media in the UK). Finally, there is another tool that is broadly adopted on Catalan news media websites (60%), ‘multiple-choice polls’, that has a low adoption among UK media (just 20%).

Earlier paragraphs have analysed and compared previously presented data by focusing attention on the tools. The most widely adopted tools have been identified and some of the differences and similarities between Catalan and UK news media websites have been presented with regard to their adoption of participatory journalism. The following paragraphs will take data from Chapters 5 and 6 in order to stress and focus attention on the kind of interactivity, completing the picture that will allow hypotheses HB1 and HB2 to be tested.

Figure 9.1 (see next page) shows similar results regarding the adoption by Catalan and British news media websites of participatory journalism tools, classified by kind of interactivity. In all the media under research, with the sole exception of the *BBC*, participative interactivity tools are those most commonly offered by news media websites. The medium that adopts the highest number of participative tools is *La Vanguardia* (12 features), followed by *20 minutos* (10). After these two media we found a high diversity of adoption, the *BBC* being the news media that has adopted the lowest number of participative features (five). Fourteen different participative tools were noted in the typology (see Table 9.1 above). From the data that have been collected above, it can be seen that the average number of tools adopted per medium is 8.2 (58.5% of the total number of tools) in Catalonia and 7.2 in the British media (51.4%). Participative interactivity features are those most frequently adopted on media websites but, as has been seen, there are great differences between the various media and most have adopted less than half of the possible features. The next section of this chapter will show precisely what these differences in participative options are that characterise some of the different models of citizen participation chosen by online news media.

Figure 9.1. Adoption of participatory journalism among Catalan and UK news media



Selective interactivity, which includes the tools designed for registration and personalization options, tends to be the second type of interactivity adopted by Catalan and British media (again, with the sole exception of the *BBC*). Eight of the twenty media under study adopt four selective tools, and eight more of them five. A maximum of six different selective tools were included in the typology (see Table 9.1). Of those, the average number of tools adopted in both countries is 4.1. The average percentage of adoption of selective features is therefore higher than in participative ones: Catalan and British media adopt 68.3% of the total number of selective tools.

Productive interactivity is the least adopted type of interactivity among the news media websites under study. Seven different productive features were included in the typology (see table 9.1). Among those, the average number of tools adopted is the lowest of the three categories of interactivity, 2.5 in the Catalan media and 1.3 in the British ones. In an analysis by medium, significant differences were also found in online media policies towards productive interactivity. Six media (three Catalan and three British) do not adopt any productive features. On the other hand, the *BBC*, *La Vanguardia* and *20minutos* accept five or more different productive tools. Other Catalan news media accept a high number of productive features on their websites: four features for *324.cat* and two features for *Vilaweb* and *Ara*. It is among the British media in particular where the differences are greatest. Despite the high level of adoption shown by the *BBC*, the other media show low levels of adoption of productive features. The *Guardian* and *Telegraph* adopt two and the *Times*, the *Independent*, *Yahoo News* and the *Financial Times* just one feature. The remainder of the British media under study adopt no productive features.

9.1.2. Models of citizen participation

This section will be aimed at explaining the different models of adoption of citizen participation that have been identified among the news media under study. This issue focuses on secondary objective B3 and its associated hypothesis B3, reproduced below:

Secondary Objective B3: To evaluate the existence of different models of participation on news media websites, based on the kinds of participatory tools adopted by news media.

- **Hypothesis B3:** The different combinations of tools allow news media websites to develop different models of participation.

It will be seen how, although the study of the different tools adopted by news media websites through the use a study sheet offers relevant insights into general trends in online media participation, it is necessary to analyse and compare the different combinations of participatory tools offered by each news media to better understand the specific different policies towards online citizen participation. Hence, confirming hypothesis B3 it is possible to study the different combinations of tools in order to conceptualise different models of citizen participation. The conclusions related to the secondary objective and hypothesis B3 can be summarised as follows:

Conclusion B3: According to the selection of tools and the levels of user-medium and user-user interaction, three different models can be defined: 'low intensity', 'user community' and 'collaboration networks'.

At the end of Chapters 5 and 6, how each news media website under study is adopting participatory journalism tools was analysed individually. This analysis allowed a better conceptualization of how the different tools adopted relate to each other and how different news media are adopting different policies regarding online citizen participation. As a result of this individual analysis of all the news media websites under study, three different participation models have been identified. These models not only draw on the tools which are adopted (selective, participative or productive), but also on participation foreseen for the users and the forms of connection promoted between medium and user. The basic characteristics of each model are resumed in Table 9.2. at next page.

Table 9.2. Main characteristics of the participatory models identified on news media websites

	Selective Interactivity	Participative Interactivity	Productive Interactivity	Medium-user Connection	User-user Connection
Low intensity	Medium	High	Low	Low	Low
User community	High	High	Low	Medium	High
Collaboration networks	Medium	High	High	High	Medium

9.1.2.1. Low intensity model

The low intensity model is based on the presence of a wide array of participatory tools. The aim of the participation model is to use these tools to attract users onto the site. In order to do so, they predominantly use those tools that do not imply a high level of engagement or effort for the user nor the medium itself. Participatory and selective interactivity tools, which bring traffic and visibility, predominate, and productive interactivity tools tend to be avoided, as they require more effort for users to produce and for the medium to administer and control. Consequently, this model does not conceive citizen participation as connected to any part of the news production processes, and neither does it make any special effort to channel users' debates and discussions by enhancing user-user interaction.

Although the emphasis of participation is put on the forms of participatory interactivity, some options of selective interactivity are always offered, such as RSS, alerts or signing in. The requirements to sign in are few and far between, and most media have adopted the possibility of signing in through social media profiles (Facebook, Twitter or Google +). This option allows for any interaction on the

medium's web to be published in each social network profile or timeline, thus increasing the medium's presence on social networks.

The main tools to encourage user participation on these media websites are the comments on news stories, blogs or opinion articles, as well the activity on social networks carried out by each medium. Comments are allowed in most cases without any previous control. Moderation tends to come after comments have been published, and when the other users report possible abuse or inappropriate use. Users also tend to vote for or "reward" comments from other users. There is no direct communication between users (for example, through private messages), thus limiting any communicative options to a user-medium connection. However, in some cases, tools in comments on news such as 'respond to a previous comment' are adopted, to put some order into the discussions. Apart from comments on news stories, news media that adopt this model tend also to adopt other participative tools, such as the possibility to vote for and recommend news stories, or to contribute to multiple choice surveys. As demonstrated, productive interactivity tools tend to be rare, normally reduced to the possibility of sending letters to the editor.

The low intensity model is the one adopted by most of the UK media under study: *Yahoo News*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun*, the *Independent*, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Times*. In contrast, the model groups only four Catalan media: *El Punt Avui*, *ARA*, *El Periódico* and *Nació Digital*. Although all are included under the low intensity model of user participation, noticeable differences can be found among the news media grouped into this model. Firstly, there are the news media websites that opt for a 'catch-all' policy regarding participation, adopting a really high number of different participatory tools. The examples can be found in the *Guardian*, the *Independent* and the *Times*, in the UK group, and in *ARA* and *El Punt Avui* in the Catalan group. All these media adopt eight or more tools on their websites under the label of participative interactivity. Another group is the one formed by those news media which articulate user participation mainly through comments on news stories and the connected participatory tools (for instance:

vote, reply other comments etc.). These media are the *Daily Mail*, *Yahoo News*, the *Sun*, the *Financial Times*, the *Times* and *Nació Digital*.

However, two of the aforementioned news media websites, despite being included in the low intensity model, deviate slightly from the general tendency. These three media have some peculiarities that cause them to exist on the border between the low intensity and other models and hence deserve further analysis. First of all, *El Punt Avui* which, unlike most of previous media, has a varied participation section that allows the sending of photographs to galleries devoted to anniversaries, landscapes and weather, and even sections to put users in contact with their city council or to send letters to the editor. The forms of participation they offer facilitate the increase of user loyalty to the medium, but a close connection beyond a mere showcase wherein readers can show their pictures, announce anniversaries or other events is not encouraged. Secondly, the *Guardian* also has a participation section, 'Comment is free', which is used to post opinion articles. This section, although it is aimed at users' comment and debate, includes hardly any debate or issue started by users and the news media does not provide user-user communication capabilities or community-building tools, as do other new media in the community of users model. Consequently, although it has some of the characteristics of the community model, its adoption of user participation is closer to the low intensity model.

9.1.2.2. Collaboration networks model

The model of collaboration networks pursues the creation of a community link through high-intensity user participation. Unlike the other models, it promotes the construction of affinity feelings between the users and the medium, so that the first ones share the process of information production. The existence of this community often materialises in the presence of their own meeting space or participation section (although, as will be seen, some of the media under study also organise offline meetings of users). Although at different degrees among the media under study, the collaboration networks model is characterised by allowing users to

influence the news production process in some way, by sending their own material, publishing it or even by having real power of decision over what is going to be published and how. The following paragraphs look at the way in which the different media included under this model incorporate users' contributions.

The forms of productive interactivity are of course predominant in this model, although several levels of intensity can be distinguished depending on the medium. In the case of *El Periódico*, *20 minutos* or *324.cat*, productive interactivity is present in low intensity. In the case of *20 minutos* it is limited to letters and photographs from the readers, as well as a gallery of the most active users and the most replied comments. There is also a list of news stories originated by information sent by the readers. *El Periódico* also focuses its participation section "Entre todos" (All together) on news stories developed by journalists but originating in complaints and warnings from the users. Comments are not allowed in this last case. Regarding *324.cat*, there is "ElMeu324", a space where previously moderated user-generated content (mainly videos) is accepted for publication, although the level of participation is low. Finally, *BBC News* is perhaps the news media that encourages users the most to contribute with original content. Its participation section, 'Have Your Say', is not just aimed at commenting, but also at sending original material that can be also used in the TV programmes, as well as in interviews with journalists and other people of interest.

Regarding *La Vanguardia*, it increases the range of participation options and groups them in a well-identified space of its own. This section groups all of the participatory tools allowed on the website which are not included as options related to news stories or opinion articles. When some information is particularly relevant, this section generally opens with a piece written by a staff journalist which gathers the various related comments posted by the readers on that particular news story. Another recurring section is that of "Lectores corresponsales" (Correspondent readers), which gathers contributions made by *La Vanguardia* readers living abroad. Photographs taken by the readers, digital meetings (interviews with user-made questions), contests, letters from the readers and surveys complete this section. Despite the diversity of options, users cannot

send their own content and publish it on the newspaper's website without passing through a previous filter from the medium.

Finally, *Vilaweb* seeks a higher level of engagement with the users, even assigning them some of the power and responsibility, in what Carpentier (2011) considers "true participation" in media. In both cases, participation policy is based on a voluntary system of monetary donations to the medium. On *Vilaweb*, users might even influence staff decisions and the process of information production. Subscribed users receive a digest version of the contents the medium is planning to include for the next day, and might answer by suggesting topics or ways of dealing with information. Moreover, they have the possibility of hosting a blog on the medium's website, which they can update without previous control, and might attend the annual meeting where the newspaper's editor presents new projects and analyses the situation of the medium. Higher donations allow access to group interviews conducted at the newspaper's office and to monthly meetings with journalists and/or the editor.

9.1.2.3. *User community*

The main characteristic of the user participation model is the adoption of a series of tools oriented towards the creation of a community. The nature of these tools can be very different, but all of them share the trait of being designed to increase user-user interaction. The model draws significantly on the use of participative tools to facilitate user interaction, not just limited to the usual comment on news stories or reply to other users' comments. Additionally, it also requires highly developed selective interactivity tools that normally take the form of complete users' profiles, in order to facilitate users' identification. Options of productive interactivity, however, are not a priority for the media adopting this model. The main goal of the user community model is then to create a community of users within the medium, facilitating the establishment of links between them and turning the medium into the key element of the interaction process between users. In this model, media try to reproduce a horizontal connection structure similar to

that of networks, which facilitates exchanging ideas and opinions. Among the media under study the *Huffington Post* is the one that better represents this model. *El Mundo* and *El País* can be also considered as developing a user community.

The user profile is particularly important in this model because it shows users' activity on the medium site: which news he or she has commented on or voted for, which articles he or she has read, etc. In some cases, such as in the *Huffington Post*, it even exposes the activity of other users followed, allowing their comments to be seen as if it were the timeline of a social network. The media adopting this model provide users with access to the profiles of other users, thus showing several activity indicators the purpose of which is to reflect the most active users on the site. Regarding the *Huffington Post*, these indicators adopt the form of "medals" to be won by the users achieving a certain amount of contacts or commenting frequently. Medals can be seen not only in the users' profiles, but also in their comments. Thus, the comments section distinguishes between the users who are most loyal to the medium and those who comment only on occasion, through a mechanism reminiscent of forums. In the case of *El Mundo*, user activity is represented with "karma" points to be won similarly to the *Huffington Post*, but including a secret algorithm which takes into account how many times the web is accessed and the time spent navigating.

User participation in the model is limited to the comments on news stories and opinion articles. Forums or other spaces of debate are uncommon, as are also productive interactivity tools. Comments on news stories tend to present most of the options available: responding to previous comments, voting for or rating comments and reporting abusive comments. Some of the media even foresee the option of following other users, specifically through the comments bar, to facilitate the process of following the users whose comments are of interest. Direct interaction between users does not tend to be allowed in conjunction with the comments section except in *El Mundo*, which allows for this option through private comments.

The influence of social media is obvious in this model. Media are highly interested in creating a participation model which attracts and connects audiences in the same way as they connect to social networks. This is most obvious on the website of *El País*. This newspaper includes its own social network, Eskup, which is devoted to sharing and commenting on politically themed news stories. Launched in 2010, its goal was to draw users towards the political debate, creating a space where users and journalists could interact. Despite being launched with great expectations and publicity, users were less participative than was expected. At the time of writing these conclusions *El País* had conducted a full renewal of its website. In the new design, Eskup, which has been losing importance since it was launched, is hardly promoted on the website. In a clear example of how the medium has lost interest in developing the user community model, in its own news about the website's renewal there is no mention of Eskup at all⁶⁵

9.1.2.4. Summary of the different models

To synthesise, the low intensity model is generally defined by the presence of a wide array of participation tools that have in common that all of them demand a lower involvement of the user. However, this high level of adoption does not go hand in hand with a clear strategy about the role of citizen participation on the website. Rather, participation is conceived as a tool to attract visitors and increase the time they spend on the website, without connection to the news production process or intention to generate debate around the published content.

On the contrary, the other two models -user community and collaboration networks - do demand conscious decision-making and a specific application of participation mechanisms. They both draw on clear participation strategies, although based on different suppositions: the first one advocates the creation of a

⁶⁵ See news from October 1st 2014:
http://tecnologia.elpais.com/tecnologia/2014/10/01/actualidad/1412134388_262059.html

community of users around the debate and exchange of ideas, whereas the second one strengthens the connection based on the productive possibilities of the audience and the medium-user relationship. Although these two models could also use online participation for attracting users, in this case online participation is also connected, even if always at different degrees among the media under research, to some of the functions of news media in society. In some cases, this connection takes place with the direct involvement of citizens in the news production processes while in others this connection occurs in the context of the role of news media as public spheres of debate and opinion exchange.

It is necessary to point out that the presence of certain forms of interactivity and the development of one model or another does not imply that one medium is more perfect or of higher journalistic quality than another. Nor have these diverse models to be understood as an inevitable evolutionary process, in which news media websites will continuously adopt more and more participatory mechanisms. The adoption of participatory mechanisms is a relevant choice for a news medium. This decision could work perfectly in the sense of a lower adoption of these mechanisms, without affecting the journalistic quality and practice of the medium. In other cases, the decision to adopt some mechanisms could also lead to situations where, although participation is adopted, users are not interested and therefore do not participate in the numbers previously expected by the medium. The following paragraphs will analyse in more detail each of the models and the distribution among them of the news media websites under study. It will be seen how, although in most cases news media can be easily identified with one of the models, in others this identification is less clear, with some of the media showing characteristics of more than one model. This represents an unclear policy towards user participation and involvement on the website: some news media have been adopting participatory tools without defining a clear policy about how to implement user participation or defining the objectives of participation.

9.2. Citizens' attitudes and motivations towards online media participation

Section III of this research (which includes Chapters 7 and 8) has presented the results of the focus group sessions conducted in London and in Barcelona. In total, fourteen focus group sessions (six in London and eight in Barcelona) were conducted for this research. This methodological approach has provided the answer to main research objective A which is reproduced here for the benefit of the reader:

Main Research Objective A: To research how citizens perceive online media participation, focusing on their attitudes and motivations towards the different options offered by news media to participate on their websites.

This main research objective is divided into four secondary research objectives that stress different approaches and perspectives of the research subject. These secondary questions, together with their connected hypotheses, will be shown again at the beginning of each of the following sections.

9.2.1. Conceptualising online and offline participation

The main question to be answered in this section is whether the research participants' identified participatory energies are being accommodated in the online environment. Does a willingness to participate offline directly imply a higher online participation? Are contextual factors influencing how research participants behave online and their adoption of online media participatory practices? These questions are synthesized in secondary objective A1 and its associated hypothesis A1. These are shown below for better understanding of the reader:

Secondary Objective A1: To comprehend how citizens understand online media participation in relation to their offline engagement and involvement in public issues.

- **Hypothesis A1:** There is no direct and absolute relationship between on and offline participation. The relationship is better conceptualised as dialogical.

According to what has been found in the study of participants' public engagement (see the first sections of Chapters 7 and 8), those focus group participants in Barcelona tend to be more involved and participative than the ones in London. As will be explained in this section, the focus group results proved that the hypothesis of this thesis is correct: the participatory energies present in the offline world are being transferred into the online realm, implying a higher online citizen participation in Catalonia than in the UK due to contextual factors. Furthermore, although the general levels of online participation would be higher, individual factors would also affect each participant's level of online participation. In other words, a higher level of offline participation will not directly imply more online participation. These main findings are summarised in the following conclusion. This is followed, as in previous sections of this chapter, by a further explanation of the issue.

Conclusion A1: A higher level of public engagement of a research participant does not imply a more active online participation. Contextual factors (the economic crisis and the national debate) mean that, generally, the research participants in Barcelona are more participative than those in London. Individual factors, such as attitudes and motivations towards online media participatory practices, as well as age, also play an important role.

There is not much previous research on this issue that allows findings to be compared, but a recent study showed some macro results of a comparative survey between several European and non-European countries (Newman and Levi, 2013). These authors found that in Spain the percentage of citizens interested in news is

higher than that in the UK (81% versus 67%). Accordingly, the percentage of those citizens that confirm that they are non-interested in news is lower in Spain than the UK. With regard to online participation, results support this thesis, Spanish citizens are more likely to comment on news stories on social networks (27%) or share them through social networks (30%) than UK citizens (10% and 11% in the aforementioned activities). Sharing a news story through email is also higher in Spain than in the UK (24% and 10%) as is talking online about a news story (30% and 16%), and the same tendency is followed with other indicators of online participation⁶⁶.

However, although these survey data confirm the aforementioned hypothesis of a higher online participation in Spain compared with the UK, they do not explain why Spanish (as well as Barcelona) citizens tend to participate more online than the British. Results from focus groups showed how Barcelona participants were more involved and participative offline than London ones due to contextual factors, rather than due to differences towards the perception of the public world and life in democracy (that is, differences in political or civic cultures, which have been revealed to be more similar than divergent). According to what has been found through analysing the focus groups participants, the Catalan public sphere shows a higher factor of conflictuality that makes it more vivid than the UK one. Participants' discourses showed that most of the participatory activities in which they are involved could be connected to two main issues that are currently dominating the Catalan public sphere: the economic crisis and the national debates about a referendum on independence. All the participants that joined the research reflected interest in at least one of these issues, and most of them also in both. The nature of the Catalan public sphere implies a higher level of public talk as well as higher levels of attention to public issues and news media.

Moreover, it implies a higher number of Catalan participants performing activities of low intensity of participation (those participants labelled as 'civically involved' in the study of levels of public engagement), even though the number of research

⁶⁶ Although no results exist for the different regions that form each country, it can be assumed that, due to the existing widespread Internet adoption in both countries, the two urban areas of Barcelona and London are represented by these average percentages of online participation.

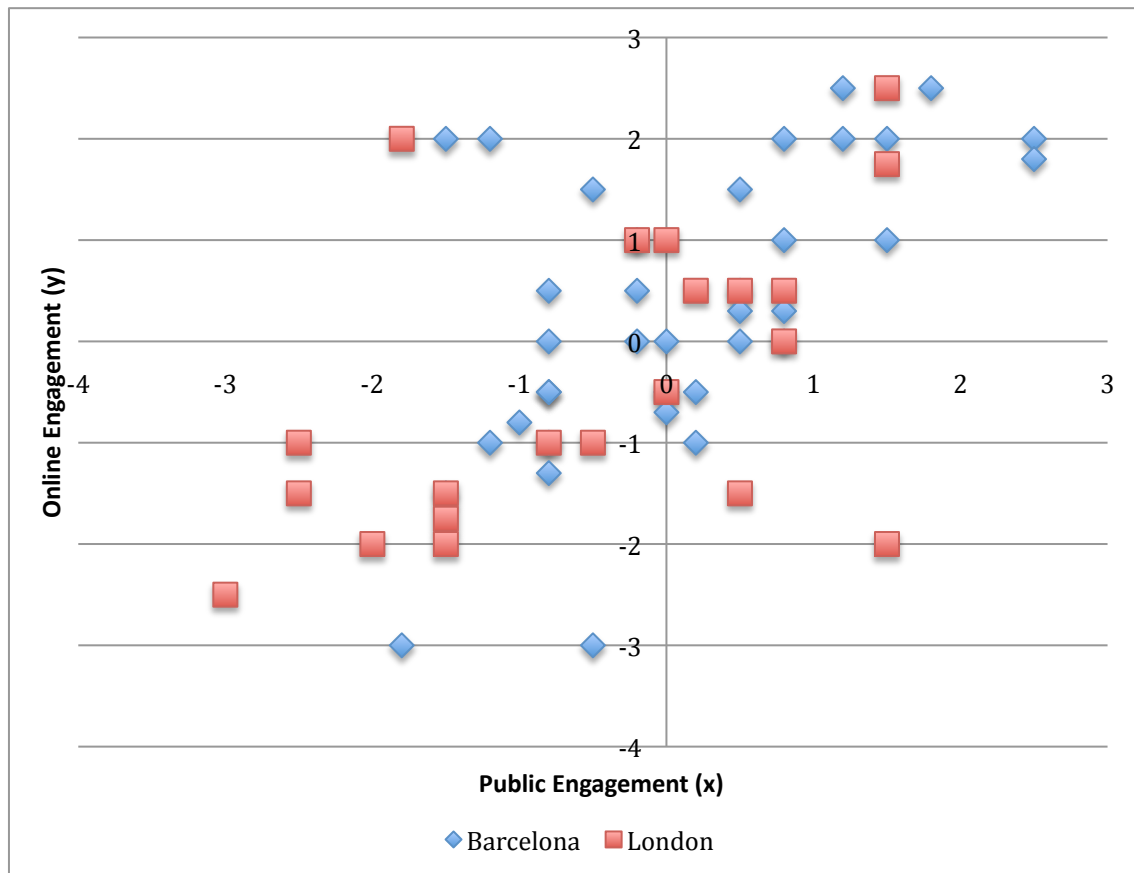
participants who show high intensities of participation is similar to that of the UK (those labelled as 'dutiful citizens', 'actualizing citizens' and 'legal activists'). It can be concluded that the more vivid Catalan public sphere is therefore particularly efficient at mobilizing those citizens that could be passive in 'normal circumstances' of less conflictual political contexts or public spheres. Due to the aforementioned contextual factors these citizens could be more likely to have a major degree of attention and also be more likely to conduct participatory practices of low-intensity, such as occasionally joining demonstrations or being involved in associations or NGO activities.

Following a similar trend, this research will argue that the Barcelona participants show higher levels of online participation due to the same contextual factors that are influencing their levels of public engagement, rather than due to different attitudes and motivations towards online media participatory practices. The following paragraphs will confirm that these attitudes and motivations are similar, without great differences, to both groups of participants. As a consequence, the answer to the question of why the Barcelona participants are more active online should be answered in relation to the contextual factors that are contributing to make the Catalan public sphere more vivid than the UK one. By doing so, this research agrees with Aouragh and Alexander (2011) when they argue that online and offline participation are better understood as having a dialectical relationship, rather than conceptualised as existing in isolation. Nevertheless, as will be shown in the next paragraphs, despite this dialectical relationship, a higher level of public engagement does not imply per se a higher tendency to online participation when the micro level is analysed. Other personal factors, such as age or the particular attitudes and motivations towards online media participatory practices, need to be taken into account in analysing the individual level in order to better understand why citizens engage in online participation.

Data that was collected from the London and Barcelona focus groups illustrate how online participation connected to public issues is not generally considered as one of the most common forms of Internet use. Moreover, the participants' discourses towards how they use the Internet are highly similar in both groups,

with no relevant differences between the participants from London and those from Barcelona. When the participants explain how they perceive the Internet and which practices connected to the new medium are more frequently performed, most of them talk about job-related practices, contacting friends (through e-mail or social networks) or checking news media. The general discourse is to understand participatory practices online connected to public issues as something circumstantial, to be conducted occasionally and in contexts associated with everyday life, such as social networks or news media websites. Figure 9.2 below at next page gathers data from Chapters 7 (Figure 7.3) and 8 (Figure 8.3) to compare how public and online engagement are distributed among the participants in London and Barcelona.

The first conclusion is that the distribution of the research participants generally follows a similar pattern in London and in Barcelona, confirming the similarities with regard to the understanding of Internet use among the participants of both groups. Most of the research participants do not consider the Internet as a medium to be used mainly to conduct participatory practices connected to public issues. Those citizens that are more participative or connected (values of public engagement from 'civically involved', -0.5, to 'legal activists', 2.5) tend also to have positive values of online engagement, having an understanding of the Internet as a primary or secondary source for news. Less engaged participants tend to consider the Internet more as a medium for entertainment, practical information or are not interested in it.

Figure 9.2. Public and online engagement in London and Barcelona

Note: The values of public engagement are those of the typology of public engagement introduced in the methodology chapter. The values for online engagement are explained in Figures 7.3 and 8.3 but reproduced here for better comprehension: +4: Internet perceived as a space for original content production; +3: Internet understood as a space for political participation or campaigning; +2: Internet as a space for interaction, debate and opinion exchange; +1: Internet as a primary source for news about public issues; 0: Internet as a secondary source for news about public issues; -1: Internet as a source for practical information; -2: Internet as a source for entertainment; -3: Internet perceived as non-interesting; -4: Anti-Internet discourses.

Only a minority of the participants manifest a clear understanding of the Internet as connected to participatory practices (values of online engagement of 2 or more). These are almost exclusively citizens included under the category of 'actualizing citizen'. As seen previously in Chapters 7 and 8, these citizens understand participation as connected to personal interests or lifestyle issues and do not necessarily connect their participation with collective or societal goals. Consequently, they show a preference for individual forms of participation that seem to be especially associated with online participatory practices. Hence, during

the focus group sessions these were the citizens who were more likely to understand engagement and involvement in public issues as mainly an online practice, giving a secondary role to offline participatory practices .

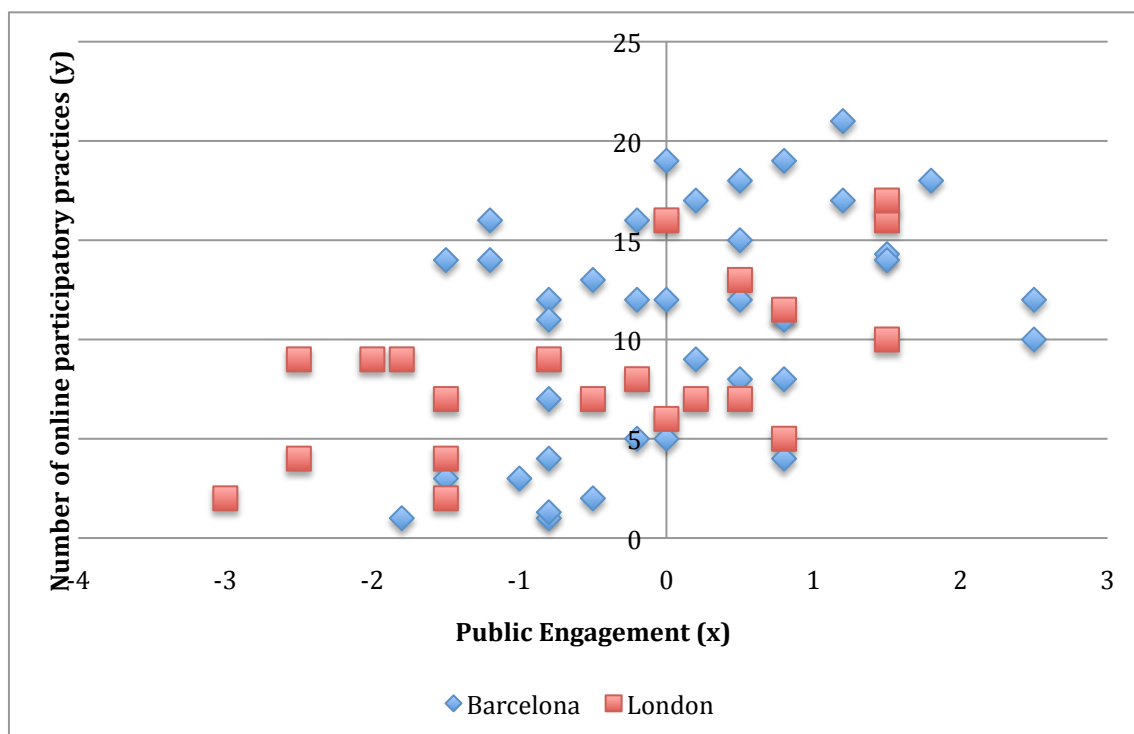
However, the research participants labelled as ‘actualizing citizens’, although being the majority of participants with a value of +2 in online engagement, are not the only ones who understand Internet use as mainly a participatory practice. A minority of those considered as ‘attentive’ also understand Internet use in this way, similarly connecting the concept of participating or being involved in public issues with practices primarily conducted in online environments. The discourses of these participants work along the lines of perceiving that the offline world does not offer interesting possibilities of participation, the online sphere therefore being where they conduct their infrequent participatory practices. In these cases, online participation can be understood as a catalyst for previously non-participative citizens. Participants identified as ‘legal activists’ (public engagement 2.5) also understand their Internet use as primarily connected to participation in public issues, but in this case their discourses are not connected to a lack of participation in the offline world, nor do they understand engagement and involvement as practices developed mainly online. Rather, it can be argued that in their case, online participation complements rather than substitutes an offline one.

Most of the participants, however, are not included in these aforementioned categories. For participants with values of online engagement of less than 2, the Internet is not primarily perceived as a space for participation. Rather, it tends to be understood in many different ways, as seen in Chapters 7 and 8 (for contacting friends, as a source of entertainment, for gathering practical information for daily life or as a quick and easy tool to check the news). As already explained, most of the research participants do not attribute high importance or relevance to their online media participatory practices. According to the focus group results in London and Barcelona, these tend to be conducted in a complementary way to their offline participation and in non-specifically political websites, such as social media sites or news media websites. These kinds of online environments allow citizens to conduct low-intensity participatory practices, such as commenting on

news stories or links posted by friends, sharing their own content, rating news stories, or even publishing their own materials connected to public issues or the broad world of ‘the political’. Online participation is thus perceived as something circumstantial, part of daily life and sometimes produced as a reaction to previously published content (as for example with comment on news, as will be seen later).

This characteristic of online participation as naturally embedded in daily life implies that it cannot be directly associated with public engagement. In other words, the fact that a citizen conducts frequent participation and involvement in the offline world cannot predict that the same citizen will be especially interested in online media participatory practices. Figure 9.3 (see next page) combines the information previously presented in Figure 7.4, from Chapter 7, and Figure 8.4, from Chapter 8. Figure 9.3 shows the results for the research participants overall, combining their levels of public engagement with the total number of online media participatory practices that they have conducted.

Figure 9.3. Public engagement and number of online participatory practices in London and Barcelona



The first conclusion that can be deduced from Figure 9.3 is the generally higher number of online participatory practices conducted among the research participants in the Barcelona focus groups compared with the London participants, confirming the trend that has already been pointed out. The percentage of Barcelona participants who conduct 10 or more online participatory practices is 62%. By comparison, the percentage of London participants who conduct 10 or more of these practices is just 28.5%. As has already been seen, the attitudes and motivations towards online participation being similar to both groups, it is in contextual factors (a more vivid public sphere) where the reasons for this highly differentiated behaviour among research participants can be found.

Secondly, Figure 9.3 offers interesting insights if it is analysed at the individual level, by comparing participants' levels of public engagement. As has already been shown, higher involvement and participation (positive levels of public engagement) do not always imply a higher online participation. In fact, this assumption is only true for 'actualizing citizens', the kind of participants more likely to participate online in a high number of different practices. Others, however, do not follow this assumption. 'Dutiful citizens' (participants from zero to one positive values of public engagement), for example, have a similar number of participants performing fewer than ten than more than ten participatory practices, both in the London and Barcelona groups. Furthermore, discourses about online participation during the focus groups showed a wide diversity of attitudes towards the different formats of participation in online environments. While some participants in this category of public engagement were actively looking for online spaces that could accommodate their participatory energies, others showed no interest in online practices, being satisfied with what they could find in the offline world. As seen when analysing media engagement in Chapters 7 and 8, most of the 'dutiful citizens' are higher consumers of news media websites. However, the low-intensity participatory practices that these sites offer do not generally interest them, as will be seen in the following sections. Moreover, the other spaces that facilitate citizens conducting this circumstantial online participation, social networks, are not widely adopted by this kind of participant, who tends to be more than 40 years old.

It is, however, among the categories of public engagement of 'attentive' (from -2 to -1) and 'civically engaged' (from -1 to 0) where the more relevant difference between the focus group participants in London and Barcelona can be found. Ten research participants from Barcelona included in these categories conduct more than ten participatory practices, while just one participant in London conducts more than this number of practices. According to the focus group results these are the groups of citizens who are connected but not especially participative or active ('attentive' citizens) and those citizens who are also connected to the public world and do perform some activities, but of low-intensity of participation, such as contributing occasionally to a local NGO or sometimes attending neighbourhood meetings ('civically engaged'). These are the citizens that are more likely to mobilise online through low-intensity online media participatory practices. They have a basic connection to public issues but do not have the willingness, time or interest in going one step further and being more involved in the offline world (especially the 'attentive' group, whose participants do not conduct any kind of offline participatory practices with the only exception of public talk). However, due to contextual factors, they will be more likely to participate online in practices that do not require a high level of effort and commitment, which explains the higher number of participatory practices among some of these Barcelona research participants.

As already noted, these low-intensity practices are predominantly identified in two different online environments: news media websites and social networks. Being present in these online environments is then a necessary precondition for this kind of online participation. As has already been seen in Chapters 7 and 8, there is a correlation between levels of public engagement and news media consumption, and those more engaged citizens are also more active in surfing online through different news media websites. However, as will be seen in the following sections, news media websites do not seem to be especially efficient in channelling the participation of these citizens. Conversely, social networks, which tend to attract participants younger than 50, are more likely to produce these low-intensity kinds of online participation. The following sections will deeply analyse participants' attitudes and motivations towards participatory practices connected to news

media websites, comparing them to other online practices such as social networks to better understand which online spaces will better accommodate citizens' participatory energies.

9.2.3. Discourses of non-participation

This section is aimed at analysing secondary objective A2 and testing hypothesis A2. These have been presented in the introduction but are now written again for better understanding of the reader:

Secondary Objective A2: To better understand to what extent citizens are participating and which kind of online participatory practices citizens prefer to conduct on news media websites: practices of selection, interaction or content production.

- **Hypothesis A2:** The options for participation included on news media websites are generally not perceived as interesting, neither as a way to contribute to the news production process nor as a format for public debate.

Results from the focus groups, in both London and Barcelona, confirm that generally participatory journalism (Singer et al, 2011) or participation *through* media (Carpentier, 2011), is not considered as an extended practice among the research participants. This confirms previous quantitative research on the subject, which points to a lack of interest on the part of citizens in the participatory options provided by news media websites (Heise, Loosen, Reimer & Schmidt, 2013; Larsson, 2011; Bergström, 2008). There are, however, several nuances that can be detected in this general assumption thanks to the qualitative data collected in the focus groups. Firstly, confirming hypothesis A2, results point towards a greater interest on the part of the research participants in online media participatory practices of low-intensity (selection, personalization or interaction) rather than others that need more time or involvement, such as original content production.

Secondly, for some engaged citizens, the lack of interest in participating in news media websites is not due to a lack of interest in online participation. Rather, their discourses show that they do have participatory energies, but these do not find accommodation in the formats used by news media websites for user participation. These general conclusions, summarised below, will be further developed in the following paragraphs of this section.

Conclusions A2: Although options for user participation are not generally attracting research participants to participate frequently, they are valued and appreciated. Participants prefer to be involved in practices of low intensity, although the current formats adopted by news media websites are generally considered as inappropriate.

First of all, it is necessary to point out that regarding attitudes and motivations towards participatory journalism, no important differences have been found between the participants in London and in Barcelona. This confirms and follows the results already presented in the previous section about participants' understanding of Internet use and general attitudes towards online media participation, namely, if participants' attitudes and motivations towards participatory practices conducted online are similar in both groups, differences in the level of online participation in London and Barcelona must be explained by contextual factors rather than by individuals' perceptions about online participatory practices.

Secondly, when introducing the topic of participation on news media websites in the focus groups the general common understanding with which participation is associated is comment on news⁶⁷. It means that other forms of participatory journalism (such as content production or personalization) are completely secondary in participants' discourses and that their attitudes and motivations

⁶⁷ Following participants' understanding of comment on news in a broad sense, including for example formats such as comments on opinion articles, blogs or comments on pieces that appear in the *Guardian* 'Have Your Say' section. All these options for user participation, although they are not purely 'news', follow a similar format to comment on news.

towards participation on news media websites are strongly influenced by their opinions towards the concrete form of online participation 'comment on news'. Furthermore, when introducing the topic of in which contexts they can debate online, comment on news appears to be the most common answer. Other formats of public discussions used on news media websites, such as forums or other similar spaces for user discussion, are not generally mentioned. The other online spaces, outside news media websites, which participants identify as suitable for public debate and discussion are social networks (generally associated with Facebook)⁶⁸. Considering the relevance that research participants attribute to comment on news it makes sense then to start the review of findings related to participants' attitudes and motivations towards participatory journalism with their discourses related to this particular form of online media participation.

Discourses towards discussions and debates about public issues conducted on news media websites (practices normally associated with comment on news), are expressed in a negative way by research participants. Most participants have made at least one comment on a news website, although only a few participants confirm having conducted these kinds of discussions regularly. Even among those participants that do engage frequently in discussion on comment and news formats, the common perception is that these spaces are not suitable for debate and opinion exchange. Although there is generally low active engagement in comments on news stories, participants state that they do read the comments frequently after reading the news story or its headline. This is due to a curiosity to test 'public opinion' about a particular issue or with the desire to know what kind of debate it has generated. Even if interested in reading some comments, most participants just decide to engage in the discussion in a reactive way: the topic of the news story or a comment that they have read makes them especially angry or produces a strong disagreement. As a result, they want to have their say and contribute to the discussion. In most cases, this is not due to a willingness to start a debate or an exchange of opinions, but obeys the necessity they feel to express their opinion.

⁶⁸ How research participants make sense of social networks and how they use them for public debate is an issue that will be analysed in section 9.2.5.

With regard to the broad negative understanding of comment on news there are three different points that have been detected in participants' discourses. Firstly, the more common one is the perception that comments on news stories generally follow a format that is not, or is only barely, moderated. According to the research participants this means that uncivilised and inappropriate behaviours are common, especially as far as the more controversial topics are concerned. In consequence, the research participants think that comments should be more controlled, rather than establishing free environments where inappropriate behaviour is not punished. Secondly, and strongly related to the first point, the participants consider that debate and opinion exchange with other users that they do not know is not as interesting as with other users that they do know. In other words, debating with strangers is not something in which research participants show any special interest. According to the focus group results, the fact that when commenting on news stories the users do not generally know each other or can post anonymously, contributes to the aforementioned inappropriate behaviour, as well as contributes to a disorganised discussion in which generally no one is really interested in opinion exchange. Last but not least, research participants with high levels of public engagement also shows a tendency to argue that comments on news stories are not a suitable space in which to look for new information or points of view. These participants, normally dutiful citizens, are the ones who follow a higher different number of news media, also showing a strong interest in getting in touch with different perspectives and opinions. According to their interventions in the focus groups, they believe that online public debate should be able to provide them with contrasting opinions or suggest new sources of information. As the current configuration of comments on news stories is not generally generating this kind of information, these citizens do not feel compelled to engage.

When analysing the focus group results (as well as the conclusions from previous chapters on news media adoption of participatory journalism), a first general conclusion can be deduced. In their online spaces aimed at public debate, news media are trying to generate a user-media relationship in which the medium is always at the centre of the relationship. Through their fear of losing power, media

do allow some participatory practices that could be beneficial for them, enhancing the user communities of engaged citizens that already exist but which in most cases suffer from a lack of suitable spaces in which to interact. User-user relations are not developed on most news media websites. Such relations would aid in building spaces based on users that know and trust each other and can communicate and exchange information, without the media necessarily always being at the centre of the conversation.

In the study of how news media adopt user participation on their websites (Chapters 5 and 6) this research discovered that some news media, despite being media with a small audience, have active user communities, even bigger than other media with many more visitors to their websites (the *Huffington Post* is the best example of this situation). These media include several features in order to create a community of users that know each other. Users can follow or be 'friends' with other users. The user's profile is a 'social news' site where the latest comments of their 'friends' appear, and by commenting or adding contacts their profile gains badges that identify the user as active. Complementing these options more common tools are also to be found such as responding to other users' comments or reporting inappropriate comments. All these features work along the lines of facilitating users that are commenting on news stories in getting to know each other, contributing to create a community of users aimed at debate or opinion exchange, rather than isolated individuals that post as a reaction.

According to the focus group participants, these tools are appreciated, although not by everyone at the same level: for those participants for whom online debate is not a relevant or interesting practice this will not make a difference, in convincing them to engage. However, these kinds of options can make a difference to those users that are more interested in online debate or that have commented on news stories occasionally, but are not convinced by the more conventional format of comments on news stories. As has been seen, one of the shortcomings of both public spheres in London and Barcelona is the lack of spaces in which to conduct public talk outside the traditional groups of reference (family and friends), where citizens can get in touch with other opinions and points of view. News media

websites have the potentiality to gather engaged citizens in public talk. However, according to the focus group participants, the actual formats by which this kind of participation is implemented are not attracting them to engage.

Websites like the *Huffington Post's*, then, do include some features that work in the direction of generating some user-user relations, clearly inspired by the user-user relations that are produced on social networks. However, most of these news media that are adopting policies of community-building still have a border to cross: allowing direct contact between users on their websites. Media websites are designed to allow some kind of user participation, but this participation always has the medium at the centre of the relationship. Users can reply to news and other comments, maybe even send some user-generated content to be published after previous control, but cannot have any relationship outside these news contexts. Most media websites do not allow users to following other users, or send them private messages or links recommending articles or videos. According to the focus group results, citizens are more likely to participate in online environments where they know and trust each other. Allowing a direct user-user relationship, moving discussions and contact between users outside the context of comment on news will help in the direction of community-building, something that some users will appreciate.

That point being made, it is however necessary to highlight that although news media websites implement such community-building features, these will not attract the majority of users, who do not show a willingness to participate in online debate on a regular basis. Those that actively look for debate and opinion exchange online will always be a minority of engaged citizens (found in the categories of civically engaged, dutiful citizens and actualizing citizens) for whom the online environment offers something that cannot be found offline: public talk with other citizens who have different positions or that, even agreeing on general values and political positions, could offer them valuable insights or new information. As these participants also show high levels of media engagement, they normally consume news and spend significant time on news media websites, being perfect candidates for the regular activity of commenting on news stories.

As demonstrated above, the actual configuration of the formats for public debate on most news media websites, however, is not attracting this kind of ‘target’ user who could be more willing to engage in online debates: comment on news is performed regularly by only a few of the engaged research participants. And even among them, the perception of the practice is negative. It can be argued, then, that they are commenting on news media websites because they do not find any other participatory space online in which to conduct public talk. The general trend, however, is that engaged participants who are actively looking to participate in online debates have already abandoned comment on news after an initial period of commenting on news media websites. These participants in the focus groups, normally middle aged, seem to be turning to other online spaces that they know in order to conduct the practice of online public talk. It has been seen how some participants have email lists of people with whom they debate about public issues or have even created their own forums, with access restricted to those they know. Finally, as will be seen in section 9.3.5 which follows, younger engaged participants tend to prefer social networks for online public talk, as well as specialised websites for concrete public issues or lifestyle.

Regarding other participatory practices that can be conducted on news media websites, participants tend to show a lower level of interest when a higher level of activity or involvement is required. They also tend to show a lower level of knowledge or interest compared with their answers related to comments on news stories. For example, when asked about options for sending their own material to news media websites, the common understanding related to these formats is to relate them to materials absent of newsworthy content, such as pictures about the weather, holidays or similar. It is normally necessary to insist on the issue for content production connected to public issues to appear in participants’ discourses. These options of content production are generally appreciated by most of the research participants, although they confirm that they are only interested in sending pictures, videos or a letter to the editor in exceptional circumstances and as a way to publicise a situation that is personally affecting them (normally local issues such as problems with rubbish collection or with public transportation). The common discourse is that, in a context of absent and passive public

institutions, the capacity for publishing a picture or a letter denouncing a problem in the local community may force institutions to react and give an answer. Most participants agreed that this kind of mechanism to put pressure on public authorities is better than following the normal procedure of writing to the representative or public officer. Nevertheless, this capacity of agency through news media is perceived as effective only at the local level, it being considered almost impossible to have the same effects at the national level. Finally, participants also perceive positively the use of user content in news stories, in those cases in which citizens are witnesses to particularly relevant events and the only existing material is user-generated content produced before the arrival of professional journalists. In any case, although the content originates with an ordinary citizen, participants trust news media to check its veracity.

Most of the participants, however, are not interested in regular or frequent content production. Some focus group participants labelled as 'dutiful citizens' were especially active in writing letters to the editor, and another engaged participant has their own blog on a news media website, but this cannot be considered a general trend. What some research participants asked for is more effective options to directly contact journalists and the newsroom, as well as, for example, the capacity to start their own debates through letters to the editor (that in most cases cannot be commented on), avoiding being restricted to commenting only on the issues that news media consider newsworthy and are consequently published as news stories. Arguments for participation *in* the media (Carpentier, 2011) do not point in the direction of controlling the newsroom, but to having the chance to establish some contact with the news-making process. This also includes some practices that already exist on news media websites, normally labelled as 'networking journalism', in which the medium asks for citizens' cooperation to make the news. This implies a lower level of participation compared with content production, but the capacity to influence the actual process of news production, which for some engaged citizens seems to be very attractive.

In a similar way to formats of content production, participatory formats of selection or personalization tend to be more positively perceived in so as far as

they are of low-intensity. For example, 'soft' personalization such as newsletters or, aggregators such as iGoogle or following news media on social networks to receive their publication on the timeline (selecting in some cases the kind of news: politics, international affairs and sports etc.) is considered as positive. This is especially so among the most engaged citizens, who tend to follow a higher number of news media and appreciate these kinds formats that allow them to 'put some order' in their news sources. With regard to formats of 'hard' personalization, such as options for choosing which kind of news will appear on the home page of a news media website, these are not appreciated, as participants tend to value the news selection made by the media they follow. Similarly, possible options of implicit personalization (the news media adapts the content based on what the user has chosen in previous visits to the site), are also perceived as negative. Finally, with regard to personalization, most of the research participants are not interested if it implies modifying the 'normal' selection of news stories, but they show greater interest and more positive attitudes if it is just aimed at aiding them to gather content from different websites.

9.2.4. Contesting hegemonies

This section is aimed at analysing secondary objective A3 and testing hypothesis A3. As in the previous sections, these have been included below again for better comprehension.

Secondary Objective A3: To analyse how the participatory dimension of the new media environment has affected the formerly existing hegemonies of traditional media institutions and professional journalists within the public sphere.

- **Hypothesis A3:** In what regards citizens' discourses, the hegemony of professional journalists and traditional media institutions as the main actors as producers of news content is generally not under question.

Results from both focus groups in London and in Barcelona confirmed hypothesis A3. According to the research participants, the participatory dimension of the new media environment did not imply a change in citizens' discourses related to the traditional hegemony of journalists and media institutions as the main actors in the production of news about current affairs and public issues. However, although news production can be considered as a non-contested hegemony within the public sphere, there are other traditional hegemonies of news media and professional journalists that are under treat. Participants' discourses showed how the participatory dimension of the new media environment implied the modification of formerly existing common-sense understandings, changing some of the discourses that used to perceive traditional media institutions as central actors within the public sphere. The inefficiency of news media websites in channelling participatory energies of expression and involvement implied that most citizens attracted by online debate and opinion exchange are turning to alternative spaces. Furthermore, a high number of citizens also seem to be attracted by practices of sharing public issues content through spaces such as social networks, starting to contest former hegemonies of traditional media institutions as gatekeepers of what can be considered as newsworthy and what cannot. The next paragraphs will further develop these findings, summarised in conclusion A3, presented below.

Conclusion A3: Discourses related to participation in the media sphere are pointing to possibilities for a major involvement with news content, rather than direct content creation. However, the inexistence on news media websites of appropriate or suitable spaces in which to conduct practices of involvement and interaction implies that citizens are turning to other online environments, indirectly contesting the former hegemony of news media as central actors in the public sphere, as well as their hegemony in news selection and distribution.

In the analysis of participants' public and media engagement a general high level of distrust of journalists and traditional media institutions (present at all levels of

public engagement, although at different degrees) has been perceived. The research participants perceive these traditionally hegemonic actors as biased and as connected to politicians and economic elites. Some participants even conducted discourses of lack of quality in journalists' coverage of some public issues. However, these general discourses of distrust are not transferred to widespread discourses based on contesting the hegemony of these actors in the public sphere. Journalists and traditional media institutions are commonly understood as the actors that should inform citizens about the 'issues of the day', selecting what is newsworthy, interpreting reality and creating the news content that citizens consume in order to be informed. Consequently, the main common-sense understanding among research participants is to identify news media as key actors in society. Traditional media institutions are generally identified with the aforementioned role of informing citizens about 'what is going on' in politics and public issues. However, one of the other main roles generally attributed to news media, the 'watchdog function' (news media and journalists as actors who control political representatives and economic elites), was not generally mentioned during the focus groups. Only some of the more engaged citizens (mostly 'dutiful citizens') mentioned this function of media in society, and when they did it was more to complain about the actual performance rather than to acknowledge it (an argument strongly connected to discourses of distrust).

Although the widespread discourses of distrust connected to journalists and traditional media institutions, as well as the general complaints about the actual practice of the journalistic profession, the common understanding of the participatory dimension of the new media environment is not constructed in relation to discourses of change or modification of the existing hegemonies. Instead of turning to alternative sources (such as citizen journalism or non-traditional media), or taking the lead with participatory practices of content creation, participants prefer to continue respecting journalism as a profession (differentiating it from amateur news content) and traditional media institutions as the main producers of news and the main actors in setting the agenda.

The participatory dimension of the new media environment provides multiple different ways and formats that enable citizens to produce and publish online their own content about public issues or current affairs. Regarding this ‘amateur’ or ‘non-professional’ news content, most research participants show the same level of distrust as that regarding the content originated by traditional news media institutions. Amateurs or ‘citizen journalists’ are considered as also having their own agendas and ideologies, in the same way as traditional sources of information. Furthermore, the common understanding of research participants is to connect these discourses of distrust with discourses related to lack of quality. It is commonly understood that the Internet is a medium where everyone can publish without any previous control. Although some participants stated that this characteristic was positively valued during the first years of the Internet, nowadays it has lost most of its positive connotation. The ‘amateur’ culture that in other fields is encouraged and valued (in fan culture, or regarding leisure activities or hobbies), generates a lack of trust with regard to public issues about the actual knowledge of non-professionals that are creating and publishing their own content, as well as concerns about the actual levels of accountability of these actors. Consequently, despite discourses of distrust towards traditional media institutions, research participants still value them as the hegemonic actors in news production. In the same way, journalists are commonly understood as the professionals who have the knowledge and skills to report news about public issues, and who can be held accountable for the content that they publish.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that non-professional sources are completely discarded by the research participants. Some of the research participants turn to these kinds of news sources in order to compare the points of view of traditional news institutions, although always conscious of their aforementioned limitations. The research participants included under the categories of ‘actualizing citizens’ or ‘legal activists’ are more likely to show positive discourses towards ‘non-professional’ news content. They tend to be less worried about the lack of quality of these sources and are also less worried about the possible bias in information that they could contain. According to these participants’ discourses, ‘citizen journalism’ and other forms of amateur news content are valuable because they

represent new voices in the public sphere. Their presence may indicate that issues that were hidden or not covered by traditional news media are now seeing the light of day and reaching public opinion. Despite this more positive opinion, not even ‘actualizing citizens’ or ‘legal activists’ show any special interest in producing their own content. When they do, however, they prefer formats outside news media websites, such as creating their own blogs. Other formats of content creation, for example, letters to the editor, are preferred by citizens such as ‘dutiful citizens’, who are more likely to engage on news media websites, having lower levels of distrust with regard to these institutions.

The fact that the participatory dimension of the new media environment is not enhancing citizens’ positive discourses linked to content creation is due to the fact that the common understanding of online participation is similar to the one attributed to offline participation, or more specifically, to political participation. According to participants’ discourses, participation has a meaning close to ‘involvement’, rather than a meaning connected to ‘full participation’, which tends to equalise the power positions of all the actors present in a concrete practice. Participants’ discourses towards life in democracy are pointing to an increase in citizens’ agency and to an increase also in the possibilities for their voices to be heard in the political sphere, rather than a demand for a direct and continuous presence in decision-making processes (that is, direct democracy).

Similarly, discourses related to participation in the media sphere are pointing to possibilities for a major involvement with news content, rather than direct content creation. Consequently, participants’ discourses towards online media participation stress cooperation with the existing hegemonic actors rather than a willingness for active contestation, implying a preference for low-intensity online participatory practices, as has been seen in the previous section of this chapter. That is, the research participants do not generally show any willingness to act as journalists or substitute traditional media institutions. Even those participants who engage in active and periodical practices of content creation related to public issues, such as blogs, are doing so connecting these activities with a need to express themselves, for entertainment purposes or with the aim of generating

debate and discussion, rather than creating an alternative to traditional news producers. However, although contestation or challenge of hegemonic actors might not be a component of the participants' discourses, the participatory dimension of the new media environment has brought with it new actors and formats of online participation that are altering, in an indirect way, some of the formerly existing power positions of news media institutions and professional journalists.

In part, this indirect contestation is produced due to the inexistence on news media websites of appropriate or suitable spaces in which to conduct practices of involvement and interaction. As has been seen, in their online spaces, traditional news media are not developing formats that are attracting users to discuss and debate public issues and current affairs. Similarly, news media websites are not developing user-user interaction out of comments on news stories. Hence, those participants that visit news media websites do not find there appropriate formats that could accommodate their participatory energies.

This situation has led citizens to look for other online environments in which to conduct practices of involvement and interaction. As seen in the previous section of this chapter, some citizens create their own spaces where they can conduct debates about public issues, or use existing formats such as email lists to get in touch with friends, share links about current affairs and start discussions and opinion exchange. Most research participants, however, find the spaces to conduct these kinds of practices on social networks. By doing so, participants, although in an unconscious and indirect way, are starting to contest some of the traditionally uncontested power positions of news media and professional journalists within the public sphere. More specifically, by conducting practices of disseminating links about news content, participants are directly affecting the way that information flows.

Furthermore, by performing practices of online discussions in these environments, participants are challenging the traditional central position of news media within the public sphere. However, although these practices do suppose a redefinition of former hegemonies, it is necessary to point out that they are not yet questioning

the hegemonic power position of news media in the different processes related to the news cycle. Despite the fact that they can conduct these practices outside news media websites, what citizens share and debate online are still mainly links to traditional news media websites. Here it is necessary to point out also how research participants tend to refuse options of hard personalization. Options for personalization that imply modifications of the 'normal' selection of news presented on news media websites were commonly perceived as negative, with most of the research participants believing that is important to be in touch with the media's selection, without, for example reading only about what they like the most. By doing so, the research participants were accepting that the role of news media as gatekeepers of what is newsworthy or what is not is still acknowledged.

9.2.5. Alternative spaces

This section will analyse secondary objective A4 and test hypothesis A4. These have been included below for better understanding.

Secondary Objective A4: Based on previous research, confirming that news media websites are not attracting most of the online participation, studying why citizens prefer to conduct online participatory practices outside news media online environments.

- **Hypothesis A4:** The lack of suitable spaces for participation on news media websites is bringing citizens to other online environments to fulfill their participatory intensities.

According to the focus group results, hypothesis A4 can be confirmed. As has been seen in the previous sections, news media websites are not commonly understood as suitable online spaces in which to conduct practices of involvement and expression, although they are perceived as the main source of online information about public issues or current affairs. The following paragraphs will summarise how research participants understand and make sense of social networks. The

majority of the research participants have generally identified these online spaces as the main environments where they conduct online media participatory practices. The attitudes and motivations of the research participants will be analysed together with the characteristics of these online spaces to better understand why they are seen as suitable spaces for online participation. Finally, the implications that social networks have in relation to the shortcomings and hegemonies within the public sphere will be analysed.

Conclusion A4: Although both news media websites and social networks adopt mainly low intensity formats of citizen participation, the research participants tend to prefer the latter rather than the former. Social networks allow users a higher user-user relationship, ensuring that users can use these online environments in many different ways without the medium being the centre of the interaction.

Among the research participants, social networks are an important medium in which to conduct online participation connected to public issues⁶⁹. It is among the young research participants where more interest and involvement in these kinds of online environments can be found, although other participants older than 30 also show different levels of activity. For some of the young participants, social networks represent their most common understanding of Internet use. However, they do not attribute a direct 'political' meaning to most of the practices conducted on social networks, neither do most of them normally connect these practices to public issues or current affairs. This is due to the fact that social networks, for all the participants who use them, are environments strongly embedded in everyday life contexts, used principally to be in touch with friends and family or to receive updates about citizens' hobbies or interests. Hence, 'political' activity or practices connected to public issues are not the principal activities performed in such environments. Rather, these kinds of participatory practices are conducted in an

⁶⁹ For most of the research participants 'social networks' are identified as Facebook. Some of the youngest research participants also identified the concept with Twitter or Instagram. Although in these conclusions I will refer generally to the term 'social networks', in most cases it is necessary to point out that in fact we are talking about Facebook, by far the most widely adopted social network.

environment in which ‘the political’ is intrinsically embedded in the private sphere, therefore making it hard for the research participants to differentiate the latter from the former. Social networks allow users to share content that might be easily perceived as ‘political’ (such as links to news media about a corruption scandal, for example), but also to share content that has less obvious connotations or that mixes ‘political’ issues with entertainment (such as ‘memes’ about a politician or political party, for example). Furthermore, any of this kind of content might attract users’ interest, prompting them to resend it to their contacts or even to comment on it, which generates debate and discussion and more visibility for the content.

Although practices connected to social networks such as sharing public issues links or getting involved in debates are widespread among the research participants (disregarding their levels of public engagement), there are two different groups of research participants who especially exemplify the strong presence of social networks in citizens’ everyday life and how they affect participants’ discourses associated with ‘participation in the community’. Firstly, there are some of the less engaged participants (mainly ‘attentive’ or ‘apolitical’), for whom ‘being involved’ or ‘participating’ in their communities is basically identified with participatory practices connected to public issues and conducted on social networks. This means that sharing links about political or public issues on social networks is a practice directly understood as the principal political activity that this small group of participants is conducting. Moreover, for these participants, such practices conducted on social networks are the only practices connected to public issues that they are conducting at all. With almost no involvement in offline participatory practices, their reduced participatory energies are then predominantly shown online. It is generally perceived as a quick and easy participation, normally connected to some news about current affairs that has caused an emotional reaction, and is also generally associated with effectivity, as will be explored further later on in this section.

Secondly, there is the group of citizens labelled as ‘actualizing citizens’. For these research participants, Internet use is strongly understood as participatory practices, social networks being the preferred online environments in which to

articulate participatory practices aimed at expression and involvement. They tend to have a more 'political' common understanding about their activity on social networks, less embedded in daily life and more purpose-motivated to individual or small group forms of participation. However, this 'political' activity tends to be addressed to personal interests or lifestyle, rather than collective public issues: 'actualizing citizens' tend to be less identified with the traditional model of citizenship and participation as aimed at collective goals, preferring to be involved in small private spheres of action. Hence, political activity online obeys more a conscious and willing motivation to get involved in issues of personal interest, rather than being articulated through a reaction to some news or links about current affairs that they have previously seen or heard about (which is usual in other kinds of citizens). Finally, although they do not limit their participatory practices to those conducted online, also being participative offline, these participants find in online spaces such as social networks the ideal environments in which to get in touch frequently with similar like-minded individuals, debating, sharing content and articulating offline action and online campaigning.

These behavioral patterns identified among 'actualizing citizens', although relevant⁷⁰ cannot be extended to the research participants overall. As already mentioned, most citizens do not perceive social networks as spaces in which to conduct mainly 'political' participation. Rather, they are understood as spaces for communication with friends, family or other groups of contacts, as well as spaces where they can gather information about hobbies or personal interests. Despite this secondary 'political' role of social networks, almost all of the research participants who are active in these online spaces have posted links about public issues on their timelines, links that normally come from traditional news media websites. This practice of sharing content about public issues is, among the research participants, commonly understood as a political activity, aimed at publishing or 'letting people know' about some news that they have become aware of and feel the need to share with contacts. Regarding this action of sharing, it is

⁷⁰ Chapter 10 will include a final discussion in which the possible implications for the immediate future of social networks and models of citizenship such as 'actualizing citizens' will be further addressed, putting into context some of the findings of this research with previous literature on late modernity.

normally due to the fact that the object of the news caused an emotional reaction or feeling of indignation, thus compelling the participant to denounce a certain situation⁷¹. Practices of sharing are commonly perceived as effective: they allow contacts on the social network to be aware of the denounced situation, normally generating feedback about the issue, in the form of 'likes' or 'comments', or even sharing it on their own timelines. Moreover, if the issue is local, research participants perceive it as also more likely to generate 'noise' that can affect political representatives in order for them to act upon it.

The other practice related to public issues on social networks that is mentioned by the research participants is debates generated through links or status updates published by their contacts. The participants said that they were more likely to read links published by close friends or relatives. Similarly, they are also more likely to engage in public debate on social networks, especially Facebook, due to the fact that these discussions and debates will be conducted with other people that they know. Moreover, as on Facebook people tend to know each other (a point that is less certain on other social networks such as Twitter or LinkedIn), participants have the perception that debates conducted on this social network tend to be civilized and constructive. Furthermore, the research participants confirm that through debates on social networks they are able to get in touch with different political positions or points of view, having the feeling that these kinds of online discussions have a positive outcome in that they learnt something or perceived that the exchange of opinions was useful.

At this point, it is necessary to highlight the general positive common understandings that participation on social networks generates among the research participants who are active on these sites, in comparison with the opinions that participation on news media websites generate among the participants who are also frequent visitors. Both online environments generally conceive participation as divided into small 'modules' or 'tasks' of different

⁷¹ Examples of issues that have caused participants to share news are: corruption scandals, calls to participate in demonstrations, a special event such as the death of Margaret Thatcher, election results or news related to the economic crisis and its consequences (such as evictions and poverty).

magnitudes and participatory intensities⁷², with both of them, therefore, theoretically being similarly able to attract different kinds of citizens with divergent participatory energies and also a diverse willingness for online participation. For example, the most popular social network among the research participants, Facebook, allows users to check the timeline in order to know what contacts are posting, register a 'like' or make a 'comment', or even publish original content, such as a picture, or open a particular space (fan page) aimed at a particular interest (from hobbies to political issues). Similarly, most news media websites also allow users to get involved at different intensities. Users can always just visit the website, surfing through its diverse news content. However, if they prefer they can also comment on news stories, rate news stories or other comments, participate in polls or online interviews or even produce their own original material, or cooperate in creating a particular piece (networking journalism). As previously seen, allowing for different intensities of participation, there are no major differences between social networks and news media websites.

However, as has been seen in previous sections of this chapter, news media websites adopt models that, even allowing for different intensities of participation, restrict users' involvement to a user-medium relationship and do not allow users to go further than the strict borders of the features provided. On the other hand, social networks tend to be created with another purpose in mind: to give users a set of features but also the freedom to develop and use them in whatever way they decide. A good example of this is one of the research participants, who instead of using Facebook as a tool to be in touch with friends or relatives, is using it specifically as a kind of newsletter, following various media fan pages and checking the timeline to see the latest news stories being shared. Furthermore, possibilities for user-user interactions on social networks are higher than on news media websites, facilitating user exchange. This is especially obvious on social networks such as Facebook, where according to the research participants people normally tend to know each other, but it becomes more relevant for community building on social networks such as Twitter or LinkedIn, where the level of previous

⁷² In his study about political participation in Britain, Chadwick (2014) defines as 'granularity' this characteristic of collaborative and participative online environments in fostering audience involvement and participation.

knowledge of the contacts is lower. It is precisely this point of knowing each other that greatly contributes towards an increased willingness to participate on social networks rather than on news media websites. In a similar way, alternative spaces for debate or opinion exchange created by research participants (such as closed forums for political debate or email lists), work in the same direction: ensuring the quality of the debate by limiting the participation to those people whom the participants already know, rather than opening it up to everyone.

Nevertheless the aforementioned practices of debating and sharing public issues content have a series of important consequences that go beyond their comparison with news media websites and that are connected with several issues of public engagement already presented in this summary of findings. First of all, they affect the previously identified shortcomings of the Catalan and UK public sphere (see the first sections of Chapters 7 and 8): selective exposure, and the lack of spaces in which to find citizens with different political positions or values. The focus group analysis has identified that the online practice of being active on social networks could mitigate, in part, these shortcomings of the public sphere. Links about public issues or current affairs shared by contacts limit issues of selective exposure: participants are more likely to read links posted by friends, and to start online discussions with people whom they actually know. Through these practices social networks could be a tool to find new perspectives outside the news media that they normally follow and beyond the political positions shared in their group of friends or relatives. Contacts on social networks are not limited to these groups, normally people also have among their contacts old friends, former job colleagues, people that they do not meet on a regular basis and that might be outside their groups of reference, thus being more likely to have different values and political positions. As has already been seen, this component of 'meeting the other' is necessary for a healthy democracy. Most citizens tend to be in contact with friends that think in a similar way, and in a high-choice media environment, it is only the participants with higher levels of media engagement who make the effort to gather different media in order to receive several 'views of the world'.

In conclusion, social media may help to mitigate some of the effects of these shortcomings, especially for those less engaged citizens ('passive' or 'attentive' citizens) who limit their news media consumption and infrequently perform public talk. Consequently, social networks might be perceived as facilitators of public engagement, spaces where information flows and calls for action are disseminated, being particularly relevant for the less engaged citizens who would normally be outside the more traditional spaces in which to be in touch with information or to be called to active participation and involvement. Furthermore, this is also strongly related to the contextual factors that are affecting the public sphere: focus group results showed how the Catalan participants are more active in sharing and commenting on social networks compared with the London participants. In a more vivid public sphere such as the Catalan one, it is more likely that this kind of low-intensity participation of sharing and commenting will be more common, with citizens' timelines tending to receive more links about public issues and current affairs. As a result, more citizens (including those who are normally more passive) feel compelled to share or debate on social networks, facilitating the motivation for these citizens to go one step further and become active offline also.

Furthermore, practices of sharing and commenting on social networks, to the extent that they are becoming widespread among citizens, might be challenging some of the former hegemonies of traditional media institutions within the public sphere. First of all, by sharing links about public issues, citizens are contributing to generating visibility for this content: it is distributed on their timelines and can be seen by all their contacts. Moreover, it can be resent or commented on, thus increasing its visibility on the social network. If the content is interesting enough, it can be easily shared among a significant number of citizens, going 'viral' and becoming something newsworthy that traditional media institutions will be more likely to pick up and disseminate. Research participants are aware of this potentiality for social networks to disseminate content, valuing the fact that from their accounts they can effectively influence the public sphere. Something of which they are less aware, however, is the fact that this could represent a contestation of the traditional hegemony of traditional media institutions as the gatekeepers who select what is newsworthy and what is not. When choosing the content they share,

research participants showed no preference regarding links from news media or from other non-traditional actors. However, the fact is that most of the participants have shared news media links, this being the kind of content related to public issues that is most shared, which can be considered as normal as news media websites are by far the main source of information among the research participants. In conclusion, it can be argued that social networks have the potentiality to affect the agenda setting, but due to the fact that news media are still the main source of information, they still hold a hegemonic power position in news production and distribution.

However, this position could be endangered in the near future if alternative media or citizen journalism become more widely accepted and followed as sources of information about current affairs. Regarding this point, it is necessary to highlight that when considering social media effects it must be taken into account that, currently, not everyone in the population is an active user of these online environments. Nevertheless, their use is becoming more and more common, even among age groups traditionally outside internet developments (older cohorts). Understanding now some of the potentialities of social networks may help us to better analyse possible future scenarios and evolutions of the media environment, if in the next few years their use becomes as widespread as traditional media are today.

Table 9.3. Resume of research objectives, hypotheses and conclusions

MAIN RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	Secondary objectives	Hypotheses	Conclusions
A- To research how citizens perceive online media participation, focusing on their attitudes and motivations towards the different options offered by news media to participate on their websites.	A1- To comprehend how citizens understand online media participation in relation to their offline engagement and involvement in public issues.	HA1- There is no direct and absolute relationship between on and offline participation. The relationship is better conceptualised as dialogical.	CA1- A higher level of public engagement of a research participant does not imply a more active online participation. Contextual factors (the economic crisis and the national debate) mean that, generally, the research participants in Barcelona are more participative than those in London. Individual factors, such as attitudes and motivations towards online media participatory practices, as well as age, play an important role.
	A2- To better understand to what extent citizens are participating and which kinds of online participatory practices citizens prefer to conduct on news media websites: practices of selection, interaction or content production.	HA2- The options for participation included on news media websites are generally not perceived as interesting, neither as a way to contribute to the news production process nor as a format for public debate.	CA2- Although options for user participation are not generally attracting research participants to participate frequently, they are valued and appreciated. Participants prefer to be involved in practices of low intensity, although the current formats adopted by news media websites are generally considered as inappropriate.
	A3- To analyse how the participatory dimension of the new media environment has affected the formerly existing hegemonies of traditional media institutions and professional journalists within the public sphere.	HA3- In what regards citizens' discourses, the hegemony of professional journalists and traditional media institutions as the main actors as producers of news content is generally not under question.	CA3- Discourses related to participation in the media sphere are pointing to possibilities for a major involvement with news content, rather than direct content creation. However, the inexistence on news media websites of appropriate or suitable spaces in which to conduct practices of involvement and interaction implies that citizens are turning to other online environments, indirectly contesting the former hegemony of news media as central actors in the public sphere, as well as their hegemony in news selection and distribution.
	A4- Based on previous research, confirming that news media websites are not attracting most of the online participation, studying why citizens prefer to conduct online participatory practices outside news media online environments.	HA4- The lack of suitable spaces for participation on news media websites is bringing citizens to other online environments to fulfill their participatory intensities.	CA4- Although both news media websites and social networks adopt mainly low intensity formats of citizen participation, the research participants tend to prefer the latter rather than the former. Social networks allow users a higher user-user relationship, ensuring that users can use these online environments in many different ways without the medium being the centre of the interaction.

<p>B- To study through which participatory options news media websites are adopting citizen participation. To research if news media are opening their websites to users' contributions, facilitating citizens' opinion exchange, or restricting participatory formats.</p>	<p>B1- To analyse which kinds of options for participation are more adopted by news media websites: options of selection, interaction or content production.</p>	<p>HB1- News media generally prefer to continue offering users options of participation that are not directly connected to the news production process.</p>	<p>CB1- There exists a series of participatory tools that tend to be the most adopted on most news media. News media websites prefer to include options of low-intensity of participation. This implies adopting participatory interactivity and formats of selective interactivity that do not imply hard personalization. Formats that allow users' direct contribution (productive interactivity) are those that are least adopted.</p>
	<p>B2- To look for differences between kinds of media or between the two countries present in the research.</p>	<p>HB2- Regarding participatory journalism, no big differences are expected to be found between Catalan and UK news media websites.</p>	<p>CB2- Although there exists a series of widely adopted common tools, there are also great differences in the total number of tools and how these are applied and combined. UK news media tend to adopt a lower number of participatory options than Catalan ones. There is also a tendency on British news media to control comments and establish mechanisms to enhance quality and limit inappropriate use or antisocial behavior.</p>
	<p>B3- To evaluate the existence of different models of participation in news media websites, based on the kinds of participatory tools adopted by news media.</p>	<p>HB3- The different combinations of tools allow news media websites to develop different models of participation.</p>	<p>CB3- According to the selection of tools and the levels of user-medium and user-user interaction, three different models can be defined: 'low intensity', 'user community' and 'collaboration networks'.</p>

CHAPTER 10

Final discussion

The previous chapters of this thesis have shown, firstly, the theoretical and methodological background on which this research builds and to which it aims to contribute. Secondly, the different fieldwork that forms the main body of the research project has been presented, both in its quantitative and qualitative parts. To conclude, the preceding chapter, Chapter 9, drew together all the results gathered during the fieldwork, connecting them with the initial objectives and hypotheses and presenting the different conclusions of this research. At this point, it is necessary therefore to come back to the first chapters of the thesis, with the aim of connecting and comparing previous research with the findings of this study. This final chapter will go through the different theories and arguments analysed in the literature review, putting into context the different findings of this research and reflecting on how these may evolve the different issues raised throughout the previous chapters. By doing so, it will show more clearly what this thesis has contributed to research in the field, which areas have been clarified and which ones still remain partially in the shadows. Finally, the last paragraphs will show which research lines this research has opened, suggesting new objects of investigation that may continue the work started in this research project.

The literature review of this thesis has shown how definitions of ‘participation’ in media studies tend to be strongly influenced by political theory (Livingstone, 2013; Dahlgren, 2013; Carpentier, 2011). This implies that, generally, media studies adopt a normative dimension of the term, considering citizen participation within the media sphere as intrinsically beneficial and as generating positive outcomes

for society. Although in political theory not all 'models of democracy' (Held, 2006) attribute the same level of importance to citizens' participation in public issues and democratic life, all do agree in arguing that some level of citizen participation is needed: while 'elitist' models tend to advocate a minimum level of direct citizen participation in public issues, 'participatory' models of democracy prefer to expand the borders of participation, advocating a more direct and active involvement of citizens in public life (Pateman, 1970).

Similarly, despite 'monitorial citizen' theories (Schudson, 1998; Zaller, 2003), media studies have tended normally to highlight the importance of the 'informed citizen', as well as the relevance for democratic life of citizens' involvement with news media (Curran, 2011; Dewey, 1923; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Papacharissi, 2002). The new media environment, however, brought new possibilities for citizens' active involvement 'in' and 'through' media (Carpentier, 2011; Press & Williams, 2010), which implied a reconfiguration of academic discourses about citizen participation within the media sphere. Debates that were once about how to connect and engage citizens with journalists and media institutions, 'democratizing' news media by incorporating ideas from public journalism (Rosen, 1999; Friedland & Nichols, 2002), have now been almost entirely substituted by participatory theories that have argued in favour of expanding citizens' access to media production and distribution (Jenkins, 2006), or of enhancing the capabilities of the Internet for the development of a new digital public sphere (Malina, 1999; Sassi, 2000; Papacharissi, 2010), following the different waves of online optimism or Internet-based euphoria that were produced during the development of new communication technologies (Curran et al., 2012).

As becomes clear in the body of literature that has analysed the participatory dimension of the new media environment (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009; Bruns, 2008), media studies have tended to advocate that more citizen participation in the media sphere will be intrinsically positive, mixing the notions of producers and consumers, assuming that every citizen wants to be an active practitioner. Consequently, theories about media and participation normally argue in favour of citizens' direct implication in decision-making processes, following maximalist

approaches based on political theory. Citizen participation in the media sphere is therefore not considered as an option but as a societal objective, as part of a democratic struggle that has its roots in the battlefield of 'the political' (Mouffe, 2001, 2005). To 'democratise' news media thus becomes a key objective for those projects that advocate a more active involvement of citizens in public life, stressing the value of direct participation instead of representation or delegation of power. As a consequence, participation is sometimes conceptualised in contraposition to 'interaction' (Carpentier, 2011). Such an approach understands 'participation' in terms of 'full' participation that holds some level of power position in decision-making processes, and 'interaction' as other practices that are not aimed at participating in these processes of making decisions (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). In the context of the newsroom, this would mean limiting participation only to practices connected, in one way or another, to content creation, in relation to the newsroom or conducted through alternative media⁷³.

This identification between participation in the media sphere and participation in public or democratic life becomes especially strong in previous research conducted on participatory journalism. As seen in Borger et al. (2013) in their review of the body of literature about this subject, one of the main characteristics of previous research that has studied news media's adoption of citizen participation on their websites is a clear 'normative' approach to the phenomenon. Accordingly, those news media that open their websites to citizen participation are celebrated as enhancing the democratic function of news media and contributing to the creation of a new and more egalitarian public sphere, while those who do not are pointed to as being anti-democratic or as too protective of the traditional hegemonies of news media and professional journalists in news selection, production and distribution.

Nevertheless, the focus group results, both in London and in Barcelona, have shown how the research participants generally construct their participatory

⁷³ This research, as has been seen, adopts a different perspective, also including under the concept of 'participation' practices of involvement with media content or with professional journalists.

discourses differently depending on the societal field with which these are connected or associated. Participation in democratic societies tends to be perceived as a 'method' through which citizens can make decisions or influence their representatives. Common discourses among research participants tend to be identified with 'participatory democracy' models rather than with 'elitist' ones (Held, 2006), although the research participants show different participatory intensities, being active or participative at different levels. This implies that research participants can be categorised by their 'levels of public engagement', as has been seen in the preceding chapters. Moreover, these levels of public engagement can also be understood as different kinds of citizenship or attitudes towards the public world, although, the one thing common to all of them is a general perception that 'to participate' or 'get involved' in public issues is important: personal circumstances may imply a more active or passive participation, but even those more passive or actively disengaged participants acknowledge that citizen participation is a key element for a healthy democracy. Participation in democracy or in the public world is thus associated with having an active role in decision-making processes, or with forms of expression that allow citizens to have their say or show their opinion about a particular public issue. Furthermore, 'democratic' participation is manifested in multiple forms or practices, both online and offline, and associated with different ways of understanding citizenship and life in democracy.

On the other hand, formats of participatory journalism (Singer et al., 2011), or participation 'in' or 'through' news media (Carpentier, 2011) are not associated with the same kinds of attitudes and motivations towards the public world. Journalism is still seen as an 'expert system' (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2008) or an elitist sphere in which citizens have no special interest in entering into decision-making processes. Similarly, news media institutions, although suffering from a lack of trust among citizens, are still perceived as the main and most valued source of news about public issues and current affairs. Furthermore, practices connected to 'participatory journalism' are not generally connected to 'democratic' or 'civic' aims. Consequently, citizens understand participation in the media sphere more in terms of involvement with media content rather than high-intensity participation

or content creation, and do not tend to connect formats of participatory journalism with the democratic role of media in democracy. More specifically, research participants showed different levels of 'connection' (Couldry et al., 2007) with news media and public issues (highly related to their levels of public engagement, as has been seen), but no special relation between their attitudes towards the public world and online participatory practices conducted in news media websites.

These citizens' perceptions contrast with the behavior and attitude of journalists and media institutions. Traditional news media, like many other companies that try to deal with 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013) and adapt it to their routines and practices, tend to consider that they are facing a saturated water dam. They would like to open the gates slightly, adopting formats for citizen participation in order to attract users' attention and increase their website's traffic rankings. But they are also afraid that if they create a small loophole, it will eventually grow by itself ending in an uncontrollable waterfall that might change the power relations in the journalistic field as well as their traditional role as hegemonic actors in news selection, production and distribution. Previous research on participatory journalism showed how motivations to adopt citizen participation obeyed economic imperatives (attracting traffic), rather than a willingness to contribute to enhancing the democratic function of journalism (Shever & Shever, 2006; Vujnovic et al. 2010). Moreover, previous studies also showed how professional journalists are concerned about their status, striving to maintain their power position as gatekeepers and news producers against the new capabilities introduced by the participatory dimension of the new media environment (Domingo, 2008; Williams et al. 2010; Singer et al. 2011; Ruiz et al. 2011; Hermida, 2011).

As seen in previous chapters, however, most of the research participants are willing to participate online, but not along the lines of being active producers of media content, neither on news media websites nor in other online environments. Rather, they show more interest in low-intensity formats of online participation, such as formats aimed at public talk, content sharing, cooperation with news media or direct contact with journalists or the newsroom. Instead of substituting

journalists, contesting their hegemony as news producers, the research participants showed more interest in cooperating with them or interacting with media content, understanding participation on news media websites as something additional or secondary to the main informative function of these websites.

News media have then no need to be concerned for their present hegemony as news producers if they open the doors to citizen participation, whether it is for economic reasons or for a true understanding of journalism as a key element of the public sphere, a public space that should be open, under some controlled limits, to citizen participation. As has been seen in the chapters aimed at showing the results of the focus groups, both Catalan and UK public spheres suffer from several shortcomings, some of them being the high levels of distrust of traditional news media institutions and the lack of spaces in which to conduct public talk and meet different perspectives and points of view. As Nick Couldry has argued, news media are one of the 'natural' spaces to host online participatory practices (Couldry, 2010), being able to contribute to mitigating these shortcomings, creating a more deliberative and less partisan public sphere where the 'agonistic pluralism' (Mouffe, 2001, 2005) could be developed, strengthening the ties between citizens and news media and contributing to a more healthy democracy. It is necessary, however, to acknowledge that online media participatory practices are not per se fostering democracy or enhancing a long-lost public sphere (Papacharissi, 2010). Although they have the potentiality to do so, it will depend both on the formats that are adopted to channel citizen participation and on the existing attitudes and motivations of citizens towards these formats and online participation.

Regarding the formats and environments where citizens can conduct online media participatory practices, according to the focus group results news media websites have two main characteristics that could make them suitable candidates to gather online citizen participation. Firstly, they are everyday life environments that citizens visit to gather information about current affairs, and secondly, the structure of these websites may allow a wide variety of formats for citizen participation, with different levels of participatory intensity that can suit the needs of different types of users (from content production to comments on news stories

or contacting a journalist, as has been seen in the chapters aimed at studying Catalan and UK news media websites). According to the research participants, only a minority of engaged individuals are actively searching the Internet for spaces directly aimed at online participation related to public issues. Most of the participants, therefore, are not interested in these kinds of specialised 'political' websites, or they visit them only occasionally (for example, websites for online petitions, platforms of citizen journalism or websites aimed at political debate such as Open Democracy). Nevertheless, most of the research participants do visit news media websites during their everyday life to be informed, and might be attracted by the 'incidental' formats of participation that these websites adopt, based on the different low-intensity forms of online participation adopted by news media.

Despite being 'natural' environments to foster citizen participation, the focus group results showed that options of participatory journalism are not attracting most of the research participants, confirming results from previous quantitative studies that have pointed out the low numbers of citizens that are engaging in these kinds of online media participatory practices (Newman & Levi, 2013; Larsson, 2011). As seen in previous chapters, news media websites adopt a high number of different tools. Most of them do not allow options for productive interactivity or original content creation, and when they do so, they are normally content for it to be moderated before publication or unconnected to the news production process (such as users' blogs, for example). The same can be said about selective interactivity and forms of personalization. Most news media allow users to choose between 'soft' formats for receiving news, such as newsletters or RSS, but do not allow forms of 'hard' personalization that would allow users to modify which news stories can be seen on the homepage based on their own preferences. In fact, these patterns go hand in hand with the research participants' attitudes and motivations towards online media participation: with only a few exceptions, options for content production and 'hard' personalization are not attracting the Catalan and UK focus group participants. This lack of interest is not produced because the actual formats adopted on news media websites are inadequate, but is due to the fact that most citizens do not show any great interest in practices of content creation or personalization, the former because it requires a high level of

involvement and the latter because it implies too radical a change in the way that they receive news media content. However, regarding options of participative interactivity, aimed at interaction between users or between users and media content, participants' attitudes showed, firstly, a greater interest in engaging with these options; and secondly, widespread disagreement with the actual format that news media websites are using to implement them.

As previous chapters have shown, participative interactivity is the most adopted format for participatory journalism. In great measure, how news media websites configure this kind of interactivity affects the model of participation that they apply on their websites. It is precisely by developing this kind of interactivity that news media could strength the ties with users and journalists, developing formats to facilitate users' contributions and cooperation and creating suitable environments for debate and opinion exchange. The study of Catalan and UK news media websites showed how news media, although with different policies and at different degrees, are currently developing such spaces and formats for user participation.

Nevertheless, the focus group results showed how the formats adopted to enable participative interactivity that are currently developed by news media websites are generally not valued positively by the research participants. The participants point to a lack of spaces in which to interact with the medium, for example, by contacting journalists or different sections of the newsroom. Moreover, in the spaces provided for that function (such as 'comment on news' or in journalists' blogs, where journalists are rarely present), news media are not engaging with users. Furthermore, the formats provided for user interaction are not developing user-user interaction, always keeping the medium and the text (news) at the centre of the conversation. As an example, comments on news stories are generally the only option for users to interact with each other and, although some news media adopt users' profiles similar to social networks, private messages and conversations among users are commonly not allowed. Without these options, the creation of communities of users who know and trust each other is difficult to implement, except in the case of the smallest news media with a particular

ideological or editorial position (as seen in *Vilaweb* or in a different case, in the *Huffington Post*).

Consequently, formats for public debate on news media websites are generally perceived in a negative way, being seen as inappropriate and inefficient environments in which to discuss and exchange opinions with other users. This implies that the few engaged participants who are actively looking for online participation are not attracted by the formats adopted by news media websites and those who visit news media websites to gather information about public issues are not generally engaging in 'incidental' formats of online participation. To sum up, the current formats adopted by news media websites are not attracting most citizens to online participation. In some cases, such as news production or personalization, this is due to the fact that only a minority of users are interested in these formats. In others, such as formats of participative interactivity, this is due to a failure of existing formats in attracting citizens to engage on the website.

Apart from this inadequacy of formats, what news media websites are also facing is a disjunctive between quantity and quality. Regarding issues of increasing the quality of media content through citizen participation, the 'collaboration networks' model of participation on news media websites is a good example. It adopts formats that allow news media to channel user participation in order to aid journalists in their work and involve citizens in the news production process. Furthermore, examples of 'user community' models have also been seen in which news media websites successfully channel users' participatory intensities, creating spaces for debate and opinion exchange by adopting participatory options that work along the lines of facilitating users in getting to know each other, although this is not the case for the majority of news media regarding comments on news stories. But to successfully adopt these models of user participation, news media websites need to actively remediate participatory culture, adapting it to the context of journalism and news media institutions and modifying their traditional praxis in order to include users' contributions or to moderate and receive feedback from their communities of users, which certainly implies costs in terms of time and resources. These are costs that might result in incrementing the quality of users'

participation (through involving them in the news production process or in contributing to create spaces for debate and opinion exchange) but that will rarely result in attracting large numbers of users. As already seen, online participation works in the same way as the offline one: the higher the intensity of participation that the practice requires, the fewer the participants who will take part in it. Consequently, for those news media that are more interested in attracting traffic through citizen participation, practices of high intensity are not a good option. However, for small news media, to focus on these kinds of online practices may work along the lines of creating an active and engaged community of users, a community that, due its small numbers, is also easier to control and moderate.

As seen in the previous paragraphs, the different ways in which traditional news media institutions are trying to adopt participatory options on their websites is a good example of the special moment of transition that late modern societies are experiencing, especially with regard to the profession of journalism. According to some authors, we are now in a moment of transition between media regimes (Jenkins et al. 2013; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011; Press & Williams, 2010; Jenkins, 2007) in which the media environment is changing, technology and social practice being highly mutable. In this context, it is hard to predict how the current transformation of the media environment will affect the media regime and how the role in democracy of journalism will be redefined. There is as yet no agreement about to what extent participatory culture will be widely diffused and extended among late modern societies (Papacharissi, 2010). Will the participatory dimension of the new media environment suppose a challenge for media power and traditional hegemonies of news media and professional journalists? Or will it imply more of a redefinition, aiding the development of a new model of late modern journalism in which cooperation and networking between citizens and journalists will be the key to creating participatory narratives? (Dahlgren, 2013).

Coming back to the first research conducted on participatory journalism, it becomes clear that news media have tended to adopt a high number of participatory formats on their websites, and that these formats have evolved since the first attempts to adapt citizen participation (Thurman & Hermida, 2010;

Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Domingo et al, 2008). Nevertheless, it is also true that participatory formats did not radically imply a change in the news-production process: although the formats have been changing through the years, citizens' presence in decision-making processes remains relatively rare (Paulussen et al., 2007). Neither have they been perceived by citizens as tools to enhance democracy or increase the quality of journalistic content, according to the focus group results. After several years of adopting participatory culture, the profession of journalism has undergone what can be defined as an evolution rather than a radical transformation (Almiron & Jarque, 2008). Moreover, as has been seen in previous chapters, some news media are currently working along the lines of restricting user participation on their websites, rather than continuing to open their gates following the trend that they have been applying since the mid 2000s⁷⁴. Hence, are we now facing the beginning of a turning point regarding citizen participation? Will news media websites in the future be more focused on pure information and analysis, limiting the participatory options offered by the website to a minimum and channelling medium-user interactions towards other online environments?

According to the focus group results, this is a plausible future scenario. As has been seen in Chapters 7 and 8, some transformations in the media environment are producing a new series of practices (sharing or spreading messages and content through social networks or other formats such as emails or mobile messaging services) that indirectly contest the former hegemonic role of news media and journalists in news selection and distribution: news media can no longer control what public opinion is talking about nor can they select which voices will be heard within the public sphere or put limits on the distribution of content or political messages. Furthermore, the fact that news media websites are not generally developing formats of participation that might attract their visitors implies that citizens are channelling their participatory energies to other online environments (or even creating them, as has been seen with some of the Barcelona research participants). As a consequence, news media are losing their traditional position as main actors within the public sphere, especially regarding practices of deliberation and public debate. Nevertheless, the focus group research participants

⁷⁴ As seen in Chapters 5 and 6, this trend is especially relevant among UK news media.

showed how, although with high levels of distrust, the hegemony of traditional news media and professional journalists as main producers of news content is not (yet) under contestation: citizens might be gathering in online environments outside news media websites to comment on and share public issues content but this content is still mostly produced by traditional news media. Furthermore, according to the focus group results there are as yet no clear signals that this situation will be modified in the near future. It can therefore be said that the participatory dimension of the new media environment is threatening some of the former hegemonies while respecting the core of the journalistic profession. The last paragraphs of this final discussion will be aimed at analysing these key transformations caused by the participatory dimension, studying how the public sphere is being modified and how these on-going transformations might affect issues of citizenship and offline participation.

As explained in the theoretical background chapter, new communication technologies brought some hopes about the revitalization of the long-lost Habermasian concept of the public sphere (Papacharissi, 2010). In fact, media studies have had a long-time fascination for the concept of the public sphere (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). Although the seminal work of Habermas was not translated into English until the late 1980's, it acquired high importance in academic debates about what the role of news media in late modern societies should be, revitalizing the role of public service broadcasting in a context dominated by privatizations and commercial interests (Curran, 1991). More recently, the concept of the public sphere has been used to reconceptualise the role of news media within the context of the new media environment. Hence, the participatory dimension has been identified as the online reformulation of the geographical spaces, cafes and social clubs, which used to host the processes of formulation of public opinion, through deliberation and expression and supported by a press free from economic and political powers (Habermas, 1989). Consequently, debates centred on whether the Internet could be not only an environment where citizens could gather information, but also a place in which public opinion might be formulated (Ruiz et al., 2011). It also helped some reformulations made by Habermas (1984) to adapt the theory to late modern societies, in which he conceptualises the public sphere

less in terms of a geographical entity (cafes and social clubs) and more in terms of the nature of the forms of communication that might hold the different processes of formulation of public opinion (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). This is a reformulation that better suits the changing nature of both late modern societies and the new media environment.

The focus group results showed how the participatory formats offered by news media websites are not attracting citizens to practices of expression and deliberation. However, findings suggest that, although citizens are not using news media as a public sphere, they have found other online environments that can foster these communicative processes of public opinion formulation. As seen in previous chapters, these spaces can be generally identified with social networks, although some research participants use other formats such as emails or their own tailor-made forums to conduct online public talk. Despite these spaces being identified nowadays with social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, what is relevant here is not the particular medium or technology, but the social practices of self-expression that are formulated within these environments and the transformations they have brought. As Chadwick pointed out, even if the most common social networks of our day are likely to be replaced in the future by other actors, “their foundational rationales will survive in one variant or another” (Chadwick, 2012, p. 55), as they are strongly embedded in daily life and citizens’ social practices. Consequently, the online spaces might change, incorporating new capabilities, but the changes brought in personal relations and within the public sphere are likely to continue, or in any case evolve, but they are not likely to return to the previous scenario.

Several authors have identified the social practices of self-expression connected to these online environments as a reflex or as a consequence of recent changes in postmodernist or late modern societies (Dahlgren, 2013; Bennett, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010). According to several theories, the on-going cultural shifts of the last decades are pointing towards citizens’ individualization and preference for self-expression and quality of life concerns, implying a decay of horizontal institutions and rigid social norms (Bauman, 2005; Inglehart, 1997;

Giddens, 1991). Moreover, societal transformations might be pointing towards a reconsideration of the Habermasian concept of the unified and state-structured concept of the public sphere: as society becomes more pluralistic and based on subjects' self-identification, the public sphere becomes divided between 'micro-public spheres' based on the communicative processes of everyday life and groups of self-identification (Keane, 1995; Fraser, 1992). Issues that were once the domain of private life or individuals' interests have acquired in recent decades a conflictual nature, individuals being more and more attracted to being self-identified on the basis of issues such as cultural interests, lifestyle, consumption, gender, sexual orientation, religion or even medical beliefs and a never-ending list of new -isms or ideologies.

As seen in the theoretical background chapter, this new model of citizenship (the self-actualizing model) is characterised by a preference for more individual and more personalised forms of participation and self-expression, rather than the traditional model of citizenship (the 'dutiful' model) based on collective action and identification with organizations such as political parties or unions (Bennett, 2008 and 2013). These societal and cultural trends are changing the ways in which citizens get involved in 'the political', transforming the 'civic subject' (Dahlgren, 2013). Moreover, they might also be shaping the particular ways in which new technologies are created, interpreted and used by individuals, affecting also traditional media institutions and their position within the public sphere, in the same way that they are affecting other 'horizontal' institutions such as political parties. Hence, these new forms of citizenship would be especially attracted by the participatory social practices brought about by the new media environment, adopting new communication technologies as a natural medium of self-expression. Individuals' self-identification can then find in new communication technologies, especially through some particular online environments, the perfect allies that enable them to gather with like-minded citizens.

Nevertheless, during the study of participants' levels of public engagement (see Chapters 7 and 8) it was found that this new form of citizenship or attitude towards the public world represented only a minority of the research participants,

all of them under the age of thirty. Most of the participants, although at different levels of action, still perceive public issues and participation in public life in terms of activities aimed at collective goals and more in terms of a 'duty' or a 'need' rather than connected with individual or small community goals. However, although participants labelled as 'actualizing citizens' were only a minority both in London and in Barcelona, some of the aforementioned characteristics of this model of citizenship have been found in other levels of public engagement. For example, discourses of distrust or lack of engagement with 'horizontal' institutions such as political parties or traditional media institutions were widespread among the research participants. Furthermore, although all the research participants labelled as 'actualizing citizens' were young, not all young participants have been labelled at this level of public engagement, participants under thirty being present in all levels of public engagement. Consequently, it is perhaps too soon to know if the self-actualizing model of citizenship (Bennett, 2008; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) will represent a majority of citizens in the near future. It could be that future generations will generally adopt this model, the actualizing citizens of today thus being a cohort of 'early adopters'. Or rather, it could happen that this new model of citizenship will in the future be more extended in society, but coexisting with other more traditional forms of citizenship.

Regarding this issue, it is necessary to highlight that social practices of self-expression connected to online environments, such as social networks, are not just conducted by actualizing citizens, despite this group showing high preference for forms of online participation. What the focus groups confirmed is that a high number of research participants (especially the young, but not uniquely) do tend to adopt social practices of self-expression through new communication technologies, although this does not mean that their attitudes and motivations towards the public world can be generally identified with actualizing models of citizenship. Practices of self-expression through online environments are therefore generalised, disregarding the levels of public engagement of research participants. Additionally, in the measure that this self-expression is connected to 'the political' (Mouffe, 2001, 2005), it implies bringing conflictual or agonistic issues into a social sphere formed of friends, relatives or acquaintances. Nevertheless, the research

participants stated that, rather than being concerned about posting 'political' content or links to news stories about public issues among their contacts, they perceive these kinds of practices positively. It allows them to 'let other people know' about something, enter into discussions and debates and 'test' public opinion about a certain issue. The research participants then, through online practices of self-expression, are creating their own spheres in which to conduct public talk and formulate public opinion in everyday life contexts in which the social and the political become strongly intertwined.

Some authors have conceptualised these online participatory practices of self-expression as key elements in constituting citizens' 'private' or 'solo' spheres (Dahlgren, 2013; Papacharissi, 2010), in contrast with the aforementioned Habermasian conceptualization of the public sphere. Patterns of individualization and self-expression are thus producing, through the use of online participatory practices, new ways of expression and participation in public issues. Most citizens, just by having access to new communication technologies and learning a series of basic skills can conduct these practices. These practices, rather than being conducted in 'political' online environments, are happening in everyday life contexts, with the same groups of citizens with whom non-political activities are commented on and planned. As seen during the focus groups, practices of sharing, commenting on or spreading content are 'soft' in terms of intensity of involvement: they can be conducted in a short period of time and without great effort or costs. Nevertheless, these social practices have a powerful potentiality to modify the configuration of the public sphere, fragmenting it into small spheres of action and involvement and breaking former hegemonies and power positions. Consequently, rather than a widespread formulation of a new model of citizenship or a new 'civic subject' (Dahlgren, 2013), new communication technologies are aiding in the development of a more pluralistic public sphere.

As seen in Habermas (1989) and Papacharissi (2010), the public and the private sphere are differentiated spaces, something that online practices of self-expression have completely overcome, mixing the concepts of audience and publics, as well as the distinction between geographical spaces of media consumption and spaces of

formulation of public opinion. As explained in Chapters 7 and 8, through practices of sharing, commenting on or spreading content, citizens indirectly and unconsciously challenge the way that information used to flow within the traditional configuration of the public sphere, contesting also the function of news media as gatekeepers of what is and what is not newsworthy. This also implied that in the online world news media have not successfully become places of formulation of public opinion: citizens prefer to debate in other spaces rather than on news media websites. In the new media environment, then, their hegemony is weaker than before, as they see their traditional hegemonies of news selection and distribution contested through everyday practices of ordinary citizens. However, claims about the end of journalism or in favour of a redefinition of the journalistic profession might be too ambitious. As the focus groups showed, citizens still value the traditional sources of information. Although this is not the only kind of content about public issues that they share and comment on, most of it still comes from traditional news media. Journalists might not control the conversations that are occurring online, nor can they choose the ‘issues of the day’ anymore without the influence of the public. However, their position within the public sphere as the main actors in news production is as yet uncontested.

Additionally, the focus groups also identified an important number of citizens that are still living their daily lives completely outside environments such as social networks. It is necessary then to consider that, although the hegemonies and professional practices of journalists and media institutions are affected by these online environments, a large part of citizens in late modern societies are outside these online ‘private’ or ‘solo’ spheres. Despite their importance in the future if social networks become as generalised as news media, it is important to highlight that this situation has not yet arrived: the scenario will be better conceptualised if we take into account that the unified conceptualisation of the public sphere can coexist with these individual and micro spheres of action.

Finally, the question still remains as to whether this reconfiguration of the public sphere, these ‘private’ or ‘solo’ spheres of action belonging to individuals, will contribute to enhancing or diminishing life in democracy, as the bourgeois public

sphere used to do before its decline (Navarro, 2014). As seen in Mouffe (2001, 2005, 2013), postmodern societies are intrinsically pluralistic, with a strong need for spaces in which the different 'us' can get in contact with the different 'them'. Although pluralism cannot be considered negatively per se, a pluralistic society may face serious problems of citizens' engagement and identification with collective or societal goals, if it lacks spaces and institutions that work along the lines of gathering the different collectives together. Such pluralistic societies have a real need for spheres of involvement in which citizens may develop agonistic relationships in public spaces, openly showing discrepancy and conflictuality, conveniently channelled through suitable institutions. Papacharissi (2010) argues that, even if the participatory dimension of the new media environment is creating a new public space, to be considered as a new public sphere, this online environment should enhance discussion and democracy, promoting rational discourse and attracting citizens to opinion exchange. Nevertheless, according to Dahlgren (2013) the threat might be that these 'solo' spheres of action will contribute to isolating individuals in small spheres of shared interests, disconnecting them from broad public issues and harming civic life for the benefit of exalting small lifestyle communities.

Without contradicting the preceding argument, the focus groups pointed towards a more optimistic interpretation of the capabilities of these 'solo' spheres. As seen in Chapters 7 and 8, practices connected with social networks have been identified as contributing to partially overcoming some of the shortcomings of the Catalan and UK public spheres, especially among those participants who showed lower levels of public engagement. Through being exposed to the posts and links of their contacts, research participants confirmed that they are in touch with links about political issues, most of them having received in this way links that reflected other points of view or that challenged their own opinions about a certain topic or public issue. The practice of social networking appears to be important then to contributing to overcoming selective exposure among less engaged citizens, who are those who check fewer different news media and conduct lower levels of public talk. Similarly, the focus groups also showed how, through social networks, research participants are more likely to engage in online discussions and debates,

favouring these environments rather than other online formats such as comments on news stories or debates on political websites. Moreover, debates in environments such as social networks are more likely to be conducted with non like-minded citizens, contrary to what happens in the usual everyday life offline environments where citizens conduct public talk (with family, friends or at the work place). To sum up, results point towards a series of characteristics pertaining to social networks that work along the lines of 'meeting the other', favouring the possibility of less engaged citizens getting in touch with different sources of news as well as increasing the possibilities for citizens to engage in public debate with other citizens who have different ideologies or show different points of view.

As seen, these findings point towards an optimistic understanding of the capabilities of these 'solo' spheres of action and involvement for life in democracy. Nevertheless, there are still many questions to be answered regarding the future configuration of the public sphere in the new media environment and the role that these micro spheres will play in it, particularly with regard to the relationship between these 'micro' or 'private' spheres and news media. Can we conceptualise these as separate spheres of involvement, operating in isolation from the unified and traditional concept of the public sphere? Will these spheres then represent alternative channels through which to formulate public opinion? Or rather, would it be better to conceptualise these individual spheres of action as an element of a unified and media-centred public sphere?

The previous paragraphs of this chapter have reflected how the new media environment has brought important transformations to the public sphere, ongoing transformations that are, in great part, a consequence of the participatory dimension introduced by this new media environment. This thesis has been aimed at analysing how news media are adopting citizen participation on their websites, as well as how citizens make sense of the formats offered and how they use them in the context of the high number of participatory options that they can conduct in relation to public issues, both off- and online. The conclusions of the research have been presented in Chapter 9, and put into context in this last chapter. Nevertheless, as seen in this last chapter, the work conducted in this thesis has offered new

insights and perspectives into some relevant subjects, insights that future research may address, continuing to study the changing media environment and its effects on society. This thesis will conclude by presenting a new line of research that can continue the work started in this research project, bringing new perspectives into the field.

First of all, as already presented in previous paragraphs, there is a need to better conceptualise the public sphere in relation to citizens' 'micro' or 'solo' online spheres of involvement and connection among citizens. Due to the fact that news media websites are not successfully working along the lines of being environments likely to attract citizens' participatory intensities, it is necessary to research how the different individual spheres of involvement that are currently channelling online participation can be conceptualised. Although these are also defined as 'private' (Papacharissi, 2010) or 'solo' (Dahlgren, 2013) spheres, terms that recognise how strongly embedded in citizens' everyday life these spheres are, these are not 'private' in the sense of 'limited' or 'restricted'. Neither are they 'solo' in the sense of loneliness or lack of engagement. In fact, although social networks have recently been moving towards ensuring more privacy options for their users, the main characteristic of Twitter or Facebook is precisely the fact that individuals are connected to a high number of contacts. This means that these 'private' spheres cannot be defined as spheres of isolation, they are spaces where citizens gather, share and comment on content and are also exposed to a large amount of other citizens' material. The potentiality to spread content easily, even making it 'viral' and as a consequence getting to more people than the contacts a citizen already has, is precisely what defines these online environments. Consequently, such environments can be considered also as spaces where public opinion is formulated, although in a different way than the geographically located deliberation in cafes and social clubs that exemplifies the traditional Habermasian concept of the public sphere. Nevertheless, it is not yet clear if these spaces contribute to creating a parallel online public sphere or, if rather, they would be better conceptualised as an extension of the already existing offline version of the traditional public sphere.

The approach adopted in this thesis, as well as some of the results, may be a good starting point through which to define a strategy to research this subject. According to what has been seen, news selection and distribution are former hegemonies of news media that are being contested by the widespread adoption by citizens of online participatory practices such as social networks. Moreover, as seen in the previous paragraphs, these practices might mitigate some of the shortcomings of the public sphere, such as the selective exposure of news and the lack of public talk between non like-minded citizens. As a consequence, although these are practices conducted outside news media websites, it can be argued that, rather than damaging the public sphere, they are in fact aiding in connecting citizens to public issues, especially those citizens that are less engaged with and connected to news media, but who do have accounts and are active users of social networks.

Nevertheless, although such practices might have positive effects on the public sphere and life in democracy, they do so by altering and modifying the actual power positions within them. As seen in the previous chapters, practices of sharing and spreading public issues content are affecting the way in which information flows, as well as modifying the traditional hegemony of news media in selecting which issues should be raised in public debate. However, according to the focus group results, practices of re-dissemination of public issues content are not conducted with the particular aim of contesting the central position of news media within the public sphere. Citizens are not therefore gathering in online spaces outside the control of news media as a contestation or disaffection, but because these environments are more suitable to their participatory needs. Furthermore, the focus group participants generally confirmed that what they share online in relation to public issues is in great part content from traditional news media websites. In order to know if these 'private' spheres are a challenge to media power, then, it is necessary to better understand if the conversations that are generated there, the issues that are emerging in these environments, are different or not from what news media, as hegemonic actors, are bringing into the public sphere.

Social networks and other online environments might be actors which contest traditional news media hegemony, but in order to do so, they have to be used by citizens as an alternative to the 'official' public sphere: if what is shared and commented on in these 'private' spheres is more or less the same as in the public sphere dominated by traditional news media, then it would be better to conceptualise these spheres of involvement as constitutive of the main public sphere. Conversely, if the individual spheres of involvement show different discourses in relation to public issues, this will consequently point towards a use of these environments as an alternative to the public sphere and its hegemonic actors. It has been seen during the focus group sessions how research participants use online participation for practices that they cannot find offline.

Future research may address the question of what citizens are sharing and debating online and how they are talking about these issues, by subsequently comparing it with traditional news media agenda and their particular approach. If citizens' 'private spheres' are generating different discourses from the ones present in news media, it can be argued that media power is under contestation: citizens would be gathering online as a result of a shortcoming of the traditional public sphere, seeking online the information and the public debate that they cannot find offline or online through traditional sources. Consequently, this will also indicate that these online spheres of action are strongly differentiated from the traditional public sphere in which hegemonic actors, such as news media and political institutions, hold the power to decide which are the relevant issues that should be on the agenda and dominate public debate. Such an approach can be based on qualitative methodologies such as focus groups, to dig deeper into citizens' motivations for sharing public issues content, but most importantly, it will need an exhaustive content analysis of both news media and social networks. Regarding the first issue, content analysis of the news media agenda does not imply introducing new methodologies. However, content analysis of what is shared and commented on in social networks does imply the need to conceptualise new methodologies to approach the issue.

This line of research allows continuing with the analysis of citizen participation in online environments. It keeps news media at the centre of the analysis but assumes that the online environments that are gathering citizens' participatory energies, and consequently transforming the public sphere, are not news media websites. Through the different chapters of this thesis the challenges for media power introduced by the new media environment and, particularly, by its participatory dimension have always been present. It has been seen how news media conducted a process of 'remediation' of online participation, adapting it to their needs. Contrary to what some research has claimed, the fact that news media are not opening their websites to citizens' original content production is not something that especially concerned the research participants. As seen, what citizens are asking of news media is to make the most of the new capabilities introduced by the news media environment to strengthen the ties between journalists and media institutions and their readers, as well as among the readers themselves. Nevertheless, news media websites have not successfully channelled citizens' participatory intensities, which implies that other online environments have gathered citizens' energies for online participation related to public issues. How this will affect the formerly central position of news media within the public sphere could be one of the key issues that research on media and communications might address.

In order to better address this key issue, I believe that it is important to point out the relevance of the particular approach followed in this research project. At the core of the argument the issue of the relationship between on and offline participation has always been present. This has sometimes been confused in previous literature, as media participation has sometimes been analysed through the lens of political participation and associated with active power positions in decision-making processes of news media content. The approach followed in this research project allowed the study of participatory journalism practices, as well as other online media participatory practices, in the context of, and in relation to, citizens' attitudes and motivations towards life in democracy and public issues. By doing so, it has been seen how citizens value differently participation in society or democracy and participation in the media sphere. Although most of the

participants acknowledged that direct participation and involvement in civic life are needed in healthy democracies, the media sphere is perceived in terms of professionalism and participation is understood as involvement with media content, rather than direct participation or content creation. Moreover, regarding online participation, citizens also showed different attitudes and motivations depending on the different online environments. This approach also allowed a better conceptualisation of the role of the series of practices associated with social networks and how these might affect and modify the public sphere. As seen in this thesis, media studies can benefit greatly from their cooperation with political theory. Complex and pluralistic societies cannot be understood and researched using closed and limited fields of study. However, in crossing between fields it is always positive to maintain a distance and not assume that theories that might work in political theory can be directly adopted in media studies. As already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this was precisely the case in previous studies on participatory journalism and online participation. Future research will be in a better position to question normative assumptions regarding media and participation in order to better analyse how citizens in late modern democracies make sense of the participatory dimension of the new media environment.

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Appendix 1

Focus group guide

1.- Introduction

Thanks to the assistants and explain how the session will be structured.

Give the participants the questionnaire, wait that they fill it, start to record and begin the session.

2.- First group of questions

This group of questions is aimed to make the participants discuss about issues of “Public Engagement”.

- Give the participants the list of public issues – activity one (see at last pages of the guide). Ask the participants to look at it and to think and underline the five ones that more interest them or that they think are most important. Participants can also public issues that are not in the list. This activity is useful to start the session. The participants start to think on the issues that are going to be introduced during this first part of the session.

- “Regarding your own list of public issues, do you think that news media are talking about them? Do you receive enough information about these issues?” – “And politicians and political parties, are talking about the public issues that you consider more relevant?”

-
- “In relation with your own list of public issues, are you talking about these issues with other people?” – “With who and when are you talking about these things?”
 - “What is your opinion about the concept of ‘being active’ or ‘to participate’ in your community or in relation with public issues?” – “Are you conducting any activity that might be considered as ‘to participate’ or ‘being involved’ with public issues or with the community?” – “In which issues are you being involved, in the same ones that you have marked at the list?”
 - “Regarding the concept of ‘political efficacy’, do you think that being involved makes a difference?” – “Do you think that you can affect the political decisions that affect the public issues that you consider more relevant or that affect you the most?” – “Do you think that to participate or being involved in the community is useful?”

3.- Second group of questions

This group of questions starts with general issues of “media engagement”. It ends with questions aimed to online media participation.

The second part starts by showing the participants the picture about media and democracy – activity two (see it at last pages of the guide). Participants are asked to write what they think the picture represents. The aim of the image is to encourage the participants to think about which is for them the role of the media in democracy. Once everyone is ready, ask some of them to read what they have written and contrast it with other participants.

- “How do you define your use of the Internet?” – “What are you doing when you are online?” – “In which places do you connect to the Internet” – “Is there any case that you consider your use of the Internet as connected to public issues?”
- “Some news websites allow you to register in order to access content or to participate. Have you ever registered in one of such websites?” – “Some news media allow users to personalise the news at the homepage according to their own preferences (sports, politics,...). Would you do that?” – “Are you receiving

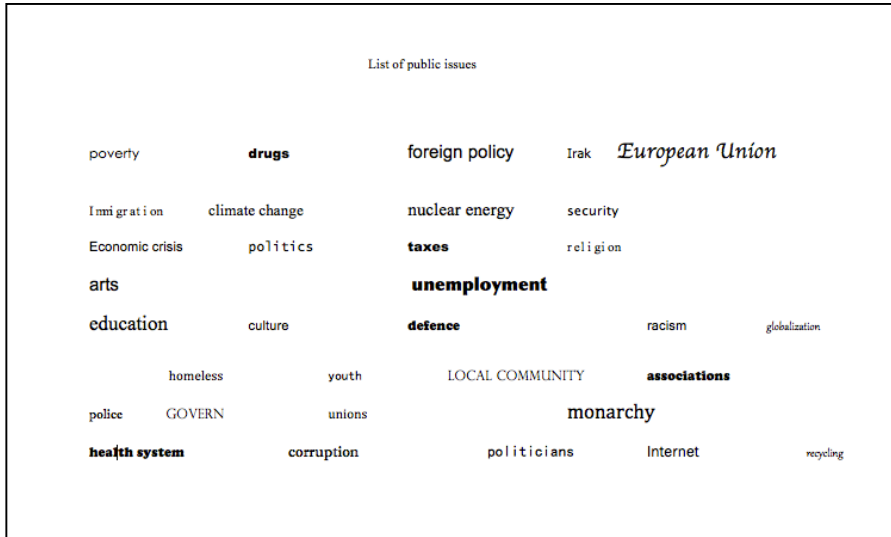
any news media newsletter or using any other tool to access or receive news media content?” – “How do you generally choose the news you consume?”

- “Some news media websites include the option to comment news stories or opinion articles. Are you interested to know what other users have commented?” – “Do you usually comment or have you ever done it?” – “What is your opinion about the conversations or the debates that are produced in news media websites?” – “Do you know any other format or website where you can debate about public issues with other citizens?” – “What about other formats included in news media websites, have you ever participated in any other format, like forums or interviews with users’ questions?”

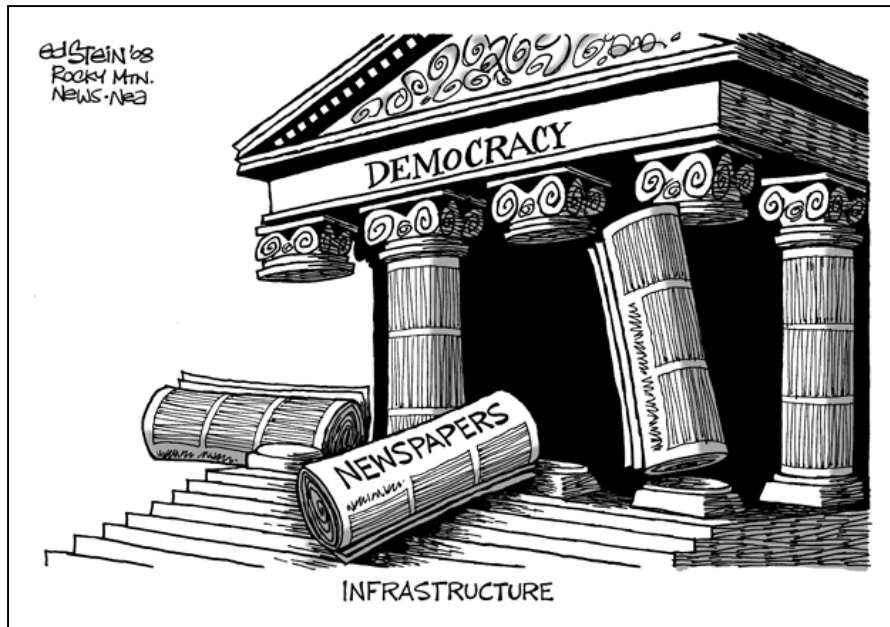
- “Who of you have an account on social media? In which ones?” – “Why are you using social media?” – “In your use of social media, is there any relation with news media, news stories or public issues?” – “Have you ever shared news content or content about public issues on social media? Which was your motivation to do that?” – “Do you have any friend or contact who post links with news or about public issues?” – “Have you ever commented one of these links or started a debate?”

- “Have you ever heard about the concept of ‘citizen journalism’?” – “What do you think about that? Do you consider relevant that citizens can produce and publish their own news stories? Will this make a difference?” – “Who of you have a blog? Which was your motivation to start it?” – “Are you visiting blogs?” – “Have you ever sent your own material (stories, pictures, videos,...) to a news media website or to a journalist? In which cases would you do that or consider this options as interesting?” – “Have you ever participated in a news story, as a witnesses or in any other form online?”

- Activity one: list of public issues



- Activity two: Media and democracy



Appendix 2

Previous questionnaire

Please, answer the following questions. If you have any question, do not hesitate to ask the moderator of the focus group

Name:

Age:

Profession:

Education:

1.- Could you name the media (TV channels, newspapers, radio stations, websites) that are you consuming at least once per week?

1a.- Regarding the media you have listed above, could you say the proportion of time that you consume them? For example, being 100 the maximum: Television X, 60%; Television Y, 20%; Newspaper Z, 20%

2.- Mark with a "x" the activities that have you ever realised:

Follow weekly news about public issues

Follow daily news about public issues

Talk about public issues with friends, family, job mates, (...) less than once in a week

Talk about public issues with friends, family, job mates (...) at least once in a

week Talk about public issues with friends, family, job mates almost everyday

Urged someone to vote

Non-voting for political reasons (ex: do not trust political parties or in the system)

Vote in most of the last elections

Vote in some of the last elections

Sign an online petition (ex: change.org)

Signed a law petition

Perceive politics as non-interesting

Involved in local community (local associations, neighbours,...)
 Donate money to a Non Governmental Organization
 Member of a Non Governmental Organization
 Boycotted products for political reasons
 Attended a rally/demonstration
 Participate in a political strike
 Perceive politics as something important
 Present my views/opinions to local councillor, MP, MSP
 Donated money to party
 I am/was member of a party
 Being identified with a party/ideology
 Participate in a party activity/meeting
 Civil disobedience (ex: squatting, illegal demonstrations...)
 Any other similar activity that you are doing and it's not in this list?

3- Regarding your total time of media consumption, which percentage do you think you are consuming media to be informed about public or political issues?

0% (I do not consume media to be informed)	
1%-15%	51%-70%
16%-30%	71%-90%
31%-50%	91%-100%

4- Which media do you consume specifically to be informed about public or political issues?

5- Could you name the first 5 websites that you visit more frequently?

5.- Mark with a "x" the activities that have you ever realised:

Registrate in a news website
 Actively use media to gather information about politics
 Be subscribed to a newsletter

- Actively avoid reading news or watch it on TV
- Comment on news
- Sent your own content (pictures, video, news) to a news media
- Emailed a journalist
- Vote a new in a news website
- Have an account in social networks (please, name which ones)
- Being active in social networks (publish or update weekly)
- Share media news links in social networks
- Share links about public or political issues on social networks
- Participate in an online forum
- Have your own website
- Read a blog in a newspaper website
- Read an independent blog
- Have your own blog
- Participate in a forum about politics
- Participate in an online poll in a news website
- Sent a history/picture/video to a news website
- Participate in an online interview
- Any other similar activity that you are doing and it's not in this list?

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