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Journalism

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Abstract

Many professional journalists and journalism scholars consider the increasing attention paid to audiences as one of the causes of the gradual loss of journalistic quality. They reason if ratings, circulation figures, hits and shares determine the content of journalism, the core values of journalism become jeopardized. This article argues how and why studies of journalistic quality should take the actual readers, listeners and viewers of journalistic texts seriously. It reports on a different kind of research for measuring the public's news interests and preferences; one that concentrates on value – what makes journalism precious for people and how news organizations can provide this. By zooming in on the professionals' and public's *experience* of quality information instead of their views on the topic, the article shows how pleasing the audience might be compatible with producing excellent journalism.

Keywords

experience, genre, journalistic quality, news audiences, news habits

Quality still serves as the pre-eminent standard for judging public service media as well as first-rate journalism. Yet, scholars of journalism and professional journalists focus in particular on the quality of journalistic content and by extension on the quality of the production conditions of news. Audience research plays a marginal role in journalism studies. This may be partly due to the implicit or explicit assumption that a concern with quality is hard to reconcile with an audience perspective. While quality journalism is usually linked to production conditions like independence,

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transparency, accountability and public service, an audience perspective is associated with propaganda, a commercial approach or the abandoning of professional autonomy. Although professional journalists are well aware of the increasing relevance of ratings, hits, shares and circulation figures, many in fact consider the mounting attention paid to audiences as one of the signs and causes of the gradual loss of journalistic quality. A case in point is leading BBC anchorman Jeremy Paxman's call to attention in 2007: 'Let's spend less time measuring audiences and more time enlightening them.'

A basic assumption of this article is the ambivalent relationship between journalists and their audiences. On the one hand, journalists take pride in their independence and consequently try to ignore their audience and, in its wake, audience studies. On the other hand, our production studies suggest that although professional journalists may consider giving in to their audience as a sign of giving up on quality, it is not uncommon to tap into the latest shares, hits and ratings at regular intervals. Journalists want to know whether their work has been noticed. The paradoxical effect is that by refusing to pay real attention to ratings conventions, which have news *exposure* as the key measurement (Balnaves and O'Regan, 2010), many journalists (and journalism scholars) are inclined to take these figures as a measure for their audience's news *interests*. As a result, they risk simplifying their concerns. As one journalist remarked about taking his audience more seriously: 'I would then have to present things simpler or different or snappier or more briefly.' Another television maker put it even more straightforwardly: 'I do not go down on my knees. I refuse to pretend to be more stupid than I am.'¹

The complex discrepancy between professional views on quality journalism and what their readers, users and viewers value in journalism is the main theme of this article. It is based on a secondary analysis of seven studies conducted between 1999 and 2011 into the production, content and reception of 'journalistic quality' (Table 1). Although the studies' main point of departure is television news, additional research among newspaper journalists and print journalism suggests a common frame of reference and an interpretive community regarding what counts as 'quality journalism' (cf. Zelizer, 2009).

This article argues how and why studies of journalistic quality should take news users – the actual readers, listeners and viewers of journalistic texts – seriously. As the starting point of our research we adopted a fundamental change of perspective: first, rather than focusing on public *exposure* – and in its wake the question how news media can reach as many people as possible (marketing approach) – we reversed the question: what do people really *value* in journalism and how could news organizations provide this (public service approach)? Second, instead of inquiring about the *views* of professionals and publics on the quality of journalism, we zoomed in on the professionals' and public's *experience* of quality information. Putting the experience of journalism at the heart of our investigations was motivated by an early confirmation of Wober's suggestion (in Leggatt, 1996: 75–80) that over recent decades quality journalism and quality programming have hardened into a genre with its own topics, rules and conventions, as well as interrelated status, values and approaches. Like Wober, we found that people's experience of quality was attached to other news

Table 1. Overview research projects 1999 – 2011 about 'journalistic quality'

Research project	Production	Audience / users	Content	Scale
<i>The Public Quality of Talk Shows</i> (Costera Meijer, 1999)	6 talk show hosts		16 leading television talk shows	National
<i>Public Quality of the (National) News</i> (Costera Meijer, 2000)	Participant observation (year) and extensive interviews with 30 newscaster employees		365 main evening editions (2000) and 90 editions of the competing commercial newscaster	National
<i>How Public Newscasters Can Accommodate a Younger Audience</i> (15–25) (Costera Meijer, 2004)		239 in-depth interviews, 148 news biographies, 65 online questionnaires		National
<i>The Need for Quality Television</i> (Costera Meijer, 2005–7)	In-depth interviews 59 producers of quality programming; extensive survey among 211 of all 322 employees	Audience survey among 3000 viewers; in-depth interviews with 251 informants 15–85	Qualitative content analysis of 50 domestic programmes, 50 foreign programmes (SWE, BBC, Arte, Canvas, ARD)	National
<i>Searching for the Social Value of Local Newscasters for their Residents</i> (Costera Meijer, 2007–10)	Participant observation October 2007 – April 2008; in-depth interviews 24 TV journalists	100 street interviews, two internet surveys, 25 in-depth interviews with local citizens, representative survey among 3000 Amsterdam citizens	Qualitative content analysis of all news programmes broadcast between October 2007 and April 2008	Regional/ local
<i>The Impact of Community Television</i> (Costera Meijer, 2009–11)	Participant observation; interviews 14 professionals and 7 neighborhood journalists	55 lengthy in-depth interviews	Quantitative content analysis of 2.5 years of national and regional reporting about two neighbourhoods; qualitative content analysis of 780 news reports	Hyperlocal
<i>The Transformation of a Regional Newscaster into a Regional News Community</i> (Costera Meijer et al., 2011)	Participant observation (1 week); in-depth-interviews 15 journalists	In-depth interviews with 16 residents; in-depth interviews with 13 representatives of regional companies	Qualitative content-analysis of the website and television programmes broadcast in February 2011	regional

formats and journalistic genres than the ones associated with ‘quality journalism’ as a standard. By extension, the audience’s experience of quality turned out to be a better predictor of actual media use than their opinions about quality journalism (Costera Meijer, 2009).

Third, the discrepancy between quality as media genre and quality as media experience raised the question of the organizational, stylistic or narrative conditions under which contemporary and future news audiences would make (more) use of excellent journalism. On the one hand, excellent journalism faces the challenge of losing its audience if it does not take into account the public’s changing habits of media consumption (Bird, 2010; Madianou, 2010; Martin, 2008). Yet it is also true that excellent journalism might not survive if news makers merely follow the rules of popularity. Our audience research suggests that ratings, hits and circulation figures might work out well as a measure of news stories’ entertainment value. However, it is doubtful whether these are adequate indicators of what people really demand from good journalism. To solve this dilemma, the article turns around Paxman’s argument and suggests that journalists are only able to enlighten *and* to increase their audience if and when they have a better understanding of what people experience as quality. To this end, a secondary analysis was done of the results of the earlier research projects (see Table 1). In addition these secondary analyses were updated with seven smaller follow-up studies (master theses supervised by the author) and two expert-panel discussions in which 15 frontrunners in journalism innovation participated.

The experience of excellence in journalism: Lessons from news users

Our audience studies reveal how news should not only be important and useful; users also want to *value* and to *enjoy* journalism (Costera Meijer, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). This enjoyment should not merely be associated with superficial entertainment or *feel-good* experiences; rather, it pertains to a concrete sense of *delight*. Despite differences in age, cultural background, gender and education, it is possible to identify some common user patterns and tendencies in connection with a quality experience of news. The argument below highlights three shifts in the relationship between excellent journalism, its users and its makers that separately as well as combined point to a public need for expansion and reinterpretation of the democratic task of journalism:

- 1 Participation: News users value journalism more when it makes better use of their individual and collective wisdom.
- 2 Representation: News users value journalism more when it takes their concerns and views into account.
- 3 Presentation: Valuable journalism distinguishes itself by a captivating presentation, a gratifying narrative and layered information.

As a whole, the notion of valuable journalism serves as an extension of professional notions of democratic quality (Gans, 2010; Schudson, 2008) and as the foundation for a new publicly inspired normative concept of journalistic excellence.

Participation: Valuable journalism makes better use of the individual and collective wisdom of news users

For a long time journalists have conceived of the audience as a rather nondescript entity, as some abstract, distant crowd of people eager for sensational and superficial entertainment (Costera Meijer, 2001, 2003, 2010; Ryfe, 2009). Reasoning from such perspective, one television maker distanced himself from the organizational remit to become more valuable to more people, because, as he put it in 2006:

Most people are bad and brainless ... so contemplating how to reach a large as possible audience is totally mistaken. This is really a completely wrong way of thinking.

If today few journalists will dare to associate some audience, let alone the audience as a whole, with such negative qualifications, many will still argue in favor of preserving some sense of hierarchy between news producers and news consumers. Yet journalists become increasingly aware of their crumbling knowledge monopoly. Although they are likely to be well informed about general trends and social developments, specific individual citizens are bound to have more information on particular topics or, for that matter, have it available sooner (Gillmor, 2004). This has always been the case, of course. New is that today's assertive news users expect journalists to take advantage of their divergent expertise. Journalists, however, tend to take a reserved stance – often with reference to their autonomy – and they are either hesitant to trust such 'lay' expertise (Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; O'Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008) or unsure of how to give expert wisdom its rightful place (Oosterbaan and Wansink, 2008). For example, as a rule journalists routinely will have their story ready before consulting an expert source and they will mold the expert's knowledge into their preconceived frame. If the expert demands a more accurate account of her expertise in a news item, journalists will sometimes give in to the expert, but often they will do so reluctantly because they tend to experience it as loss of control, as potentially causing the erosion of their autonomy and professionalism (Ryfe, 2009; Singer et al., 2011). Our interviews with members of various expert audiences suggest they are seldom satisfied with the journalists' representation of their expertise. Too often, they claimed, crucial information was omitted or oversimplified. Few journalists realize that their reserved or sometimes even paternalistic attitude towards 'expert citizens' may lead inadvertently to less trust in the press. As one media user, Karel, a 64-year-old engineer, put it:

If a story seems to have it wrong in the instances where in fact I am well-qualified to judge its merits, the journalist is likely to have it wrong in other instances as well.

So far, making use of the expertise of the 'ordinary' reader or viewer (as opposed to the expert one) has been a matter of marginal significance in the everyday routines of journalists (Patterson and Domingo, 2008). This 'wisdom of the crowd' still largely goes untapped. Today, Twitter appears to be one of the few platforms journalists use to check or share their data with their 'followers', or as a way to call on their knowledge (Hermida, 2011; Kwak et al., 2010). Before 2009, our interviews suggested, it seemed merely a matter of lack of knowledge or imagination about how to deal with audience input. One

journalist despairingly cried out: 'The last thing you want to do is to research some program with forty of its viewers.' By 2011, however, as Singer et al. (2011) suggest, more and more journalists had become quite aware of the significance of involving their readers and viewers. As the managing editor of a news site commented:

Well, in the old days we were the most expert. Perhaps the audience as a collective was more expert, but they were never perceived as a collective. But now with the internet ... the network is more expert than our editorial staff will ever be. So you can no longer arrogantly assume like: we know what is good for you or we know how the world works.

Our group interviews with 15 frontrunners in innovative journalism (print, television and mobile news) illustrate how the discussion about citizen journalism and quality has changed in five years. It started out with fear of losing control over the production process by citizens actively intruding. In 2011 citizen participation had become 'encapsulated' and was apparently transformed from participatory journalism, an active term revolving around subjects in journalism, into user-generated content, a passive term, revolving around an object in journalism. A deputy editor of a regional newspaper explains why citizen journalism is a non-issue:

The boundary between journalists and non-journalists has become so vague and sliding; it does not make a lot of sense to talk about the differences. You'd better discuss the qualities of the journalistic product itself and whether or not it is a good product, whether or not it complies with the ethical standards we have formulated.

A CEO of an expert agency in social media countered that he, as a consumer, only distinguishes between well-told stories and badly told ones, stories which make use of excellent sources and stories which do not: 'A personal blog about a topic like ADHD can be just as valuable as a professional exposé.' A former editor-in-chief of a leading Dutch quality newspaper contradicted:

As a news consumer – if, being a professional, I can still see myself as such – I would like to know whether someone has consulted different sources or whether he wrote from a personal commitment and selected sources from his own personal environment.

What counts as valuable from the perspective of the media user and what counts as professional quality are standards that apparently operate within separate logics. Reasoning from a professional quality logic, journalists as a rule refer to following particular procedures, necessary to ensure the impartiality of the stories' point of view. When users underline personal gratification as a quality criterion for journalistic stories they often refer to the impact journalism makes: does the story enlighten them, does it broaden their minds or deepen their understanding, does it enrich their lives or open up their self-evident norms and values? As one reader comments on the intentions for 2012 of the leading Dutch quality paper, NRC (30 December 2011):

I don't need to read merely opinions that I agree with, on the contrary. To sharpen one's mind it is necessary to take cognizance of all perspectives.

Representation: News users value journalism more when it takes their concerns and views into account

A second reason for journalists to pay close attention to their audiences' expectations of quality journalism has to do with dissatisfaction among groups of media users with how they do or do not end up in the news. Some people – the poor, women, youngsters, and ethnic, religious or sexual minorities – are misrepresented more often by the news than others (Bullock et al., 2001; Dreher, 2009). These groups wonder why they would still follow the news if journalists systematically ignore or poorly reflect their concerns, views, experiences and perspectives. Couldry et al. (2007) already suggested that their number is currently on the rise. Our audience research shows how people become increasingly aware of how public communication in modern societies depends upon media-based technologies: their fellow citizens make sense of themselves, the world and each other in and through media (Coleman and Ross, 2010). Couldry (2001, 2006) speaks of the 'hidden injuries of media power'. In a recent study of the impact of media (over) exposure on two problem neighborhoods, residents even claim that distorted media images of their neighborhood made them lose touch with everyday reality (Coster Meijer, 2012 in press). Regional and national journalism alike undermined their interpersonal communication by fuelling prejudice and exaggerating the neighborhood's problems.

Look, Dutch people, simply because they hear so many things, have a very negative image of us, you see? They are also afraid, say, to come in here. (Nashida, 35)

In this respect, the work of Roger Silverstone (2007: 5) has helped us to understand the impact of systematic underrepresentation, overrepresentation or misrepresentation of people. He recognized media as 'environmental', as 'tightly and dialectically intertwined with the everyday. We have become dependent on the media for the conduct of everyday life.' Residents from multi-ethnic, fast changing regions, expect good journalism to help them make sense of their world, to familiarize them with each other and their neighborhood. Briefly put, these people want to understand the world, but they also want to be understood by the world! If journalism is to foster democratic culture, citizens suggest that it should start explaining everyday behavior, customs and habits to them. In the same vein, the demand for 'multiperspectival news' (cf. Gans, 1980), already a big issue in our interviews with young adults in 2004/5, was underlined once again. Good journalism was expected to tell stories from different perspectives where protagonists act as subjects and were not merely presented as objects.

Yet Ryfe (2009) is skeptical about the willingness of news media to become more representative in their news selection and news presentation. As long as journalists attach more importance to certain news moments (such as press conferences) or news frames (such as horse race and conflict), he reckons that chances are small that journalists take issue with the knowledge and the questions of ordinary citizens. Democratization of journalism itself, Ryfe suggests, demands a profound cultural re-orientation of news organizations.

The value of presentation for news enjoyment: How to deal with contradictory preferences?

If serious journalism is to live up to its democratic tasks, meaning that it informs well, represents and facilitates the social participation of its readers, listeners and viewers, it can accomplish these democratic functions only if people – preferably as many as possible – will use it. How to choose which mode of presentation is the third dimension of valuable journalism. When asked to define quality journalism, the opinions and experiences of journalistic excellence did not coincide. Both makers and users employ expressions like informative, in-depth, reliable, factual, of some length, showing both sides, attention, completeness, transparency, distance, authoritative when asked about their opinions (Costera Meijer, 2006, 2010). Yet, when invited to describe which kind of journalism was truly gratifying, users (and often journalists as well) gave preference to – sometimes contradictory – standards: good journalism should be compact, offer parallel (layered) storylines, be exciting, recognizable and acknowledgeable; it should trigger a sense of aha-experience; cover multiple perspectives, be adventurous (action orientation) and provide good stories told from an insider's position. About television news, John (college student, age 20) suggested in 2006: 'They can improve the news by adding more dialog, pitting one party against another.' Or, as was pointed out by Auk (teacher, age 59), narrative complexity is critical for captivating viewers:

I do not want TV to be like a children's book, with a single line. I rather like an exciting novel with many storylines, flashbacks, flash-forwards, a first-person perspective. This will hook me.

As suggested by Knobloch et al. (2004) and Machill et al. (2007), adopting a particular narrative form for news improves people's reading enjoyment and viewing pleasure. In our 2004/5 Young People and News research project (Costera Meijer, 2006, 2007, 2008) and the 2008 Quest for Quality study (Costera Meijer, 2009), audiences' criticism of quality journalism as a particular genre was very much interwoven with allegations of simplistic storytelling, detached tone of voice and lack of engagement. As Arne, an IT expert aged 45, commented:

Often distant concerns are involved. The topics treated do matter, of course. But on purpose, it seems, they tend to be removed from daily life ... or, well, how to put it, have no direct relevancy to the audience.

Our investigations suggest how the experience of quality may be far more decisive in whether or not users will actually read the newspaper, check the news site or watch the program. Chris Peters' (2011) suggests a diversification of emotional styles in the news and an increasing acceptability of journalistic involvement. In line with his analysis, both young adults and members of the so-called 'creative class' prefer engaged reporting from journalists who are on top of things and who instantly jump into the action (Costera Meijer, 2009). These groups wondered why independent coverage should be linked up automatically with the neutral, uninvolved attitude of the outsider. After all, keeping one's distance can also give the impression that journalists are not really in touch with society. Albert (retired, age 62) claimed to be bothered by the use of:

... a cool, detached voice-over ... It's a little like a laboratory atmosphere where people ... are sort of observed. This is why only very few conversations really touch you.

Five years later, our follow-up studies confirm that news users still value a broader selection of news stories, multiple perspectives, engagement, compassion, an open mind and a cordial tone. Remarkably, our data imply that mobile or net news users might not look for these properties in one single journalistic text, platform or medium any more. The most active news users had started to compose their own multi-perspectival news story from the different sources on offer, and journalists simply represented one such source (Meester, 2011). They illustrated a turn around of the conventional transmission model of news communication.

News habits, user modes and quality enjoyment

Eye-tracking studies of news sites and newspapers clearly reveal what people are interested in, which headlines, pictures and texts they look at first and which aspects they rarely notice. Similarly, graphs from ratings organizations (like the Dutch SKO)² indicate in great detail people's viewing habits, popular TV moments, when they quit watching and where they go next. But still very little is known about the enjoyment that comes with using news and journalism. All our audience research suggests that some form of pleasure is important as a prerequisite for developing a particular media habit, conceived by LaRose (2010: 217) as 'a form of automaticity in media consumption that develops as people repeat media consumption behavior in stable circumstances'.

Ten years ago Theodore Glasser (2000) called for more study of 'enjoyment of news use'. Our everyday news use, he argued, could not be explained merely by rational, utilitarian, extrinsic and other instrumental motivations, which is why it is important to understand the appeal of news based on the reading or viewing experience itself. As an example, Glasser referred to the experience that users can be quite annoyed when their newspaper is not delivered in the morning. What they miss out on, then, is not so much the latest news itself, but the gratifying habit, the ritual moment of tranquility and reflection (even when the news is about uproar) and the feeling of being 'connected' (cf. Bird, 2010). So far it has remained underexposed which different habits, quality experiences and, in its wake, quality standards are enabled by new media platforms. Text TV-news and internet facilitate other user rituals than newspapers and television news, such as the satisfying habit of regularly checking the news (Costera Meijer, 2008; Lewis et al., 2005). Although this ritual seems at odds with the tranquillity associated with reading the newspaper, it turns out that people also very much enjoy the excitement of being on top of the world and actively taking part in society's ongoing dynamic. Bird and Dardenne suggest that today's young people may still be interested in news, but their 'news habit' is completely different:

People used to set aside specific times in their days to 'keep up' with the news perhaps reading a morning paper, and/or watching TV news broadcasts later. The arrival of 24-hour cable news starts eroding that habit; the online environment has transformed it. (2009: 293)

Powers (2009: 272) expresses the vital importance of ‘the internet’ in terms of ubiquity:

While I am generally reticent to speak for others, I am comfortable – and, I imagine, uncontroversial – in saying the following: for people of my age (late twenties) and younger, the Internet is not a medium; it is where we live a great deal of our lives.

According to Schröder and Larsen (2010), internet news is now equal in importance to TV news as the most worthwhile overview news medium. Mobile news users want to navigate efficiently through the latest and the most important news. It would not be possible otherwise to keep up with the news. When asked how often she checks her news on her smart phone, a 27-year-old camerawoman laughs:

Honestly, I couldn’t say! Because when I have only a second to spare, I will grab for my phone. When I’m at work, I put it in a locker and I will check it during breaks. Otherwise, I might check it as many as twenty times in a single hour.

How strongly this particular habit can be embedded in everyday media use is illustrated by the same camera woman. She compares her habit of automatic news checking with mindlessly snacking peanuts or potato chips:

Yesterday, for instance, I was watching Louis Theroux on TV. I’m a great fan of his work, highly interesting. But at some point I noticed I had picked up my phone automatically; I thought hey ... I’m on Twitter now, yet I have no real reason to go there right now. This [TV programme] is interesting enough.

In a similar vein, Smith (2011: 40) has suggested that the new habit of checking the news is not always motivated in positive terms: ‘After e-mail, participants in the study said they checked updates and headlines as a way to pass time and break boredom.’

Different news media, different user pleasures

Some contradictions in audiences’ narrative preferences can be explained by distinguishing news platforms or news environments. Television news is generally appreciated because it wraps up the events of the day. By providing voyeuristic pleasures and the possibility of ‘bodysnatching’, the viewer might immerse herself with its storytelling qualities (Costera Meijer, 2007, 2008). Nielsen (2008) distinguishes a TV mode and a Web mode:

The Web is an active medium. While watching TV, viewers want to be entertained. They are in relaxation mode and vegging out; they don’t want to make choices. TV is a passive medium. This doesn’t mean that you can’t have entertaining websites or informative TV shows. But it does mean that the two media’s contrasting styles require different approaches to entertainment and education.

Nielsen discovered earlier that people rarely read Web pages; instead, they scan them, merely picking out individual words and sentences. If this consumption pattern is not

accommodated by the way in which news is presented, news organizations will risk losing users. Using the ‘thinking aloud’ method, we found out how making news easy to navigate, to grasp the essentials and to rank its relevance and importance at a single glance, is apparently a *sine qua non* for worthwhile news sites or news apps. A 35-year-old business consultant explains how ‘color coding’ may work as an extra signpost:

Look, this Karremans here [pointing to a news item about a former army general], a grey background for a grey gentleman. It tells you: this is a factual article about political intrigues. It is perhaps interesting to me. But here EO Youth Day [pointing to another news item about a large annual event organized by a Dutch Christian broadcaster]. I see various happy youngsters cheering. This tells me it is more like an entertainment article. I do not need a headline with ‘entertainment’ to understand the genre. That is smart, using color coding in the pictures makes it easier for you to sort the news.

Media users have learned to enjoy handling information differently on account of the introduction of various Web applications (wikis, apps, podcasts, RSS-feeds) and various social media such as Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, MySpace, Facebook or a free encyclopedia like Wikipedia. The checking, sharing and exchanging of information requires news users to adopt a more active user mode – ‘lean forward’ – than the ‘lean back’ mode of reading or watching information. Before selecting a news item, the regular news ‘checker’ wants to know the topic and its status. Criticizing the news site of a public newscaster, a 26-year-old consultant exclaims:

What kind of messages are these? Is this the most important news, or the latest news? (...) Also, having to scroll down just won’t work with an iPad. You want a start-up screen, which enables you to click. (...) This is too much information for the iPad.

Individuals have different quality expectations of different platforms. Reliability is, for instance, considered far more relevant for newspapers and newscasters than for news sites. Their experience of quality is also related to the pleasure one expects to gain from deploying a particular news platform or news carrier: feeling connected by ‘quick and dirty’ journalism via news apps, or feeling truly informed by the hourly newscast or daily paper.

Gratifying news talk

In her overview of news practices in everyday life, Elizabeth Bird distinguishes between news habits and news talk. News talk is defined as ‘the informal and often very active way that news stories are communicated among people, and meanings are made that may have more or less to do with the original intent of the journalist who created the text’ (2010: 420). As Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) have suggested, pleasure and play call for ‘open’ texts, for options to speculate on meanings of texts and intentions of newsmakers. In a similar vein, Glasser (2000: 24–25) conceived of journalistic reading and watching experiences as communicative acts, whereby elements of play and fun serve as goals in their own right. Newspaper and TV audiences would have learned to value this form of engagement as a communicative activity and even as a profound creative experience, whereby,

in Glasser's words, 'they can seriously yet imaginatively contemplate their life in the light of the circumstances of others'. This invitation to speculation and participation might be similar to the gratifying challenge of our emotional intelligence in international popular TV entertainment such as *Farmer Seeks Wife*, *So You Think You Can Dance* or *Idols*. According to Johnson (2005: 99) such programs invite people's emotional participation and train viewers' interpretive skills by testing their personal evaluations, predictions and explanations of situations and behaviors against the considerations and decisions of the TV personages. In line with Tenenboim Weinblatt's (2008) analysis of non-closure strategies for enhancing readers' involvement, one respondent (age 23) appreciated the introduction of a cliff hanger in one particular news item, because it provided food for talk:

The item about elections evokes the most curiosity on my part, because it deals with something in the future, still unsettled and therefore exciting. The other two items are a little fait accompli, as it were.

The suggestion is that journalism perhaps could learn from the interactive and speculative formulas of reality television. As Glasser argues (2000: 28), rather than merely increasing their factual knowledge, it is crucial that news is told as an open-ended story that invites communication:

... without narrative news loses its *expressive* power; and without the power of expression news fails to engage readers as participants in the process of understanding.

Our investigations of the experience of quality television also revealed that quality broadcasters (such as Dutch VPRO) have tended to confuse quality with the length of a serious item or program. Johnson's (2005) suggestion that TV journalism might elicit deeper enjoyment by offering viewers more information simultaneously, albeit in a stacked (layered) form has been affirmed by our studies. Julia, student age 24, positively evaluates the various parallel storylines of an item on *De Wereld Draait Door* (a popular Dutch talk show on public television):

One of the guests is a Moroccan artist, who paints and has work in the Cobra Museum. He also made a painting of Allah and people do not like this, as they also point out. ... So, they talk about his paintings, but meanwhile it is also about migrants and native residents ... It is about the place of art in our society, about what you can or cannot say as artist. Thus it is about standards of decency, or their limits. Again, then, it is one of those small topics, but also one that suggests many larger topics.

Younger and higher-educated viewers prefer this layered narrative structure as an alternative way to produce density and 'depth' in a program (Costera Meijer, 2009).

Conclusion: Quality of life as normative standard for valuable journalism?

If the quality label is no longer confined to particular media products or genres – quality newspapers, public TV news – and can no longer be defined by a certain news approach

(objective and with distance), a particular layout (well organized), text feature (closed, length) or a specific selection of topics (politics, domestic, foreign, economy), how, then, can we productively reflect on the value of journalism? In contrast to the common assumption of skeptical journalists and journalism scholars that more sustained attention for the user perspective automatically leads to ongoing lowering of news standards, this article argues that attentive listening to news users makes clear that the public does not ask for a jazzing up of news or a trivialization of its news selection. What it does value, though, requires a widening of the narrative and democratic repertoire of journalism.

The pursuit of the viewers' or readers' enjoyment calls for a re-gauging of the journalistic values at issue in quality journalism and a need to re-envision public engagement. Our research confirms the importance of three extra registers to make sense of the audience's news assessment: participation, representation and presentation. Contemporary audiences aspire to participate in the journalistic process, not for the sake of participation as such, but to enable a more valuable, more truthful, multi-vocal journalism. Also, media users – and in particular the groups that feel excluded or misrepresented and have therefore dropped out – demand a more optimal representation of their situation, experiences, concerns and issues (Costera Meijer, 2008, 2009). This task pertains to the immense significance of media, not only as window to the world, but especially as both vehicle for and touchstone of the realities represented (Coleman and Ross, 2010). A media-savvy audience realizes all too well that unless people are directly faced with some particular situation, they tend to assume that situations or issues exist or are recognized only to the extent that they have been addressed by the media, and with whose description and representation they are assumed to comply.

The third register to ensure journalism's continued democratic function points to its bearing on users' lives. Entertainment and information generally appear as mutually exclusive labels, as incompatible objectives, functions and motivations for media use. Yet, approached from the perspective of valuable journalism, media users tend to respond less in terms of media content, or its intended function (information or entertainment), and more in terms of the everyday affect of media, or about media as a common environment. Media impact has largely been theorized in a social political mode as a particular effect on the opinions of people, or in a social-psychological context as a particular systematic effect of media on people and their moods. Users themselves, however, stress that they derive the value of media not just from the civic quality of the information or from their personal satisfaction of watching or reading. For this reason, we suggest the concept 'quality of life', might be better suited as a normative standard for valuable journalism.

Although the quality of life frame was developed by the economist Amartya Sen and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2000, 2001; Nussbaum and Sen, 1993) within a context of care and economics, our audience studies appear to underscore the usefulness of the concept as a '*sensitizing concept*' to define the value of journalism for media users (Bowen, 2006).³ Apparently, it offers a good starting point and inspiring alternative to the traditional frame applied to measure desirable effects of good journalism, namely informed citizenship (Papacharissi, 2009). Compared to the political notion of public opinion or the psychological concept of 'mood', the notion 'quality of life' presents a broader range of valuable experiences. Moreover, this concept automatically

gears attention to the users of news. It is their lives, after all, that should be enriched. Quality of life can be associated much more easily than informed citizenship with the 'pleasure' of media use, allowing more room than 'enjoyment' to bring into play the social impact of media.

If news media aspire to mean 'more democratic' and 'pleasurable' to their audience, further studies are required of the ways in which they, as organizations and in their work processes, can become more valuable. Additional research is necessary on the cultural transformation needed to make professional journalists and program makers more receptive towards the knowledge, needs, concerns, questions and sensitivities of their users, subscribers, readers and viewers and in particular of those who are now insufficiently or one dimensionally addressed.

Doing research on valuable journalism also means studying how interactively structured journalistic formulas would perhaps better tie in with contemporary democratic culture. Additionally, the values of journalistic formats and genres that originate in the context of new media platforms and information carriers should be assessed properly. The changing ritual enjoyment of news use and the pleasure enhancing impact of certain textual and visual features of news have hardly been studied, let alone in the various contexts of different media and platforms. Media organizations would do well to develop, together with scholars and users, innovative narrative forms that better meet the public's wish for a pleasurable, representative and engaging journalism, so that news use will become a quality experience for a larger group of people.

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Notes

- 1 The particular quotations used here I derive from my own studies. Whenever I use them, the quotations represent more than a unique standpoint. As much as possible I have held on to the original phrases used, even when they were not fully correct in terms of their grammar or linguistic conventions.
- 2 Stichting Kijk Onderzoek (SKO). <http://www.kijkonderzoek.nl/>
- 3 By choosing quality of life as *sensitizing concept*, we made ourselves aware of and sensitive to empirical phenomena that fall under the label of 'valuable journalism'. According to Bowen (2006) a 'sensitizing concept' makes a scholar sensitive to particular phenomena because in contrast to a 'definitive concept' (which exactly prescribes and describes what is going on) it indicates a certain direction and offers suggestions for approaching particular empirical phenomena. The advantage of this qualitative approach is that the emphasis is on learning to perceive and penetrate particular social phenomena. In new developments particularly, this has proven a justified and productive method.

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