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Communication Model for Generalist News Media Websites

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Abstract

This paper presents a communication model to support participation initiatives in generalist news media websites. Within this context, it is proposed a conceptual model and a proof of concept – a Web platform – is presented. The initial goal was to provide an answer to the identified communication gap between the generalist news media and its user community. It is believed that the proposed Web platform can contribute to strengthen the communication and relationship between these two key stakeholders and provide a digital mediation infrastructure between them.

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1. Introductions

In recent times, Internet usage is becoming relatively more interactive and user-oriented. The Web 2.0 and, more recently, the rise of Social Media have not only created new playing fields for communication and self-expression but also new forms of social behavior. A key factor of Web 2.0 and Social Media is participation.

After observing users participation in generalist news media web portals we realized that, in most cases, their activity is reduced to posting comments. Moreover, when we analyzed the communication type between

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online generalist news media and its user community, we verified, as shown in Fig. 1, that activity it is mostly based in unidirectional communication.

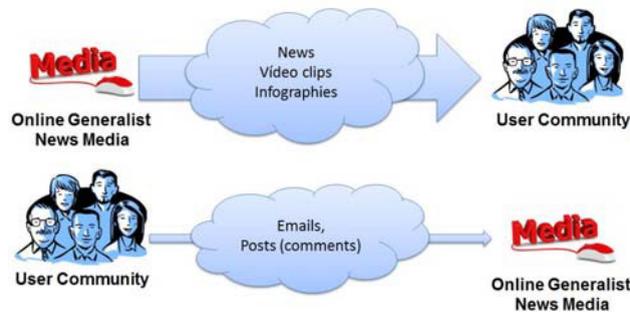


Fig. 1 Unidirectional communication between online generalist news media and its user community.

Thus, as a result of these findings and of the performed bibliographic research [1, 2, and 3], a preliminary important research question emerged: How to enhance user (citizen) participation in online generalist news media and improve communication between these two actors?

In order to address this question, we believe that it would be useful and desirable to develop a technological solution that promotes structured and multidirectional communication between online generalist news media and its user community, in a single, neutral and regulated place. Such solution would take the form of an e-participation tool and take into account the requirements and needs of these actors, a balanced way. Thus, with this application we intended to narrow the communication gap identified between these two key stakeholders and convert the citizen – from the traditional role of information consumer – into an agent with the capability to intervene and produce information. We may argue that News Media do not want to consider this so balanced relationship, but with a growing demand oriented interaction and access freedom, available in the actual Internet setting, it provides a new context to be dealt with by all the stakeholders (a changing game situation, we may say).

This paper is structured as follows: In section 2 it is proposed a communication model for generalist news media websites. Section 3 describes the proof of concept of the model – a Web application named *Liberopinion*. Section 4 contains the conclusions and some topics for future research and development.

2. Communication model for generalist news media websites

Conceptual modeling is the activity of formally describing some aspects of the physical and social world for understanding and communication purposes [4]. It is an abstract representation of reality, highlighting the most important issues in a specific context or under a particular viewpoint.

The first construction phase of the proposed model focused on the identification of key stakeholders and their roles. Thus, as a research result on generalist news media web portals and the feedback gathered from personalities with expertise in the field, we considered the following actors for a communication model for generalist news media web portals: users (citizens), guests, and generalist news media representatives.

Users are understood as people that access generalist news media web portals. Guests are people invited by the platform editor to discuss (synchronously or asynchronously) with the user community on the most up-to-date news. Examples include politicians, entrepreneurs, analysts, commenters, journalists, athletes, celebrities, artists, among others. Usually they would be experts on the debated theme. Generalist news media representatives are employees of the generalist news media company that incorporates the (*Liberopinion*) participation web platform. They can be, for example, journalists, directors, among others. Fig. 2 illustrates the proposed communication model for generalist news media web portals.

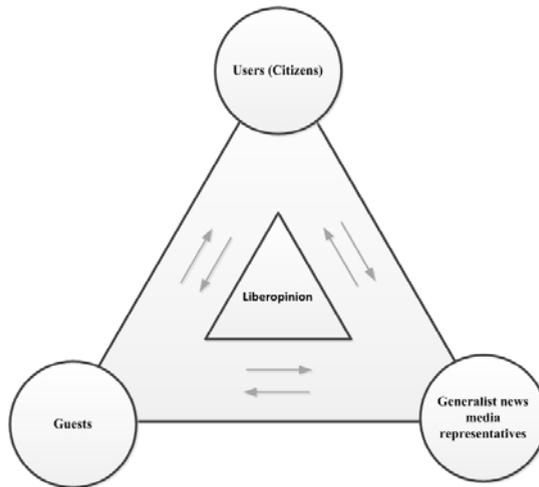


Fig. 2 Communication model for generalist news media websites.

On figure 2, the arrows stand for the open channels of multidirectional communication among key actors. In the model above, technology is not explicitly depicted, since it is considered that the digital dimension is implicitly part of the model. Note that a Web application was implemented based on the proposed model. Similarly, the editor is not explicitly represented, since, as well as technology, it is inherent to the model. It is a neutral element, whose main functions are to create, manage, boost and moderate the participation events, according to the website terms of usage and to ensure the users management. This role can be played by a team or by a single person that belongs to the staff of the generalist news media company which incorporates the *Liberopinion* platform in its Web portal. What matters is that the editor has absolute neutrality and behaves as an authentic information curator of the participation platform [5].

Taking this perspective, there are a number of authors that state that neutrality is impossible to get, both as a result of current economic context and by the fact that many Media players are controlled by specific economic parts. This means that it is not consensual that the Media are in a best position to become the information curators that e-participation platforms need to have. However, although it is an acceptable position, we intent in future work to support and verify this work thesis and not to deal with the resulting subjectivity of existing asymmetric systems that defend particular interests (many of them referred as lobbying). We claim that digital mediation proposes one such ecology where the participation space is also a space for power confrontation. Within this context and in a transparent way, we propose the use of a platform, neutral and digital based, that allow to transfer to the confronting parts the content and outcomes of their participations – it also provides a digital memory of such activity.

3. Proof of concept – The *Liberopinion* platform

Liberopinion was designed and developed, based on the proposed model, to allow, through multiple participation events, a structured, mediated and multidirectional communication between generalist news media and its user community. *Liberopinion* can be easily integrated (embed) into any news media website. Then it can be used as a participation area that is continuously available. Alternatively, *Liberopinion* can be used as a separate tool to create sporadic participation events that can then be easily incorporated into a news media Web portal. Note that this alternative way requires less editorial effort, since is not necessarily to boost participation initiatives 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In Fig. 3 a simplified UML (*Unified Modeling*

Language) class diagram is presented showing the actors, their roles and the different kinds of participation events which can be carried out on the *Liberopinion* platform.

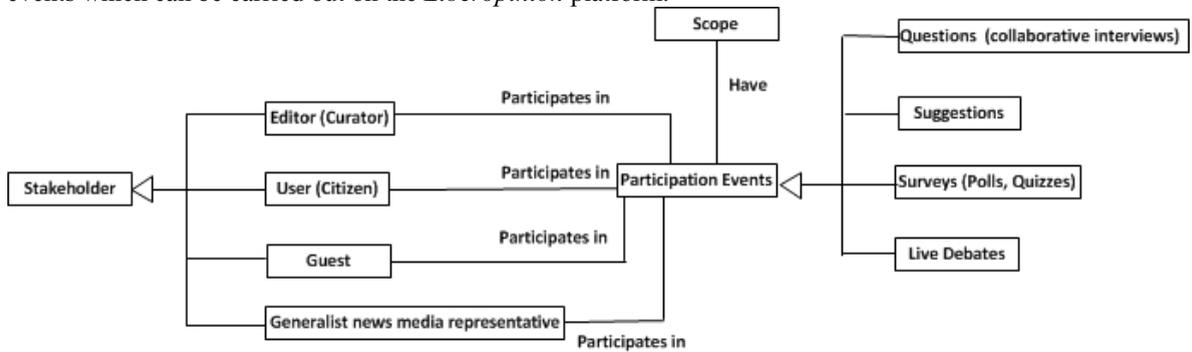


Fig. 3 UML class diagram of the *Liberopinion* platform.

In brief, figure 3 presents the user community (citizens), guests, and generalist news media representatives participate in events, which are created, managed, boosted and moderated by the editor (curator) of the platform. The participation events may consist of four different types, namely: (1) questions from the users and corresponding answers from the recipient (guest, or generalist news media representative); (2) suggestions and ideas from the user community; (3) surveys and (4) live debates. In <http://noticias.liberopinion.com/> is available a demo version of the platform (in Portuguese).

The application is organized into five major areas: a personal user area and one area for each type of public participation event. The management of users, editorial content, participation events and their moderation is made by the editor of the platform in a dedicated area, the back office. Next, in Fig. 4, the main functional areas of the *Liberopinion* platform are presented.

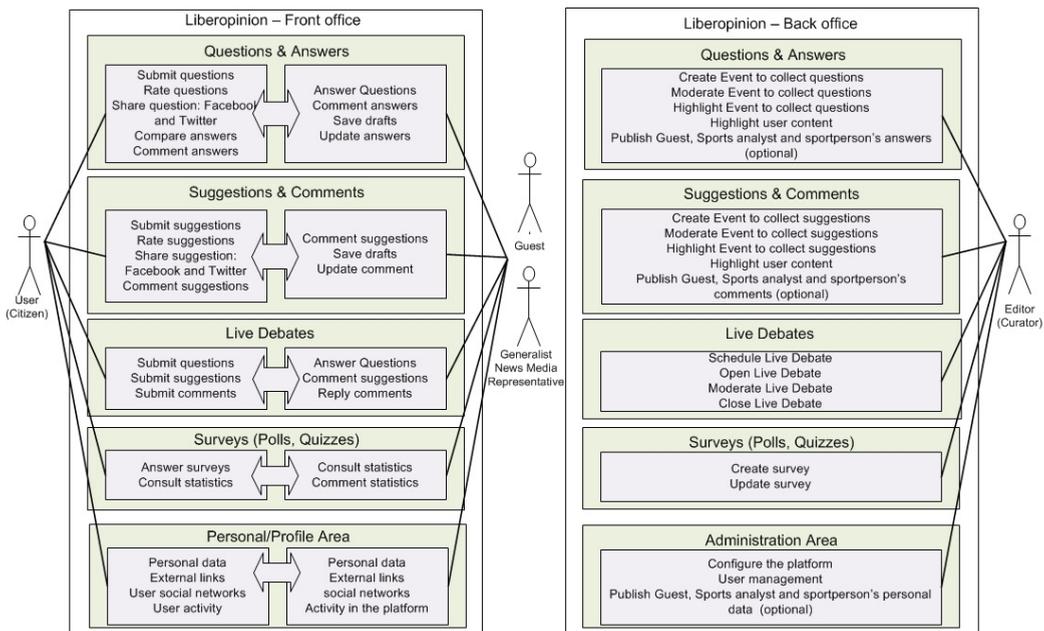


Fig. 4 Functional areas of the *Liberopinion* platform.

In the following sections, the functional areas of the *Liberopinion* platform are described in more detail.

3.1. Questions from the user community

The main purpose of this area is to conduct online collaborative interviews and discussion panels. If the context is an interview, in a first step, the editor of the platform challenges users to submit questions about a hot topic. Note that when creating a new event to collect questions, the editor defines whether the questions have an underlying theme or, on the contrary, have an open scope (the two available options). The questions are then voted by the users on its relevance during a predetermined period of time, enabling this way to distinguish the best ones (that is, the most voted/rated) from the whole set of questions. In a second step, if *Liberopinion* is configured to be used without direct interaction of the interviewed person, the editor selects the (top) questions and sends them to the interviewee. In a last step, the interviewee's answers are inserted into the platform and published by the editor. Note that in a more interactive mode, interviewees, in the role of invited guest or news media representative, have an access account to *Liberopinion* and this area allows them to directly answer questions from users. If the context is a discussion panel, the workflow is similar to the previous description. The main difference is that there are several persons to answer simultaneously the users' best questions. One interesting feature is the possibility to compare side by side the answers of different panel members to the same question. If *Liberopinion* is configured to be used with direct interaction of the panel members, these actors have a dedicated interface in the application where they can write the reply and automatically publish it. In order to help the interviewed or the panel member to draft a reasoned and thorough answer, it is possible to save the answer as a draft to be finished and published at a later stage. Moreover, in order to foster communication, all interactions between users and interviewees or panel members are associated with a specific comments area. The comments section associated with every question and associate answers allows easy and intuitive follow up of discussion threads by implementation of a "reply to comment" mechanism.

3.2. Suggestions and ideas from the user community

Whenever there is a wish to discuss and gather ideas and opinions about the hottest news and events, the editor of the platform can open a new participation initiative to collect suggestions from the community. The interaction model used in this area of the platform is similar to the questions area. Users are stimulated to provide their own ideas and encouraged to comment on and to vote on all the ideas submitted, enabling this way to highlight the best ones as seen by the overall community. One possible usage scenario is inviting users to expose what they would do if they were decision makers (e. g. politicians) and highlight the best ideas. Then, in an interactive configuration mode, decision makers (in the role of guests) are also given the chance to provide, in this area, feedback on the proposals by leaving comments on a text area designed for this purpose. To foster constant feedback and to provide means to ascertain the community reaction to the comments, all these entries are also subject to rating by the citizens.

3.3. Community surveys – polls

In this section, several questions are presented to the community members on the most up-to-date and controversial news. Through a simple and intuitive interface users are invited to give their opinion through voting. Each user can only vote once, but it is always possible change the vote. The main purpose of this section is to know the community opinion in relation to key topics of the news actuality. Note that voting statistics are gathered which turn possible to ascertain the opinion of the community.

3.4. Live debates

In this area of *Liberopinion*, users can read archived discussions, gather information about scheduled debates, and if there is a live debate ongoing, they can access and participate in this debate. Note that, the discussions in this area are moderated and will not require that citizens, log in to submit questions and comments. One of the innovative features of the *Liberopinion* consists in the use of the section dedicated to questions and suggestions for the creation of TOPs that can then be used during live debates. With the purpose of creating these TOPs, the community members are initially invited to submit questions and suggestions and vote on their relevance for a predetermined period of time. Then, along with the statistical information collected in the section dedicated to community surveys, the TOP questions and suggestions may be used to feed the live debates with guests or news media representatives.

3.5. Personal area

All registered users have a profile area where they can insert personal information, including contact details, links to their pages on social networks, blogs and their websites. Each user's public profile also presents its recent activity (questions, suggestions and comments) in the *Liberopinion* platform. In this area, users can also set criteria for receiving notifications (e.g. when a guest or news media representative answers a question or publishes a comment to the user submitted suggestion, when another user replies to a submitted comment, when initiates an participation event about the user's favorite themes, among others), and propose improvements to the *Liberopinion* platform.

4. Conclusion and future work

This paper presents an approach for fostering user participation in generalist news media Web portals. It is intended to improve communication between news media and its user community, through open, multidirectional and regulated communication channels. We believe that tools as *Liberopinion* can also contribute from a pedagogic perspective because they allow the stimulus of a civic spirit, foster collaboration and sharing, and provide support to open and civilized dialog.

As a topic for further research, it would be interesting to study the impact of some variables, such as live debates and of promotion and advertising of e-participation events, in the number of user visits and participation actions. Specifically we intend to compare the results with other studies that analyzed this subject [6]. Moreover it would be useful to compare with other participation initiatives performed outside the media sphere to analyze the media potential to increase users' participation level.

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