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Abstract

In order to find out whether international news production takes place in form of Participatory Communication, 252 news videos on the events of the Arab Spring produced by Al Jazeera English, France 24 English, euronews English and Press TV English, were analysed using a Grounded Theory approach and Critical Discourse Analysis. Additionally, interviews with representatives from these organisations were also held so as to understand how news is produced using material from various sources. Various forms of contributed material were identified, ranging from interviews and citations to amateur and State TV content. The integrated content was identified and analysed so as to understand how it was presented for the final viewer. The findings of this study will contribute to participatory theory in the field of journalism and international news production.

Keywords: arab spring, Participatory Communication Research, co-construction, participatory audiences, participatory journalism

How is international news production a form of Participatory Communication?

Sawsan Atallah Bidart, PhD

Introduction

This paper has been written in response to the call for papers made by the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) for the 2019 Congress of the Association held in the Complutense University of Madrid in Spain on July, 2019. The central theme of the conference focuses on communication, technology, and human dignity and this paper has been written in response to be presented at the Participatory Communication Research section.

The paper will explore two research approaches: Participatory Communication theory as well as Grounded Theory in an attempt to highlight the similarities whilst also taking note of the differences. Participatory Communication is of course also linked to Participatory Journalism, which in itself must also be explored to understand what it encompasses in news production. As participatory journalism seems to put forward the essence of collaboration through participation, the notion of co-construction will be questioned. This questioning will result in answers found during my PhD research, which focussed on international news production in the context of the events of the Arab Spring between 2011 and 2013.

Participatory Communication Theory and Grounded Theory

Participatory theory prescribes that meaning is not found outside of the human mind awaiting to be discovered, rather meaning is reached through participation, collaboration involving social constructions of interpretation.

Paolo Mefalopulos defines Participatory Communication in a simple and practical way, by saying that it englobes communication theory and practices that will oblige researchers to involve people, field actors, in the process of problem identification and solution proposal (Mefalopulos, 2003). Participatory Communication Theory, a type of Action Research also called Collaborative Research (Tavakoli, 2012), prescribes that the researcher develop a relationship with actors on the field so as to better understand the local setting through

experience provided by being on the field. Researchers are unable to understand a context until they have it explained to them by people involved in the context or by actually entering the context. What is also of essence to Participatory Communication Theory is that researchers and field actors will communicate, collaborate and participate in identifying problems in their livelihoods, education, health, production or any other aspect of concern. What is of essence is that the identified problems are not solely of interest to the research but primarily of significance to the stakeholders. These problems can be identified together through interviews and of course actual observation of the actors in their activities. Once a problem is identified in this constant dialogue and collaboration between researchers and actors, stakeholders to the identified problem will also be highlighted so as to reveal the possible causes of problems but also the possible solutions by including all stakeholders. Possible solutions and recommendations can be found through Participatory Communication, whereby researchers can prepare and recommend detailed implementation plans to be adopted by the field actors. The researcher may also provide training or instructions via Participatory Communication to ensure that the implementation plan is understood and followed. Interestingly enough, the work of the researcher does not stop at the recommendation of an implementation plan; researchers will also be interested in evaluating the post-actions by monitoring the ways in which the plan was successful or otherwise. The evaluation leads to discoveries on what may or may not work for specific problems.

Participatory Communication theory can be tied to the Grounded Theory research approach. The researcher's objective in Grounded Theory is to propose theories that will be applicable to researchers, professionals and laymen, because the theories will be grounded in data. Grounded Theory does not take into account large amounts of literature reviews, because researchers do not want to be influenced by other studies when construction their data corpus or event when analysing it. Grounded Theory initially proposed by Strauss and Glaser (Glaser 1967; Strauss & Corbin 2008) is an inductive research stance and approach that researchers will adopt so as to use systematic procedures to identify and also verify and further develop theories. The theoretical research is not decided upon prior to beginning the research because the researcher is attempts to spot new patterns in their data so as to build theories that will be applicable to all, including people outside of academic research. Therefore, hypotheses are revealed from data that has been collected. As Grounded Theory is an inductive approach, it enables the controversy of personal researcher bias to be overcome by information revealed by the gathered data. Of course, some will argue that collecting data and embarking on a research project with no knowledge of the domain can lead to disastrous results (Charmaz, 2006). But it can also be argued that knowledge on a subject matter

could influence researchers in their criteria when selected data to incorporate in their corpus and further influence the data extracted from the corpus for analysis (Glaser, 2010).

As data collection is of essence to theorisation, the Grounded Theory research approach ties very much into Participatory Communication Theory as the data gathered comes from the field and not only literature. Initially used is sociology, Grounded Theory is known to reveal qualitative information, but can also identify qualitative information in quantitative studies including large numbers of texts so as to ensure that the theories are produced from enough data. Data can of course come from interviews with prime actors, which means taking on an approach allowing for open dialogue with research participants, just as in Participatory Communication Research. Although the qualitative research approach by Grounded Theory and Participation Communication Research differ, in that participatory research is more of an approach than a specific method, whereby GT is a method, they both use observation, interviews, focus groups and documentation as data sources. Another difference between the two research approaches and methods is that participatory theory is more concerned with finding solutions by making recommendations and evaluating them with field actors in an agile approach, whereas Grounded Theory is concerned with theory development rather than solution propositions. Grounded Theory does not actually analyse or even test data to prove a hypothesis, because theories are found in the data. Theories can of course be tested in other studies using different research approaches, or further developed by also using Grounded Theory approach.

Participatory Theory and Journalism

We can look for a link between Participatory Communication and Participatory Journalism in that there is the notion of people participating in order to reach an objective. With Participatory Communication, the researcher initiates communication with people on the field. In participatory journalism, there is the notion of news audiences suddenly participating in news production. But it is worth noting that there are differences between Participatory Audiences and Participatory Journalism. Participatory Audiences broadcast events directly to audiences on social media, blogs, the WebSphere and other public forums on their own. Participatory Journalism involves a cooperation or collaboration between audiences, citizens, and the professional news organisations. Bowman and Willis propose a definition of Participatory Journalism: “The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing [sic] and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant

information that a democracy requires" (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Of course, there are known challenges to Participatory Journalism, noted by Bowman and Willis as early as 2003. Despite being a "healthy trend", Participatory Journalism may "make us un-comfortable, raising new questions of trust and veracity" (idem), and "participatory journalism could someday require the permission of Big Media and Big Government" (idem). Indeed, today there are some laws that have been put in place to combat fake news, defamation and racism within the freedom rights to expression, and some governments make no difference between professional and participatory journalists, requiring anyone who wants to broadcast a message on the internet or offline publication to have a press permit or license.

Co-construction between Journalists and Participating Citizens

Some may argue that this collaboration in news production can be referred to by the term "co-construction". Jacoby and Ochs define "co-construction" as being a "joint activity of creation, deliberately leaving one in the dark as to who (or what) might be acting in concert and what exactly is being jointly created (Jacoby & Ochs 1995, p.172). The idea of co-construction is a seamless integration of ideas and resources that is unseen in the final constructed product; Jacoby and Ochs and states that "co-construction that although the 'co' prefix in co-construction represents some sort of interaction (collaboration, cooperation, and coordination), "co-construction does not necessarily entail affiliative or supportive interactions" (idem). The Bakhtin Circle's literary theory teaches us that all texts are the result of previous texts. Ferguson (1964), Brown (1977) and Cross (1977) have also contributed to what we know about co-construction, by looking for co-construction patterns between parents and children in children's utterances. Co-construction very much calls on the Participatory theory because they both prescribe that meaning is the results of exchanges with other people.

Using both a Participatory theory approach and a Grounded Theory method, we ask whether co-construction does indeed take place in international news production between news organisations and citizen journalists.

Participatory Journalism in International Coverage of the Arab Spring

In order to find out whether international news production takes place in form of Participatory Communication, 252 news videos on the events of the Arab Spring produced by Al Jazeera English, France 24 English, euronews English and Press TV English, were analysed using a

Grounded Theory approach and critical discourse analysis. Additionally, interviews with representatives from these organisations were also held so as to understand how news is produced using material from various sources. Various forms of contributed material were identified, ranging from interviews and citations to amateur and State TV content. The integrated content was identified and analysed so as to understand how it was presented for the final viewer. The findings of this study will contribute to participatory theory in the field of journalism and international news production.

The data collected for this research included 252 international news videos on several events of the Arab Spring ranging from 2011 – 2013, from 7 different countries. These news videos were produced by 4 international news channels: Al Jazeera English, France 24 English, Press TV English and Euronews English. The respective news channels also broadcast the news videos online the video UGC platform YouTube. These news videos were analysed using Grounded Theory, whereby not one item was sought to verify a hypothesis, but rather using IT tools, to extract as much information as possible, ranging from the length of the videos to the location of journalists and also whether the footage was provided by an amateur. 11% of our news videos clearly used amateur footage. Amateur content was found in: 20% of AJE videos, 13% of euronews videos, 5% of F24 videos and PTV had no videos containing clearly marked amateur content. The news videos were watched to understand how mainstream media incorporate amateur content into their news and also to understand the role and function of amateur content in the news. The various ways in which amateur content was integrated in news videos was identified and it was also necessary to observe the news videos by asking how the message would be different if the amateur content was not included in the news video.

Use of Amateur Content in International News Videos
1. To construct propaganda machines for governments of international news outlets a. Using a mix of amateur content and content from State TV so as to show objectivity b. Using amateur content to disguise bias or inability to take a neutral stance c. Using an already produced news video from a partner channel that has incorporated amateur footage content to simply translate or reword the content for different viewers d. Using amateur footage content with or without a brief silence so that the audience identifies and empathises with the victims of a tragic event e. Using amateur footage as exclusive content when there is rare footage of an event f. Using amateur content in a news report to shock and/or entertain audiences
2. To construct censored news and a. Using amateur content to situate the viewer when using non-local people to represent a news story b. Using amateur content when the event location is inaccessible by journalists, either because journalists are banned or because it is too dangerous c. Using amateur content to represent events that journalists would face ethical and legal implications over d. Using amateur footage content while someone is being interviewed over the phone so as to show footage of the location
3. To construct a democratic transparency into news making a. Using a series of amateur videos constructed with a recount of events to visually construct the narration b. Using amateur footage content along with descriptive journalist voiceover in order to present evidence to audiences c. Using amateur content in a news report to highlight the significance of User Generated Content (UGC) in today's world d. Blending amateur content in one news report along with footage presented as though internally produced so as to appear transparent in construction and show their presence on the field

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(Atallah Bidart, 2019)

Readers interested in the analysis process used to theorise the use and role of amateur content in international news videos can refer to the thesis quoted (Atallah Bidart, 2019).

Critical Theory and a form of Participatory Communication Theory

Collecting, watching and analysing the news videos gave us the possibility to understand how news was presented. It was thought that this study would be incomplete without knowing "why" the news was presented in such a way. Therefore, it was decided that in addition to our news corpus, we would also hold interviews with news organisations, the dominant discourse producers of the events of the Arab Spring.

The essence of including discourse producers in research is prescribed by Critical Discourse Analysis. Geus explains that at the root of Critical Theory, Marxism upholds the "imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being" (Marx 1997, 257–258)" (Geus, 2016). Geus explains that Critical Theory "demands for self-determined, participatory and just democracy" (idem).

Critical Discourse Analysis prescribes that researchers not only study the discourse produced by dominant institutions in a society but also identify and then study the dominant discourse institutions in a society, because they are the primary influencers of the produced discourse and potential dialogue.

We identified our news channels as dominant information institutions and we also identified 1 international press agency, AFP and a Participatory Journalism press agency, Crowd Spark. We also studied the media landscape in the 7 countries covered in the news in our corpus, and we therefore included the local media and national governments in our list of dominant information institutions. The media landscape was of importance to us in each country as that would inevitably influence the news production decisions. Interviews with AFP, Crowdspark, Al Jazeera, France 24 and Euronews were held so as to also understand the relationship between amateurs and the news organisations.

Journalist Statuses

It was found that there are not two but 3 journalist statuses: the fulltime permanent journalist of a news outlet, the freelance journalist that works for several news outlets, with or without a contract and finally, the amateur journalists who send material to the news outlets. The work practices, communication and editorial decisions were impacted based on the statuses. More than anything, the journalists' safety was linked to their status. News outlets all admitted that incoming material from zones of conflict was always a plus, they also all shared their concern about news verification when receiving news from unknown sources. Citizen journalism will certainly help give a voice to people in places inaccessible to professional journalists. Some events are inaccessible due to conflict, danger or bans put in place by governments, whilst other events are mentally inaccessible in the sense that many journalists sent to areas of conflict often do not have the experience or the historical knowledge needed to understand an event so as to be able to interpret it for audiences worldwide, leading to news that is sometimes ambiguous or contrarily overly simplified. The journalists we interviewed revealed that news material is

indeed contributed by amateurs, but that there was no actual participation between amateurs and news outlets when it came to news production. All news production decisions were made by the news organisation.

Co-construction and News Accountability in International News Production

We can therefore go back to our question of co-construction and deduce that although our news corpus revealed various ways of integrating amateur content into international news videos, our interviews with the experts informed us that this integration was controlled by the news organisations and not very influenced by contributors, or even freelance journalists. Indeed, one can agree with Fairclough's statement that the world is actually socially construed (or imagined) rather than socially constructed (Fairclough, 2003). Our study portrayed that news is not a co-constructed product between amateurs and journalists, but rather a product built with various contributions by news outlets that do not include amateurs in any decision making processes.

Despite what seems to be a bleak finding on the lack of co-construction in the news between audiences and news outlets, new journalism models are currently being built, which try to involve audiences, notably activists in regions of conflict that are inaccessible to certified and professional journalists. For example, AFP currently trains activists in Syria to become what they call "stringers" and they communicate with them from their Beirut offices to not only receive footage but also to verify information by acting as informers.

Journalism as we know it will of course evolve, just like any other profession, but it is also important to understand that lack of co-construction in the news is not necessarily a negative result, because it leads to making journalists accountable for producing and broadcasting verified news as opposed to blaming the various actors in the news flow for fake news. After all, Participatory Audiences in the case of activists will most probably not lead to unbiased journalism as the activists are fighting for a cause that they strongly believe in.

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